

Review of the China Centre

Final Report

Summary of Recommendations

This report presents the findings of the Review Panel that was set up by College Council to review the China Centre and its mode of operation. The report describes the background and development of the China Centre at Jesus College and explains the rationale for the seven-point plan presented in the final section of the report. We begin with a concise summary of the main recommendation. The Review Panel recommends that:

7. Council should, in due course, set up a working party to consider the long future of the China Centre, with a view to reporting to Council before the end of the time period specified by Council in relation to recommendation 1.

Background

The China Centre was formally established at Jesus College in 2016. Its origins date back to discussions in 2013-14 about a possible partnership between Jesus College and Peking University. The aims and purposes of the China Centre have evolved over time. In recent years the Centre has become increasingly focused on one central aim: to deepen mutual understanding between China and the West through a programme of regular academic seminars and workshops. The Centre is currently housed in two offices in West Court. The roles of Director and Deputy Director are non-stipendiary, and the Centre has a part-time administrator; the current Director is Professor Peter Nolan, a Fellow of the College and Emeritus Chong Hua Professor in Chinese Development at the University of Cambridge. Governance of the Centre is the responsibility of the China Centre Advisory Committee (CCAC), which is required to meet at least twice in each academic year. The CCAC includes several Fellows and representatives from the student body and it reports to the College Council.

In May 2021, the Master convened an open meeting of Fellows to discuss the China Centre and its role in the College. It was agreed at this meeting that the College should set up a Review Panel to review the Centre and its mode of operation, and to consider ways in which the Fellowship and the student body could become more involved in the Centre and its activities. College Council appointed Professor John Thompson to chair the review, and a panel of six senior Fellows of the College, drawn from the sciences, social sciences and humanities, was set up. Council approved the Panel membership and the Terms of Reference. It was agreed that the Review Panel would operate on the understanding that opinions expressed would remain confidential at all times and that nothing would inhibit the free and frank provision of advice or exchange of views.

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for the Review Panel were established as follows:

1. Role: What role does the China Centre play in the life of the College and how does it fit within the wider context of the University? Is the role clear and well-defined? How unique and important is this Centre? What are the benefits and risks for the College? How could the Centre be developed in order to maximize its potential?
2. Funding: Should the Centre be relying on funding from the CCDT? Are there risks associated with this funding? Is the funding adequate? Could and/or should the Centre be funded differently?
3. Director: What are the roles of the Director and Deputy Director? How should these positions be filled and for how long? Is the Centre sustainable if the Director and Deputy Director were to leave? Is it sustainable if these positions are non-stipendiary?
4. Governance: What are the Centre's structures of governance and accountability? To whom does the Centre report and how often? What is the role of the Advisory Committee and how effective is it? How are its members chosen and what are their duties and responsibilities? What role does the Committee play in scrutinizing the Centre and shaping its activities?
5. Operation: How are ideas for seminars and other activities generated in the practical operation of the Centre, and how do ideas get implemented – e.g., how are topics for

engagement with China, and this provided a supportive environment for collaborations of various kinds. The culture of engagement was a direct response to the dramatic change in China's role in the world during the era of reform, which opened up the possibility of developing much stronger connections between China and the West. When David Cameron visited Beijing in 2010, he set out a clear ambition for Britain to build a strong partnership with China, an ambition that was reiterated by the then Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond when he visited Beijing in 2015. This culture of engagement and collaboration was evident not only in the worlds of politics and business, but also in the spheres of research and higher education. Many universities in the UK, such as Nottingham, Liverpool and the LSE, established collaborations with Chinese universities, including in some cases setting up campuses in China, to offer teaching and training programmes and to facilitate joint research. Academic centres focused on China were also established in the UK: in 2014, for example, the University of Oxford opened a China Centre, housed in a building in the grounds of St Hugh's College and supported by a large

PKU's portal to the University of Cambridge, enabling it to collaborate not just with Jesus College but also with other parts of the University.

In a parallel development, the then Development Director at Jesus College was in discussions with the Jao Foundation about a possible donation to the College. At this time, Jesus College was involved in a major development project, having acquired Wesley House and embarked on an ambitious building programme to create a new court, called West Court, on the site of Wesley House; both the Master and the then Development Director were involved in a variety of fundraising initiatives in relation to this project. The Development Director had been put in touch with the Jao Foundation by a Jesus alumnus living in Hong Kong. The Jao Foundation, based in Hong Kong, was a charitable organization established to commemorate the achievements of the Chinese sinologist and calligrapher Jao Tsung-yang. The Development Director was exploring the possibility of a substantial donation from the Jao Foundation to fund a named building in West Court. The Development Director was also hoping that an endowment could be secured to cover the cost of a core permanent staff of the China Centre. It was envisaged that both the China Centre and the Jao Centre could become part of the broader range of intellectual and academic activities that would be located in West Court once the site had been re-developed.

In September 2015 the then Master Professor Ian White, signed a Memorandum of Intent with PKU to establish a China Centre at Jesus College. On 15 April 2016 the Master signed a formal Agreement with PKU at a ceremony.

The October 2017 paper sets out the central purpose of the

understood: this separate initiative

events, going virtual has enabled the China Centre to reach a wider audience with its seminar programme. Data on participant bookings for the virtual seminars held between January and November 2021 show that the average number of participants per seminar across 19 seminars was 97, many seminars had over 100 participants, and several had 120 or more (see Appendix 1). The data also show active participation from 55 (College) members, including Fellows, students and alumni, as well as high levels of participation from other members of the academic community in Cambridge who are part of the University but not members of Jesus College. Cambridge is a very busy academic environment with lots of lectures and seminars by distinguished scholars; given the plethora of options available and the demands on people's time, it is not easy to run a seminar programme that attracts a consistently high level of participation. The fact that the China Centre has run a programme of seminars throughout 2021 that has attracted an average of nearly 100 participants for each seminar is, in the Cambridge context, an exceptional achievement and a real tribute to the time, effort and creativity invested by Professor Nolan and his team. Moreover, the numbers of participants attending the China Centre seminars are comparable to the numbers of people who registered for online events organized by the Intellectual Forum at Jesus College over the same period: special IF lectures by high-profile scholars like Mary Beard and Lyndal Roper attracted significantly more participants, as one would expect, but a typical IF event attracted numbers that were broadly similar to the numbers participating in China Centre events.

Concerns Raised

Beginning in early 2020 and running through 2021, some concerns were raised in various quarters about the College's China-related activities. These included articles and reports in a number of newspapers, periodicals, websites and related media. Jesus College's China initiatives were

Similar concerns were also raised by some Fellows, some students and some alumni of the College. A number of alumni wrote to the Master and the Director of Development and Alumni Relations about the College's activities in relation to China – in some cases to express support for these activities and in other cases to express concern and to call attention to the reputational damage that could be caused to the College by the negative press coverage. Several alumni were dismayed by what they perceived as inconsistency or even hypocrisy on the part of the College, which was taking steps to remove the memorial to Tobias Rustat in the College Chapel because of his involvement in the slave trade, on the one hand, while the China Centre appeared to be turning a blind eye to the treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, on the other. A number of Fellows also expressed their concern about the lack of speakers on controversial topics like human rights, press freedom, the treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the political situation in Hong Kong, stressing the importance of ensuring that academic freedom is rigorously upheld in time; they also called for greater transparency with regard to the governance structures and funding arrangements for the College's China initiatives and they emphasized the need to avoid conflicts of interest, especially given the increasing sensitivity of issues surrounding China. Students have expressed similar concerns on various occasions and in various settings, including via their representatives on the CCAC.

While some of the concerns raised in the press and by some Fellows, students and alumni have been about specific issues, they also reflect a broader change in the political environment. By 2020, the optimism of the 2010-2015 period, when both businesses and universities were being actively encouraged to engage and collaborate with China, had faded considerably; with Xi Jinping's rise to power and the cooling of relations between China and the West, the culture of collaboration and engagement had given way to a culture of growing suspicion and distrust. Academic institutions that had programmes focused on China were being subjected to increasing scrutiny. And a culture of growing suspicion and distrust – especially when it concerns a very powerful global player like China – provides fertile ground for rumours, speculation and conspiracy theories to flourish.

Hong Kong and Xinjiang

As mentioned above, in the course of 2020 concerns were raised in various quarters about the absence of seminars at the China Centre on some controversial topics such as the political situation in Hong Kong and the treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and it is not difficult to understand why some people might have felt at the time that the Centre was avoiding these topics. It is clear from the minutes that the concerns expressed in the press and elsewhere were being discussed both by College Council and by the CCAC. At its meeting of 13 July 2020 Council emphasized that the principle of academic freedom was fundamental for the College and reaffirmed its view that no subjects were 'out of bounds' for the seminar programme. From mid-2020 on, the CCAC

Participation levels for both of these seminars were high: the Hong Kong seminar attracted 129 participants, including 10 Fellows and 9 Jesus College students, and the Xinjiang seminar attracted 140 participants, including 5 Fellows and 13 Jesus College students. While in many respects these seminars went well and provided an opportunity for Fellows, students and others to hear different views about the situations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, concerns were raised by some members of the audience about the decision taken by the Chair not to take questions from the audience in the seminar on Hong Kong. The Chair explained that he took this decision because several speakers had used their allotted time, which left very little time for questions, and he decided that it would be better to use the time remaining to give each of the speakers a chance to respond to issues raised by the other speakers rather than to take questions from the audience. However, this didn't go down well with some members of the audience who felt – understandably – that the audience was being deprived of an opportunity to question and challenge the views that had been expressed by the speakers.

Of course, it is not always possible to control what happens in live online events – they can take on a dynamic of their own, and speakers can talk for too long. It is easy to understand why the Chair proceeded in the way he did on this occasion: he could see that time was running out and he had to take a decision, on the spur of the moment, about how to use the time that remained. In retrospect, given the level of scrutiny to which the China Centre has been subjected in recent years, this was probably the wrong call. It would have been better if the Chair had kept the speakers to their allotted time and allowed some time after their presentations for members of the audience to question and challenge them: allowing space for criticism is an essential part of academic freedom. But running online events of this kind, with several speakers located in different parts of the world, is not a simple and straightforward process, and it is easy for some things to go wrong in the learning process for everyone concerned. It is worth noting that in the seminar on Xinjiang, there was, by contrast, plenty of time for audience members to ask questions, and the Chair made a special point of prioritizing students when he called on audience members to put their questions to the speakers: this was noticed and appreciated by students.

While the seminars on Hong Kong and Xinjiang were very welcome developments and well attended, there were downsides to the fact that they occurred 2-3 years after the events in Hong Kong and Xinjiang had become the focus of widespread public concern. The absence of seminars on Hong Kong and Xinjiang had contributed significantly to the negative press coverage that had been directed at the China Centre and the College in 2020, so that, by the time the seminars happened in 2021, some reputational damage had already been done. Of course, the China Centre is an academic institution, not a media organization, and the seminar programme should be driven by intellectual concerns rather than media agendas. But the political situation in Hong Kong and the treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang are issues of genuine intellectual concern as well as being important and topical political issues, and it is clear that there were many Fellows and students in the College who were pressing for seminars to be organized on these topics. Had these seminars happened sooner, it might have helped to reassure both members of the College and those outside the College that the China Centre was tackling difficult and sensitive topics in a timely and proactive way.

Looking Forward: A Seven-Point Plan

The College's China initiatives have evolved over time, and, as explained above, it is only since 2017-18 that the China Centre has assumed the form that it has today – namely, as a College-based organization that is focused on running a series of seminars on China for the benefit of the academic community in the College and in the university more broadly. The China Centre has been clearly separated from the Global Issues Dialogue Centre (GIDC) – the latter has been moved to the Intellectual Forum: this is a welcome change and it should help to ensure that these two organizations, which are entirely separate from one another, are not confused in public discussions about the College's China-related activities. The latter are now clearly and unambiguously focused on the China Centre and its ongoing programme of seminars.

Some people have questioned whether academic institutions in the UK should be engaging at all with China in the current climate, given the concerns that have been raised about human rights and other issues in China. But just as it is an essential part of academic life that students and academics should be free to discuss any topic and probe the views of speakers in a critical way so too it is an important part of academic freedom that academics should be free to engage with countries – with their people, their culture and their history – even if the politics and policies of their governments are objectionable. Many academics in Cambridge and elsewhere work on aspects of China's history and culture and are widely recognized as some of the world's best scholars of China; many Cambridge academics also have collaborations with Chinese researchers in many different fields, from the natural sciences and engineering to the social sciences and humanities. Moreover, given the importance of China in the world today, with a population of more than 1.4 billion and the world's second largest economy, it is clearly important that we in the West deepen our understanding of China, its history and its role in the world. Indeed, it could be persuasively argued that it is precisely at a time of growing tension between China and the West that engagement, dialogue and mutual understanding are more important than ever.

A good case can be made for maintaining the kind of China Centre that the College currently has – namely, a streamlined organization that is focused on putting together and running a series of seminars on China for the benefit of the academic community in Cambridge. But members of Jesus College might reasonably ask: why should this Centre be in Jesus College, rather than in the University or in some other college? The answer to this question is partly historical and partly practical. The historical aspect is that, as noted earlier, Jesus College has a long history of interest in and work on China, dating back to the 1940s, and a number of its current Fellows work on China and/or have important research collaborations with Chinese colleagues.

However, it is clear that in the current political climate, having a China Centre carries certain risks for Jesus College, including significant reputational risks. In our view, the China Centre should be reformed and restructured in certain ways, and implementing these reforms should help both to improve and strengthen the China Centre and to reduce the reputational risks. Our recommendations take the form of a ten-point plan.

1 Maintaining the China Centre for a specified time period with a clearly defined academic purpose

We recommen

benefit from the expertise of some of the University's best China scholars. In making these additional appointments, Council should bear in mind the desirability of achieving a gender balance and of including one or more Chinese nationals on the CCAC.

There is a second way that the relationship with the University could be strengthened – and

management positions of this kind, both to ensure that the institution remains dynamic and to prevent it from becoming too closely identified with the interests and priorities of particular individuals.

While the formal governance structure of the China Centre is fine, we think that it would be sensible especially in the current climate for the planning and execution of the seminar programme to be handled by a small management team that would comprise the Director, the Deputy Director and at least one other Fellow. This small management team would not displace or compromise the governance of the CCAC, which is the College committee that has formal responsibility for overseeing the activities of the China Centre and reporting to Council. Members of the CCAC are actively encouraged to make suggestions for possible seminars, and the minutes of the CCAC now formally record these suggestions in an annotated list which is used to monitor progress in the seminar programme – this is a sensible and welcome innovation (though the mechanisms for soliciting ideas and suggestions should be broadened to include a wide range of Fellows and students, as recommended in point 2 above). But the CCAC is not responsible for the day-to-day running of the China Centre, and it cannot get involved in the practical details of organizing seminars, inviting speakers, etc. these practical activities have to be delegated to others. Given the sensitivities associated with running a series of seminars on China today, there are risks involved in placing all responsibility for organizing the seminar series in the hands of one individual. By establishing a small management team of the Director, the Deputy Director and at least one other Fellow, the CCAC would be assigning responsibility for the seminar programme to a small team. This would have several advantages: it would broaden the management range and make the seminar programme less dependent on the interests and contacts of one individual; it would spread the workload across several people, helping to reduce the burden on the Director and to ensure that the China Centre is able to respond quickly and effectively to the suggestions of Fellows and students; and it would lessen the focus on the Director, who in the current structure, all too easily becomes the target of criticism.

6 Transparency

The Review Panel is firmly of the view that the College should be fully transparent about the activities of the China Centre and the ways that it is funded and governed. The China Centre has a homepage on the College website where its aims are briefly described (<https://www.jesus.cam.ac.uk/research/global/centre>) and there is a link to another page which lists the seminars and other events that have been organized by the Centre, but there is nothing on the website that describes the funding arrangements for the China Centre and explains how the Centre is organized and governed. This lack of transparency fuels the suspicion that there could be surreptitious sources of funding behind the China Centre that are skewing the seminar programme and compromising academic freedom.

The best way to counter this kind of suspicion is to be completely open about the funding arrangements and governance structure of the China Centre: if the College has nothing to hide, then it has nothing to fear from complete transparency on these issues. The funding arrangements, organization and governance structure of the China Centre should be fully explained on the China Centre's web pages.

A good model for the kind of transparency we are recommending here can be found on the website for the Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication:

<https://wintoncentre.maths.cam.ac.uk/> The 'About Us' drop-down menu has sections on Aims, People and Funding, and the Funding tab describes the sources of funding in detail. The Review Panel recommends that the China Centre creates a similar 'About Us' area on its website with sections on Aims, People, Governance and Funding. We also recommend that the Annual Report be made publicly available on the website.

7 Developing a clear plan for the future

The Review Panel has recommended that the China Centre be given a remit by College Council to continue operating for eco tas t rCene (t)-6 (t)-2 (h s) (r)-iTd [(r)-1 ((i)-6 (ar)-1.1(a C)-7

should be some remuneration attached to this post. If the College were to attach some remuneration to the role of Director, then the running costs of the China Centre would increase, making it all the more important to ensure that the funding of the China Centre was put on a secure long-term basis.

4. Further consideration should be given to the relationship between the China Centre at Jesus College, on the one hand, and the University, on the other, and to how exactly the China Centre at Jesus College relates to, and is integrated with, the University's broader strategy and approach to research and teaching on, and collaboration with, China. While we have indicated some ways in which the relation between the China Centre and the University could be strengthened in the short term, there are other aspects of the University's strategy and approach to China that would need to be addressed in any plan for the long-term future of the China Centre.

In recommending that the China Centre be given a remit to continue operating for a specified time period the Review Panel does not want to suggest that the fundamental questions about the long-term future of the China Centre at Jesus College have been resolved. On the contrary, we are well aware that these questions remain, and we strongly recommend that, in due course, a working party is set up by Council to address these questions and, if deemed appropriate, to develop a clear plan for the future of the China Centre, taking account of the issues outlined above.