THIS WEEK

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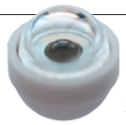

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Cultural conundrum

The Chinese government's professed commitment to transparency and responsiveness has had a rocky start. That bodes ill for the desire to attract the best science brains from around the world.

The Chinese government is open and accountable. Says who? Says the Chinese government. In mid-February, the state council, the nation's highest administrative authority, released a statement saying that government affairs should be "transparent to, understood by, and responsive to the public".

Ten days later, it announced a new social-media app to allow interaction with the government and distribute information about government services, boasting the slogan "the government is right by your side".

And earlier this month, premier Li Keqiang told all ministers that they would have to make themselves available to the press. Sure enough, at the end of the annual meetings of the People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPCC), a couple of dozen ministers appeared in the Chinese media to discuss the meetings' proceedings and the future of the country.

But China's version of transparency is very one-sided. Information flows freely in one direction, and it is not towards the people. For Chinese people even to ask questions of the government remains a no-no.

President Xi Jinping made this clear during a tour of China's three most prominent state-owned media outlets, when he encouraged journalists to toe the party line. His message was clear: the media are a propaganda tool of the state rather than an outlet for public discussion.

'Don't ask, we will tell', has also been the government's approach to its environmental problems. Although the government often laments its air and water pollution problems in the state media, it does not appreciate being questioned about how well it is dealing with them. Last year, it quickly blocked *Under the Dome*, a video documentary by journalist Chai Jing detailing the problem, which had gone viral.

The freedom to question is a hot topic in China right now. Last week, amid the government's latest responsiveness and transparency campaign, a journalist for the *Science and Technology Daily* asked a CPCC member an innocuous question on a topic discussed in the previous day's government meeting. Officials had mentioned that some industries that served the military had major down time between military projects, causing gaps in productivity. The journalist wanted to know what might be done to help these industries, and whether lessons from other countries might offer any clues. The CPCC member berated the journalist in front of the whole forum: "I'd like to point out that some media, for example, you, the one from *S&T Daily*, dwell on some negative issues," he said. "I've already noted down your licence number, so be careful, or you'll have to answer to the authorities." The journalist said that there must have been a misunderstanding and offered to discuss the matter later. The bureaucrat refused: "I don't have an obligation to talk with you," he said.

One of China's major goals is social harmony, and it remains an open question whether a democratic or an autocratic form of government is best able to achieve that. The Chinese state media have been quick to point to the current US presidential race as a clear sign of the 'malfunction' of democracy, because people 'vote to vent', not to choose a good leader. But China holds tightly to another goal as well — scientific development and innovation — for which free questioning and open debate are essential. Restricting the ability to ask questions does not work for that. It doesn't work for keeping scientific experiments on course, or for making sure that publications are as good as they can be. It doesn't work for confirming the details of a potential scientific collaboration, or for ensuring that grant committees select the most promising projects. It doesn't work for nailing down the details of material-transfer agreements, or for picking the best science-policy objectives. And it won't help China's ongoing efforts to lure the best brains from around the world. From the fear of increasingly strict regulations on what can be said to the ban on the use of tools such as Google and Google Scholar, which many scientists consider essential for information gathering, the country is making itself a much less attractive destination.

"For Chinese people even to ask questions of the government remains a no-no."

If China is to meet its scientific objectives (see page 424), a culture of debate and transparency is essential. No scientific community does this perfectly, but, in a country that discourages questions, the will to investigate and fully understand cannot be expected to take root. ■

Siren call

Now that gravitational waves have been discovered, it is time to put them to use.

The Universe is big, and getting bigger all the time. A little-known fact about gravitational waves, the latest cosmological discovery to get physicists excited (see page 428) is that they could help to measure this expansion. And they could show why the expansion has been accelerating, rather than slowing down as expected, under the push of a mysterious force dubbed dark energy.

The way in which astronomers conventionally measure distances has ancient roots. With ingenuity and a dash of basic trigonometry, the ancient Greek astronomer Aristarchus of Samos was able to measure the Moon's distance from Earth with surprising accuracy — in the third century BC.

A similar method to Aristarchus', using a concept known as stellar parallax, was first applied to measure a star's distance from Earth in 1838, and is still used today. The European Space Agency's Gaia probe is currently using it to compile a state-of-the-art catalogue of one billion stars in the Milky Way, extending the reach of parallax to unprecedented

distances and cutting errors down to less than 1%.

Stellar parallax is good, but it can go only so far. It entails measuring a star's apparent position in the sky at different times of the year, as Earth (or a space probe such as Gaia) orbits the Sun. The distance between the two observing points, measured to high accuracy, provides the base of a triangle. The distant star is at the opposite vertex. The smaller the angle at that vertex, the farther away the star is.

But because the size of Earth's orbit is fixed, as the vertex moves farther away the angle becomes smaller and smaller, and ultimately impossible to measure with any accuracy. (The basic unit of measurement of astronomical distance, the parsec, is short for 'parallax of one arcsecond', which refers to the size of that angle. One arcsecond is 1/3,600th of a degree, and in typical parallax measurements the angles are much smaller.)

For objects in more distant galaxies, astronomers have devised steps that build on the parallax method. Each step is a 'rung' on what they call the cosmic distance ladder. For example, the distance from Earth of the Andromeda Galaxy, the closest large galaxy to the Milky Way, is estimated by measuring the brightnesses of various types of star in it and comparing them to the brightnesses of similar stars closer to Earth whose parallax is known. Such estimates exploit the fact that similar stars look fainter the farther away they are.

Andromeda is roughly 780 kiloparsecs (2.54 million light years) away. Telescopes cannot resolve individual stars in galaxies that are hundreds of millions of parsecs away — except when those stars happen to blow up as supernovae. Astronomers use some supernovae as signposts of cosmic distances, or 'standard candles', meaning that their measured brightness is an indicator of their distance.

A major complicating factor is that the observed brightness of distant objects can be affected by foreground matter such as dust. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a more direct and reliable way of measuring distances — one that were as precise as Gaia and worked at scales from the galactic to the cosmic?

Beginning with a paper in this journal 30 years ago (B. F. Schutz *Nature* **323,** 310–311; 1986), physicists have suggested that gravitational waves could provide such a tool. The ripples, predicted by Albert Einstein in 1916 as a consequence of his general theory of relativity, travel across the Universe without being dimmed significantly by dust or gas.

"Stellar parallax is good, but it can go only so far."

The gravitational waves that struck Earth in September and were recorded by the Advanced Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) carried information that revealed their strength at the source. In theory, this information can be used to work out the source's distance.

In the next few years, other interferometers are scheduled to join LIGO to form a global network of gravitational-wave observatories. Together, these instruments could calculate the positions and distances of merger events. Neutron-star mergers are especially interesting to cosmologists because they should also produce bursts of short, high-energy γ-rays, which would help to pinpoint their galaxies of origin.

Researchers hope that they will be able to use information from mergers as a way to calculate the distances of known galaxies. Because gravitational waves are more similar to sound than they are to light, physicists have dubbed these potential signposts 'standard sirens'.

One of the main uses of supernova standard candles has been to measure the current rate of cosmic expansion. Standard sirens could provide an independent way to do this. And, if space-based interferometers are added to the network, they could be used to track dark energy. Hear the call. ■

Power of the pen

Scientists must unite to stop Turkey from removing the right to freedom of expression.

When he labelled outspoken academics as terrorists, Turkey's increasingly authoritarian President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was probably not thinking of Voltaire's eighteenth-century philosophical maxim: "To hold a pen is to be at war".

Erdoğan sent shivers down the spines of those who care about human rights by declaring on 14 March that those who support terrorists are as guilty as those "who pull the trigger", and that Turkish law should be changed to reflect this. "The fact that an individual is a deputy, an academic, an author, a journalist or the director of an NGO does not change the fact that that person is a terrorist," he said.

One the same day, three academics from universities in Istanbul were hauled into police custody and then refused bail while prosecutors considered charges of making propaganda for a terrorist organization.

Their crime? In January, they had signed a petition that called for an end to violence in the southeast of the country, where government forces have been fighting Kurdish separatists. The petition was signed by 1,128 academics, mostly from Turkish universities, when it was publicly launched on 11 January. It immediately sparked Erdoğan's rage. Many politically appointed university rectors leapt into line, launching disciplinary investigations into members of their staff who had signed — more than 500 so far. Dozens of signatories were brought in for police questioning. The harsh response attracted a shocked solidarity. Another 1,000 people signed the petition, including a large number of Western scientists, before it was closed on 20 January.

An atmosphere of uncertainty and fear prevails. None of the signatories knows whether they, too, will be arrested, and several have had death threats. Some have actively sought sabbaticals abroad; those working outside the country are afraid to return even to visit family.

Meanwhile, Turkey is playing a major part on the world political stage, in a role that is overshadowing the fate of the academics.

Turkey is a geopolitical fulcrum. On one side it borders war-torn Middle East, on the other, strife-ridden Europe that is struggling to cope with the refugee crisis. When the country reached a historic agreement with the European Union last week to take back migrants who were crossing into Europe illegally, many in the EU complained bitterly about making a deal with Erdoğan because of his worrying human-rights record.

Terrorist attacks in Turkey are intensifying, some carried out by Kurdish separatists, others by the Islamist group ISIS. Erdoğan's controversial announcement followed on the heels of a deadly attack in Ankara, and on 19 March, a suicide bomber killed four in Istanbul. Kurdish separatist terrorism had abated during a two-year ceasefire, but that broke down last July. Erdoğan argues that the peace petition, by focusing only on government military attacks on Kurdish militants, which have killed many innocent civilians, and ignoring terrorist attacks and other serious human-rights abuses carried out by the separatists, actively supports terrorism.

While appreciating the urgency of a call to peace, many scientists and academics themselves have reservations about the petition, seeing it as unhelpfully confrontational and even intellectually dishonest. But many have still bravely spoken up for the freedom of expression of the signatories.

Turkey's recently formed Science Academy published a strongly supportive statement in January. "The right to express one's opinions — even if these might be annoying or minority views — is an essential freedom of every citizen and every academic," it said. The academy should know — it was created by those who resigned en masse from the Turkish Academy of Sciences when Erdoğan took it over by decree in 2011. Scientists everywhere should use their pens and send their support. ■

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