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EACS AT FIFTY: SPEECH

Challenges for Traditional Approaches to Sinology in Challenging Time

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This article was originally written as a contribution to the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the European Association of/for Chinese Studies held in November 2025 in Paris. It contains reflections on my own path to the EACS, the problem of the use of European national languages in Sinology as well as the history of the Association since the 1990s. At the end it discusses the necessity for maintaining relations between European and Chinese Sinological academic circles.

歐洲漢學學會於 2025 年 11 月在巴黎慶祝成立五十周年，本文系為該慶典而作。文章回顧了作者參與歐洲漢學學會的學術歷程，探討了歐洲各國語言在中國學研究中的應用與價值，並系統梳理了該學會自 20 世紀 90 年代以來的發展脈絡。結語部分進一步闡明瞭維繫中歐學界學術交流與互動的必要性。

Keywords: History of Sinology, Challenges for the Field, European Languages

關鍵詞： 漢學史，學科面臨的挑戰，歐洲語言

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My Path to the EACS and the European Problem of National Languages

It must have been in 1988 or 1989 that I first came into contact with the European Association for Chinese Studies. In 1988 I came back to Hamburg from Shanghai where I had spent two interesting years after getting my MA in Sinology with a thesis on the late Han philosopher Zhongchang Tong 仲長統 (180–220) in 1986. After trying to learn spoken Chinese, which, upon arriving in Shanghai I found I did not understand whatsoever even after a few semesters of not-so-bad instruction in that language, I slowly started work on my PhD thesis. Despite having visited the old Shanghai library located in the former Shanghai Race Club on a weekly basis in my second year, when I was back to reality in Hamburg I realized that I had not yet advanced very far. My supervisor Hans Stumpfeldt (1941–2018) was not as helpful as he had been before I went to China and clearly thought that I had to find out what to write about my subject—canonical studies in Han times—myself. At some point, and I no longer know why, I came up with the idea of writing a letter to Burchard Mansvelt Beck (1947–2020) of Leiden University, whose name I knew because he had written the section on the fall of the Han for Volume 1 of the *Cambridge History of China*, and who was about to publish a book on the Treatises of Later Han (*Hou Han shu zhi* 後漢書志) (Mansvelt Beck 1990). Of course, I wrote in English. Once we had exchanged one or two letters he proposed we put a stop to the "englische Komödie" and write in German. This was a time when French Sinologists were still publishing in French while the Germans were slowly giving up their own language as far as academic Sinological purposes were concerned. One could already tell at that time that what had been one of the richnesses of our continent, namely the multilinguality of different Sinological traditions, was beginning to vanish. I do recall, though, that as a student of Turkish studies from 1983 to 1986 I did hear the sentence: "If there is something on your subject in Russian and you cannot read it, then go learn Russian!" Sinology was done in a similar way: my teacher told me that he had learned Dutch because Joseph Mullie (1886--1976) had written what was at that time probably the best grammar of literary Chinese in that language (Mullie 1947–1948). I have thought about the "English comedy" quite often in my career, watching as fewer and fewer Sinologists made the effort to learn at least a second new European language other than English. Of course, this was not just due to the growing strength of American Sinology but also had a lot to do with the fact that more and more Chinese were joining the Western discourse on China, termed Sinology, which had before been a domain comprised mostly of European scholars. Most of them learned—and learn—English, but not the other European languages. With his expression Burchard Mansvelt Beck had shown me what a true scholar of the old school was like. I haven't heard anything like that ever since. The humanities have become much poorer over the last thirty-five years. While European Sinologists are better understood on a global level today, and while I do concede the many advantages of a lingua franca for scholarly

exchange, abandoning multilinguality has, it seems to me, also led to a certain degree of marginalization of Europe.

At some point in our letter conversation, Mansvelt Beck told me that the European Association for Chinese Studies was going to hold its biannual conference in Leiden in 1990 and that he thought that it would be a good idea for me to join, to see the faces of scholars whose books I knew, to listen to and learn from them—and to have some fun. There was only one tiny obstacle, he told me, and that was that in order to participate in the EACS, of which I had never heard before, one was required to be a member, and that in order to become a member one needed two persons who were already members to confirm that one was worthy of becoming a new member. He himself volunteered to be one of those two members, and for the other one I had to look back home. That was a problem. Hans Stumpfeldt, my supervisor, apparently wasn't a member of the EACS. As had done his teacher Ulrich Unger (1930–2006) and some other German sinologists, he had once published in *T'oung Pao* back when German was still one of the three languages that was accepted by the journal,[1] but I never heard him speak English—and the fact that he did not speak the language obviously also prevented him from participating in EACS conferences. He had learned Russian at school in Northeast Germany, but English had not belonged to the languages that were taught there with great emphasis. That professors did not speak English very well was, by the way, not uncommon in Germany until the end of the last century, which was also the case in many other fields. Having had Latin as my second language, I myself learned to speak English only in China.

Interestingly, Italian, though a major language of Sinology and arguably the one with the longest tradition in our discipline, had never played a role in *T'oung Pao*, probably the most renowned journal of European Sinology. Until 1990, many Europeans preferred to publish in their own language. It was only after the fall of the Berlin Wall that English became the language that dominated everything else. I still remember Ulrich Unger in the early 2000s speaking to me about the problem that "Deutsch als Wissenschaftssprache", just as other scientific languages, was going to die, and that this was a huge problem for scholarship since in his own opinion no one who had not lived in an English-speaking environment was able to convey ideas about complicated subjects in that language in the same way as could authors

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[1] After World War II, Ulrich Unger was the pioneer of the re-entry of German sinology into *T'oung Pao*, contributing three articles: "Zur Grammatischen Deutung der Fragesätze mit an so" (1964); "Chinesische Epigraphische Studien" (1964); and "Chou König oder Usurpator" (1966). Martin Gimm began to publish there in 1968, with "Zu den Mandjurischen Sammlungen der Sowjetunion" (for the continuation, see Gimm 1981). Rudolf Wagner, later a strong advocate of the English language, contributed "Lebensstil und Drogen im chinesischen Mittelalter" (1973), while Hans Stumpfeldt (1977) actually wrote only one piece for the journal: a lengthy book review on Herrlee G. Creel's *The Origins of Statecraft in China* (1970). It remained normal to write in English, French, but also German until the mid 1980s, as can be seen by Unschuld (1982) and Gimm (1983; 1984). When I published my first article in *T'oung Pao* (van Ess 1994), I did so, of course, in English, and still remember the many meticulous corrections made by Pierre-Étienne Will in order to render my article publishable.

who were native speakers. German had, however, always been a minority language in *T'oung Pao*.

The really interesting issue is how French, the language of most of the founding fathers of this journal, also disappeared from it, only a little while after German. Whoever wanted to be a member of the club had to write in English. In the early 1990s that was still a challenge for those who decided to publish in other languages. Most of my PhD students now insist upon writing their thesis in English, something that in Munich, where I am teaching, had until 2005 been allowed only with special permission. German or Latin were the two languages for a PhD in the humanities here, and the reason for that was that the endpoint of PhD and habilitation theses was publication as a book,[2] and that it was these books that guaranteed that scholarly traditions remained alive. Looking back at the *T'oung Pao* of the 1990s, it is interesting to see that in almost every issue there appeared a review of a German-language book. This continued into the early 2000s but stopped soon thereafter. The choice to write in English today is usually driven by the hope that to do so will increase opportunities on a difficult job market. Whether this hope is actually justified I do not know.

Remembering EACS in the 1990s

When I wanted to become a member of the EACS, my teacher Stumpfeldt was not an option because he did not usually communicate in English. I asked Bernd Eberstein (1942–) or Reinhard Emmerich (1954–) who seemed to be the only members of the EACS at the Sinological Institute of the University of Hamburg. With their help I finally became an EACS member, and participated at the 1990 conference in Leiden. The Sinological institute at Leiden was at that time considered one of the best of its kind in Europe, if not the very best. Gustaav Schlegel (1840–1903) had been one of the two founders of *T'oung Pao*, and from that time right up until about 20 years ago, when the great tradition of classical Sinological studies there began to recede into the background, Leiden had produced a great number of excellent Sinologists.

I came to Leiden to listen. As a very young and inexperienced scholar, for me this was a wonderfully interesting experience which gave me the occasion to see some of those great scholars whom I had previously known only by their written work. It also inspired in me the audacity to give a talk myself at the next conference, which took place in 1992. I gave another at my third conference in Prague in 1994, and this earned me an offer by Rudolf Wagner (1941–2019) to become an assistant professor in Heidelberg in 1995. And so EACS helped

[2] In German academia, a PhD thesis must still be published in book form.

me to escape from a position as an area manager in a business association in Hamburg, the Ostasiatischer Verein (German-Asia Business Association), founded in 1900 by Hamburg merchants doing business in Asia.

In 1998, when I had just become a professor in Munich, I participated at the Edinburgh conference and was there elected Treasurer of the EACS. The first thing that Glen Dudbridge suggested when he became the new president on the same occasion was to change the EACS constitution to abolish the requirement for new members to submit two signatures confirming that the applicant was worthy of becoming an EACS member. When this rule had been introduced in the 1970s the reason had obviously been that the young Sinologists did not want their gathering to be politicized. They wanted members who were genuinely interested in scholarship—and that meant to have an interest in those subjects that had been the common ground upon which all Sinologists had stood since the foundation of that discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century. The rule had clearly been invented to exclude those who, following the waves of Maoism in 1968, studied China because they hoped thereby to change the world. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 this restriction seemed to be a relic of the past. EACS opened up, and it grew rapidly.

Being Treasurer was a burden for a young professor who had to teach 9 hours per week back home, but it was also a joy, for I got to know so many interesting people all over Europe that it made it worth all the effort. Besides the acquaintances with colleagues from Western Europe, among whom Germans and Italians were the greatest two groups as far as the number of EACS members was concerned, those with members from countries that had belonged to the Warsaw Pact before 1989 were especially rewarding, since it had previously been very difficult to get to know them. Moscow applied in 1998 to host the 2000 EACS conference, but just as Beijing was rejected in favour of Sydney for the 2000 Olympic Games, so too was Moscow rejected in favour of Torino, which hosted the 2000 EACS conference with the theme of "The Chinese at Play". Yet, in 2002 Moscow and Petersburg jointly invited us. We could see then why Russian cities had been rejected before: after *glasnost*, the country still seemed to be in as bad a shape economically as it had been in the years before it, and all kinds of negative influences persisted. I remember that one group from Hong Kong was robbed, their money and passports stolen. At a dinner for the EACS Board at the Moscow Journalist's Club we could see that many members of the old Soviet nomenklatura were still in place. How different was the 2016 conference in St. Petersburg, when it looked very much like Russia was opening up and presented an extremely friendly face to its EACS participants! There was reason for optimism back then, despite the fact that the Ukrainian crisis was already looming large.

A Changing World and New Challenges for Sinology

And yet, the world had begun to change already some years before. Following the Jasmine Revolution in 2011 Google and Facebook were no longer accessible in the PRC, and from that moment onwards it was obvious to careful observers that a clash between the United States and China would be unavoidable. China became more assertive about its strengths and at the same time more aggressive in its rhetoric against those it believed were trying to put a stop to its rise. Scholarship on the PRC in the social sciences has become much more difficult since that time because the Chinese authorities see in Western-style social sciences the tendency to be mostly interested in finding out what China is getting wrong and using these findings to aid politicians in whose interest it seems to topple PRC rule. Many readers will remember the 2014 EACS in Braga and Coimbra when Xu Lin 許琳, the head of Hanban 漢辦, demanded that several pages should be deleted from the EACS conference programme due to the fact that the programme carried an advertisement by the Taiwan-based Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation and the local Confucius Institute had sponsored the conference. This came as a surprise since Taiwan was at that time ruled by KMT president Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 and cross-strait relations were actually quite good, and in any case much better than before and afterwards when Taiwan had presidents from the Democratic Progressive Party. The EACS reacted to this in an appropriate way by stating that it would not accept any attempt to censor conference materials.

Out of the experiences of the late 1960s and the early 1970s the founding fathers and mothers of the EACS wrote in Article 3 of its constitution that the Association "shall not engage in any political activity". I still believe that there is much wisdom in this sentence. Since the beginning of the first Trump presidency in 2017 the rivalry between the US and China has intensified. European governments, while criticizing Trump over and over again, have decided to by and large follow the Trump administration's approach to China. It is not the task of any scholarly association to follow what politicians would like them to do, but European Sinology certainly has to respond to the demand for the greater levels of "China competence" that have been called for by European governments ever since that time. Yet, while it is clear that we should maintain our good relations with Taiwan and most of all the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, it is also obvious that "China competence" cannot be acquired only by sending our students to Taiwan. That purpose demands that a substantial number of our students be sent to mainland China, and this must be done through maintaining good relations with Chinese scholars in our field and with institutions in the People's Republic of China that share our goal of promoting research into China's history, language, and culture.

Unfortunately, we currently face a trend that is detrimental to achieving these aims. The number of German students going to mainland China has dropped from 8000 in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic to slightly less than 3400 in 2025 (Fluder 2025). While the

German Academic Exchange Service provided financial aid to about 1700 China-bound students in 2017, only slightly above 500 received funding in 2024. Of course, this is not only a problem for Sinology. Other areas of expertise also suffer from learning less about China. Yet, from the perspective of our field these numbers are truly alarming. To me it is apparent that the idea to develop contemporary China studies at the expense of the study of traditional China has not really worked out well. Contemporary China studies evidently do not, or at least no longer, solve our problem of finding enough young talent to garner China competence.

What can be done? In many places in Europe China studies is facing a crisis, at least as far as MA students who were educated in European high schools and went on to obtain a BA at a European university are concerned. The number of such students has dropped. On the other hand, there is great interest in China in methodologies that European scholars apply to deal with traditional Chinese texts. At the same time, although some Chinese partners have told me that the trend among young students to avoid going abroad for education is increasing, there is still great interest at Chinese universities in sending their doctoral students to Europe for a certain period, and still enough interest among Chinese students in getting to know the European way of life. As it becomes more and more difficult for many Chinese professors, including in the humanities, to speak out and publish the full extent of what they think, they are in desperate need of contact with the outside world.

The European Association for Chinese Studies should be open to such contact. As written in its constitution, it should avoid making political statements and remain open to contact with partners in Taiwan as well as in mainland China. It should take a positive attitude towards relationships with the PRC, so long as they are scholarly. We need contacts in China and we need scholarly exchange with China. Under its current leadership, the PRC is stressing its own cultural heritage—of course, with a great number of restrictions as far as the study of religions or so-called minorities are concerned. The way China is dealing with its own past, is certainly not a route down which European Sinology is able or willing to go. And yet, while aware of all the vicissitudes that collaborating with China entails, I still believe that it is of mutual benefit to do so; otherwise European politics will lose all interest in Sinology, if there was ever any to begin with. Research on traditional China today appears to be a good way to retain our ties with the People's Republic. Thus, it is my strong conviction that EACS should maintain an equidistance with all partners in what some now have started to call the "Sinophone world".

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