



EACS AT FIFTY: SPEECH

Sinology Between China and Europe: From the Cold War to the New Era

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During the past eight decades, European sinology has followed a complex trajectory shaped by shifting political circumstances both within China, and in Europe, including the East-West divide during the Cold War: from limited access to China and its sources, through a period of openness and close collaboration, to the recent re-emergence of interference of the Chinese state in independent research. The case of both PRC and Czechoslovakia illustrate well the changing fortunes for scholarship dependent on top-down centralized decision making in the party-state institutional setting. With this history on mind, I will then present Xi Jinping's most recent program of "building up independent knowledge system" in China and related policies reviving Party control in Chinese humanities and social sciences and consider the growing risk that political considerations will once again exert a direct and detrimental influence on research in the humanities and social sciences within China, as well as on international scholarship and knowledge production about China.

過去八十年間，歐洲漢學的發展軌跡深受中國內部演變、歐洲政治變遷及冷戰時期東西方對峙等多重因素的交織影響：早期歐洲學界在進入中國、獲取研究資料方面多受限制，改革開放後雙方交流日趨頻繁、合作不斷深化，而近年來，中國政府對學術研究的幹預再度加深。中華人民共和國與捷克斯洛伐克的歷史經驗表明，在黨國體制下，依賴自上而下集中決策的學術研究極易隨政治氣候的變遷而起伏。循此脈絡，本文考察習近平近期提出的“建構中國自主的知識體系”政策綱領及相關管控舉措，分析其如何可能再度強化對中國境內人文社會科學研究的直接幹預，並進而探討其對國際學界之中國研究與知識生產可能造成的負面影響。

Keywords: Sinology, East-West collaboration, Cold War, Xi Jinping Thought, Political Interference in Scholarship

關鍵詞： 漢學，東西方學術合作，冷戰，習近平思想，政治幹預學術

Since the annual Junior Sinologues Conferences began in 1948, later to evolve into the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS) (Kampen 2004; 2008), European Sinology has undergone a profound transformation. What was once a small and highly specialized “orchid” discipline, cultivated at only a limited number of universities and largely focused on ancient China, has developed into a broad and diverse field encompassing virtually every aspect of China-related research. Today, studies about China are firmly established at hundreds of universities and research institutions across Europe. At the same time, ancient China no longer occupies a central place in most European Sinology programmes,¹ while topics related to contemporary China have gained prominence well beyond traditional centres of area studies.

These changes are inseparable from political developments both in China and internationally. Under CCP rule, scholarship could not escape the broader effort to foster ideological conformity as one of the pillars of power in the Leninist party-state. Starting from the re-education of intellectuals in the beginning of the People’s Republic to “transform their thought” (思想改造) (Nie & Nie 2018), research in China, particularly in humanities and social sciences demanded a unified vision and thought based on Marxist-Leninist dogma. This thought work was complemented in the early 1950s by the overhaul of the institutional settings for academic research and incorporation of all research institutions into the new party-state system with party organizations embedded in universities and research institutes (*Xin Zhongguo* 2000).² The following decades witnessed purges and persecutions of intellectuals in China and growing isolation from the rest of the world, culminating during the Cultural Revolution. As a result, despite the successful completion of certain big projects like the *Zhonghua shuju* critical edition of the twenty-four histories between 1962 and 1975, the humanities and social sciences stagnated in the PRC up until the beginning of the era of “reform and opening”.

The political conditions and ideological constraints that stifled academic production in China from the early 1950s through the 1970s also affected the study of China in Europe. Students and scholars from most European countries had only limited access to China, and recent Chinese publications were often unavailable in European libraries. Politics restricted opportunities for open scholarly dialogue between Chinese and European colleagues, as European Sinology was largely isolated from the very country that constituted its primary object of study.

¹ I use “Sinology” as a general term in the spirit of EACS, not as a distinct discipline preoccupied exclusively with ancient Chinese philology, as it is sometimes understood, mainly in the US.

² In China, no comparable umbrella term for the study of Chinese history, culture, society, etc., is used. Instead, the counterparts of European sinologists are Chinese scholars working across a wide range of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, most of them established in China in the 20th century in emulation of Western disciplinary categories.

This situation changed dramatically following the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978, which started the era of Reform and Opening and endorsed the policy of the Four Modernizations. In China, respect for academic expertise was restored, and the liberalization of intellectual life created conditions for a degree of academic freedom unseen since 1949. This political change gave Chinese students opportunities to pursue advanced studies at leading universities around the world and, upon their return, introduce new perspectives and methodologies into domestic scholarship. At the same time, a vast number of translations from Western languages made international scholarship and a broad range of theoretical approaches accessible to Chinese researchers.³ As a result, Chinese scholars rapidly compensated for many of the losses incurred during the Maoist period. During the first three decades of the reform era, a relaxation of political restrictions and growing openness towards global intellectual exchange enabled an unprecedented expansion of the humanities and social sciences in China.

European students and scholars likewise benefited enormously from China's post-Cultural Revolution transformation. Indeed, the policy shift initiated at the Third Plenum was a decisive factor in the rapid development of European Sinology. European students could now study in China, while researchers gained access to archival materials and opportunities for fieldwork on a scale previously unimaginable. Academic exchange flourished at all levels, European universities hosted outstanding Chinese scholars, and the results of research conducted in China came to be an integral part of a transnational scholarly dialogue that enriched both Chinese and European scholarship. Even the brutal suppression of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989 did not bring academic exchanges and collaboration between Chinese academia and Western Sinology to a halt.

The Eastern Bloc and Czechoslovakia

The history of Sinology in the Eastern Bloc followed a somewhat different trajectory. Because the newly established People's Republic of China cultivated close relations with the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies after 1949, students and scholars from these countries enjoyed advantages over many of their Western counterparts during the first postwar decade. Sinologists from Eastern Europe maintained direct contact with China, had access to the available Chinese sources, and studied and collaborated with leading Chinese scholars. For this reason, some scholars regard the 1950s as the golden age of East European

³ The number of translations from Western languages was large and the books were published fast. For example, many translated titles of recent Western scholarship became accessible in former Czechoslovakia later than they were published in China.

Sinology. This characterization is particularly applicable to former Czechoslovakia, where Sinology underwent a remarkably rapid process of institutional and intellectual maturation. Within less than two decades, it had developed to a sufficient degree that it could earn recognition as a distinct Prague School (Lomová 2022).

As members of the socialist camp, Czechoslovak students studied in China under some of the country's most prominent scholars. Milena Doleželová and Dana Kalvodová studied the history of theatre and performing arts under Wu Xiaoling 吳曉鈴; Marián Gálik's research on modern Chinese literary theory was supervised by Wu Zuxiang 吳組綸, Wang Yao 王瑤, and Yan Jiayan 嚴家炎; Oldřich Král studied *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史 under Wu Zuxiang and, among others, the then-junior assistant Fu Xuancong 傅璿琮. Josef Kolmaš, who turned from Sinology to Tibetan studies, pursued postgraduate research under the Tibetologist Yu Daoquan 於道泉.

Researchers at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences likewise maintained close professional relationships with their Chinese counterparts. Linguist Oldřich Švarný consulted his research on *putonghua* phonetics with Xu Shirong 徐世榮 and Lü Shuxiang 呂叔湘.⁴ Jaroslav Průšek as the director of the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences was an influential figure within the academic administration of socialist Czechoslovakia, who had befriended Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 already during his stay in Beijing in the 1930s, kept in contact with important scholars and cadres in the Chinese academia.⁵ Chinese scholars likewise contributed directly to the development of Sinology in Prague. Zheng Zhenduo offered an intensive course for Czech graduate students in 1957, while Ji Zhenhuai 季鎮淮 and Liu Yuan⁶ consecutively taught in Prague for an entire semester.

In the atmosphere of political solidarity that characterized Sino-Czechoslovak relations in the 1950s, Průšek was able to secure substantial government funding for the expansion of the Oriental Institute, including the development of its Chinese library. Officially inaugurated in 1952 as the Lu Xun Library and adorned with Guo Moruo's calligraphy, the collection acquired valuable materials from both the Republican period and the early years of the People's Republic.

Despite these favourable conditions, however, even Czechoslovak scholars faced significant restrictions while conducting research in China. Their communication with Chinese

⁴ The list is based on personal recollections of the Czech scholars and short remarks in the prefaces to their works and may not be complete. Milena Doleželová edited a volume of recollections of European scholars about Wu Xiaoling, in which Dana Kalvodová also has a contribution (Wu 1998).

⁵ Průšek's personal contacts with Chinese academics were remembered by his students. However, archival material on Průšek for some reason does not contain any relevant correspondence with Chinese scholars (Mádlová & Palát 2011).

⁶ I was not able to identify the Chinese name from the available materials. She taught, among other topics, a course on Song *ci* 詞.

colleagues was closely monitored, and they remained under constant surveillance, as the Chinese authorities sought to prevent uncontrolled contact between foreigners and the local population (Jisl 2016). As Augustin Palát, researcher at the Oriental Institute and Czechoslovak cultural attaché in Beijing during the 1950s, noted in private, travel approximately thirty kilometres beyond urban centres required special authorization in the form of a *jièshào xìn* 介紹信 (letter of introduction) issued by the central authorities and were not possible without the accompaniment of local cadres. Upon returning home, scholars were expected to present exclusively positive accounts of their experiences in China, a requirement that was reflected in some of their publications.⁷

Transnational academic communication in Europe was further impeded by Cold War divisions. The institutional structures and mechanisms of the Czechoslovak party-state likewise imposed limitations on contacts with the West. Following the post-Stalin thaw in the Soviet bloc, many Czechoslovak scholars were able to undertake short visits in Western countries (typically participation in international conferences), thereby establishing personal connections with colleagues beyond the Iron Curtain. More systematic forms of cooperation, however—including student exchanges, long-term research stays at Western universities, and unrestricted access to Western publications—remained largely impossible.⁸

Even within the socialist bloc, significant barriers to scholarly exchange remained. No institutional platform for regular transnational discussions among sinologists—or, more broadly, specialists in Asian studies—was ever established.⁹ One notable exception was the close collaboration between sinologists in Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic. Jaroslav Průšek supervised East German doctoral students and regularly discussed with them his research ideas and developments in the field of Sinology (Müller 2008). He also maintained a visible scholarly presence in East Germany, where he published an important edited volume on modern Chinese literature that included a substantial introductory essay of his own (Průšek 1964).

The extraordinary achievement of Czechoslovak Sinology happened within this environment of state support and privileged access to China, and simultaneously under ideological constraints and political oversight. Czechoslovak scholars produced ground-breaking research and gained international recognition as a distinct “Prague School,” particularly in the field of modern Chinese literature, owing largely to Jaroslav Průšek’s intellectual vision, organizational talent, and his ability to make the most of the available access to China. At the

⁷ This is described by Martin Slobodník’s analysis of the travelogues written by members of Czechoslovak official delegations traveling to China in 1950s (Slobodník 2015).

⁸ Průšek taught a one-semester course at Harvard University in 1967, this came at the time when the liberalization of the 1968 Prague Spring was approaching. His high-ranking position in Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences might have played a role in being granted permission to spend a longer period abroad.

⁹ For a failed attempt to establish an Eastern European Asian studies association, see Chen 2022.

same time, however, Czechoslovak scholars operated within clear ideological boundaries and could not openly challenge this ideology. The limitations imposed by this framework are evident in Průšek's extensive and highly critical review of C. T. Hsia's *History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, which reveals the extent to which even his innovative scholarship could be shaped by the official discourse of revolution and historical progress promoted within the socialist camp (Průšek 1962).¹⁰

The Sino-Soviet split fundamentally altered the conditions for Eastern European Sinology. Scholars in Eastern Europe lost both their privileged access to China and much of the political support they had previously enjoyed at home. At the same time, divisions within the communist world drew countries such as Romania, Yugoslavia, and Albania closer to Beijing, while Czechoslovakia remained firmly aligned with Moscow and became even more isolated from China. The future of Czechoslovak Sinology became uncertain after the suppression of the Prague Spring by Warsaw Pact forces in August 1968.

The event even left a direct mark on the history of European Sinology: the Twentieth Young Sinologues Conference, which was scheduled to take place in Prague at the time of the invasion, had to be cancelled. Meanwhile, the People's Republic of China used the Soviet-led intervention as a propaganda tool in its campaign against what it termed "Soviet social imperialism." As a consequence, Czechoslovak Communist Party leaders increasingly viewed Sinology as a discipline with subversive potential. As a result, the authorities began to demand exclusively negative assessments of China; the exact opposite of the previous dictum (Ślupski 1969).

Within the Leninist system, support for Sinology could be withdrawn rapidly. Most of the scholars at the Oriental Institute—the institution where Průšek had assembled a team of internationally recognized researchers—were purged. Some emigrated, while others were forced to abandon academic careers altogether. Průšek himself was compelled to retire and prohibited from publishing. Those of his students and collaborators who remained at the Institute were assigned a narrowly defined political task: preparing summaries of Chinese press materials to serve as source material for party ideologues engaged in the official critique of "Maoism" in accordance with Soviet orthodoxy. The teaching of Sinology at Charles University was similarly restricted and reshaped to meet current political priorities, while the field was placed under the direct supervision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.¹¹

¹⁰ On the complexity of Průšek's approach to C.T. Hsia book see Chan 2016.

¹¹ Instead of academic work, scholars in the Oriental Institute prepared monthly digests of Chinese press and an irregular series of translated primary sources on Chinese politics, both in the service of domestic propaganda (*Politika maoismu: studie, dokumenty*; Prague: ČTK, 1973–1982).

During the Cultural Revolution, European sinologists on both sides of the Iron Curtain were equally disadvantaged by their limited access to China. From the late 1970s onward, however, their trajectories diverged. Scholars in Western Europe benefited from China's policy of Reform and Opening Up, whereas Czechoslovak Sinology remained constrained by the continued hostility between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Up until 1989, the discipline operated under strict ideological supervision. Student enrolment and research positions were limited to a minimum and tightly controlled by the party-state, and academic exchanges with both China and Western institutions were virtually non-existent. The political priorities of the period are reflected in the Marxism-Leninism courses required of all university students. Sinology students received extra specialized instruction on the alleged dangers of "Maoist revisionism".¹²

The "New Era"

The preceding overview of the changing conditions for academic work, shaped by political developments in China, the Eastern Bloc, and the broader international environment, serves as a reminder of the nature of the Leninist institutional setting, still in place in China, in which higher education and research can be any time directly subordinated to ideological control and immediate political objectives.

The relative relaxation of domestic political restrictions and the expansion of international academic cooperation during the final two decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first created an exceptionally productive period for both Chinese humanities and social sciences and Western Sinology. This era was characterized by openness, intensive scholarly exchange, and mutually beneficial collaboration.

One distinctive feature of the post-Mao development of the Chinese humanities and social sciences was the speed with which Chinese scholars engaged with contemporary international scholarship and entered global academic debates. Western theories, methodologies, and research findings were widely translated, discussed, and adapted, contributing to the rapid modernization of many disciplines. Despite occasional debates concerning the place of Confucianism and other indigenous intellectual traditions in contemporary China, there was until recently little serious effort to replace Western scholarship with a distinctly Chinese paradigm.

¹² On the Soviet critique of Chinese Communism, see Rozman 2014.

This situation is changing today, during what has been officially termed the “Xi Jinping New Era.” Under the Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (習近平新時代中國特色社會主義思想), which is less a coherent ideology than a set of guidelines for political decision-making (Tsang & Cheung 2024), the People’s Republic of China has entered a new phase in which ideological conformity once again occupies a central place in public life, including in academic work. In this respect, the renewed emphasis on political orthodoxy recalls earlier demands for “redness” during the Maoist period.

The return of ideology, increasingly accompanied by explicit suspicion of Western intellectual influence, was first signalled shortly after Xi Jinping assumed power following the Eighteenth Party Congress. In the spring of 2013, an internal Communist Party directive commonly known as Document No. 9, or *Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere* (關於當前意識形態領域情況的通報), was circulated among party members (General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 2013).

¹³ The document warned against a supposed “tide of erroneous thinking” (*cuowu sichao* 錯誤思潮) and alleged attempts by Western forces to undermine China through ideological infiltration. In response, it called for strengthened party leadership over ideological work (加強對意識形態工作的領導).

Although the directive primarily targeted media organizations, civil society actors, and advocates of constitutionalism, political reform, and the rule of law, it also explicitly condemned so-called “historical nihilism”. In doing so, it directly affected the field of historical research by challenging interpretations of the Chinese past that diverged from officially sanctioned narratives. Since then, legislation criminalizing “incorrect” interpretations of recent history has been introduced, while campaigns against “historical nihilism” have become an increasingly important factor shaping research on modern Chinese history (van de Ven 2021).

Three years after the circulation of Document No. 9, Xi Jinping delivered a programmatic speech at the Symposium on Work in the Fields of Philosophy and the Social Sciences (在哲學社會科學工作座談會上的講話; Xi 2016),¹⁴ which has become the authoritative statement about Chinese policies toward humanities and social sciences.¹⁵ In this speech, he called for a “correct way of thinking” (*zhengque silu* 正確思路) and urged Chinese scholars to “accelerate the construction of philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics” (加快構建中國特色哲學社會科學). The stated objective was to overcome the perceived

¹³ Chinese journalist Gao Yu 高瑜 (b. 1944) was accused of leaking it and sentenced to many years in prison. Her guilt was not proven (Rudolph 2018).

¹⁴ A shortened version of the speech has been published in English translation in the second volume of Xi Jinping’s *Governance of China* (Xi 2017); some translations there may be misleading.

¹⁵ From the context it is clear “philosophy and social sciences” also encompass the humanities.

dominance of Western theories which “are incommensurate with [China’s] overall national strength and international status”, and to ensure that scholarship would “fully embody Chinese characteristics, Chinese style, and Chinese grandeur in its guiding thought, disciplinary system, academic system, and discourse system” (在指導思想、學科體系、學術體系、話語體系等方面充分體現中國特色、中國風格、中國氣派) (Xi 2016). The speech became the starting point for the official programme of constructing an “independent Chinese knowledge system” (中國自主的知識體系; Hu 2025).

The relationship of the new knowledge system to indigenous non-Western traditions of scholarship is unclear.¹⁶ Xi Jinping never clearly defines what constitutes the “excellent traditional Chinese culture” to which he repeatedly refers, beyond briefly citing a selection of historical figures and brief quotations from a wide range of classical texts. The one point on which he is explicit, however, is the assertion that Chinese culture has, since antiquity, been inherently compatible with Marxism. In this interpretation, China’s cultural tradition created the conditions for the success of the Communist revolution and ultimately destined the People’s Republic to take over from the Soviet Union the historical mission of advancing humanity toward a post-capitalist social order.¹⁷

At the core of the proposed independent knowledge system lies the demand that scholars “consciously adhere to Marxism as the guiding principle, consciously integrate the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics throughout the entire process of research and teaching, and transform it into clear theoretical awareness, firm political conviction, and scientific methods of thinking” (Xi 2016). In practice, however, this is not Marxism in the sense commonly understood in contemporary Western intellectual traditions. As a popular pun based on the famous proposition of Gongsun Long 公孫龍 (ca. 320–250 BCE) puts it, *Xi Ma fēi Ma* 西馬非馬— “Western Ma[rxism] is not Ma[rxism]”.

Since Xi Jinping Thought has been officially elevated to the status of “twenty-first-century Marxism” (Zhongyang xuanchuan bu 2019), there is little doubt that “Marxism” in contemporary Party discourse primarily denotes *Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*. In this sense, Marxism functions less as a philosophical tradition than as what Tsang and Cheung (2024, 54) describe as an “action manual” for the implementation of Party policy.

Although Xi Jinping’s 2016 speech effectively called for the intellectual decoupling of Chinese humanities and social sciences from the West, it selectively praised the past achievements of Western thought, though claiming them to be out of date and unsuitable for

¹⁶ Respect for and development of “indigenous knowledge systems” have been promoted by the UNESCO and are at the core of its programme. See <https://www.unesco.org/en/links>.

¹⁷ Claiming continuity of Chinese tradition despite the 20th-century revolutionary changes lies at the core of the concept of “two creates” (*liang chuang* 兩創), see Colville 2024.

China. Simultaneously Xi adopted elements of the vocabulary of Western postcolonial theory. This may seem to echo Western scholars critical of Eurocentrism and supportive of indigenous alternatives in social theory (Froissart 2018). Yet such understanding is problematic. In practice, the project of constructing an exclusively Chinese knowledge system is not an epistemological project related to Chinese traditional thought. Rather, it aims to replace the diversity of ideas present in contemporary Chinese scholarship with a single hegemonic discourse grounded in Marxism-Leninism, which is notably not presented as a Western intellectual tradition.

Xi Jinping assigns the humanities and social sciences a crucial role in what he describes as a period in which China is “undergoing the most extensive and profound social transformation in its history” while simultaneously carrying out “the most ambitious and unique practical innovation in human history” (Xi 2016). According to this vision, intellectual innovation and the guiding role of philosophy and the social sciences are indispensable to this “major advance in human civilization”. The mission of the highly valued humanities and social sciences, however, is not conceived as an autonomous one. Rather, scholarship must work under the leadership of the Party to fulfil its role. Xi Jinping therefore called for the party organizations to “grasp flourishing and development with one hand, and guidance and management with the other” (一手抓繁榮發展、一手抓引導管理), thereby ensuring that academic growth proceeds within the ideological boundaries controlled by the Party.

According to Xi Jinping, Party leadership should ensure that the humanities and social sciences rest upon a single “objectively correct” (客觀正確) theoretical and methodological foundation, namely Marxism. Thus the call to develop a distinctly Chinese philosophy and social sciences forms part of a broader effort by the Communist Party leadership to reassert control over intellectual life in China. It is closely connected to Xi Jinping’s earlier promotion of “Four Consciousnesses” (四個意識) and the “Four Self-Confidences” (四個自信).¹⁸ These concepts have a straightforward practical implication: intellectual and cultural activities are expected to remain firmly under Party leadership, and such subordination is presented as a necessary condition for achieving the Party’s political objectives. In pursuit of this goal, the Party has involved itself in culture, the humanities, and the social sciences to an extent not seen since the end of the Maoist period (Zhao 2016).

¹⁸ According to an online handbook of Xi Jinping Thought, the Four Consciousnesses mean “to strengthen political consciousness, overall situation awareness, core consciousness, and alignment consciousness (i.e. to align with the examples set up by the party).” The entry in the handbook goes on: “The introduction of the Four Consciousnesses marks a new phase in China’s political landscape and governance. With Comrade Xi Jinping at its core, the Party Central Committee will shoulder greater responsibility and commitment to deliver more tangible benefits to the Chinese people. The Four Self-Confidences are Confidence in the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, Confidence in its theory, Confidence in the political system, and Confidence in [China’s own] culture. They have been included in political classes in institutions of higher learning, in so-called Situation and Policy classes (形勢與政策)” (Quan & Li 2022). Zhao 2016 also discusses political education at Chinese universities, including attempts to remove “foreign” reading material from the curricula in 2015 and 2016.

Xi Jinping's programme for academia is not limited to an attempt to increase the visibility of Party ideology within universities while leaving scholars broad room for negotiation in their actual research. Nor does it merely require formal expressions of political loyalty alongside otherwise largely autonomous scholarly work. Rather, in his addresses to academics and students in the humanities and social sciences, Xi outlined a comprehensive restructuring of the academic environment through the establishment of three interconnected "great systems" (三大體系), designed to reduce dependence on Western intellectual frameworks and paradigms.

These reforms concern three dimensions of knowledge production. The first is the "disciplinary system" (學科體系), which shapes the institutional organization of teaching and research. The second is the "academic system" (學術體系), which defines research agendas, standards of evaluation, and criteria of scholarly excellence. The third is the "discourse system" (話語體系), which seeks to develop new concepts, categories, and interpretive frameworks through which knowledge is produced and communicated. Together, these reforms are intended to create an exclusively Chinese knowledge system characterized by "new concepts, new categories, and new modes of expression" (新概念、新範疇、新表述) (Xi 2016).

The significance of Xi Jinping's call for cultural exclusivism in scholarship lies in its demand to reshape the institutional foundations of scholarship, including the organizational and evaluative frameworks through which research is conducted and financed. In his speech Xi Jinping called for far-reaching administrative reforms in the humanities and social sciences. As he stated, "Building a philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics is a systematic undertaking and an extremely arduous task; we must strengthen top-level design and coordinate efforts from all sectors to advance this endeavour in a concerted manner" (Xi 2016). In accordance with this directive, the Party's extensive organizational apparatus has been granted a central role in guiding (引導) research and teaching in the humanities and social sciences, starting from the mandatory ideological and political education.

Since Xi Jinping's 2016 speech, the Party institutions responsible for overseeing philosophy and the social sciences have undergone further centralization and have become more tightly integrated into the structure of the CCP Central Propaganda Department.¹⁹ In 2018, the Central Committee established the Small Leading Group for Work on Philosophy and Social Sciences (全國哲學社會科學工作領導小組), with the National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences (全國哲學社會科學工作辦公室) serving as its executive body. Parallel offices at the provincial, autonomous regional, and municipal levels operate under this centralized system. At the same time, ten specialized centres and institutes dedicated to the study of Xi Jinping Thought have been created under the supervision of the

¹⁹ On the previous structure and mechanisms of research administration and control, see Holbig 2014.

central office. Their role is to provide theoretical and methodological guidance across the humanities and social sciences and to promote the integration of Xi Jinping Thought into research and teaching.

Control, however, is accompanied by incentives. Alongside administrative supervision and ideological guidance, the party-state has mobilized substantial financial resources to encourage scholars to participate in the construction of the new knowledge system (Rolland 2020, 26–27). The Fourteenth Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) identified the development of philosophy and social sciences in accordance with the “Four Consciousnesses”, the “Four Self-Confidences”, and the objective of constructing the “Three Major Systems” as a national priority (NOPSS 2022). Significant funding, new research programmes, and additional academic positions have been allocated to support these goals.

These policies are already producing visible results. A rapidly growing body of articles, monographs, and research projects explicitly framed in terms of Xi Jinping Thought and exclusive Chinese thought has emerged across a wide range of disciplines. The combination of ideological guidance, institutional restructuring, and material incentives has thus created a powerful framework for directing the development of the humanities and social sciences in contemporary China.

Challenges for Sinology in the Twenty-first Century

The practical implementation of Xi Jinping’s ideas demonstrates the CCP’s determination to reshape the humanities and social sciences in accordance with a single “correct way of thinking” (正確思路). From the Party’s perspective, the intellectual autonomy of these disciplines presents a potential challenge to its power monopoly and therefore requires closer supervision and guidance. In this respect, Xi’s policies represent a significant intensification of trends already visible during the tenure of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, who likewise emphasized the political role of philosophy and the social sciences (Holbig 2014). The renewed subordination of scholarship to Party leadership raises the possibility of a growing rift between Chinese and international academic communities, potentially to the detriment of European Sinology benefitting from close scholarly exchange with China.

The project of “Sinicizing” philosophy and the social sciences, however, is not meant to close Chinese scholarship off from the rest of the world. Rather, it extends beyond the domestic sphere corresponding to China’s broader ambition to enhance its global influence and promote a more Sinocentric international order (Tsang & Cheung 2024, 168–193). The construction of an independent Chinese knowledge system forms part of a wider effort to strengthen China’s “discourse power” (話語權) and to expand its international influence

(Klimeš 2017; Rolland 2020). According to Xi Jinping's vision, the humanities and social sciences constitute a component of China's "comprehensive national power" and should assume a more active role in shaping international academic debates. Chinese scholarship is expected not only to contribute to global discussions but also to provide intellectual leadership and new momentum for the study of China abroad, thereby encouraging interpretations that present China in ways consistent with its official narratives.

In his 2016 speech, Xi already outlined several mechanisms through which Chinese humanities and social sciences could expand their international influence. These included greater participation in international academic organizations, the establishment of new organizations under Chinese leadership, support for Sinology centres abroad, funding for conferences and special institutions devoted to Chinese studies, and strengthened cooperation between Chinese and foreign thinktanks (Xi 2016).

Several institutions established in recent years can be viewed in the context of these objectives. One example is the World Association for Chinese Studies (WACS; 世界漢學研究會), which was registered as a non-governmental organization in the United States and Germany in 2016. Presenting itself as "the premier global platform for Chinese Studies research and academic collaboration", WACS seeks to coordinate existing Chinese studies associations and has expressed the ambition to serve as an umbrella organization for the field (WACS 2017). The association organizes the annual World Conference of Sinology (世界漢學會議), held in different locations around the world. In the context of Xi Jinping's explicit call for Chinese scholarship to play a leading role in shaping international discussions about China, WACS can reasonably be interpreted as part of a broader effort to increase China's influence within the global community of China scholars and to promote narratives that align with official understandings of China (i.e. "tell the China story well").²⁰

Another institution providing opportunities to "experts from around the world to better understand China and tell its stories" is the World Sinology Center (Shijie Hanxue Zhongxin 世界漢學中心), affiliated with Beijing Language and Culture University and based in Qingdao. Describing itself as a global hub for Sinology, the centre organizes conferences, supports research projects, provides opportunities for students, and offers residency programmes for both established and emerging scholars from around the world (Xie 2022). In its own materials, the Center emphasizes its role in helping international scholars gain a deeper understanding of China and communicate knowledge about the country to wider audiences. As such, it represents another institutional mechanism through which China seeks to expand its presence within global academic networks and participate more actively in shaping international scholarship on China.

²⁰ On "telling China's story well" (講好中國故事), see CMP staff 2021.

Beijing Language and Culture University has also established the World Center for Innovation in Sinological Discourse (世界漢學話語能力創新中心), launched in June 2024. According to its official website, the centre is “guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” and aims, within five to ten years, to achieve major developments: to establish a globally influential research centre for Sinology and China studies; build a key platform for the production, evaluation, innovation, and dissemination of China’s external discourse; create a first-level academic discipline of Sinology and China studies; train 5,000 Sinologists and China studies specialists worldwide who are knowledgeable about and friendly toward China; establish a global network of branches of the World Sinologists Council covering five continents and 140 countries; develop a comprehensive knowledge infrastructure for Sinology and China studies; support the creation of at least fifty overseas research centres and fifty overseas academic journals; and build, through a network of Sinologists and China specialists, a global dissemination system operating in eighty languages and reaching audiences in 140 countries (The Innovation Center 2025).

These ambitious goals illustrate the scale of the Chinese government’s efforts to shape international scholarship and naturally raise questions about the effects of participation in academic networks that are explicitly embedded within the ideological framework of Xi Jinping Thought. As Perry Link’s well-known metaphor of the “anaconda in the chandelier” suggests, the influence of political constraints may operate through the anticipation of boundaries and the cultivation of self-censorship (Link 2002). It therefore remains an open question to what extent scholars participating in Party-sponsored programmes and institutions will be able to preserve the critical distance and intellectual autonomy that have traditionally characterized European Sinology.

In at least one respect, however, China’s efforts to shape global knowledge production are already having a visible impact. The growing volume of English-language books and articles published by Chinese scholars, many of them made freely available through open-access platforms, has significantly increased the international visibility of the “correct way of telling the China story”. At the same time, new journals and publication platforms have emerged whose funding structures and editorial independence are not transparent and in which mostly Chinese scholars publish research reflecting positions consistent with official Party discourse. These developments are further amplified by the increasing use of artificial intelligence systems trained on vast quantities of digitally accessible academic material.

These developments suggest that basic knowledge and education about Chinese history and culture internationally will be increasingly shaped by the CPC-promoted version of Chinese history and culture, permeated with the concepts of CPC ideology. One challenge for European Sinology for the future will therefore be to engage seriously with the growing body of scholarship produced in China and disseminated on large scale globally, while maintaining

the critical methods, pluralism of perspectives, and independence that have long been among its defining strengths.

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