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A BALANCING ACT?

A study on Sweden's ambivalence in responding to pressure from the Chinese embassy

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Abstract

Ever since Sweden was the first Western democracy to officially recognise the People's Republic of China shortly after its establishment in 1949, the two states have enjoyed decades of successful and beneficial bilateral cooperation. However, the literature states that maintaining bilateral cooperation with a growing authoritarian great power has generated an ambivalence from Sweden on sensitive issues regarding China, in order to not jeopardize domestic economic interests. This has been brought to a head, when the Chinese embassy in Stockholm has exerted pressure on independent journalists, in order to influence their reporting of China. The overall purpose of this study is to gain a deeper and further understanding of how power asymmetry between Sweden and China can affect how the case of the Chinese embassy exerting pressure on journalists will be managed from a national level. Part of the purpose is also to gain and provide insights and knowledge of the Chinese pressure from the perspective of Swedish journalists. By interviewing journalists and researchers, and applying a theoretical framework of primarily sharp, soft power and hard power and interdependence, the findings of the study show that journalists have increased their reporting of China as a response to the pressure and that they perceive measures to counter the pressure on an EU-level as essential. The findings also show that Sweden is likely to continue a pragmatic approach in dealing with the embassy's pressure, which ultimately means trying balance between upholding internal democratic values while maintaining good economic relations.

Keywords: Swedish press, sharp power, authoritarianism

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	5
1.1	Research questions, aims and purposes	7
1.2	Structure	9
2	Literature review	10
2.1	Historical overview of Sweden – China.....	10
2.1.1	<i>Swedish East India Company</i>	10
2.1.2	<i>The recognition of the People’s Republic of China</i>	10
2.1.3	<i>Achieving long-term cooperation</i>	11
2.2	Defining current relations and challenges	12
2.2.1	<i>Incentives</i>	12
2.2.2	<i>A balancing act</i>	12
2.2.3	<i>Changed dynamics</i>	15
2.2.4	<i>The free press under pressure</i>	16
3	Theoretical framework and concepts	18
3.1	New dimensions of power.....	18
3.2	Soft power	19
3.3	From soft to sharp power.....	20
3.3.1	<i>Democratic resilience</i>	21
3.4	Power imbalance; Sweden-China.....	22
3.4.1	<i>Interdependence</i>	23
4	Methodology	24
4.1	Interviews as method.....	24
4.1.1	<i>Why interviews?</i>	24
4.1.2	<i>Limitations of interviews</i>	25
4.1.3	<i>Interview structure</i>	26
4.1.4	<i>Mediated interviews</i>	26
4.2	Samples	27
4.2.1	<i>The case</i>	27
4.2.2	<i>Respondents</i>	28
4.2.3	<i>Analysing interviews</i>	29
4.3	Research criteria and ethics	32
4.3.1	<i>Reliability, validity and generalizability</i>	32
4.3.2	<i>Ethics</i>	33
5	Analysis.....	34
5.1	Journalists.....	34

5.1.1	<i>Responding to pressure</i>	34
5.1.2	<i>Perceptions of international responses</i>	38
5.2	Researchers.....	42
5.2.1	<i>Understanding the pressure</i>	42
5.2.2	<i>Maintaining balance</i>	45
5.2.3	<i>Power asymmetry and its implications</i>	50
6	Conclusion, discussion and further studies	53
6.1	Research questions	53
6.2	Concluding discussion.....	55
6.3	Future studies	55
7	References	57
8	Appendix	61

1 Introduction

China's increased global presence is currently perceived as one of the greatest challenges in international politics. Its economic and technological influence has, over the past four decades, developed to the extent that it's now to be considered a global great power, and a driving force in a changing world order (Michalski & Pan, 2015; Xinbo, 2018; Walker, 2016). China's authoritarian government has long been an issue of concern to western liberal democracies, who have hoped to influence China in accommodating to liberal democratic ideals through international cooperation (Michalski, 2013; Wong, 2019).

Sweden, being one such democracy, has had ties with China going back centuries. After Sweden was the first Western democracy to officially recognise the People's Republic of China shortly after its establishment in 1949, the two states deepened their diplomatic relations and cooperation further (Bexell, 2000; Leijonhufvud, 2016; Lagerkvist, et al. 2015). Since then, a number of exchanges ranging from environmental technology, civil society and research have been established, and there are approximately ten thousand Swedish companies in trade with China (Lagerkvist et al., 2015; Hellström 2014). The long and extensive history between Sweden and China have continuously, and triumphantly, been highlighted during state visits by Swedish as well as Chinese government officials and representatives. At ceremonial occasions, representatives for the Chinese Communist Party have referred to Sweden as "*a good, old friend*" (Leijonhufvud, 2016, 3, 7). Similarly, Anna Michalski (2013; 889) describes that the early recognition of the PRC, and the establishment of diplomatic ties that followed the recognition has generated the two profoundly different states to share "*a special relationship*".

However, maintaining decades of bilateral cooperation with a growing authoritarian great power has not always been an easy task for Sweden, who have invested in projects to spur the growth of civil society in China, in order to steer it towards a more democratic governing (Lagerkvist et. al, 2015). Lagerkvist et. al (ibid.) and Michalski (2013) argue that the relationship from Sweden's part has to a great extent been categorized by a balancing between the normative, humanitarian values to which Sweden since long has committed itself to uphold (Carlson-Rainer, 2017), and the economic, material interests that the Swedish economy rests upon. This balancing act has caused an ambivalence from Swedish policy makers when dealing with sensitive issues concerning China, such as not calling it a dictatorship, in order not to jeopardize the good diplomatic relationship (Leijonhufvud, 2016).

Maintaining the balancing between normative and material(*economic*) interests has, according to Lagerkvist et. al (2015; 80, 82) become increasingly more difficult as China has increased in power to the extent where it's difficult to influence China on normative issues. Thus, Lagerkvist et. al (ibid.) argues, Sweden has relied more on the EU to push the human rights issues concerning China and focused more on the economic ties (Leijonhufvud, 2017).

However, Sweden has witnessed its great power friend's authoritarian practices being translated into an assertive and dominant foreign policy. During the last couple of years, China has strategically adopted methods of sharp power to influence and exert pressure on the free media in multiple democracies, including Sweden (Cook, 2013; Walker et al. 2020; Kainz Rognerud, 2020). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is exerting pressure and exhortations on reporters, journalists and media organizations all around the world, in order to induce self-censorship. Its punitive foreign policy has resulted in denying VISA grants, threats and harassment of foreign reporters, in order to limit unfavourable reporting and to manipulate the international discourse on China (ibid.).

Since early 2018, the Chinese embassy in Stockholm has released statements on their website, attempting to discredit the Swedish media (Jerdén & Bohman, 2019). Moreover, Swedish journalists and news organizations have received multiple e-mails and letters from the embassy with criticism and attempts of influencing their reporting and verbal attacks on individual reporters (Kainz Rognerud, 2020). These events hit a critical point in late 2019, when the Swedish PEN organization announced that the Tucholsky-prize, a prize for persecuted journalists and publishers, would be awarded the Chinese-Swedish publisher Gui Minhai, detained in China since 2015 (Jerdén & Bohman, 2019). At this point, the Chinese ambassador stated in an interview that if the Minister for Culture would allow the prize to be awarded Gui Minhai, they would have to "*take countermeasures*" (Bråstedt, et al. 2019), and in another with Svenska Dagbladet (Majlard, 2019) he stated that "*normal cultural exchange will be severely hindered*". The Minister for Culture was also threatened with being banned from entering China (ibid.). The Chinese ambassador also expressed that the relationship between Sweden and China is "*not normal*" (Knutsson, 2019).

Following these events, the Chinese ambassador has been summoned to the Foreign Ministry, not much has been said on behalf of the Swedish government, except for a few brief comments. The Minister for Foreign Affairs has agreed on the account of the Chinese ambassador, stating that relations are currently not good but that it's still important to have good relations with China (ibid.). In January 2020, an organization named Utgivarna (2020)

released an open letter to the Swedish government, signed by two dozen journalists, where it's stated that they demand that the government should mark firmly against the pressure and that the issue should be raised on an EU-level.

1.1 Research questions, aims and purposes

In light of these events, it's relevant to further explore the pressure exerted from the Chinese embassy in Stockholm and Sweden's response to these. It's evident that Sweden's active stance on the Gui Minhai-case, and the active media reporting on this case and China's internal affairs has triggered the Chinese embassy and ultimately sparked a precursor to a potential diplomatic crisis. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine and analyse the pressure from the Chinese embassy in the context of Sweden's balancing act between interests, i.e. Sweden's ambivalence in dealing sensitive matters in relation to China without jeopardizing good economic relations.

An important aspect of this issue is that of the power asymmetry in the relationship between the two states; China is an authoritarian communist great power, who currently is the world's second largest economy, while Sweden is a small export-dependent liberal democracy (Lagerkvist et. al, 2015). Further, in the firing line of the pressure exerted from the Chinese embassy are Swedish journalists. It's therefore relevant to examine the pressure from the Chinese embassy from journalists' perspective, which will provide a deeper understanding of journalists in democracies being subjected to sharp power.

Thus, this thesis will be guided by the following questions;

1. *How have journalists from the Swedish press corps internally responded to the pressure exerted by the Chinese embassy, and how do they perceive measures to counter this pressure on an EU-level?*
2. *How and to what extent could power asymmetry and Sweden's previous ambivalence in dealing with China affect how Sweden will manage and respond to the pressure from the Chinese embassy?*

The overall purpose of this study is to gain a deeper and further understanding of power asymmetry and how this ultimately can affect how the case of the Chinese embassy exerting

pressure on journalists will be managed by Sweden from a national level. Part of the purpose is also to gain and provide insights and knowledge of the Chinese pressure from the perspective of Swedish journalists.

It should therefore also be noted that the main argument and point of departure throughout this thesis is that Sweden's balancing act towards China is a result of power asymmetry between the two states. More specifically, the power asymmetry creates a dependency from Sweden's part in that Sweden's economy has been and is still greatly benefited from export with China.

In order to fulfil the purpose and answer the research questions, interviews will be conducted with elite interviews with journalists and researchers. Because the research questions and the thesis deal with power, I will be using Nye's (1990) and Walker's (2016, 2018) framework on soft and sharp power, which enable the analysis of states' (*inter-*)dependency, power asymmetry and democratic resilience to sharp power.

1.2 Structure

The thesis is structured as follows; Firstly, an historical overview on the initial ties settled between Sweden and China is provided, mainly to set the context of how Sweden-China relations have developed over time. The literature review progresses with a closer look at Sweden's approach on dealing with normative and material interests in relations to China, current relations and China's attempts to influence and exert pressure on the media of different democracies. During this chapter, I also critically assess and discuss the literature. The thesis progresses with chapter three, where I introduce, define and discuss theoretical concepts. In chapter four, which is methodology, I introduce and discuss the chosen method and research design, interview samples, the case and assess research criteria. In this chapter, I also describe of how my interviews were conducted and how I will analyse them. In chapter five, I present and analyse the data I've gathered from my interviews by applying the theoretical framework. Every section in this chapter also contains a brief summary. Chapter six provides a summary of all the findings from the previous chapter and I discuss these in relation to my research questions. Finally, a conclusion will be provided in chapter seven, along with suggestions for further studies.

2 Literature review

2.1 Historical overview of Sweden – China

2.1.1 *Swedish East India Company*

Sweden's cooperation with China began with the Swedish East India Company, and dates back to the 18th century. Originating from the idea that Sweden could still establish itself as a European great power and with the aim to establish links with Asia, the company was actualized 1731 (Regeringen, 2019; Åberg, 1990). It settled the first ties between Sweden and Asia, with a primary focus on the Chinese market and provided goods such as tea, spices and porcelain. The company operated large scale, monopolistic and was very much a reflection of the prevailing time's mercantilist views; trade activities were limited to re-exporting only, and unlike its global competitors, the company didn't seek further than to secure domestic economic interests (Åberg, 1990; 99 – 101, 107). Views on whether Sweden gained any cultural influences through its initial ties with China are contested, mainly due to the fact that Sweden could have gained these potential influences indirectly through ties with other countries, such as France or Britain. The scientific evidence concerning the company's impact on the general domestic economy are also inconclusive, but the company did, according to Åberg (ibid.), nevertheless represent a change in domestic market activities. Moreover, as a result of foreign investment and work force in the company, they also probably contributed to the integration of different domestic markets on a global level. This is particularly interesting, considering that the company allegedly aimed solely at domestic economic objectives.

2.1.2 *The recognition of the People's Republic of China*

Much later, in 1950, Sweden became the first Western country to formally acknowledge the People's Republic of China (*Henceforth China*) (Lagerkvist et al., 2015; 14; Bexell, 2000). This was considered an important move to secure good relations and because of already established investments through Swedish corporations in China (Leijonhufvud, 2016). However, it was well calculated on behalf of the Swedish government to stand by and follow the moves of other countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States and other

Scandinavian countries (Leijonhufvud, 2016; Bexell, 2000; 8 – 11, 23 - 24). Since this was outplayed in the post-war era, the division between the East and the West was significant in how countries acted concerning the recognition of China; the UK sought to seize the opportunity to bring China closer to the West, while Sweden along with its Scandinavian neighbours wanted to form a neutral bloc between the East and the West (Bexell, 2000; 22 – 23). Interestingly, the UK and the other Scandinavian countries were among the first few countries to declare their recognition of China. China however, accepted Sweden's recognition before the others', because Sweden was first to meet the full demands of a formal recognition. This was appreciated in the Chinese government to the extent that, the then Head of State, Mao Zedong personally greeted the Swedish ambassador and received the letters of credence (ibid).

Bexell (2000; 24 – 26) describes the process of China accepting the recognition from other countries as '*the recognition of the recognition*' and argues that this was a result of China's feelings of inferiority. The last thing China wanted was to be seen as a regime dependent on other states' approval. Also, the Chinese regime wouldn't grant foreign representatives diplomatic status unless they proved that they dissociated themselves from the former Kuomintang regime. To conclude, the new leadership in China emphasised, or demanded equality, loyalty and respect for sovereignty in their future diplomatic relations and evidently, Sweden was first to provide this.

2.1.3 *Achieving long-term cooperation*

During the years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, trade activities with China were low, as well as with the overall cooperation between the two countries. Sweden did, however, over the years show their loyal support for China's seat in the UN, despite pressure from the United States (Bexell, 2000; 20 – 23). Leijonhufvud (2016) states that a pivotal moment for the future relations between Sweden and China came in 1971, when the Swedish Minister of Industry visited Peking. The visit came shortly after China had gradually started to open up to the world and aimed at planning a Swedish industrial exhibition being conducted the following year. Perhaps it was the fact that the Swedish government acted as fast as they did, the support of China's seat in the UN, or it was the visit itself that marked a new beginning for many years of beneficial cooperation ahead between the two states. Hereinafter, Swedish enterprise has played a crucial part in political exchanges between Sweden and China. For instance,

China has reached technological advancement through its close ties with Swedish (*and other Scandinavian*) corporations, which has greatly benefited their economic growth (Hellström, 2014; Wong, 2019). Similarly, Sweden has enjoyed domestic economic growth through expanding its export market in China (Lagerkvist et al., 2015; 79 – 80). At present day, exchanges between the two states range from areas such as technological and environmental development to higher education (*ibid.*).

2.2 Defining current relations and challenges

2.2.1 *Incentives*

The early bilateral ties between Sweden and China have continuously been highlighted during state visits by Swedish as well as Chinese officials (Lagerkvist et al., 2015). For instance, Chinese leaders have often referred to Sweden as a “*lao pengyou*”, meaning “*a good, old friend*” (Leijonhufvud, 2016). Similarly, Anna Michalski (2013) notes that their historical connections have earned them “*a special relationship*”, and it can be argued that this has served them well. Lagerkvist et al. (2015; 81- 82) describes the benefits that the two countries draw on each other; China’s main objectives with engaging in bilateral cooperation with Sweden is and has been technological improvement, where Sweden historically has been in the front line (Wong, 2019). As part of China’s rise to global power, it also seeks to increase its foreign influence, e.g. in the Arctic region, which has been fairly successful given that China now has observer status in the Arctic Council. For Sweden, the main objectives remain economic, i.e. further export activities in China. Apart from economic growth, Sweden also aims at cultural exchanges and stimulating the growth of a civil society in China (*ibid.*). The aim to stimulate the growth of Chinese civil society is part of a more general objective to promote human rights and democracy, which is argued to be more successful when engaging in trade activities (Bengtsson, 2020; Michalski, 2013; Wong, 2019). As will be explored in the following section, promoting human rights while maintaining good diplomatic relations with China is not necessarily an easy task for Sweden.

2.2.2 *A balancing act*

Sweden is a small export-dependent democracy, but its historically neutral position and generous foreign aid has contributed to Sweden being regarded as a “humanitarian superpower” (Lagerkvist, et al. 2015; Carlson-Rainer, 2017). Therefore, it might be expected that Sweden will always come to human rights’ defence. However, Michalski (2013; 894 - 895) states that in regard to China, Sweden has always had to tread carefully concerning these normative interests. To state an example of this, Michalski (ibid.) uses the discussions on lifting the arms embargo against China in 1989, during which the Swedish Parliament were initially divided, because of the human rights situation in China at the time being. The opposition eventually caved and agreed to lifting the embargo, because they didn’t want to jeopardize Swedish export market and China’s cooperation with the EU. According to Michalski (ibid.), the different governments in Sweden over the years have all had to make sure to not make decisions that would anger the Chinese government. She ultimately state that the relationship between Sweden and China is characterized by the fact that “*Sweden’s policy towards China, just as Denmark’s, is torn between upholding professed values and norms and securing economic interests*” (2013; 894).

Lagerkvist et al. (2015; 83) notes that Sweden today has a different approach to normative interests in China, i.e. not being too vocal in its criticism about human rights issues, and to let it be dealt with on an EU-level. The contradiction lies within Sweden’s alignment with the EU-level; Jerdén and Bohman (2019; 3) state that Sweden has, domestically, refrained from commenting and acting on contested views with China but is simultaneously one of the most prominent actors within the work of the EU to actively promote human rights issues and democracy in Chinese society. Indeed, the Swedish government is aligned with the EU; in the Swedish government’s strategy on China, it’s stated that “*The EU is our most important foreign policy arena and a strong and united EU is crucial in ties with China*” (Regeringen, Skr. 2019/20:18).

It has become increasingly difficult for both Sweden and other small EU member states to influence China on normative principles (Lagerkvist et. al, 2015). Sweden’s foreign aid to China has decreased dramatically over the years as China has been able to recover from extreme poverty and have instead risen to be the world’s second largest economy (Regeringen, 2019; Walker, 2016). Lagerkvist et. al (2015; 81) also claim that after decades of benefiting from Sweden’s technological advancements, it is argued that China is catching up and might even have overtaken Sweden in this area. Moreover, some of the literature on Sweden – China and the EU – China relations state a concern that China is now too powerful to influence. Surely, the EU is still of great importance for China to remain as the global

power it has become (Michalski & Pan, 2015; 6), but for smaller democracies such as Sweden, it is undeniably difficult to be the constant upholder of human rights while engaging with China. Consequently, it's no wonder why Sweden has aligned with the EU in its China-strategy. Interestingly, Sweden has for long been known for its solid beliefs in human rights, peace and democracy (Carlson-Rainer, 2017), and has yet refrained from criticism of these issues in relations to China. What can be interpreted from this is that maintaining the balancing between different interests has become too difficult for Sweden which explains the alignment on the EU. This also indicates the power asymmetry between Sweden and China, that evidently has increased over the decades as China grew stronger. Nevertheless, as of the present time, China is still attempting to execute its internal authoritarian practices within Sweden, and as a sovereign state, surely it must fight the pressure from the Chinese embassy on two fronts; in the EU and at home.

As argued, China's current economic and political position in the world indicates a shift in power in the relations between Sweden and China and is potentially challenging the notion that Sweden could successfully promote liberal democratic values when interacting with China. It's worth noting, however that Lagerkvist et al. (2015; 79) and Hellström (2014; 10) claim that despite the many differences between Sweden and China this has not (*yet*) impacted their diplomatic and economic interactions. Firstly, Lagerkvist and Hellström put this argument forward five to six years ago, which was before the pressure from the Chinese embassy on the Swedish press started. And while it's still uncertain whether the threats from the ambassador will be executed, the relationship has successively declined. Secondly, Lagerkvist et. al (2015; 81) state in the same article that the Confucius Institute at Stockholm University was disused after it received too much criticism for spreading state sponsored propaganda, which should be considered as, at least, an indicator of conflicting interests. Thirdly, Göran Leijonhufvud (2016; 7) claims that despite Sweden and China's history of good ties and cooperation, it hasn't been in either Sweden's or China's favour when it has really mattered. However, and interestingly, Hellström (2014; 10-11) also presents findings of interviews with Chinese officials, which stated that they have a positive perception of the Nordic countries, mainly because the Nordic countries are less suspicious of China, in contrast to other western countries, and that cooperation with the Nordic countries is more "*smooth*" than with the US and the UK. Further, Hellström (ibid.) presents findings of a survey based on a random sample in the Chinese population showed that the Nordic countries are perceived as "*successfully balancing social, environmental and economic achievements.*" (2014; 10).

To conclude this section, it might have been a few decades of smooth and beneficial cooperation, but it can be argued that the reason as to why it's been possible to maintain the stability of the relationship for so long, is presumably because of Sweden's ability to maintain the balancing act. It can also be argued that because of this balancing act, China has viewed Sweden (*and its Scandinavian counterparts*) as more easy to deal with than greater states such as the US and the UK, and this ultimately highlights how the differences in power are relevant in analysing Sweden-China relations. Lastly, it's also clear that the literature has yet to be extended, since current relations evidently is on a decline, which will be further discussed in the following subsection.

2.2.3 *Changed dynamics*

During the past ten years, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (*Henceforth the CCP*) has advanced their methods of controlling information flows and media outlets, not only within their own borders but abroad. The United States, New Zealand and Taiwan are among democracies that in various ways have been targets of Chinese pressure and attempts of controlling their media. In 2018, it became evident that Sweden was one of these democracies as well. What started with the Chinese embassy in Stockholm criticising Swedish news reporting for spreading disinformation about China and portraying the country in an unfavourable view, has spiralled into what Jerdén and Bohman (2019) refers to as a propaganda campaign aimed towards Sweden, with the Chinese ambassador in the front. The criticism from the embassy was followed by accusations that Sweden doesn't treat their Chinese-Swedish citizens according to norms of human rights and that Sweden is anti-China (*ibid.*; Lundqvist, 2019). The Swedish public service news organization, SVT, conducted a survey among the eight largest news organization in Sweden on whether they've been contacted by the Chinese embassy regarding their reporting on China. The results of the survey were that six of them had been contacted, and often by the ambassador himself (Kainz Rognerud, 2020). Furthermore, the survey showed that journalists have received both exhortations and threats, but also invitations to formal meetings to discuss the content of certain articles that raises criticism towards the Chinese regime (*ibid.*).

Another central character in these events is the Chinese-Swedish publisher Gui Minhai, who have been held in China since 2015 and was in February 2020 sentenced to 10 years in prison, which many are convinced is after publishing books about the personal lives of political

leaders in China¹. This has sparked outcry in both Swedish and foreign press (Jerdén & Bohman, 2019) and the case got even more infected in late 2019, when the Swedish PEN Association awarded Minhai the Tucholsky-prize, a prize for persecuted authors and publishers. This prompted the Chinese ambassador to release a public announcement, stating that there will be diplomatic consequences if the Swedish government allowed for the prize to be awarded Gui Minhai (Knutsson, 2019). It was also as late as in December of 2019 that the Chinese vice Minister of foreign affairs referred to the Sweden-China relationship as “*not normal*”, an account which the Swedish Minister of foreign affairs, Ann Linde agreed to (ibid.).

2.2.4 *The free press under pressure*

Jerdén and Bohman (2019; 2) argues that it's possible that the Gui Minhai-case has worked as a trigger for the Chinese embassy, but that it's just as likely that the Chinese government is trying to show other democracies in Europe what will or will not be tolerated from a Chinese perspective, and to manipulate the public's view of China. The former being less likely than the latter, because although the Gui Minhai-case was, and is to date a well-covered sensitive issue in media reporting, it doesn't explain the same trend in other democracies. As briefly mentioned in the previous section, in countries all over the world the CCP are restricting unfavourable reporting, conducting cyber-attacks and pressuring reporters and media owners to alter content. In Taiwan, for instance, the attempts to influence the free press have been systematic since 2008 (Hsu, 2014; Cook, 2013). By placing embedded advertising to spread propaganda, pressuring media owners to self-censorship and having tycoons purchasing Taiwan media outlets, the Chinese government are seizing the opportunities of Taiwan's free press and open markets (Hsu, 2014; 516-518). In other Asian countries, local governments are restricting and punishing reporters for unfavourable reporting of China. One example that Cook (2013; 22) describes is Cambodia, who's state-owned media avoids negative reporting, and who's government also receives considerable amount of aid from China. It is, according to Cook not unusual that economic and political incentives play into how reporters, media companies and governments handle the pressure to self-censor from China, and rewards and punishments are strategically used by Chinese officials. Foreign reporters that don't adhere to

¹ The Chinese government claims that Gui Minhai was being held because of a traffic incident and that his 10-year sentencing is based on providing intelligence abroad (PEN International, 2020; SVT Nyheter 2020).

the CCP's demands of pro-China reporting are more frequently denied VISAs and are banned from entering China. In some cases, foreign reporters have been threatened and even physically assaulted (Cook, 2013; 9-12, 15; Pexton, 2012).

For the most part, the literature specifically on China exerting pressure on the free press of democracies focuses mainly on Chinese propaganda, soft power and public diplomacy. This branch of the literature consistently state that China is using soft power to improve its international image and to secure foreign interests, which according to Brady (2015) derives from China's historically bad image that has hindered the acceptance from the outside world that China seeks. Wilson (2015) and Walker (2016) however, stress that China is practicing soft power as a way of counteracting Western democracy and its influence. Walker (2016; 61) specifies that China's aim is not to promote authoritarianism, but to "*reshape norms of the international order*". This will be further discussed in the following theory chapter.

3 Theoretical framework and concepts

In this chapter, I present the theoretical framework that will be used to analyse the data presented in chapter five. As have been stated previously, the overall aim of this thesis is to explore and examine how power asymmetry affects how Sweden deals with China in their diplomatic relations, and specifically how this power asymmetry creates an ambivalence from Sweden's part in this relationship.

The chosen framework is therefore based on different forms and dimensions of power. Power is a crucial concept within political science, because it deals with relations both within states and between states. The concepts that form the base of the theoretical framework are the concepts of soft power and sharp power, as introduced by Joseph S. Nye (1990) and further developed by Christopher Walker (2016, 2018). However, closely related to these two concepts are also hard power and normative power. The strength of using this framework is that the core concepts, soft/normative and sharp/hard power, enable the analysis of power asymmetry between states and the vulnerability of smaller states, in that they expose how the concept of power itself is complex and intangible (Nye, 1990), as will be demonstrated in this chapter. Moreover, Emma Jeannes (2019) states that hard power "*is generally exercised when there is an imbalance in a relationship, for example when one party is more dependent or weaker than the other party*". Thus, this framework is suitable for analysing Sweden's delicate balancing between upholding internal values and maintaining material interests in relation to China.

3.1 New dimensions of power

Joseph S. Nye (1990; 154, 160-162) describes power as the ability to control others into doing what they normally wouldn't do. Traditionally, states' ability to exert power on others has been determined by resources such as military capacity, political stability, territory and natural resources. However, modern communication and economic interdependence has made the traditional, more costly forms of power less useful. Also, changes in international political issues require multilateral cooperation and effective communication to a greater extent than military capacity. Nye (ibid.) concludes these changes as a diffusion of power, which brings new dimensions to the concept of power and ultimately changes the premise on who possesses it. While economic growth is still a power factor, communication and information has become

equally, if not more important as traditional means of power (Wilson, 2008; 113). In his article from 1990, Nye states that power in the 21st century won't be derived as much from "capital-rich", as from "information-rich" (1990; 164), and it's ultimately about "whose story wins" (2018; 1).

3.2 Soft power

As interdependence has generated the concept of power to be more elusive, and military and economic capacity has been categorized as means of power rather than the only definition, being able to depict a favourable view of one's internal values and policies to the outside world is a means of power (Nye, 2018). By adopting the strategy of *soft power*, a state can shape the preferences of others through three primary resources; culture, foreign policies and political values (Nye, 2008; 95; Szczudlik-Tatar, 2011; 47). When Nye introduced the concept of soft power, he defined it as not coercive in its nature, but that it rather rests on skilful persuasion, attraction and seduction to appeal other states in order to achieve policy goals (ibid.). It emphasises the values that are expressed in a country's culture, i.e. how it cooperates with others and what values underlie national policies and practices (Nye, 2008; 94-96). Consequently, by adopting the strategy of soft power, a country can boost its international image and gain more allies in the global political arena, by persuading others to *want* to do what you want, without using coercion (ibid.; Walker, 2016; 60-61). Carlson-Rainer (2017) describes how Sweden has had great impact in shaping international discourse on human rights through soft power diplomacy. She further explains that small states such as Sweden are vulnerable to international political instability and conflict and thus have been in the forefront of integrating human rights perspective to secure long-term peace and stability. Especially Sweden, but also some of its Scandinavian counterparts have through soft power diplomacy shaped human rights and peace norms in the global discourse and international affairs.

However, soft power doesn't necessarily aim at foreign governments, but rather their population, which stresses the importance of culture as a primary resource (ibid.). Different forms of cultural exports are ideal tools for soft power, because "*Culture is the set of practices that create meaning for a society*" (Nye, 2008; 96). Thus, cultural exports such as literature, education, popular culture and news media are particularly important and effective sources of soft power, because they all share the ability to frame global events and issues to the public (Bebawi, 2016; 157-158). Education plays an important role in shaping a state's international

image because it enables long-lasting relationships and cooperation between different states, involving key individuals and institutions of society. This is usually executed through exchange programs, lectures and seminars (Nye, 2008; 101-102).

3.3 From soft to sharp power

Soft power is, as described by Walker (2016; 61-62) a benign form of power, since it's merely a strategy that many states adopt to enhance its international image and general attractiveness. Indeed, states have for long used soft power as a tool to gain attractiveness or to reinstate a good reputation, such as France, Italy, Germany and the United States before World War 1 (Nye, 2008; 95-96). As a political institution, the EU is considered to be a normative soft power in its attempts to convince both member states and the outside world how powerful the normative foreign policy framework of the EU is (Michalski, 2005; 125-127; Nielsen, 2013; 728).

However, the same resources and methods can also be used with a more harmful agenda, i.e. to manipulate and control, which are characteristics of *sharp power*. What precisely defines sharp power is that it *pierces* and *perforates* institutions and political discourse in order to distort political environment and public opinion (Walker, 2018; 11-13). It's not always easy to distinguish sharp from soft power, due to similar means of exercising it that can be fairly subtle. The fact that *soft* power involves framing, and that it allows states to give prominence to more favourable elements of its culture and practices, makes the lines between soft and sharp power blurred at times (Walker, 2018; Nye, 2018; 2). Nye (ibid.) and Walker (2016, 2020) state the example of CCP-sponsored news that are being broadcasted in multiple democracies aimed at non-Chinese audiences. While this is a clear example of soft power, however, as soon as content become altered or manipulated, to the extent that it hints towards propaganda, it's sharp power.

It's not unexpected that states such as China and Russia are part of the conceptualization of sharp power, since elements of strict media control and propaganda are part of authoritarian governing. Advanced technology and globalization have enabled such states to spread disinformation, surveillance and conduct cyberattacks abroad, in order to restrict regime critique similarly as they do at home (Walker et al., 2020; 126-129, 135; Cook, 2013; 8-10). Ultimately, it generates an 'augmented authoritarianism' and China and Russia are prominent figures in this regard (ibid). In addition to spreading disinformation and conducting

cyberattacks, methods of sharp power can also be more vivid and less anonymous. For instance, direct pressure such as threats or bullying foreign journalists, researchers and public officials to self-censorship are other examples of sharp power (Nye, 2018; 1; Walker, 2016; 58-59). China uses “*carrots and sticks*”, as Cook (2013) describes it, to control the publishing of what they perceive as defamatory content by either denying or delaying visa grants. This way, it’s easier to restrict unfavourable reporting and induce self-censorship among journalists and publishers.

As been demonstrated, sharp power works through exerting pressure on specific domains of society, specifically those that help shape political expression and public opinion. Walker (2018; 12-14) states that the openness of democracies makes them particularly vulnerable to sharp power, and further explains that it aims at targeting “*sectors that are crucial in determining how citizens of democracies understand the world around them*” (2018; 12). He refers to these sectors as CAMP; culture, academia, media and publishing, which are also the sectors through which soft power is channelled. Further, Walker (2018; 9-10) argues that democracies have for too long engaged uncritically with China, granting it access to these vulnerable sectors. The idea that if western democracies engage in cooperation with authoritarian regimes, this would eventually influence the authoritarian regime to be influenced by democratic values, has been naïve and has backfired. He states the example of Australia, where a deal that would enable broadcasting to Chinese audiences instead resulted in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation censoring critique of the CCP (ibid.; 9-10).

3.3.1 *Democratic resilience*

To stay resilient against sharp power and to protect CAMP-sectors, Walker et al. (2020; 132-134) as well as Cook (2013; 50) suggest that democracies must reinforce the values on which they are built i.e. transparency, the freedom of expression and accountability. Interference in these institutions are often carried out through advanced technology, and leaders and civil society therefore must gain expertise in how authoritarian states use technology to exercise sharp power (ibid.). However, it’s worth noting that this example is stated in a context of economies that are still developing, where access to functioning connectivity is limited but the demand is high. This creates a different dependency on e.g. China, that can offer developing economies these services but at high political costs (ibid.). Developed democracies already have technological advances and can detect intrusion and manipulation by foreign powers to a greater extent that developing states have. In this regard, one could argue that democratic

states already possess skills that decreases their vulnerability. Nevertheless, even though government officials and elites might be well aware of sharp power, when the Chinese embassy in Sweden exert pressure and influence on independent journalists, one can't assume that sharp power doesn't influence citizens of a democracy. Consequently, Walker's (et al. 2020) argument of transparency is crucial in a journalistic context, because the media informs the public.

Nye (2018) takes a similar standpoint; he argues that when CAMP-sectors are being exploited by sharp power tools, democracies should use their transparency and accountability to expose these attempts to interfere. More specifically, he argues that shutting down platforms where pressure and interference occur is counterproductive. This reasoning builds upon the fact that while *soft* power can enhance the attractiveness of a state, it can also reduce it, especially if the line for sharp power is crossed. According to Nye (2018; 2), China could generate more soft power if its methods of sharp power were reduced. What Nye then actually suggests is that democracies would be guilty of using similar sharp power- methods as China, if they choose to dissolve Confucius Institutes, as in the case of Sweden. If such a scenario would occur in the specific context of Chinese pressure on journalists, what would the equivalent situation look like? Presumably, journalists would then counteract with taking measures of discrediting officials, distorting facts or making subtle threats, which are all sharp power techniques. Instead, if following Walker et al., Cook and Nye's model, journalists should strive for a neutral, transparent and ethical reporting, and aim towards exposing how China uses sharp power to the public. Lastly, collective approaches are crucial in responding to sharp power, since regimes behind it benefit from, but also aim at, dividing allies. Specifically independent institutions of civil society should seek collective approaches, because they are often the targets (Walker, et al. 2020; 133).

3.4 Power imbalance; Sweden-China

It can be argued that sharp power explains how China is exerting power. However, to analyse power asymmetry between Sweden and China, it's necessary to view the two states as being two different forms of power. Wilson (2008; 113-114) describes how neorealists stress the importance of traditional hard power as statecraft; military capacity, (*economic*) sanctions and coercive diplomacy (*sharp power*), i.e. values that are ascribed great powers such as China. In contrast, liberal internationalists emphasise soft power as a resource essential for governing (ibid.). Sweden, being aligned with the EU's normative framework of peace, human rights, the rule of law and fundamental rights (Manners, 2002; 240-242; Michalski, 2005), and

having a long tradition of advocating these, can be argued to be a soft power (Carlson-Rainer, 2017; Keohane & Nye, 1998; 86).

3.4.1 Interdependence

In Nye's article on (*soft*) power (1990; 157-158), he explains how increasing interdependence between states implies a mutual dependence that is unevenly balanced. In a scenario between a vulnerable state and a less vulnerable state, the less vulnerable and stronger one will use threats to obtain power and dominance over the other. However, it's also likely that the stronger and less vulnerable state has limited ability to influence a smaller state with solidly organized political institutions. Further, in a relationship between states that share mutually beneficial cooperation but differ in strength, the stronger state won't necessarily benefit from exerting pressure on its weaker counterpart (Nye, 1990; 165-166).

4 Methodology

This study is a case study and the data will be collected through interviews. As every method has its limitations, the limitations of interviews as chosen method will be discussed in this chapter. I also present the process of sampling in relation to respondents and I will clearly argue for the relevance of this particular case study. Moreover, the chapter will provide the reader with how I will apply the theoretical framework and concepts to my analysis, and a discussion on research criteria and ethics.

4.1 Interviews as method

Throughout this chapter, I will argue for the strength of interviews as method, but also highlight its limitations. This will be done from a general perspective, as well as from the perspective of this particular study. Further, I will in the final sections describe the interview structure and how the interviews will be conducted.

4.1.1 *Why interviews?*

For this study, the data will be collected through elite interviews. In order to fulfil the purpose and answer the research questions, interviews are essential, because they enable perspectives and knowledge that wouldn't be accessible through e.g., public documents. More specifically, the strength of using interviews are that through the enabled space for reflection and mutual discovery, they can provide insights and new knowledge that else wouldn't have been accessible (Tracy, 2013; 132). Using public documents as collecting data was the initial idea for the thesis, and it could potentially have provided the study with valuable data, but as the purpose and research questions developed it was evident that documents would have been far from sufficient. The case of the Chinese embassy's attempts to influence the Swedish press is a fairly new course of events, and most of the accessible public documents related to this issue are general strategies of the Swedish government and its China policy, and don't explicitly mention events of this kind. Thus, my research questions and purpose will be approached through conducting elite interviews (*discussed and defined in section 4.2.2*). To characterize the form of interviews that will be conducted, I've used what Brinkmann and Kvale (2015; 33) describe as specified interviews, because these interviews aim at describing specific situations and actions. However, this form of interviewing also overlooks general opinions of

the subject, and this part is not completely accordant with my aim and purpose. I thus also adopt a descriptive form of interviewing because these aim at collecting data that is nuanced and diverse, in order to learn the respondents experiences and how they have acted in specific situations and contexts (ibid.).

4.1.2 *Limitations of interviews*

Interviews as method undoubtedly has its limitations. Research criteria such as validity, reliability and generalizability will be discussed in more detail in section 4.3, but general limitations of interviews will be briefly discussed below.

Typical criticism towards interview research have focused primarily on ethical concerns and the issue of subjectivity. Interviews are, above all conversations, within which the participants create meaning that ultimately will be interpreted to explain and understand a phenomenon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; 4-6). Naturally, *meaning* and *interpretation* brings the discussion to biases, and Brinkmann and Kvale (2015; 198-199) discuss the criticism of subjectivity and confirm that biases can invalidate a study. However, they also emphasise the strength in recognizing biases, because even this can contribute to a “*multiperspectival construction of knowledge*” (2015; 198). Interviews can also be problematic in that they are very time-consuming and dependent on respondents. Being reliant on respondents can cause problems for a study overall, if respondents decide on a short notice to not participate. Likewise, the process of finding new respondents or to find respondents that are suitable for the study can either slow the process down or make it difficult to conduct the study in the form it was initially planned.

Naturally, it's also difficult to anticipate the outcome of an interview, and what kind of data it will generate. This, however, is as previously mentioned rather a strength, because on one hand, it can provide the study with unexpected knowledge, while on the other, it can create difficulties in validity. Validity in interviews, as well as most of the criticism on this method, is as Brinkmann and Kvale (ibid.) says to a great extent dependent on the craftsmanship of the researcher/interviewer. Even if the use of the criteria of validity in qualitative research is debateable (*see section 4.3*), it should though be kept in mind throughout the entire process, and not solely in the interview process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; 284-285). This is done through a continuous checking of the research questions, aims and purpose(s) formulated for the study (ibid., 199).

4.1.3 *Interview structure*

Due to the variety of respondents and their different backgrounds and expertise, interviews conducted for this study will differ in character, mainly in that the interview guide contains specific questions aimed at explaining specific course of events, by which the respondents are carefully selected due to their involvement or expertise in the specific case that is this study. The interview guide will therefore be altered slightly depending on the respondent. This will be discussed further in section 4.2. Tracy (2013; 139) notes that structured interviews are often suitable when you wish to compare data in a large sample, but that they are also lacking in flexibility, and the interviews will thus be semi-structured and open-ended. As an interview in this study proceeds, the questions change in nature from being specific and aiming at specific events, to questions that are more reflective in its character and allows the respondent to argue and reflect freely. Specifically, the interviews are semi-structured in that they focus on respondent's knowledge and experiences in their lived world, on a chosen topic or theme (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; 29, 31).

4.1.4 *Mediated interviews*

All interviews in this study will be conducted digitally, either by Skype, Zoom or e-mail.² Mediated interviews are, after all, slightly different from face-to-face interviews. However, mediated interviews are mostly beneficial for several reasons; they are cost-effective and time-effective because they don't depend on geographical location (Tracy, 2013; 164-165). Interviewing through digital devices can also create a safer space for respondents to share their experiences and thoughts and ultimately, encourage engagement (ibid.). Most importantly, because face-to-face interviews demand more planning and organizing in that they require a suitable location that works for all participants, mediated interviews are more flexible. Tracy (ibid.) states that this can make potential respondents more inclined to participate.

Some of my interviews are asynchronous, which means that they are conducted through e-mail or telephone (Tracy, 2013; 164). One of my respondents had limited possibility to participate in interviews through Skype or Zoom and preferred to have questions sent to them

² This thesis is written during the corona pandemic, and while mediated interviews exclusively wouldn't have been the primary choice of conducting the interviews, it is necessary given the circumstances.

through e-mail. An advantage of this is that it enables respondents to reflect on their answers for a longer period of time, which can make the answers, and ultimately, the data more organized. Finally, a benefit with asynchronous interviews are that they are “self-transcribed” (ibid.). Naturally, asynchronous interviews conceal facial expressions, emotions and, one could argue, the authenticity of respondents personal experiences. However, I don’t consider this problematic, since my study doesn’t aim at exploring the respondents’ emotional or personal experiences, but rather their professional views, practices and experiences.

4.2 Samples

4.2.1 *The case*

As Tracy (2013; 230) argues, to achieve quality in qualitative research, one must have a relevant and worthy topic. The case of the Chinese embassy’s attempts to influence the Swedish press is interesting and relevant for several reasons.

Firstly, central and most important for this study is the concept of power. China is an authoritarian power, whose financial growth and global expansion has earned them great power status. Sweden, a small democracy whose domestic economy has benefited greatly from its bilateral cooperation with China, is and has been regarded as a ‘humanitarian (*super*)power’. One could argue that Sweden and China represent two ends of a continuum, and this indicates the power asymmetry between them. In line with the theoretical framework and concepts of this study, China can also be viewed as a sharp or hard power, given their economic and military capacity, while Sweden can be considered soft, normative power.

Secondly, the two countries have, despite these contradicting traits engaged in cooperation within a number of fields for decades. As have been discussed in the literature review, representatives from both the Swedish and the Chinese government highlight their long history of cooperation and have considered each other “*old friends*”. This is also emphasised in the literature on Sweden-China relations, which Michalski (2013) calls a “*special relationship*”. The reason as to why it’s been possible to maintain these friendly ties may be because Sweden has kept a low profile on sensitive matters concerning China, i.e. the balancing act. With this background, when China is exerting pressure and intervening in democratic institutions in Sweden, it’s relevant to further explore the meaning of this alleged

special relationship and extend the analysis of the balancing between normative and material interests.

Thirdly, and finally, as the Swedish press is being targeted with pressure from Chinese officials, it's not only serving China's presumed aim to manipulate the public's view of China and enhance their image internationally (Edney, 2012), it can also potentially undermine one crucial body of liberal democracy i.e. the free press, which is the main aim of sharp power (Curtis, 2004).

4.2.2 Respondents

For this study, elite interviews will be conducted with journalists from the Swedish press corps and researchers within international relations, politics and/or China focused studies. Elite interviews refer to interviewing those who are experts or have powerful positions in a community (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; 171). When conducting elite interviews, it's important to have good knowledge or be well-read within the field of the topic that will be discussed in the interviews, but also to have some pre-knowledge about the experts that are being interviewed (ibid.). Regarding the researchers that were sampled as respondents, I had already gotten familiar with some of their previous work and knew their areas of expertise, which is also how I knew that they would be suitable for the study. I argue that interviews with journalists are also elite interviews. They are usually tied to larger and established news organizations, who have foreign correspondents as well as national political correspondents and therefore have access to political domains that others don't.

The data in this study is gathered from interviews with six respondents. There were initially eight respondents but there was a loss of two. Surely, to have all eight respondents would have been preferred but different circumstances in the process of sampling made this difficult. Nevertheless, Tracy (2013; 148) mentions that 5-8 respondents is a good rule of thumb to achieve "pedagogical value", but she along with Brinkmann and Kvale (2015; 140) also state that the number of respondents is not fixed, and rather depends on how many you need in order to answer your research questions and fulfil the purpose of the study. Hence, there will be three journalists interviewed and three researchers. Two of the journalists work for two well-established news organizations in Sweden, while the third is a freelance journalist and active in the organization Swedish PEN. Although there were more journalists initially, I argue that the journalistic society in Sweden, at least among the most established news

organizations, is fairly homogenous in that neither one has very strong political party affiliations and have similar structures. Also, all three journalists work for a journalistic organization of some sort and are interviewed as professionals and on behalf of their organizations. Further, I've chosen to interview journalists because, to a great extent, the study relies on information from representatives of this sector, in that they are in the firing line of the pressure exerted by the Chinese embassy. Thus, only their perspectives can provide the data that is needed in order to answer the research questions. This is, by Tracy (2013; 134) categorized as purposeful sampling because respondents are sampled accordingly to the research questions and purpose.

The process of sampling the journalist respondents is primarily based on a survey that was conducted by the public service news organization SVT Nyheter (2019). The survey showed the news organizations that had been subjected to pressure from the Chinese embassy and based on these results I made a first sample of which organizations to contact. Once I began the process of reaching out to potential respondents that I knew were connected to the public debate on the Chinese embassy's pressure, I was immediately guided or bridged to someone that seemed a better fit, similar to snowball sampling (Tracy, 2013; 136). This was very helpful and ultimately made the sample more tailored to the study. In conclusion, all three journalists interviewed have first-hand experience of the pressure exerted from the Chinese embassy.

While doing interviews with journalists is undeniably important for this study, I chose to also include researchers who had previously conducted research on China. This choice was motivated by the fact that researchers can provide a different perspective which is important for the research questions and the purpose, i.e. perspectives on power differences between Sweden and China and potential policy actions from the Swedish government, in the absence of government officials. These respondents were selected due to their previous research on China and found through contact with different research institutes. One of these respondents have also previously worked with Asia-relations on a governmental level, which I believe can provide particularly interesting and relevant data.

4.2.3 Analysing interviews

Rather than using traditional forms of analysing interviews, e.g. discourse analysis, I will be applying theoretical reading. More specifically, instead of a systematically interpreting the

data, you “*reflect theoretically on specific themes of interest.*” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; 270). What can be problematic with this form of analysing is the risk of potential bias, in that you read through a specific theoretical framework, which is difficult to avoid. However, Brinkmann and Kvale (2015; 272-273) suggest that you are aware of the risk of bias and read your interpretations as the devil’s advocate, i.e. questioning your own interpretations. However, this thesis is centrally about power asymmetry and the interview questions are therefore created through different concepts and variations of power. Also, Brinkmann and Kvale (ibid.) suggest sensitizing when interpreting the interview data, which means that the theory guides you to a certain direction, but keeps interpretations open for other perspectives and dimensions.

In figure 1, the interview questions are categorized into themes, that relates to the theoretical concepts. More specifically, the table explains *a)* what themes interview questions are based on and what they aim at exploring *b)* what characteristics to look for in the data and *c)* what concepts these relate to. It should be noted, that since the respondents are both journalists and researchers, the interviews are slightly altered depending on the respondent, however they all contain the same themes.

Figure 1. Analysis scheme

Interview themes	Characteristics	Concept
Pressure from the embassy	Manipulating information, discredit information, disinformation, threats, punishment, sanctions, interference, preying on democratic openness	Hard power Sharp power
Responses to pressure	Reinforcing democratic values; transparency, unity, knowledge, collective approaches	Democratic resilience
Power imbalance/power asymmetry, balancing between interests	Vulnerability, (<i>inter</i>)dependence Small state/large state	Hard power/Soft power Normative power

4.3 Research criteria and ethics

Both Tracy (2013; 228-235) and Brinkmann and Kvale (2015; 281-285) discuss the traditional positivist criteria's applicability in qualitative research. In short, it is argued that these can be ill-suited because they don't consider contextualized knowledge, social construction and exceptionality in events (ibid.). Thus, these arguments along with alternative criteria suggested by Tracy will be present in the discussion in this section.

4.3.1 *Reliability, validity and generalizability*

Studying the case of the Chinese embassy's attempts to influence the Swedish press poses a few challenges. Although the case is relevant, as argued in section 4.2.1, one of the biggest challenges is that it's an on-going and fairly new scenario. This can potentially affect the reliability of the study, because as events are unfolding, new knowledge and perspectives may arise. Further, this study is conducted in a Swedish context, and I'd argue that with the variety of states' resources, values, political systems and stability in mind, the findings could also vary due to these variations. Although journalists in democratic countries surely adhere to similar journalistic principles, as well as researchers adhere to the same ethical guidelines, the context of the study could matter. Consequently, when using interviews to collect data, it's difficult, or as Tracy (2013; 229) firmly states, problematic to assume that the study would generate the same results if it was replicated with different respondents, or simply during different circumstances and contexts. Even though respondents have been carefully selected because of their knowledge, experiences and relation the specific case, they can't predict the future. Moreover, if the respondents were the same, one can't assume that they would hold the same knowledge or beliefs over time (ibid.). Nevertheless, as mentioned, all respondents were carefully selected in relation to the specific case to ensure that the study overall is trustworthy, and that it is consistent with the aims, purpose and research questions.

When the findings of a study can be applied or related to other contexts or to a population at large, the study has produced formal generalizability (Tracy, 2013; 229). To produce generalizability one should preferably have a large sample (ibid.). However, a large sample when doing interviews is time-consuming and I'd argue that a larger sample in this study,

despite increasing generalizability, wouldn't necessarily generate more value or quality to the findings and the study as a whole. As argued by Tracy (2013; 230-231), while generalizability is important for quantitative research aiming to explain patterns or behaviour on a global or societal level, it doesn't serve the purpose of qualitative research in the same way.

4.3.2 *Ethics*

There are a few ethical considerations that have guided me in the process of reaching out to respondents and conducting the interviews and are in line with Brinkmann and Kvale's ethical guidelines and informed consent (2015; 86-93).

Firstly, when I contacted potential respondents, I briefly explained the idea and the purpose of the thesis and explained that all respondents will be anonymous. Although some of the respondents didn't mind having their names published in the thesis, I concluded that all respondents should be anonymous, in order to stay consistent.

Secondly, I also mentioned that the length of the interview would be kept at a length of approximately thirty minutes and that I would ask for their consent to record the interview. During the interviews I made sure that the respondents were aware that all recordings would be deleted after transcribing.

Thirdly, I informed all respondents during the interviews that they will be sent the transcribed version where I indicate what I would like to use for the analysis. This part of informed consent is important from an ethical perspective, because it offers the respondents a chance to confirm that the material is true to their articulated statements (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; 93). All respondents also received questions beforehand.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that all interviews were conducted in Swedish and are therefore translated in the analysis. The process of translating interviews can be challenging, due the risk of discrepancies that can occur in this process. Mainly, I discovered that certain expressions and idioms could increase the risk of discrepancies in the process of translating. However, knowing this it's easier to avoid this risk and I therefore carefully translated the quotes and made sure that they were consistent and coherent to their specific contexts.

5 Analysis

Tracy (2013; 139) argues that a strength with semi-structured interviews is that they stimulate discussion. As also previously mentioned, the interview guide is not strict, but rather gives a point of departure for each question, while they are still connected to each themes presented in the previous chapter. Thus, the conversational character in semi-structured interviews can bring forward new knowledge and perspectives, which will be apparent when I present and analyse the data in this chapter.

In section 5.1, I present and analyse the data from the interviews with journalists. The focus is on how journalists and their respective organizations have responded to the pressure from the Chinese embassy and how they view responses on an EU-level. This section is focused on the first research question. In section 5.2, the data from the interviews with researchers are presented. The main focus will be at the asymmetric power relationship between Sweden and China and on Sweden's balancing between interests, i.e. Sweden's ambivalence in relations with China. Thus, this section is focused on the second research question.

5.1 Journalists

This section is focused primarily on the first research question;

How have journalists from the Swedish press corps internally responded to the pressure exerted by the Chinese embassy, and how do they perceive measures to counter this pressure on an EU-level?

5.1.1 Responding to pressure

Since the current Chinese ambassador started his services on behalf of the Chinese embassy in Stockholm, Swedish journalists have noticed pressure coming from the embassy. The pressure aims towards news organizations at large, but also aimed directly towards specific reporters that are writing for the organization. One journalist that works for a well-known and well-established news organization says that they have received multiple letters and e-mails from the embassy, and at times been 'carbon copied' in e-mail dispatches. Apart from letters and e-mails, this news organization has also been referred to by the ambassador in interviews and in

statements on the embassy's website. They all contain attacks on the news organization, and seem to aim at illegitimizing the content, but without naming specific journalists.

Respondent #1:" From what I can remember, it has not been about specific names [of journalists/reporters] but rather that we are lying, that we are part of a media tyranny and that there is no prevailing freedom of expression in Sweden, it's media tyranny. And that we are completely wrong in our reporting of Gui Minhai."

Similarly, another journalist from another well-established news organization describes that they have received remarks and exhortations from the embassy in various forms.

Respondent #2:" sometimes it has occurred in connection to another contact, for example in an interview request or during journalistic gatherings /---/. But it has also occurred through statements on their [embassy's] website where they have discredited specific reporters that have worked for us and urged us not to publish their work."

A freelance journalist who is active in the Swedish equivalent to the organization PEN International, an association that has been a driving force in the releasing of Gui Minhai, describes that they along with other organizations and journalists have received an e-mail from the embassy. The e-mail contained what was referred to as the "true" story about Gui Minhai and all the offences that he supposedly had committed. This respondent also remembers statements on the embassy's website and press releases that was triggered after Swedish PEN organized campaigns and public meetings with other organizations outside the Chinese embassy.

Respondent #3:" But the big reaction came when it became official that we were going to award Gui Minhai with the Tucholsky-prize. This was in the beginning of November last year. Surely, we had expected reactions, but we had not expected the reactions to be that sharp. Because at first, we were the ones in the line of fire and the ambassador said these a bit more classic things such as 'those who are responsible for nominating Gui Minhai as prize winner won't be able to feel safe anymore', he said in an interview."

What the freelance journalist describes is what has also been described in several news media surrounding the Tucholsky-prize. He mentions the threats that have been aimed towards the Minister for Culture, and that the ambassador threatened that the award will bring consequences for the diplomatic relations between Sweden and China.

On the question regarding how they dealt with and responded to the pressure from the Chinese embassy, the same respondent describes that they have taken the threat aimed towards their organization seriously;

Respondent #3:” We’ve had to look over part of our security, [it’s] likely that we are still a bit sloppy with this, in how we communicate. We have consulted SÄPO [Swedish Security Service] on how we should act. They don’t really have more than advice to offer. We are not an object of protection; they can’t offer us protection in that regard. Also, we have alarmed PEN International, pretty soon after these threats were aimed [at us], a few dozen PEN centres worldwide did some very sharp statements in support for us and in protest of China’s handling of this.”

Respondent #1 and #2 have taken different actions than Respondent #3, in how they have dealt with and responded to the pressure aimed towards their news organizations, presumably because the pressure aimed at them weren’t explicit threats. Respondent #1 says that they have had editorial discussions that concluded that it’s important that they don’t change their overall reporting of China;

” On the contrary, it has resulted in an increased focus on China, and their obvious ambition to increase their cultural power in the world. /---/ It has accelerated an increased coverage of China and its activities around the world. It is a part of our daily editorial discussions, what our journalism should look like and how to maintain our integrity.”

Respondent #2 states that they condemn the attempts of the embassy to influence their reporting by emphasising the prevailing freedom of press in Sweden, and further says that;

“We don’t take instructions from the Swedish government nor foreign governments, and we definitely won’t cease to use certain reporters just because the [Chinese] ambassador in

Sweden doesn't like what they write. /-----/ I think that perhaps they reason that if they keep doing this and criticize, attack and suspect etcetera, it would generate a form of self-censorship, that you back away from certain topics and write less about China and specifically about things that are controversial in China, and we must show that it won't be like that.”

It is also worth noting that both Respondent #1 and #2 add that even though they are determined to not let the embassy's pressure affect their reporting, it gets difficult to maintain the same level of coverage when their resistance comes with direct consequences.

Respondent #1:” But we have also become aware through an interview that the ambassador did with SVT, that we won't be granted any visas unless we change our reporting on Gui Minhai. So naturally, it affects us in that we can't go to China to observe, which we would want.”

Respondent #2:” It might have been at some point where it was trouble with getting visas, for example. /---/ that you don't get a visa or that getting visas suddenly takes a very long time.”

This form of punishment follows the same trend as in similar cases, as described by both Cook (2013) and Walker (2016; 9), where using “*carrots and sticks*” (Cook, 2013; 8) is a way of getting media owners, reporters and publishers to self-censor content.

To summarize, all three journalists can give a clear narration of the pressure that has been exerted from the Chinese embassy, and how they have managed, dealt with and responded to these various forms of pressure. They have adopted one of the approaches that Walker et al. (2020) encourages, i.e. to reinforce democratic values, in this case the freedom of press and free expression to stay resilient against pressure. The journalists emphasise the autonomy and independence of the democratic institution within which they operate, and that they adhere to journalistic integrity rather than state power and pressure. These responses to stay resilient to the pressure do, however, imply challenges to their continuing reporting on China, because of the manipulation of visa grants, which is an expression of China's punitive foreign policy (Cook, 2013; Walker, 2016).

The more explicit threats communicated from the ambassador, and the attempts from the embassy to induce self-censorship are, in fact sharp power (Nye, 2018; Walker, 2018; 13). Respondent #3 describes responses that Swedish PEN received after alarming other national PEN centres, which is also stated by Walker et al. (2020) is a way of reinforcing democratic

values, through uniting civil society. However, and interestingly, the statements on the embassy's website that the respondents mention, could undeniably be interpreted as serious in that they discredit the reporting of independent journalists. Yet, they are published within the frames of regulation, such as The Freedom of Press Act (1949:105). This raises the main concern with sharp power, namely the asymmetry between the unfree and free system, that Walker (2018; 17) describes as a facilitator of sharp power. It is, as he states, the openness of democracies that makes them exceptionally vulnerable to this kind of pressure from authoritarian regimes (ibid.).

5.1.2 *Perceptions of international responses*

The respondents were asked about the open letter signed by journalists and published by Utgivarerna (2020), where it is declared that the Swedish government should mark firmly against the Chinese embassy's pressure on the Swedish press. It also states that EU should be involved. The respondents were asked if this initiative have generated any effects so far and were asked to reflect on what actions or measures they see necessary to deal with increased Chinese pressure. This question was asked in order to see if an EU-response was a given answer for the respondents and to stimulate reflection on other potential responses. All of the respondents were confident that measures on an EU-level were essential, however all three also problematized this.

Respondent #1: No, I can't say that there has been a clear confirmation that this particular call or appeal received attention. However, it is important that there is an on-going public debate that keeps both UD [The Foreign Ministry] and the EU on their toes in this. /----/ I'm personally, and I'm hardly the only one, convinced that action on an EU-level is the only thing that will have an effect /----/ and Germany has, even before this appeal, been fairly active and has worked towards cooperative action in the Gui Minhai- case.”

However, this respondent also says that the discord in the EU that might be problematic;

/--/ that China has invested a lot in some EU-countries creates a financial dependence on China and on Chinese investments which perhaps makes the voice of the EU less unified than one would wish. But I put great trust in Germany's firm attitude in these issues.”

Respondent #2 doesn't know if the open letter to the Swedish government has led to anything, but still stress the importance of international cooperation.

“It's mainly that there is international unity, and these issues should probably be handled in the EU. Sweden is, after all a very small country and China probably has the idea that Sweden would give in to pressure. /--/ and perhaps they conclude that it doesn't cost them that much to try. /---/ but also, that there is transnational cooperation among publicists and that everyone really stands up for the free press in democratic countries.”

This respondent states that the reason why the EU should be involved is because in terms of economy, the EU is comparable to China, which Sweden is not. Further, the respondent states the example of how the Chinese ambassador threatened that if the Minister for Culture allowed for the Tucholsky-prize to be awarded Gui Minhai, it would severely affect their diplomatic exchanges, especially in the absence of international support;

Respondent #2: “China has shown several times that they connect everything. They connect trade with the things that are written about the country in the media.”

The answer of both Respondent #1 and Respondent #2 highlights how the power asymmetry between two states creates vulnerability for the smaller, more dependent state (Nye, 1990). Sweden is, as previously mentioned a small export-dependent state, and both respondent #2 and #1 argue that Sweden can't combat the potential long-term implications of the pressure on its own.

Lastly, respondent #3 doesn't know of any concrete actions that has followed the releasing of the open letter but mentions the EU and awareness as important responses.

Respondent #3” The EU has, as far as I understand it, difficulties in agreeing on a common China-strategy, not least due to different degrees of economic interests among the member states. However, I know that the Gui Minhai-case is discussed on the EU-level, so there is awareness, but the collective action is still too weak.”

This respondent, who was also involved in awarding Gui Minhai the Tucholsky-prize, stresses the importance of going against the embassy's threats and exhortations surrounding it.

“I think it's a lot about awareness. The principle outcome of the award was that the awareness that this is a concern enhanced. I think that previously, authorities, municipalities and organizations have gone to China being a little as happy tourists, thinking it's very exciting with many big cities with millions of people and that everything grows so quickly. /---/ But what implications come with the fact that an autocratic communist party still governs the country? These questions are important for the free speech and the free press.”

Walker et al (2020) and Cook (2013) puts emphasis on learning about how sharp power works, and how authoritarian regimes such as China's use this to obstruct and manipulate. They emphasise the importance of being skilful in noticing when these techniques are used by foreign powers, not just government officials but the civil society. Respondent #3 captures precisely this. By awarding Gui Minhai the prize (*in his absence*), the public got informed of the controversies surrounding it, and the threats and pressure from the Chinese embassy.

Respondent #3 also adds that during the prize ceremony, political representatives attended.

”/---/ but both the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister and all the political parties were very clear [in showing support] in the beginning of November, before the prize ceremony and the different political parties and the government showed their support for our right to award this prize. And during the ceremony, Ulf Kristersson from the Moderates attended, Amanda Lind [Minister for Culture] attended as a representative from the government and other parties had sent representatives to show their support.”

Attendance from government officials at events usually attracts press, and especially an event that has been surrounded by much media attention and controversy. Consequently, such attention helps strengthen civil society, inform the public and is ultimately a counteract to

China's sharp power (ibid.). However, this respondent adds that it's necessary to involve the EU because it's too easy for China to dismiss the severity of the events in Sweden. Moreover, the respondent argues that it's possible that the pressure on the Swedish press is a way for China to test its power on smaller states, and more specifically to move from soft to sharp power;

“I think that Utgivarna are correct in that in order for it [measures] to be vigorous, it has to be [dealt with] on an EU-level and the EU must find a common strategy. /---/ what happens in Sweden is absurdly easy for China to dismiss. /---/ Because we function as a sort of trial balloon for a foreign policy where they try to have more sharp power, and not just the softer power as earlier.”

In summary, neither of the respondents know of any concrete actions following the open letter to the Swedish government, but all three confirm that the best way to deal with the Chinese pressure is as suggested by Utgivarna, international unity, especially among the EU and EU member states. The respondents are consistent in their arguments that Sweden is a small state, and that in order to deal with the pressure that is exerted on behalf of China, a counterpart with at least similar (*economic*) muscles is necessary. However, they also mention the lack of accord in the EU in relation to China's persistence and assertiveness in its foreign policies, in that member states of the EU have benefited greatly from Chinese investments and cooperation. It can therefore be argued that responding to Chinese pressure on an EU-level is difficult because of the power leverage that China has.

Walker (2018) states that western democracies have been naïve in witnessing China rising to global power, in that they underestimated and miscounted the direction in which it was heading. More specifically, he argues that they didn't foresee the implications of allowing China to invest in individual democracies, which in extension led to increased possibilities for China to influence the systems within these. Respondent#3 highlights this discussion, with the example of cooperation between Sweden and China on local and regional level. This example sheds light on the fact that engaging uncritically with China has enabled the transition from soft to sharp power to go unnoticed for quite some time. However, through respondent #3's answer, it's also evident that there is some awareness of this transition, even though the general public perhaps don't view it from the perspective of theoretical concepts of soft and sharp power. Nevertheless, the sharp power techniques that the Chinese embassy has adopted

are difficult to miss, but as Nye (2008) argues, it's the transition from soft power to sharp power that is subtle and that has been underestimated. Lastly, all three respondents recognize how engaging with China on an EU-level has increased the dependence on Chinese economy, which one could argue ultimately elevates the discussion on balancing between interests from a Swedish context to a European context.

5.2 Researchers

This section deals with the data from the interviews with researchers. It has emphasis on Sweden's relations with China, the balancing act and specifically how these previous relations can affect how Sweden will respond to the pressure. Thus, this section aims at answering the second research question;

How and to what extent could power asymmetry and Sweden's previous ambivalence in dealing with China affect how Sweden will manage and respond to the pressure from the Chinese embassy?

5.2.1 Understanding the pressure

These respondents were first asked about how the Chinese embassy's pressure on the Swedish press can be understood in the context of the supposedly good and special relationship between Sweden and China. This question aims at exploring how the pressure from the embassy can be understood in a larger context of Sweden and China's diplomatic history and power asymmetry.

One of the respondents says that there can be two ways of interpreting the pressure from the embassy in respect to the historically good ties between Sweden and China, one being that it is due to these good relations that this aggressive rhetoric from the embassy has occurred. The respondent explains this by saying that there might be a disappointment in Sweden, that because of the extensive history and good diplomatic ties, China would expect Sweden to

behave differently towards them.

Respondent #4:” One interpretation could be that it’s because of this that China is acting the way it is. That there is a disappointment in Sweden; ‘We thought Sweden was an old friend, and yet they keep harassing us’. However, I’m not sure I believe in this [interpretation]. Another interpretation that I believe in more, is that this “friendship” perhaps wasn’t as deep after all. If it was, then how could this relationship weaken in a relatively short period of time, within so many areas? And it could be favourable to refer to this “friendship”, and that Sweden was the first country to initiate diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic [of China], in the non-communist Europe. And surely, there have been a bond between Sweden and China, and there have been individuals on behalf of both parties that truly have had a genuine appreciation and understanding of the counterpart, and within different sectors; politics and administration, enterprise, academia and the civil society and so on. /--/ but the fact that the relations worsened over the course of a few years’ time, and that the views of China in Sweden has worsened, brings me to believe that perhaps this “friendship” wasn’t as deep and stable as sometimes portrayed.”

Further, this respondent also says that the rhetoric of referring to each other as “*friends*” and emphasising extensive historical ties is likely part of diplomatic logic.

“I’m not sure that it [the relationship] has been more special than other states’ relationships with China. But I think that there is a diplomatic logic on behalf of both parties, and for Sweden to emphasise this. Because China is, within many areas, more important to Sweden than Sweden is to China. And by highlighting this history, it’s a strategy of saying that Sweden saw to the PRC’s interests more than others did. This can in extension help Swedish policy makers show their Chinese counterparts that Sweden is a reliable country. /--/ And from China’s perspective, it’s generally common to use this vocabulary with “friendship” in a very strategic manner, and [to point out] that some forms of criticism of China should be avoided.”

Respondent #6 mentions the rhetoric of being “*good, old friends*” is a result of the early recognition of the PRC but that it doesn’t say much about the pressure from the Chinese embassy. Through e-mail correspondence, respondent #6 states the following;

“The tension between China and Sweden doesn’t contrast the one between the west and China at large, even if there are some important differences between the China policy that is conducted on behalf of the US and the one that is conducted by the EU. /---/ The tension between Sweden-China relations are particularly great but occurs within the frames of the bigger picture of strained relations between China and the west.”

Similarly, Respondent #5 describes that the relationship has previously been depicted in a favourable way; Sweden regarded the relationship with China as good, as did China. This respondent points out that this has, over the course of the last few years been put in a new perspective, as China has become increasingly reactive towards criticism, especially criticism from smaller states. Further, this respondent describes that while China’s more aggressive responses to criticism about human rights violations is part of a punitive foreign policy, the Gui Minhai-case has worked as a trigger in Sweden.

Respondent #5” As I understand it, two things have happened: China has a new self-image and has become increasingly more authoritarian. Therefore, criticism towards China concerning human rights violations is no longer accepted, and then this particular case with Gui Minhai emerged. /---/ China’s self-image has evolved, and Sweden has had to handle a particularly difficult case where [Sweden] hasn’t stepped back but has kept supporting Gui Minhai. The relations have definitely worsened, that is very clear.”

Carlson-Rainer (2017; 82) mentions that human rights violations are uniquely difficult issues to raise with other states, and that it can create friction and jeopardize diplomatic relations. What is ultimately described by respondent #5 is that although both Sweden and China have emphasised their good relations, China’s increased global power has resulted in China viewing itself as too powerful to be criticized. From this perspective, historically successful cooperation and good diplomatic ties surely should matter less, especially in a scenario between a global great power as China and a small state such as Sweden. However, in this scenario, the clash between a powerful, hard power and a less powerful, soft power should imply such power asymmetry, that it could be argued that it wouldn’t benefit the more powerful counterpart to exert pressure and threats on the smaller, less powerful state.

5.2.2 *Maintaining balance*

This subsection deals with Sweden's ambivalence, i.e. how Sweden has maintained a balancing act concerning interests in relation to China.

Respondent #1: "There has been a balancing act from Sweden's part. I think that both Social Democratic governments as well as Moderate governments have had a pragmatic approach on how to deal with China. [Where] you don't want to sacrifice Swedish interests by angering China too much, and this has been possible due to the consensus between the Moderates and the Social Democrats during many years. /---/ There has been criticism, but mostly coming from smaller parties that haven't done any claims on governing the Foreign Ministry, such as the Liberals. This has enabled the more pragmatic approach and made this balancing act manageable. However, this isn't really the case anymore because this balance is lost./---/ The purpose of maintaining the balance from Sweden's part is to maintain some sort of stability in the relationship, a so-called good relationship, as diplomats say. And this is not the case today, we have a bad relationship [with China], and to keep a balance between Swedish interests, normative interests, economic and geopolitical interests, you maintain a balance in the relationship, but this balance in the relationship is lost. It's not a stable, good relationship today, and it makes it harder for people to see why it's so important to maintain this balancing between normative and other interests, because the relationship is already bad. And I think this generates the media and politicians in opposition to say that we have to be more tough towards China."

This respondent confirms what has been stated by Michalski (2013; 894-895), that the balancing act has been maintained through consensus between the traditional majority parties in the Swedish parliament. Moreover, the respondent says that as the balance has been lost, the consensus no longer prevails.

"--/and this enables a more extensive debate on internal policy, which we can see in the Moderates, who today advocate a much tougher China-policy than any of the previous oppositional parties have done, that I'm aware of, during the last decades."

“When it comes to the ambassador’s criticism of Swedish media and Swedish opinion-formers, I believe it’s a difficult issue for the government to handle due to the fact that what the ambassador is doing lies within the frames of regulated public debate. /--/now, when threats and disguised threats against media organizations or even individuals occur, and the government’s strategy to deal with this is to say that we have prevailing freedom of speech in Sweden, the suggestions from critics so far is to dismiss the ambassador. That is quite extreme and nothing that the Moderates wishes either, it’s not realistic. So, the question is; could we try something else? However, I think it’s been difficult to deal with this issue, but I also believe that even if the balance is lost, you want to recover the balance. [Sweden] still wants to have a good relationship with China, and you don’t want to take unnecessary measures that will contribute to a further escalation of this conflict.”

The respondent’s statement brings the discussion to what has been done so far. The open letter to the government stated that the government should mark more firmly against the pressure, i.e. the response thus far had been too timid. The respondent mentions this, stating that the government’s response so far, except for summoning the ambassador as reported by Knutsson (2019), has been to declare that Swedish media is protected by the freedom of speech and the freedom of press. This illustrates the ambivalence, and how Sweden has to carefully balance between upholding and defending internal values while maintaining the relationship with China. And as respondent #4 argues, this is probably difficult for the government to handle, because if measures are too firm, it could trigger more extreme reactions from Chinese officials in Sweden, and in extension from China. The respondent mentions that the pressure exerted by the ambassador and the embassy are within the frames of regulation, as previously argued in section 5.1, and limiting the embassy’s access in any way would contradict internal democratic values. Thus, the suggestion that dismissing the ambassador would also be counterproductive, which is in line with Nye’s (2008) argument; if democracies restrict the access to platforms where soft power can shade into sharp power, democracies themselves can be practicing a form of sharp power.

Respondent #5 explains in more detail how the balancing act has been performed previously in the relations between Sweden and China, and ultimately states the same as Lagerkvist et al.(2015) and Hellström (2014), namely that seeking support in the EU has been a way for Sweden to get out of, what respondent #5 refers to as “the pincher”.

Respondent #5” I believe that [Sweden] is still trying to avoid situations where Sweden can end up in the line of fire of the aggressiveness in China’s foreign policy./--/ From the Swedish perspective, you usually hear demands that the government should raise the issue of China’s human rights violations and the Swedish government has tried to respond to this. In a difficult situation as this, and the position it puts the government in, you have, on the one hand, wanted to respond to the Swedish voices that demand that the Prime Minister should for example raise the issue of certain political prisoners. And on the other, you don’t want to anger China, and so it has been raised to an EU-level.”

The respondent also says that this has been the case for many European states, and further states that

”Many EU member states have, on the one hand tried to maintain trade relations and their more extensive economic ties with China, but on the other tried to raise issues that deals with human rights and perhaps even political rights as democracy, on an EU-level. /---/ But then, when Sweden ends up in a specific situation, as in the case of Gui Minhai, who has both Swedish and Chinese citizenship, [Sweden] has been forced to stick its head out a bit more, and then the Chinese reaction has backlashed on Sweden. [Sweden] has tried to seek support in dealing with China, from the EU but has still ended up in the firing line. Thus, for Sweden to maintain the balance has become increasingly more difficult.”

As presented in the literature review, dealing with the increased pressure from China has generated a greater reliance on the EU. This brings the discussion back to the findings of the interviews with journalists in section 5.1, where it’s stated that EU member states have economic incentives connected to Chinese investments, and that this creates a power asymmetry between the EU and China as well. As stated in 5.1, this elevates the balancing act from Swedish national level to supranational level. Sweden’s reliance on the EU in order not to risk diplomatic ties is surely in the interest of the EU as well, mainly to be able to keep promoting the normative framework, but also to ensure economic balance. However, as Sweden is a sovereign state, shouldn’t actions be taken on a more national level as well?

Respondent #5:“/--/ the relations with China must be nurtured, and that’s why it’s difficult when the relations worsen. Naturally, this is not in Sweden’s favour, but how should it be handled when an increasingly aggressive China insists that even European states should show reverence and no longer tolerates criticism?”

As have been argued by the researchers previously in this chapter, dealing with China's assertiveness and its sharp power techniques are not an easy task for Sweden, and the above statement by Respondent #5 pinpoints the primary question that not only Sweden has to deal with, but also many other democracies (Cook, 2013; Walker, 2018). However, the respondent reflects on this matter further. The respondent believes that Sweden will deal with the Chinese pressure by seeking support at an EU-level, but also describe the issue of the balancing act;

“The Chinese ambassador has been summoned to the Foreign Ministry several times, both regarding Gui Minhai and his behaviour in Sweden. But on the other hand, the Swedish government has not publicly criticized China, and perhaps that's because they are aware that China probably will respond with punitive countermeasures./---/ I think that Sweden will continue to go through the EU. Then, of course, what is happening in Sweden must be responded in some way. However, I believe that [the government] will seek support on an EU-level and other member states, because you don't want to be alone against China.”

The respondent adds that Sweden will most likely also keep a greater emphasis on the economic ties with China.

“/---/ And the other [way], is to separate issues of human rights, such as the Gui Minhai-case, from other forms of collaboration such as trade.”

It can be concluded that respondent #5 believes that Sweden will, more or less continue a similar path, as described by Lagerkvist et al. (2015) and Hellström (2014), which then is the same path as recent years. Respondent #4 and #6 has a similar viewpoints;

Respondent #6:” I think the EU is our most important support in this regard.”

This respondent however, also offers a perspective that stands out from previous statements in this chapter, namely those institutions in society that aim at advancing methods of detecting

intrusion, interference and pressure from foreign powers. Expanding such infrastructure, Walker et al. (2020; 134-136) argue, is a crucial part of democratic resilience against sharp power.

Respondent #6: "The strained relationship [between Sweden and China] is part of the bigger picture, as I've mentioned before and specifically the Gui Minhai-case, which I don't think will be solved quickly or easily. Regarding the Chinese [embassy's] pressure on the media, these must be handled within the frame of a Swedish civil defence against foreign power's operations of pressure and influence. These functions are currently being expanded in the Swedish society."

Respondent #4 problematizes one likely response from the Swedish government, that was raised in section 5.1, namely assistance from the EU.

Respondent #4: "As I understand the situation, Sweden has wanted to ensure that it has the EU's support in releasing Gui Minhai. Some argue that it should have been made into an EU issue much earlier. In the current situation, from what I've seen, the government's actions and the signals coming from the EU, the EU has not fully stepped up to support Sweden concerning the pressure. The signals are not very clear, both in relation to the pressure aimed at the government and at journalists."

Respondent #4 says that one way of interpreting the lack of a clearer support from the EU could be because Sweden doesn't want to have that much support from the EU. The respondent explains that this could be due to reluctance within the EU to push for these kinds of issues, or that it might provoke further countermeasures from China.

"It could be an explanation and something that we haven't seen, that Sweden has tried to seek support from the EU earlier, but perhaps there has been a reluctance within the EU commission or member states to actively push for these issues. That's one explanation."

"Sweden doesn't want to be in the front line of a global resistance towards China. --/ If Sweden very actively pushes for this within the EU, it could generate that Sweden puts itself in the spotlight, and that can lead to further escalation, i.e. countermeasures from China. So from what I've seen so far, it doesn't seem as if Sweden is keen on, very strongly, turning the issue

of Chinese pressure against Sweden into an EU-issue.”

Thus, respondent #4 concludes the following scenario;

”The most likely scenario is that [Swedish government] will continue a similar position as thus far; when pressure is aimed at the media, they’ll say that Sweden has prevailing freedom of speech and that they will try to avoid untimely efforts to raise the issue to an EU-level.”

Walker et al (2020) states that part of the aims with sharp power is to divide allies. Several of the respondents have, throughout this entire chapter, referred to a lack of unity and common strategies on how to handle China’s increased assertiveness. Respondent #4 gave a possible explanation for the lack of engagement from the EU concerning increased pressure on Sweden, which was precisely the potential reluctance from the EU to actively push back on China. If the case is as Respondent #4 suggest as a possible explanation, for Sweden, this might ultimately mean that they have to remain timid in its response to China’s pressure on two fronts; domestically and on an EU-level.

5.2.3 Power asymmetry and its implications

Both Leijonhufvud (2016), Lagerkvist et al. (2015) and Hellström (2014) describe how China previously has been eager to learn from Swedish innovations in technology. As China’s expertise within this has advanced, the issue of concern would be if the interdependence between the two states has changed to the extent that China no longer needs Sweden in this regard. An interesting point that Keohane and Nye (1998; 89) makes is that power is held by those who can afford to break ties. What they refer to, however, is asymmetrical interdependence and the ties they are referring to are trade ties. Nevertheless, it offers an interesting parallel to the discussion on Sweden’s ambivalence in its ties with China, due to the power asymmetry between the two, and how this power asymmetry can increase if interdependence is lost. Respondent #6 discusses this;

“The power balance is naturally to China’s great advantage and I assess China’s sensitivity in relation to Sweden as very limited. There are a few issues where China’s relationship with Sweden potentially has special features: China is, after all, sensitive to its reputation and balances between exerting its newly won global power, although very ungracefully at times,

and nurturing its reputation. In this regard, there might be a certain sensitivity in relation to Sweden due to the early recognition [of PRC], China's earlier interest in Swedish social solutions and the few remaining areas of Swedish technological advancement where China yet haven't been able to outrival [Sweden]"

Naturally, the hard power is, in general, more favoured by the power leverage it has over the small, soft power. However, as will be discussed below, it might not necessarily always be the case.

Respondent #5: "China has become increasingly more prominent within technology, but what China still wants is good relations to other states, that says precisely the things that it wants to hear, that they praise China. Perhaps China then opens up its market and cooperation within certain sectors; parts of the economy, areas such as elderly care and social security systems"

This respondent's account can be argued to complement the previous one, from Respondent #6. Apart from environmental technology, if learning about civil services might be part of China's interests, the ties with Sweden surely must be important to maintain. In this case, surely it can be argued that China would be 'learning from the master', due to the welfare state that Sweden is perceived as being. These specific issues aside, Respondent #4 brings the focus back to what has been discussed concerning (*inter-*)dependence and the EU.

Respondent #4: "China's dependence on investing in Sweden seems to have increased, with more Chinese investments now than earlier. And China's relationship to Sweden doesn't occur isolated from other states, especially in Europe. And China's relations to Sweden could potentially also get affected, even if it hasn't happened to a great extent, thus far. But it can potentially affect the EU's relations to China. So there is absolutely an interdependence. In some ways, one could argue that Sweden is more dependent on China, than the other way around, but what is currently happening between Sweden and China attracts attention from outside of Sweden's borders. This is mostly negative attention for China, but that indirectly can harm Chinese interests."

The power asymmetry between Sweden and China has many important dimensions, one being that it can be diffused and un-fixed. As Respondent #4 argues in the above citation, the fact that China has aggressively exerted its power on Sweden can also lead to an increased

suspicion against China. As Hellström (2014; 10) presented, China is sensitive in this regard. Increased suspicion towards China can, as Respondent #4 says, generate consequences that are harmful to China's interest, because China is, after all benefited by its cooperation with the EU and EU member states (Michalski & Pan, 2015; 6). Nye (1990; 165-166) argues that when states that share mutually beneficial cooperation but differ in strength, pressure exerted from the stronger counterpart can yet have disadvantageous implications for this counterpart. While it can be argued that Sweden is more dependent on China than the other way around, but as have been demonstrated in this final section, there is still interdependence in the relationship. Consequently, China's efforts to pressure and influence Swedish journalists and the free media, can in the long run be more damaging to China than perhaps it anticipates. Finally, in this section the researchers that have been interviewed all discuss how China's sensitivity to criticism is central in the case of the embassy's pressure. Keohane and Nye (1998; 89) argue that reputation is an important element of power in world politics, which also emphasise how the pressure can have long-term implications that are not necessarily in China's favour.

6 Conclusion, discussion and further studies

In this final chapter, I will answer my research questions and discuss the findings. The chapter finishes with suggestions for further studies.

6.1 Research questions

The purpose of this thesis was to gain a deeper and further understanding of power asymmetry between Sweden and China, and how this can affect how the case of the Chinese embassy exerting pressure on journalists will be managed from a national level. Part of the purpose was also to gain and provide insights and knowledge of the Chinese pressure from the perspective of Swedish journalists.

RQ 1: How have journalists from the Swedish press corps internally responded to the pressure exerted by the Chinese embassy, and how do they perceive measures to counter this pressure on an EU-level?

The journalists that were interviewed for this thesis gave various descriptions of how they, and their respective organizations have responded to the pressure from the Chinese embassy. Respondent #1 described how the editorial discussion had focused on precisely this and concluded that they would keep reporting on both the Gui Minhai-case, as well as on other issues regarding China. Specifically, this respondent said that the pressure had rather triggered the news organization to increase its reporting.

Respondent #2 described a similar situation and emphasised the importance of relying on their journalistic integrity rather than foreign powers – or domestic powers. Similarly to respondent #1, this respondent stressed the importance of continuing to report on China, because the obvious aim of the embassy is to induce self-censorship. However, these two journalists also described how the pressure from the embassy had interfered with their reporting despite their firm responses, in that they no longer attained visas.

The third journalist that was interviewed didn't work for a news organization, but for the organization Swedish PEN, that awarded Gui Minhai the Tucholsky-prize. This journalist and the Swedish PEN organization had received threats that were more serious, to the extent that

they consulted SÄPO, the Swedish Security Service, for advice. This journalist also said that they alarmed national PEN centres and the International PEN.

The second part of this question aimed at answering how they perceived measures on an EU-level. Measures on an EU-level were demanded by the organization Utgivarna in the open letter to the Swedish government. All three journalists perceived measures and responses on an EU-level as essential in dealing with the pressure exerted from the Chinese embassy towards them and their respective organizations. The journalists emphasised how differences in power between Sweden and China make it necessary to deal with the Chinese embassy's pressure on a supranational level, mainly because the EU is an institution with similar economic muscles. However, all three journalists raised the issue of lack of unity and common strategies within the EU. For instance, two of the journalists specifically described how Chinese investment have created conflicting interests within the EU, and one journalist mentioned how this creates an increased economic dependency on China. In summary, all three journalists perceived measures on an EU-level as very important, but not unproblematic.

RQ2: How and to what extent could power asymmetry and Sweden's previous ambivalence in dealing with China affect how Sweden will manage and respond to the pressure from the Chinese embassy?

The conflict that has occurred after the Chinese embassy started to exert pressure on the Swedish press corps has generated that the relationship between Sweden and China is bad. This imply that Sweden's balance between upholding internal democratic values and good relations with China is lost. However, as Sweden wants to restore balance and maintain good relations with China, Sweden will most likely try to keep the same approach as previously and thus far. This ultimately means that Sweden is likely to keep a more restrained rhetoric in public statements concerning the embassy's pressure and refer to prevailing freedom of press and speech. Furthermore, this will also mean that Sweden will most likely seek support at an EU-level, similarly to how Sweden previously has actively pushed normative issues in relation to China through the EU, instead of doing this on a national level. However, Sweden will likely not seek an untimely and too active support from the EU, to avoid the risk of provoking the Chinese embassy, and in extension China, which could ultimately generate countermeasures or a further escalation of the conflict. Ultimately, and in summary, it's very likely that Sweden will try to keep a pragmatic approach in managing and responding to the pressure exerted from the Chinese embassy, similar to as it has done before.

6.2 Concluding discussion

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the case of the Chinese embassy's pressure is something that Sweden is very unaccustomed to, and something that Sweden will most likely be struggling with further on. The balancing act that Sweden has maintained in relation to China has most likely hit its most critical point, and the fact that China's rise to power is something that comes with a lot of uncertainty implies that there is probably no correct answer on how Sweden should deal with this. When considering the findings of this study, particularly those tied to the second research question, it can be concluded that no matter which direction Sweden will take, the situation will remain difficult.

However, it can also be concluded that international unity could be the best strategy for Sweden to deal with this issue. What has been consistent throughout the chapter where the interview data was presented, is that the power asymmetry between Sweden and China implies too much dependency for Sweden on economic interests with China, and by seeking support within the EU, this can neutralize the asymmetry.

Another important conclusion in this study, I argue is that the relationship between Sweden and China were probably never more "*special*" than those between China and other states. If the relationship had been as good as have been suggested in the literature, it's strange how China has been so reactive in Sweden. Even if the relationship between Sweden and China once was exceptionally good at some point, it then goes to show that all is fair when dealing with an authoritarian hard power.

Another important conclusion drawn from this study is the importance of a strong civil society when dealing with authoritarian sharp power. The journalists that were interviewed for this study all followed the same countermeasures as Walker et al. (2020) argued would increase democratic resilience.

6.3 Future studies

Future studies should preferably be focused on the internal discourse of the Swedish parliament, from the time when the pressure from the Chinese embassy started until a few years ahead. It would be interesting to see how the balancing act takes form in this context, and what arguments underlie those in favour of a tougher policy on China and what arguments underlie those who oppose.

Also, since this study was conducted during the Corona pandemic, it would be interesting to see if, and how this has affected Sweden-China relations from different perspectives.

Lastly, this study was difficult to conduct in that it studied a case that is still on-going, which has the down-side that it generates speculations based on certain aspects, such as theoretical presumptions or previous cases. Thus, studies that focuses on the pressure from the embassy and Sweden's responses from a retrospective perspective would be particularly interesting. Surely, there are no indications that the pressure from Chinese officials would suddenly stop, but to track the Swedish governments responses for a certain period of time would certainly extend the research on Swedish-China relations, and particularly that on Sweden's ambivalence in dealing with China.

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8 Appendix.

Interview guide

This interview guide contains all questions asked, both those asked journalists and those asked researchers. The interviews were semi-structured, and follow-up questions could therefore occur that are not included in this interview guide. Some questions were specific in relation to the respondent, all respondents were anonymous, and I have for ethical reasons decided to exclude those.

1. Can you describe the pressure from the Chinese embassy; character, scope, in what form?
2. How have you and [your organization] responded and handled this?
3. Research literature on Sweden's relations with China emphasise how important these relations have been in terms of economy and politics. Representatives from both countries have highlighted that they are "old friends" and some literature also indicate that this relationship has been special. Yet, China has had a very aggressive rhetoric towards Sweden through threats and pressure on journalists. How can this be interpreted? Why isn't Sweden spared?
4. Literature on Sweden-China relations also describe Sweden's relations towards China as a balancing act, in that Sweden has kept a low profile on sensitive matters concerning China. How could this come to affect how Sweden will respond and deal with the Chinese pressure on Swedish media?
5. How do you think that the Swedish government will react to the pressure, if it continues?
6. China has previously received aid Sweden and has benefited from Swedish knowledge in e.g. technology. Now China is an authoritarian great power and Sweden still a small export-dependent democracy and described as a humanitarian great power. How do you perceive this relationship in

terms of power? Are China still benefited from cooperation with Sweden?

7. The organization Utgivarna received an open letter to the Swedish government, stating that the government should mark firmly against the pressure from the Chinese embassy, and also state that it should be dealt with on an EU-level, what are your thoughts on this/in what way can EU assist/ other alternatives?