Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies

Sterckx, Roel. Sinology at a Crossroads? A View from Britain. *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies*, vol. 7.1 (2026): 43–51.

DOI: 10.25365/jeacs.2026.7.1.stercks

EACS AT FIFTY: SPEECH

Sinology at a Crossroads? A View from Britain

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This article examines the current condition and future prospects of Sinology in Britain against the backdrop of renewed Sino-scepticism, declining foreign-language study, and shifting institutional priorities in higher education. Taking recent reports on academic freedom and the state of Chinese Studies as its point of departure, it situates the apparent crisis of the field within a longer history of British Sinology, from small, language- and philology-based programmes to the rise of disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and area-studies frameworks. The article argues that falling student numbers, the marginalisation of full-time Chinese Studies degrees, the division between modern and pre-modern China, and the proliferation of loosely defined "China centres" all point to deeper structural tensions rather than a simple failure of recruitment. It further reflects on the changing profile of graduate students, the role of native speakers of Chinese, and the pressures placed on small departments to serve broader institutional agendas without adequate investment. Against calls for indiscriminate expansion or purely modular provision, the article defends the continuing necessity of rigorous language-based training and research through primary sources in Chinese. It concludes that the academy still needs Sinologists, though not necessarily in large numbers, because there are no shortcuts to globalising the humanities or to understanding China in its historical, linguistic, and cultural particularity.

本文以英國為考察視域，探討了當代漢學在對華認知審慎、外語教育危機及高校體制轉型等多重語境下的現實處境。文章系統回顧了英國漢學從傳統的語言文獻訓練向區域研究、跨學科化及 "中國中心" 範式演進的歷史脈絡，並指出當前面臨的學生規模萎縮、學科碎片化與資源錯配等困境，難以僅憑學科擴張予以消解。研究強調，漢學的核心價值始終在於紮實的語言訓練、古典文獻精研以及對複雜中國問題的細密把握；在全球化人文學科的演進中，學術深耕並無捷徑可尋。

Keywords: Chinese Studies, Sinology, academic freedom, foreign language education, higher education, disciplinarity, language-based training, Sino-scepticism

關鍵詞： 中國研究，漢學，學術自由，外語教育， 高等教育，學科性，語言本位訓練，中國懷疑論

The Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies (JEACS) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the EACS, www.chinesestudies.eu. ISSN: 2709-9946

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In August 2025 an organization named "UK-China Transparency" (UKCT, 英中透視) published a report of a survey of academics working on China in British institutions of higher education.[1] UKCT identifies itself as a think tank aiming to fill "a vital gap in knowledge about ties between Chinese and British educational and research institutions, companies, NGOs, political groups and government bodies". Its report (15 pages) is entitled "Cold Crisis: Academic freedom and interference in China studies in the UK". It opens: "Concerns about Chinese Communist Party (CCP) influence and interference in British universities have in the past six years or so become more widespread. The diplomatic dispute between the UK and China over Hong Kong, the outcry against ethnic cleansing in Xinjiang, the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of Chinese technology companies, and other factors have combined to fuel these concerns and shape the broader political, academic and media environment in which these concerns are articulated and debated." Of the 469 academics invited to respond to its questionnaire, only 50 replied. The issues flagged up in this survey echo concerns raised in recent years across the university sector in Europe and beyond: pressure on academic freedom, laxity in due diligence by university authorities when courting Chinese institutions for collaborations and funding, Chinese students expressing unease on campus, the presence of government eyes on university campuses, visa politics, etc. The report's conclusion is sharp: "This survey presents strong evidence that CCP-linked repression has had and may continue to have a distortive effect on our China studies system, disincentivising sensitive yet critical research" (UKCT 2025).[2] China scholars who have been in the profession for a while will take such reports with a nod of *déjà vu* and/or a pinch of salt. After all, periodic outcries about governments who overly or covertly seek to influence and steer academic research are not new. Nor are they exclusive to China, as colleagues working on US campuses today will confirm. Nevertheless, the message is out there, perhaps more loudly today than before.

Less than three months later, the Universities' China Committee in London (UCCL)—an educational charitable trust established as far back as 1925—published its periodical report on the state of Chinese Studies in Britain (UCCL 2025). Its executive summary notes "that student numbers in Chinese studies at undergraduate level are falling, compounded by a clear shift from single honours to joint honours degrees. There is no doubt that the study of Chinese language and culture at undergraduate level is caught up in the wider 'crisis' in

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[1] Script of a presentation given at the European Association for Chinese Studies 50th Anniversary Event, Collège de France, Paris (21 November 2025).

[2] https://ukctransparency.org/ Accessed 11.1.2026. The organisation was registered with the UK Charity Commission in 2023. At the time of writing, the Charity Commission reports six trustees chaired by Martin Rowland Village. Academic members among its trustees and advisory board include Bernard Silverman (Emeritus professor of statistics, University of Nottingham) and David Tobin (East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield). Listed advisory board members include Howard Zhang (journalist, formerly at the BBC) and Hong Kong activist Simon Cheng. Its mission statement in its first annual report opens: "For the public benefit the advancement of education, training and research in the relationships between China and the UK in education, business and culture and in good governance, ethics and transparency in such relationships."

modern languages which has been amply documented, contested and addressed [...] Chinese studies is not immune from these trends." Among its more poignant observations are an acknowledgement that the vast majority of doctoral research conducted on China in UK institutions today is undertaken by native speakers of Chinese, most of whom are PRC nationals: "Many of them conduct research in subject areas they would not be able to study in their home country." The UCCL report further highlights that Brexit has resulted in fewer European students, at all levels, coming to study in the UK. Undergraduate degrees with "Chinese" or "Chinese studies" in their title or on a degree certificate have nearly vanished.

To be sure, surveys such as these never tell the full story nor should they be taken as the final verdict on the present state of the field. Yet, even if we turn down the volume, these reports are but one among many memes in recent British public discourse that have (re)turned China from a rising dragon and a partner for a new golden age into a renewed "yellow peril" and predator in the knowledge economy. Sino-scepticism is rife again. To many British politicians and public figures, the rise of China has been even more jarring against a background of years of economic and moral decline under a succession of incompetent governments since the financial crisis of 2008 and the trauma of Brexit. Perceptions of China's rise to world power have left domestic wounds in what some have argued is a broken society that is undergoing its most challenging identity crisis since the end of the second world war. Traditionally trusted media outlets such as the BBC do little to address China ignorance. China (and most of East Asia) rarely gets airtime, in-depth analysis has disappeared almost completely from a media landscape that is obsessed with the so-called special relationship between the UK and the United States, and the vagaries of its president. For example, an otherwise excellent three-part BBC documentary on the history of the British empire by David Olusoga released recently makes little or no mention of what happened east of India, on the Malay peninsula or indeed Hong Kong.

The extent to which versions of the China image described above have influenced choices which teenagers and young adults make for higher education is hard to gauge. Yet what is beyond doubt is that social media play a greater role in shaping the average teenager's discovery of China than anything they are taught as part of the regular school curriculum. Equally indisputable is the fact that the teaching and uptake of foreign languages in Britain is in deep crisis, one that could end up being existential in the case of some languages. Ever since the Blair government abolished the requirement for pupils to study a modern foreign language past the age of 14, the teaching and uptake of European languages, both modern and classical, has been on a steady decline. In my own institution at Cambridge, students can now embark on a degree in Classics with Latin and Greek taught entirely *ab initio*, similar to how languages such as Chinese, Arabic, or Japanese are taught. According to figures of the *Association for Language Learning* (ALL), in 2025 only 17,407 secondary students (out of a pool of 882,509) took A-levels in French, Spanish or German; that is, only 2% of students

qualifying for higher education took a language past the age of 16. Only 2,224 pupils took German. Since 2019 uptake of French has dropped by 17.9%, German by 26.7%, Spanish by 3.5% and other languages by 19.5%. By contrast, in the same period, Economics rose by 38% and Psychology by 18%. The number of students taking further maths in 2025 (nearly 20,000), arguably the most difficult qualification on offer, exceeded the total number of students studying a foreign language by nearly 10%. (most students take three, exceptionally four subjects in sixth-form college). Language learning itself is has become increasingly utilitarian and some schools now openly invoke AI and machine-generated translation as a panacea for the decline in foreign language education. In 2023, 1,499 students took Chinese at A-level. Since most of these students are heritage students and/or bilingual to some extent, they are not a reliable pipeline for Chinese studies degree programmes (ALL 2025). It is against this challenging landscape that Chinese Studies programmes in the UK are forced to profile themselves. Applications for either full-time or joint BA degrees in Chinese have either remained steadily low or, in some institutions, have never been lower than they are at present. According to a 2023 report by the British Association for Chinese Studies, student enrollments for Chinese fell from 1535 in 2012 to 1055 in 2021/22, that is, a drop of 31% in less than a decade (BACS 2023, 17).

The above statistics can rightfully be seen as a cause for panic or alarm; but my question is, should they be? Let us remind ourselves where we came from. In the 1960s, 1970s, and indeed the 1980s, the in-depth study of the Chinese language, sinology, or "Oriental Studies" was largely the exclusive preserve of a select number of universities. These programmes were run in small subject groups overshadowed by degree courses in the Western languages and humanities. Unlike today it was more challenging to gain a taste of the Chinese language or exposure to things Chinese –either through travel or the web. The teaching of Chinese was the sole preserve of institutions of higher education. Hardly any incoming student had been exposed to Chinese in secondary school, or through evening classes, summer schools, Confucius Institutes, etc. Sinology departments –alongside China watchers and journalists– had an almost exclusive monopoly on the transmission of knowledge about China ("si-knowledge"). The academic sinologist was expected to be a version of the *uomo universale* or Chinese literatus, who could converse with equal expertise about Zhou bronze inscriptions in the morning, Tang poetry over lunch, and Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in the evening. There was little or no competition offered by China experts from social science departments.

"Chinese studies" was mainly understood as text-based philology and language training, or the discovery of Chinese civilisation and society through language-based study. Disciplinary forays into history, philosophy, art, archaeology, literary theory, geography, religion, politics, linguistics, and other cognate fields resulted mostly from the research interests of individual sinologists. The development of Chinese Studies curricula and areas deemed worthy of

research did not always result from articulate academic choices made by sinologists. Rather, curricular choices at times merely responded to the failure by existing humanities and social science departments to appoint any China experts or offer any courses on China at all (For a polemical account of the history preceding this trend, see Barrett 1989). Hence classical Chinese figured on curricula alongside the human geography of contemporary China in some institutions, Chinese linguistics alongside economics or Chinese politics in others. Students could read Mencius in the morning and be introduced to international relations theory in the afternoon. One might argue that sinology was defining itself almost *ex negativo*, that is, in opposition to established, namely Eurocentric, fields.

Once "disciplinarity" had become the catchword, the assumption in many universities was that whereas other fields could boast a disciplinary identity, sinology had none. Therefore, it would pay for sinologists to immerse themselves in "the disciplines", where the so-called big conversations took place. Yet, the time required to learn Chinese and plumb beneath the surface through endless language drill left sinology students deprived of the space needed to acquaint themselves with "ideas", unlike those who trained in European languages and had sampled Shakespeare before they arrived at university. The professor of French renaissance literature did not quite comprehend how the professor of Chinese could find pleasure in teaching her students how to order a bowl of noodles (the pleasure is short-lived indeed). Next came "inter-disciplinarity" (a double tautology), with its focus on the "region" and the "area". Whereas programmes in European languages were allowed to continue evolving as "language and civilisation" concentrations, East Asia and the Middle East had become a region. As a result, language learning, in the eyes of some, was to become a service department; modularity brought with it the assumption that sinologists could be useful in offering take-away Chinese language courses as electives on other degree programmes. It had become institutionally (and politically) incorrect not to invite sinologists to reflect on how China fitted into the grand narratives that had been conceived, ironically, by others and elsewhere in the so-called "disciplines". Some figures in the academy who had appropriated the key to defining what disciplinarity meant were dismissive of the claim that sinology also had a modicum of disciplinary coherence. Few British universities maintained, or continue to maintain, full-time BA honours degrees in Chinese or Chinese Studies (they include SOAS, Edinburgh, Leeds, Cambridge and Oxford).

With rising demand for more China knowledge, sinologists were forced, and perhaps even wished, to have the patent on all teaching and research that related to China, even if that meant appointing an expert in Eastern Han phonology alongside a political scientist or an economist in the same department; or even if that meant dividing up the study of China into contentious subfields echoing *duandai* 斷代 historiography, except that sinologists in Europe chose to chop up the field into two halves only. There was modern and contemporary China and pre-modern China. The definition of the former was allowed to evolve (1911 became

1949 to become 1978, now morphed into *Xin shidai* 新時代). In the eyes of university administrators and those charged with student recruitment, modern often simply meant relevant. While most sinologists conceded that the pre-modern precedes the modern, few agreed on where the former ended and the latter began. Posts dedicated to modern China tended to be occupied by modern (post-1850) historians, social scientists, or, less frequently, scholars of modern Chinese literature. Pre-modern China stood for a static and unchanging world known as "classical" or "dynastic" China which could only be unravelled by philologists. Whereas the historian of Roman Britain needed little justification for his presence in a history or classics department, the scholar of pre-modern China increasingly had to defend his existence on the premise that "in order to explain China's present one must understand its past" (a piece of wisdom that will sound like an uncontroversial truism to any historian). No European language-based discipline instinctively divided itself up into modern versus pre-modern, yet sinologists seemed to almost take it as a disciplinary given, either out of intellectual conviction, or to gain institutional leverage. This self-inflicted divide among sinologists between modern and pre-modern or classical studies (both arbitrarily defined) has arguably been the greatest impediment to the institutional development of sinology, more so than its meeting with the social sciences.

Once China opened up and invited rising student demand, there was an expectation in some corners that, given that one fifth of the world's population spoke Chinese, one-fifth of our students who would normally take up European languages would switch to Chinese as their main degree course. Today it is clear that Chinese is unlikely to become the new Spanish at British universities. The prospect of attracting solid student numbers no doubt played its part in campaigns with university administrators to increase provision in Chinese studies. Sinology programmes were expanded to be more inclusive, or, as the critics would have it, diluted to a smorgasbord of language and content courses depending on the specialism of the academics in post. In the past the lone student of Chinese would have been served either a pre-dominantly text-based and philology-heavy menu or a course basket inspired by Red China. Within the space of a decade there were expectations that Chinese studies programmes should expose students to every possible discipline as it related to China. New Chinese studies programmes mushroomed with more institutions offering provision, mostly in the social sciences. Language teaching was often devolved to language centres or, in some cases, Confucius Institutes (seen in some universities as a panacea for lack of provision or a license for not having to invest autonomously in Chinese language pedagogy at the expense of European language provision). Along came the phenomenon of the "China Centre". No university could do without. Yet they mostly tended to be rebranding exercises consisting of a website listing together all existing faculty members across an institution who could (sometimes remotely) be labelled as China experts. These "centres" could cluster around a lecture or seminar series, but they rarely added teaching or research capacity. Some were set up as a platform for fundraising. Many China centres have disappeared as quickly as they

arrived (the history of what eventually became the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies at the University of Nottingham [dissolved in 2016] is an example of this).

On top of increasing demand for more diverse offerings at undergraduate level, along came the graduate student. Three types of graduate students needed to be catered for: the research student trained in a full-time undergraduate programme in sinology; the graduate student coming in from other disciplines in need of a conversion course and basic language training; and native speakers of Chinese whose numbers now rapidly made up the majority of graduate students. The latter were welcomed across departments since they could be supervised by scholars who had little or no knowledge of China or Chinese. Native speakers also brought with them the advantage that institutions could be seen to be engaging with the study of China without having to invest in Chinese language teaching at the graduate level. Pressure mounted on small sinology departments to increase their visibility across disciplines; yet investment in additional academic posts remained largely dormant, especially at institutions where the need for China expertise was assessed solely on the basis of applicant numbers for full-time Chinese studies courses. This was, and still is, a false economy.

Two centuries on from the establishment of the first chair in sinology for Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832) here at the Collège de France, is it fair to say that we as sinologists are now finally acknowledging that we are experiencing a mid-life crisis? China is too big; it can no longer be handled or covered in a small languages-and-civilisations department (even though universities continue to turn to these departments as the natural home for any academic initiative dealing with China, from oracle bone inscriptions to the Hang Seng index). Funding bodies seem to suffer a similar dilemma. Who and what research merits funding? Any project that touches on China or things Chinese? Language-based work only? Chinese students seeking disciplinary training in Europe? Students with no prior knowledge of Chinese who wish to branch out at graduate level? Should they fund Chinese students to do fieldwork back at home in China, or save resources for non-native speakers and graduate students wishing to travel between European universities and libraries? Should funding be set aside to train a cohort of local, non-China-born researchers? Should taxpayer-funded doctoral training be directed towards homegrown students? How do we maintain a pool of graduate students that is sufficiently diverse to foster a distinctive and stimulating intellectual climate on campus?

Have our expectations of tremendous growth in student numbers wishing to read full-time degrees in sinology been misguided all along? Were such expectations premised on the anticipation that a move towards modular degrees, and the subsequent boost in student numbers, would lead to a boost of extra resources for Chinese studies? When scholars are invited to reflect on their own expertise, they tend to confound personal enthusiasm and the perceived importance of their own field with the limits of what can be reasonably achieved within the space of an undergraduate degree programme lasting no more than four years.

The requirements for full-time undergraduate training in Chinese sit uncomfortably alongside aspirations that students should uncover the gems of every single discipline that touches on our knowledge economy of China. In a system where higher education is largely free and students can navigate a course menu across different programmes at no extra cost, the drawback of moving away from a language-intensive and fully China-focused degree course may be manageable. Student statistics would continue to look good regardless of whether any students in the pack have genuine sinological interests. Yet in a fee-paying higher education sector such as that in the UK, students look for added value, or a unique selling point. Such added value, I would argue, lies in a comprehensive language training and language-based approach to the study of China, both modern and pre-modern. Sinology programmes that compromise on high-level language training and research through sources in the original language(s) risk losing their raison d'être.

Perhaps we may need to accept again that the number of students motivated to take full-time sinology degrees and flow through to graduate level will remain relatively small. In an age where sino-scepticism is raising its head again, we should value institutions prepared to invest in small-scale but full-stream language-based sinological training. Identifying students and future researchers who are drawn to those programmes will be increasingly challenging. China distracts as much as it attracts. Institutions that benefit from traditions of philanthropy and fundraising would do well to consider directing their energies toward substitute funding and endowing existing academic posts in sinology rather than focus on the mantra of expansion that rang loud during the past three decades. Relying on government funding only as guarantor for the efflorescence of Chinese studies would be an existential misjudgement. Debates on the future of the humanities in Britain remain deeply scarred by the legacy of empire, although few will advertise this publicly. Not only did Britain, within the space of one generation, lose an empire which, at its height, included one quarter of the world's population, it also failed to find solace with itself as an equal member in a European Union. The legacy of empire and recent political events have left deep marks on discussions about the future of the humanities. The loudest noise comes from those who call upon all to decolonise the curriculum and "globalise" the humanities. Ironically, this has been the mission of generations of sinologists long before labels such as global, inter-, intra-, cross- and trans- became indelible prefixes in the vocabulary we now use to justify our existence in the academy (in this respect, Simon Leys' brief 1984 review of Said's *Orientalism* was visionary; see Leys 2011, 360–63).

So here is a challenge for us and those who step into our shoes. Having made the case that the study of China ought to be taken up in the disciplines, sinologists have, one might argue, been partly responsible for creating a horizon in which their own departments could, or should, become redundant in the eyes of some. Why re-appoint a historian in a department of Chinese studies alongside a linguist, art historian, and a scholar of online Chinese fiction

if these appointments can be better used to "globalise" traditionally Eurocentric programmes that attract larger student numbers anyway? The answer is that the academy needs the sinologist, albeit perhaps not an army of them, as it ought to focus on fostering the complex skill sets required to teach and research China with an eye for the particular. If we tailor China expertise merely in view of the largest common denominator — a casual encounter with China and Chinese among the boundless menu of "the disciplines" — we will not have learned the lessons from our sinological midlife crisis. There are no shortcuts to globalising the humanities.

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