SCIENTIFIC EXCHANGES

U.S. May Renew Collaboration After China Relents on Data

After a 3-year deep freeze, formal scientific relations between the United States and China are beginning to thaw. The reason: Chinese officials appear to be more receptive to joint research projects that probe politically sensitive topics. As a result, U.S. science officials are hoping to renew an agreement covering basic research with China that was allowed to lapse in December 1990.

The first crack in the ice came a few weeks ago, when Chinese officials agreed to revive a social science project between the University of Michigan (UMI) and Beijing University that was closed down in 1990 when the Chinese government seized research materials and impounded data. According to Alice Hogan, China specialist in the National Science Foundation's (NSF) international division, the State Commission on Education decided at a meeting in Shanghai in May to release the data, and NSF expects the project will now go forward. If so, NSF may soon invite Chinese officials to negotiate a new memorandum of understanding on scientific exchanges, Hogan says.

Before that occurs, however, the Chinese government would have to clarify its position on social science research. A secret document obtained by *The Washington Post* in 1991 revealed that the Chinese had imposed a ban on collaborative work with Western researchers who want to conduct social surveys. The about-turn on the UMI project suggests that this ban is no longer absolute, but the government has yet to spell out a clear position on the issue and NSF does not feel it can raise questions about a rule that existed only in secret documents. Indeed, some U.S. researchers, such as Michel Oksenberg, one principal investigator on the UMI project who is now president of the East-West Center in Hawaii, remain skeptical that social science can be conducted in China without a public guarantee of protection, given what happened to the UMI project.

The project's aim was to collect information of a kind never published before on China's social and political structure, while at the same time training Chinese researchers in computer-based methods of analysis. The Chinese side, led by Beijing University, set the objectives: to conduct a mass survey of 1300 ordinary citizens and to interview 200-300 key leaders about their political attitudes and social roles. The survey would have been controversial at any time, but it got started at the worst possible moment—just as students (including many from Beijing University) and troops met in the bloody clash at Tianenmen Square in June 1989.

The project came to a halt, but a year later, in the summer of 1990, Chinese officials allowed the Americans and their Chinese collaborators to complete the survey. Later in 1990, however, as researchers were preparing to ship questionnaires back to the United States for coding, the government stepped in again and seized the data. At the same time, China temporarily stopped a UMI sociology project investigating marriage patterns in the city of Baoding. NSF decided it had had enough and essentially put scientific relations with China on hold.

The thaw began in December 1992, according to NSF's Hogan, when several Chinese officials including the science minister made a quiet visit to Washington, D.C. They met with Walter Massey, then NSF's chief, and White House science officials. They were "anxious to get things going again," says Hogan, but NSF felt that outstanding issues had to be resolved first. In April, officials representing NSF's counterpart in Beijing—the Natural Science Foundation of China—proposed a joint discussion of priorities and methods of managing research. NSF declined, again pointing to the unresolved UMI dispute.

NSF officials didn't expect these differences to be cleared up. So Hogan skipped a meeting in Shanghai in May with members of the State Education Commission, which has jurisdiction over university matters. But the meeting produced a surprise. A recent shakeup in the leadership had given the commission a new chairman, Zhu Kiaxuan, and he declared that China was ready to release the UMI social science data and get on with the research.

Last month, political scientists formerly at UMI—including Kent Jennings and Malanie Manion—returned to Beijing and determined that it would be possible to complete the work they began about 5 years ago. However, there will be a change: Instead of bringing hundreds of survey questionnaires back to Ann Arbor, Michigan, for coding, Chinese researchers will do the work in Beijing, and the Americans will be allowed only to take away diskettes of processed data.

If this plan works, and if the U.S. researchers find it acceptable, the way would be open to negotiating a new exchange agreement for basic research. "The next step is up to NSF," says J. Thomas Ratchford, an official in the Office of Science and Technology Policy. Oksenberg warns, however, that it is important that the Chinese government be absolutely clear about its intentions. He would like to see a guarantee that research projects will not be "judged retroactively." He points out that it would be difficult for U.S. researchers to guarantee the safety of their research subjects—a standard commitment for U.S. academics—unless China makes a public pledge of such protection.

All that Hogan can say now is that "we've not received anything in writing" from China about the new policy. But NSF hopes it can work out a clearly worded agreement that provides access for social scientists and protects their data.

–Eliot Marshall

Balancing Scallops With Shrimp

An acrimonious dispute over social science research is not the only grit in the wheels of scientific cooperation between the United States and China. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which has its own cooperative agreement with the Chinese government, has been trying to move forward on a series of stalled aquaculture projects. According to marine researcher James McVey of NOAA, the two sides may have made unequal contributions to projects, including one on U.S. scallops and another on Chinese shrimp. China, after receiving 26 scallops from NOAA researchers in 1983, has now developed an industry based on these animals that produces 100,000 metric tons of food a year. Meanwhile, U.S. researchers are still waiting to receive the first of the promised Chinese shrimp. When NOAA asked for live specimens, Chinese scientists responded that a law forbids their export.

China now would like help in improving the genetics of its U.S. scallops, which may have become vulnerable to disease because they evolved from such a narrow genetic base. In discussions with NOAA this June, China also considered sending expert instructors to a new aquaculture academy that may be built in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Both sides are also interested in exporting jellyfish from the Gulf of Mexico to China as a food. First, however, U.S. officials would like to see a more balanced exchange.

–E.M.