

D3.7 THIRD PROGRESS REPORT ON RESEARCH CLUSTERS WP3

Project Information	
Acronym	ReConnect China
Title	ReConnect China: generating independent knowledge for a resilient future with China for Europe and its citizens.
Project no.	101061483
Type of Action	RIA
Deliverable Information	
Title	D3.7 Second progress report on research clusters WP3
WP number and title	WP3, China's Domestic Governance
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Description	Summary of the activities of WP3 in months 24-35
Lead Beneficiary	University of Vienna
Type	R: Document, report
Dissemination Level	PU: Public
Status	Final
History of Changes	
Draft version 0.0	Consultation with WP3 partners (5 September 2025)
0.1	First created by UNIVIE (20 September 2025)
Version 1.0	First draft completed (29 October 2025)

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1 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Meaning
DoA	Description of the Action – annex 1 to the GA
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
WP	Work Package

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Work Package 3 (WP3) of *ReConnect China* aims to explore the sources of legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) by examining government narratives, popular discourses, and their interconnections with domestic governance, ideology, and international relations. During the third reporting period, WP3 made substantial progress across all four tasks, particularly in developing a comprehensive and accessible data infrastructure, advancing research outputs, and strengthening academic and policy engagement.

Task 3.1 – Database: New Sources of Information (Lead: UNIVIE)

Key achievements:

- Data collection nearly completed, covering 320 of 380 national and subnational institutions.
- Repository now hosts 3.8 laws, regulations, policies, and announcements accessible to registered users, as well as millions of public complaints, tens of thousands of protests and dozens of millions of Weibo posts not accessible to the public.
- The platform features automated English translations and summaries, real-time data updates, and GDPR-compliant user registration.
- The repository, though not widely promoted, attracted around 350 daily users and is used for research and teaching.

Task 3.2 – Domestic Governance (Lead: UPOL)

Key achievements:

- Organized Workshop on Ideology, Governance and Discourse
- Completed three article manuscripts
- Conducted fieldwork on Party-building and civil society, presented research findings
- WP3 members contributed to discussions on data access, public policy responsiveness, and ideology in China's governance practices.

Task 3.3 – International Relations (Lead: UTURKU)

Key achievements:

- WP3 researchers played a key editorial role in a special issue of the Asia-Europe Journal on *EU-China Relations after the 2024 European Elections*
- Ongoing data collection, continued preparation of scoping reports and policy briefs

Task 3.4 – Ideology and Values (Lead: UGENT)

Key achievements:

- Completed all three main deliverables, including a peer-reviewed article and two policy briefs
- Researchers presented findings at international academic events
- Continued collaborative research on nationalism psychology and the reinterpretation of universal values within Chinese ideological frameworks.

Across all tasks, WP3 has advanced the project's technological infrastructure and methodological toolkit through large-scale data collection and automation. In addition, it produced **multiple academic publications, policy briefs, and public presentations to** communicate project results. Finally, it facilitated **interdisciplinary collaboration** among consortium partners and strengthened **policy-relevant dissemination** through workshops and journal contributions. Despite technical challenges related to server capacity, WP3 achieved its milestones in both research output and infrastructure development, positioning it strongly for the final project phase.

3 INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

In the modern geopolitical world, the EU and China stand in a constant dynamic relation with each other. The question in which domains EU collaboration with China is desirable, possible, or impossible is therefore the central focus of ReConnect China. To answer this question, this project identifies Science & Technology, Economy & Trade, Domestic Governance, and Foreign Policy as four key fields on which the EU should upgrade its independent knowledge. To that aim, it will develop a database which will provide access to new sources of information. The independent knowledge generated in this project will bring together stakeholders and experts in a Europe-China Knowledge Forum and raise awareness on China among the general public and youth. In this way, leading scientific European expertise and innovative digital technologies are mobilized to generate a deeper, sustainable understanding of contemporary China, and work towards a resilient future with China for the EU and its citizens. The project consortium brings together 15 partners from across Europe: Six universities (Ghent University, University of Tartu, University of Turku, University of Groningen, University of Vienna, and University of Olomouc), six think tanks (Egmont Institute, Clingendael Institute, Istituto Affari Internazionali, French Institute of International Relations, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Elcano Royal Institute), one research institute (ZSI), one state agency (Innovation Norway) and one public institute under governmental administration (Macau Scientific and Cultural Centre). ReConnect China is coordinated by Ghent University, Belgium.

3.1 Deliverable scope of WP3

The key objective of WP3 is to shed light on the CCP's sources of legitimacy by tracing government narratives and popular discourses on the core values underlying CCP one-party rule, its state-building efforts and its relationship with the international community. Throughout the duration of the project, this will be achieved by:

- creating a comprehensive repository of policies, laws and regulations, government narratives and social media feeds;
- using state-of-the-art natural language processing and machine learning as well as field research to trace how government narratives and popular discourses influence each other;
- researching how the propaganda system attempts to influence public opinion at home and abroad;
- keeping track of core ideologies and values informing China's policies and international relations.

This deliverable provides a summary of the activities and progress of WP3 for the third reporting period (September 2024 to August 2025 (end of the reporting period)).

3.2 Reference documents

- ReConnect China Grant Agreement no. 101061483
- ReConnect China Consortium Agreement
- ReConnect China Project Management Handbook (D7.1)

4 PROGRESS OF WORK PACKAGE 3

WP3 consists of four tasks: 1) new sources of information (lead: UNIVIE); 2) Domestic governance (lead: UPOL); 3) International relations (lead: UTURKU); 4) Ideology and values (lead: UGENT). To a large extent, the deliverables of Tasks 2-4 depend on the data collected by Task 1. For this reason, most of the activity in WP3 during the reporting period pertains to this Task. The following sections report the progress of each Task during the reporting period.

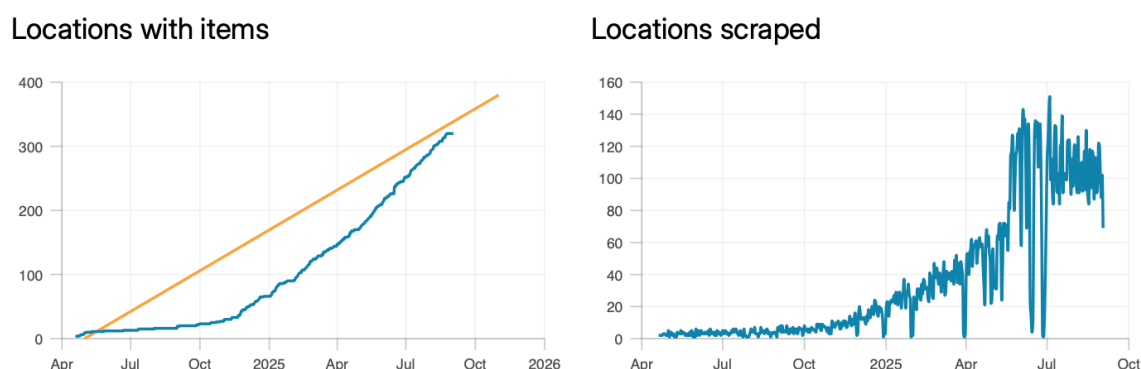
4.1 Task 3.1: Database – New sources of information (lead: UNIVIE)

Task 3.1 provides the information needed to trace political developments not only in Beijing, but also in China's provinces, municipalities and counties, to map public discourses on these topics, and to study how narratives, discourses, and policies influence each other. All this is necessary to obtain a more nuanced and up-to-date image of current political developments in China. To this end, we are creating an interactive and up-to-date repository for the analysis of policies, laws and regulations, government narratives, and public discourses which will be essential not only to the other tasks of this WP, but also for the other WPs of this project. To examine the relationship between citizen demands and public policies, the repository will also contain updated information on social unrest, citizen complaints to the government, and official responses to public complaints. Where there are no copyright issues or personal identifiable information, the information is published on the repository website <https://reconnectchina.univie.ac.at>.

Progress:

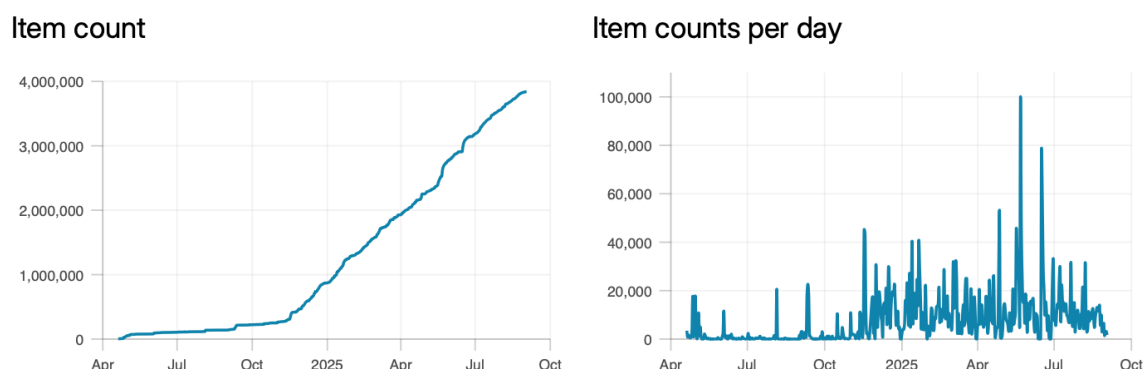
In the reporting period, task leader UNIVIE nearly completed data collection. Information of 320 out of 380 ministries, departments and provincial- and prefecture- level administrations has been collected (Figure 1).

Figure 1: planned and actual number of scrapers (left), number daily queries (right).



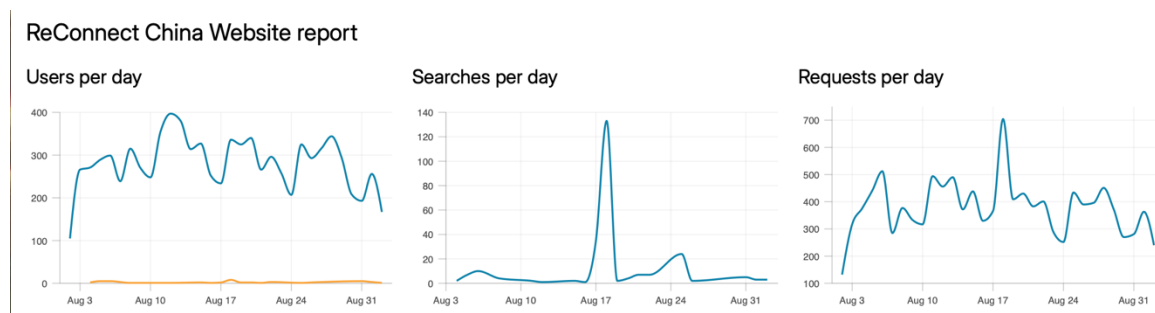
In addition, we opened the interface prototype up to the general public, improved the search function, implemented a registration system, ensured that the system is compatible with GDPR regulations, and implemented the highest accessibility standards. At the end of the reporting period, registered users had access to 3.8 million laws, regulations, policies, government announcements/local news and activities by the central and local leaders (Figure 2).

Figure 2: size of government information database (left), collected items per day (right)



The Chinese headlines are auto-translated into English, and an English-language summary is generated for each item in real time. Every day, the websites of about 100 localities are queried for new information. New information published by central government units is added to the repository within a day, information by local administrations within a week. Although we have not advertised the website widely because of technical bottlenecks and only informed selected groups of academics, journalists and decision-makers, the repository is very popular. Each day, the website is frequented by around 350 users making more than 400 requests (clicking on an item, performing a search). Search volumes peak when individuals perform research. According to feedback we received, the platform is used by researchers and also integrated into teaching and exams (Figure 3).

Figure 3: usage statistics for the repository



Progress was hindered by bottlenecks in our infrastructure. We have only one server for collecting information, performing queries and hosting the website. Due to high demand, the database and website frequently crashed. We were able to fix this through a work-intensive restructuring of our Docker container logic.

Major achievements and activities:

- Wrote, reviewed and tested approx. 3.000 webscrapers for 320 ministries and localities
- Implemented anomaly detection system to quickly identify defective webscrapers
- Improved logging
- Improved collection and storing of tables within documents
- Implemented user registration system
- Made registration system conform to GDPR regulation
- Implemented highest web accessibility standards
- Continued collection of public discourses on various subjects,
- Temporarily fixed access bottlenecks through different Docker container handling

4.2 Task 3.2: Domestic governance (lead: UPOL)

Task 3.2 is concerned with the continuities and changes in domestic politics during the Xi Jinping era and analyzes complex, contested and, in the case of the social credit system, often misrepresented policies. It will draw on a mixture of digital sources and field research in order to provide insight into the strengths and weaknesses of either research technique. In highlighting the applied potential of such technologies, the latter aspect complements the analysis done in Task 1.3. Furthermore, domestic narratives impact China's perceptions of other countries and regions; in that regard, this task links up with Task 4.1.

Deliverables related to Task 3.2:

- Workshop on Ideology, Governance and Discourse in Contemporary China (UNIVIE)
- Article manuscript on the government's reaction to popular demands for better public services (UNIVIE)
- Article manuscript on Party Building and civil society in China (UPOL)
- Article manuscript on public discourses on China's social credit system (UNIVIE)

Progress:

On March 14, 2025, the team at the University of Vienna organised a workshop on Ideology, Governance and Discourse in Contemporary China, in which several project participants

presented and discussed their work, fostering networking and exchange between project members. In addition, several article manuscripts were completed and one of them submitted to a peer reviewed academic journal. In addition, fieldwork on party building in China continued, and WP3 members presented project related research to relevant stakeholders.

Major achievements and activities:

- Workshop on Ideology, Governance and Discourse in Contemporary China held at the University of Vienna on March 14, 2025. Presentations:

Hermann Aubié: Rethinking China's Information Manipulation in Europe Since 2020 : Towards a More Integrated EU Response?

Bart Dessen: 'Drinking Xi Wine': Propagating Party Policies and the 'Overton Window'

Beatrice Gallelli: Harmony Between Humanity and Nature? Applying the Discourse of Eco-Civilisation to China's countryside

Runya Qiaoan: Social Governance in China: Grid Management and Philanthropic Organizations in the Urban Community

H. Christoph Steinhardt and Christian Göbel: Protecting Society from Itself: Justifying Social Credit on Chinese Social Media

Richard Turcsanyi: Political ideologies and political participation in China: Insights from a public opinion survey

- Article manuscript completed: Christian Göbel (UNIVIE) and Hao Wang: *When Do Protests End Political Careers? Grievance escalation and termination risk among Chinese local officials.*
- Article manuscript completed: Runya Qiaoan (UPOL): *Negotiating Party Control: Organizational Resilience among Chinese NGOs in the Party-Building Era.*
- Article manuscript submitted: H Christoph Steinhardt and Christian Göbel (UNIVIE): *Protecting Society from Itself: Justifying Social Credit on Chinese Social Media.* Revise and Resubmit, Big Data & Society.
- Another round of fieldwork by Runya Qiaoan (UPOL)
- Runya Qiaoan (UPOL) presented manuscript on Negotiating Party Control at Workshop on Moral Engineering, University of Vienna, 15 July 2025
- Christian Göbel (UNIVIE) delivered keynote on disappearing data at annual conference of Nordic Association of Chinese Studies, Copenhagen, 12-14 June 2025
- Christian Göbel (UNIVIE) participated in book manuscript workshop on working with Chinese legal documents at University of Leiden

- Christian Göbel (UNIVIE) participated in editor's workshop for a volume on Chinese Text as Data

4.3 Task 3.3: International relations (lead: UTURKU)

Task 3.3 is concerned with how the EU and other political entities are framed by the Chinese propaganda system, and how China attempts to shape citizen attitudes abroad. It will draw on existing data sets, for example MoFA's English language media communication collected by UPOL, datasets curated by NGOs as well as (official) news items and social media feed

Deliverables related to Task 3.3:

- Scoping report of recent academic studies and independent reports by Western and Taiwanese CSOs mapping out China's key information control actors and information operation networks (UTURKU)
- Policy brief on China's FIMI activities in Europe (UTURKU)
- Policy brief on Beijing's mask and vaccine diplomacy (UTURKU)
- Policy brief on government narratives and public discourses related to partners and competitors, in particular the EU and its member states (UNIVIE)

Progress:

In the reporting period, work on the scoping report and policy briefs continued, and WP3 members disseminated their research. Notably, Bart Dessein (UGENT) served as a guest editor with Jasper Roctus for a special issue on 'EU-China Relations after the 2024 European Elections.

Major achievements and activities:

- Bart Dessein (UGENT) and Jasper Roctus guest-edited a special issue on 'EU-China Relations after the 2024 European Elections. A European Perspective' with the 'Asia-Europe Journal' with contributions from ReConnect China consortium:
- **Bart Dessein and Jasper Roctus (UGent):** 'The Third Plenum of the Twentieth Party Congress: Ideological Fervor, Economic Pragmatism, and the Possibilities for EU-China Relations'
- **Beatrice Gallelli (IAI) and Marco Zappa:** 'Back to Cold War Era In-Betweenness? Italy's China Strategy in the Context of the Indo-Pacific Framework'
- **Frank Gaenssmantel (UGroningen):** 'The Risks of Continuity - Pitfalls of the EU's Policy Stance on China After the European Elections of 2024'

- **- Carmen Mendes (CCCM):** 'Greening Africa and Beyond: A new field for cooperation between China and the EU?'
- **- Françoise Nicolas (IFRI):** 'EU's De-Risking from China: A Daunting Task'
- The following members of the ReConnect Advisory Board also contributed:
- **- Margot Schüller (GIGA):** 'Geopolitical Conflicts and Economic Disruptions: Germany's China Policy Under Pressure'
- **- Hans Dietmar Schweisgut** (Centre Franco-Autrichien pour le Rapprochement en Europe, Vienna): 'EU-China Relations After the 2024 European Elections'
- Continued work on scoping report (UTURKU)
- Continued work on policy brief on Twitter diplomacy (UTURKU)
- Continued data collection on public and government narratives on the EU and USA (UNIVIE)

4.4 Task 3.4: Ideology and values (lead: UGENT)

Task 3.4 is concerned with the “big ideas” and priority areas that guide and inform policy making in China. Although ideology is often dismissed as unimportant and inconsequential, it is an essential element of Chinese politics. Understanding how concepts such as human rights and democracy are redefined, and how history and identity are reinvented by the CCP, will aid stake holders in their communication efforts by sensitizing them to the fact that the same concept might have different meanings and thereby complement existing, valuable efforts at “decoding” China. Task members will mainly draw on data produced in T3.1 and interviews that uncover psychological mechanisms behind nationalist sentiment among the Chinese youth, for example how they cope with contradictory historical/political information related to e.g. human rights after having been socialised into an official history discourse

Deliverables related to Task 3.4:

- Article manuscript on Ecological Civilization and China's Rural Policy (IAI+TARTU)
- Policy brief on China's conception of human rights, universal values (UGENT)
- Policy brief on China's role in fighting environmental pollution and climate change (IAI)
- Article manuscript on regional implementation of China's innovation policies (UTURKU)
- Policy brief on innovation policies in the Chengdu-Chongqing Twin-city region (UTURKU)

Progress:

During the reporting period, the three first deliverables were completed. Beatrice Gallelli (IAI) and Robert Weatherly (UTARTU) submitted an article manuscript to a peer-reviewed academic journals

and received a note of conditional acceptance. Bart Dessein (UGENT) and Beatrice Gallelli (IAI) completed one policy brief each. Progress on forthcoming deliverables is made.

Major achievements and activities:

- Article manuscript submitted: Beatrice Gallelli (IAI) and Robert Weatherley (UTARTU): Harmony Between Humanity and Nature? Applying the Discourse of Eco-Civilisation to China's Green Rural Revival Programme. Accepted with minor revisions, Journal of Contemporary Chinese Affairs
- Bart Dessein (UGENT): Policy Brief „Drinking Xi Wine“
- Beatrice Gallelli (IAI): Policy Brief Why “Ecological civilisation”? The values driving China's green turn under Xi Jinping
- Beatrice Gallelli (IAI): Presentation on "Harmony between humanity and nature? Applying the discourse on eco-civilisation on the Green Rural Revival Programme", Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Beppu, Japan, June 5
- Bart Dessein and Huanyu Zhao continued work on article manuscript on Human Rights and Universal Values
- Urmas Hőbepappel et al. (TARTU) continue work on article manuscript on Psychology of Nationalism in the making
- Outi Luova (UTURKU) presented research on China's regional development plans at The 2025 International Conference on China Urban Development, London, 7 Jul 2025 - 08 Jul

5 CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

WP3 has made good progress during the reporting period, with nearly all deliverables completed on time. The deliverables provide insights not only into the day-to-day activities of central and local governments in China, but also systematic knowledge on issues such as China's conditional responsiveness to citizen demands and the lack of incentives for local officials to take citizen grievances seriously; the co-optation of and cooperation between NGOs and Party organisations; how China's social credit system is discussed on social media; and the concept and practice of “Ecological Civilization” in rural China. In the coming reporting period, more outputs are expected for each of the Tasks. Three major hindrances are

- 1) the lack of hardware to run the public web interface of the database on scale;
- 2) increased access restrictions on Weibo, where we collect information on narratives and discourses, as well as
- 3) the lack of clarity what kind of collected information we can share with the public and each other. This is especially salient for Weibo data and online complaints.

As to 1), we've managed to keep the web interface accessible for the general public, but at the price of very slow queries. With regards to 2), we've also managed to devise workarounds through better identification of the collection software with the Weibo API. Point 3) still awaits clarification.