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EACS AT FIFTY: SPEECH

Fifty Years of the European Association for Chinese Studies: Reflections on a Scholarly Community and its Future

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Marking the fiftieth anniversary of the European Association for Chinese Studies, founded in 1975, this essay reflects on the field's development, identity, and future. It considers what a "European" perspective entails, celebrates the humanistic traditions and linguistic plurality of European scholarship, and examines the institutional pressures facing the discipline, arguing that scholarly communities sustaining dialogue and mentorship remain essential.

值此歐洲漢學學會創立五十周年之際，本文旨在回溯歐洲漢學之演進脈絡、身份認同與未來向度。文中不僅探討了“歐洲”視角的深層意涵，彰顯了歐洲學術的人文底蘊與多語種優勢，亦審視了學科當前所遭遇的體制性困境。文章強調，歐洲漢學的不竭活力，既仰賴學者個體的卓越建樹，更植根於一個能夠維繫代際對話、推動方法互鑒與涵養後學的學術共同體。回望五十載歲月，既為紀念，亦是對共思學科未來之深切邀約。

Keywords: European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS), academic exchange, humanistic orientation, methodological openness, institutional cooperation, area studies, interdisciplinary research, scholarly tradition

關鍵詞：歐洲漢學學會（EACS），學術交流，人文學科導向，方法論開放性，制度合作，區域研究，跨學科研究，學術傳統

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The fiftieth anniversary of the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS) offers an opportunity not only to celebrate an important institutional milestone, but also to reflect on the development, identity, and future of Chinese Studies in Europe. Founded in 1975 and formally established in early 1976, the EACS emerged in a very different intellectual and geopolitical context from the one in which we work today. Yet the principles that inspired its creation remain remarkably relevant: the desire to build a European community of scholars across national, linguistic, and disciplinary boundaries, united by a shared commitment to the study of China in all its historical depth and cultural complexity.

From the outset, the founders of the Association understood Chinese Studies not merely as a specialized academic field, but an essential component of Europe's intellectual engagement with the wider world. The study of China—its history, thought, literature, society, politics, religions, languages, and artistic traditions—was seen as fundamental both to the advancement of scholarship and the cultivation of a broader understanding of global civilizations. In this sense, the establishment of the EACS reflected a conviction that Europe's scholarly traditions could only be enriched through sustained dialogue with Chinese civilization and with those dedicated to its study.

Over the past five decades, the EACS has grown into a vibrant international scholarly community, bringing together nearly two thousand members from across Europe and beyond. Throughout these years, the Association has served as an important platform for academic exchange, institutional cooperation, and the advancement of research in Chinese Studies. It has provided a space in which generations of scholars have encountered one another, debated methodologies and interpretations, and collectively contributed to the evolution of the field.

Several initiatives have been central to this development. Since the late 1970s, the biennial EACS conferences, hosted by universities and research centres throughout Europe, have become one of the principal forums for scholarly exchange in the discipline. Their programmes offer a valuable record of the transformation and diversification of Chinese Studies over time, reflecting shifts in intellectual priorities, theoretical approaches, and research agendas.

Equally important has been the Association's commitment to supporting younger scholars. The EACS Summer Schools have provided advanced training and opportunities for international networking to the new generations of researchers. The Library Travel Grants, generously supported by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Exchange, have enabled many early-career scholars to access significant collections preserved in European libraries and museums. The Young Scholar Award, now Early Career Scholar Award, likewise supported by the CCK Foundation, has recognised and promoted excellent research. The Association's open-access journal has further extended the reach of European scholarship, serving both the EACS community and the wider international field of Chinese Studies.

These achievements have only been possible through the dedication of successive generations of scholars who have contributed their time, expertise, and energy to the Association—as presidents, board members, conference organisers, editors, reviewers, and active participants in its many initiatives. The EACS has endured because it has functioned not simply as an academic organization, but as a genuine intellectual community grounded in cooperation and shared purpose.

Yet an anniversary should not only commemorate the past. It should also invite reflection on the present and future of the field. Indeed, the history of the EACS raises a number of broader questions concerning both the meaning of a “European” perspective in Chinese Studies and the evolving nature of Chinese Studies itself.

The first question concerns the significance of the “European” dimension of the Association. Is it merely a geographical designation, or does it also imply a particular intellectual orientation? European scholarship on China has developed within a long and complex history of cultural encounters, translations, exchanges, and mutual representations. This historical experience has shaped distinctive scholarly traditions, methodological sensibilities, and institutional forms.

One may identify, among the enduring characteristics of European Chinese Studies, a strong humanistic orientation: an emphasis on interpretation, philological rigor, historical depth, comparison, and critical reflection. At its best, this tradition encourages dialogue not only within the humanities, but also across the social sciences and, increasingly other domains of knowledge. Europe’s linguistic and cultural diversity has likewise been one of the field’s greatest strengths. The coexistence of multiple scholarly traditions, languages, and intellectual genealogies has fostered plurality of perspectives and methodological openness—qualities that remain essential in the contemporary academic landscape.

At the same time, this diversity also poses challenges. The institutional conditions for Chinese Studies vary considerably across Europe. In some countries, long-established traditions continue to sustain robust programmes and research centres; in others, Chinese Studies remains fragile, underfunded, or insufficiently institutionalised. The uneven development of the field across the continent raises important questions about academic cooperation, sustainability, and the future transmission of knowledge.

A second and equally important issue concerns the nature of Chinese Studies itself. What continues to define it as a coherent field of enquiry? The paths that lead scholars toward China are increasingly diverse, as are the disciplinary approaches through which China is studied. Chinese Studies today encompasses historians, literary scholars, linguists, philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists, legal scholars, art historians, and specialists in media and digital cultures, among many others. Such plurality is undoubtedly a source of intellectual vitality, yet also prompts reflection on what binds these approaches together.

For much of the twentieth century, the framework “area studies” offered one influential answer. Today, however, the place of area studies within universities is being reconsidered in many contexts. In some parts of Europe, area-based programmes have lost institutional visibility or funding; elsewhere, they are still emerging and able to secure stable support. Consequently, Chinese Studies once again finds itself engaged in a broader debate about its place within contemporary academia: whether as a distinct domain of knowledge, an interdisciplinary field, or a nexus connecting multiple disciplinary traditions.

These questions do not beckon simple answers. Yet they underscore the importance of institutions such as the EACS, which continue to provide spaces for dialogue across generations, disciplines, and national contexts. The vitality of Chinese Studies in Europe depends not only on individual scholarly excellence, but also on the existence of communities capable of sustaining intellectual exchange, mentoring younger scholars, and collectively reflecting on the direction of the field.

The history of the EACS should therefore be understood not simply as a record of institutional accomplishments, but as a testimony to the enduring creativity, diversity, and resilience of Chinese Studies in Europe. In an era marked by profound geopolitical tensions, rapid technological change, and increasing pressures on the humanities and social sciences, the need of nuanced, historically informed, and critically engaged scholarship on China has become more pressing than ever.

The task before us is thus not only to preserve what earlier generations built, but also to rethink and renew the forms through which Chinese Studies can continue to flourish. The EACS must remain a space for rigorous scholarship, open debate, and international collaboration—a community capable of confronting present challenges while imagining new futures to the field.

As we mark this fiftieth anniversary, it is fitting to acknowledge with gratitude all those who have contributed to the life of the Association over the decades: the founding members whose vision made its creation possible; the successive presidents and board members who guided its development; the organizers of conferences, summer schools, and scholarly initiatives; the editors and contributors to its publications; and, above all, the members whose participation has sustained this community across generations.

The anniversary also reminds us that scholarly institutions are ultimately built through shared commitment and intellectual generosity. The continued vitality of the EACS will depend on our capacity to maintain these values while remaining open to new questions, new methodologies, and new forms of collaboration.

Fifty years after its foundation, the European Association for Chinese Studies remains not only a witness to the history of the field, but also an active participant in shaping its future. The celebration of this anniversary is therefore not an act of closure, but an invitation: to continue thinking together about what Chinese Studies means today, about the role Europe

can play in its development, and about how our work may contribute to a deeper understanding of China and the world we collectively inhabit.

This special issue represents an initial contribution towards this aim, gathering some of the papers presented at the Anniversary Conference held in Paris in November 2025, as well as new spotlights and research articles focused on the past, the present and the future of Chinese Studies in Europe.