

Journal of **the European Association for Chinese Studies**

| 50 YEARS OF THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR CHINESE STUDIES | 歐洲漢學學會五十週年



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EDITORIAL

EACS at Fifty: Reflections on Chinese Studies in Europe

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This JEACS special issue marks the European Association for Chinese Studies' fiftieth anniversary. Combining celebration and reflection, it examines the field's evolution, institutional pressures, and academic autonomy.

適逢歐洲漢學學會成立五十周年，本刊特推出專輯，回顧學會發展歷程，梳理歐洲漢學的歷史變遷，並探討學科傳統、課程建設困境以及政治場域對學術自主性的多重影響。

Keywords: scholarly community, post-access era, Cold War Sinology, methodological plurality

關鍵詞：學術共同體，後准入時代，冷戰時期漢學，方法論多元性

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This special issue of the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies (JEACS)* commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS). Founded in 1975 and formally established in 1976, EACS has become a central platform for Chinese Studies in Europe, fostering academic exchange across national and disciplinary boundaries and developing into a vibrant scholarly community. Over the decades it has created a network that connects researchers across Europe and beyond, transcending institutional hierarchies and national academic frameworks.

The anniversary conference held in Paris in November 2025 provided an opportunity not only to celebrate this milestone but also to reflect on the changing landscape of Chinese Studies in Europe and the continuing role of the EACS in sustaining scholarly dialogue and cooperation. The contributions assembled in this special issue combine commemoration with critical reflection, addressing the history of the Association, present challenges, and future directions for the field.

The section *EACS at Fifty: Reflections on Chinese Studies in Europe* opens with **Laura De Giorgi** and **Irmy Schweiger**'s "Fifty Years of the European Association for Chinese Studies: Reflections on a Scholarly Community and Its Future", which highlights EACS as a space for intellectual exchange, institutional collaboration, and support for younger scholars, while stressing the importance of methodological plurality and international networks. This opening reflection is followed by **Marianne Bastid-Bruguière**'s "Reviving a Republic of Letters Among Sinologists in Europe: Kristopher Schipper and Yves Hervouet at Work with Friends and Colleagues to Establish the EACS in the 1970s", which revisits the origins of the Association and situates EACS within a longer genealogy reaching back to the International Conferences of Junior Sinologues (1948–1971). Reconstructing the foundation of EACS in Paris in 1975 and its early institutional development, the article highlights the ambitions of its founders to create a European scholarly network grounded in cooperation, intellectual openness, and a broad humanistic vision of Chinese Studies. It also reflects on the evolution of the Association's identity and recalls the first EACS congress held in Paris in 1976, which laid the foundations for collaborative research initiatives across Europe. In "Why the EACS Matters", **Bart Dessein** situates the Association within broader global transformations since 1975, showing how EACS has continually redefined its mission. Hans van Ess reflects on his own engagement with EACS in "Challenges for Traditional Approaches to Sinology in Challenging Times", advocating for disciplinary traditions and continued scholarly exchange between European and Chinese academic communities despite increasingly difficult conditions. Questions concerning institutional change and disciplinary identity are further explored by **Roel Sterckx** in "Sinology, a Curriculum at a Crossroads? A View from the United Kingdom". Exploring declining enrolments and institutional pressures, he argues for preserving rigorous language-based scholarship and sustainable models of academic training. Offering a different regional perspective, **Mugur Zlotea**'s "Chinese Studies in Romania after

the Fall of Communism” examines the evolution of the field in post-1989 Romania, highlighting how political transformations and international networks have shaped its development. The section concludes with **Olga Lomová’s** “Sinology between China and Europe: From the Cold War to the New Era”. Taking the PRC and the former Czechoslovakia as points of departure, the article examines how changing political conditions have shaped European Sinology—from periods of restricted access and later openness to renewed state influence on research. It further considers recent policies under Xi Jinping and their implications for academic autonomy and international knowledge production on China.

The *Spotlight* section extends these reflections. In “When Access is Conditional: European China Studies in the Post-Access Era”, **Stefan Messingschlager** argues that access to China is increasingly governed as conditional and revocable, reshaping research infrastructures and knowledge production itself. **Hilde De Weerd’s** “Where is Chinese History?” examines the institutional and disciplinary positioning of Chinese history in Europe and its implications for teaching and research, as well as the field’s visibility and public relevance.

The special issue’s *Research Articles* section further illustrates the field’s diversity. In “Jan Myrdal’s *Report from a Chinese Village*”, **Perry Johansson** revisits one of the most influential Western accounts of Maoist China—Jan Myrdal’s *Report from a Chinese Village* (1963)—showing how Myrdal’s observations were structured and politically orchestrated, shaping Western perceptions of China during the Mao era. **Chen Huaiyu’s** “Conversations and Conflicts: The Encounter of PRC Scholars with European Sinologists in the 1950s” explores early Sino-European Cold War encounters by reconstructing the Conferences of Young Sinologues held in Leiden and Paris in the 1950s, highlighting the complex interplay of ideology and scholarly exchange.

Under *Other Research Articles*, **Johanna Krenz’s** “Through the Prism and Back: The Poet Daozi and His Holy Ink” discusses the work of contemporary Christian author Daozi (1956–2025), focusing on the interactions between his religiously inspired experimental poetry and ink painting. Using a postsecular approach, she develops the concept of “kenotheotic” writing to describe the intersemiotic dynamics of poem-image pairs, operating on explicit, implicit, and “complicit” levels that include the reader’s participation in a shared spiritual experience. **Ivan Alekseev’s** “Canon Formation and the Digital Study of Contemporary Chinese Poetry” uses CNKI-data and quantitative methods to examine literary canon formation in contemporary China between 2015 and 2021. The study identifies generational clustering, persistent gender imbalances, and the importance of institutional and commemorative practices in a contemporary poetic canon. In “Gift Exchange and Recognition in Late Ming Literati Culture”, **Li Yanran** examines the circulation of paintings, calligraphy, and other cultural artefacts in the network of the Ming literatus Tu Long (1543–1605). The article argues that such exchanges functioned as symbolic capital, enabling the negotiation of status

and recognition while also serving economic needs, thereby revealing the close interrelation of cultural prestige and material survival in late-imperial China.

Issue 7.1 contains no less than five fascinating book reviews:

- **Bart Dessein** *Mencius. A Cure for Chaos*. Adapted and illustrated by C. C. Tsai. Translated by Brian Bruya
- **Nita Handastya** *Chinese Espresso: Contested Race and Convivial Space in Contemporary Italy* by Grazia Ting Deng
- **Chen Lang** *Making Mao's Steelworks: Industrial Manchuria and the Transnational Origins of Chinese Socialism* by Koji Hirata
- **Olga Lomová** *The Poetry of Yuan Haowen: Introduced, Interpreted, Explicated* by John Timothy Wixted
- **Zhang Ning** *State Building in Cold War Asia: Comrades and Competitors on the Sino-Vietnamese Border* by Yin Qingfei

Together, the contributions in this volume demonstrate that Chinese Studies in Europe remains intellectually dynamic while undergoing significant institutional, methodological, and political change. They remind us that the field's vitality depends not only on scholarly excellence, but also on sustaining communities of dialogue across generations, disciplines, and national contexts.

This issue also marks a new addition to the journal's editorial team. We are delighted to welcome **Dr. Julian Ward** from the University of Edinburgh as a new copy-editor of JEACS. We are happy to be working with Julian and benefiting from his expertise in maintaining the journal's editorial standards and continued development.

JEACS continues to welcome proposals for book reviews via jeacsbookreviews@chinesestudies.eu. We ask prospective reviewers kindly to contact us in advance, and we especially encourage reviews of high-quality translations, monographs, and edited volumes published in European languages other than English. We would be grateful for help in sharing this call within relevant scholarly networks.

Finally, we thank all authors, reviewers, editors, and members of the EACS community whose commitment has made both this special issue and fifty years of scholarly exchange possible. We hope this volume not only celebrates the past but also invites continued reflection on the future of Chinese Studies in Europe.

The Editors

Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies (JEACS)



Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies

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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.



Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies

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EACS AT FIFTY: SPEECH

Reviving a Republic of Letters Among Sinologists in Europe: Kristopher Schipper and Yves Hervouet at Work with Friends and Colleagues to Establish the EACS in the 1970s

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The EACS, heir to the International Conferences of Junior Sinologues active from 1948 to 1971, was founded by a group of European sinologists from twelve countries at a meeting in Paris in February 1975, in the spirit of the quest for rational and truthful science, for peaceful and equal human relations, inherited from the Enlightenment. The founders voted in a provisional Board of twenty members, drafted detailed statutes, and agreed to hold a congress of the Association the following year in Paris. The original English name of the EACS was European Association of Chinese Studies, and was unofficially changed in 1996 to European Association for Chinese Studies, probably in imitation of the American Association for Asian Studies, which could be seen as a model for action in the European Union's diverse academic setting. The new name appeared on communications and the new website, but was only gradually adopted by early members, even British ones. The EACS received the status of foreign association under French law, using its French name only, on 3 December 1975. Its first congress, prepared by a local committee of twelve, was attended by over 200 participants in Paris on 6–11 September 1976. It launched three collective research projects, later supported by the European Science Foundation, on modern Chinese literature, the State in China, and the Taoist Canon, which resulted in a number of important publications from the 1980s to the early 2000s.

歐洲漢學學會（EACS）承繼 1948 至 1971 年青年漢學家國際會議之傳統，於 1975 年 2 月在巴黎由十二國學者創立，秉承啟蒙運動追求理性與平等的精神。學會於同年 12 月獲法國法律認可，並於次年 9 月在巴黎舉辦首屆大會，吸引逾 200 名學者參與。1996 年，其英文名非正式更為“European Association for Chinese Studies”，以順應歐盟多元學術環境。此外，學會早期發起的現代中國文學、中國國家體制及《道藏》等三大集體研究專案，在 20 世紀 80 年代至 21 世紀初產出了諸多重要學術成果。

Keywords: European Association for Chinese Studies, Junior Sinologues, Modern Chinese Literature project, State in China project, *Daozang* project

關鍵詞：歐洲漢學協會，年輕漢學家會議，中國近代文學專案，中國國家專案，《道藏》專案

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The EACS is heir to the now defunct International Conferences of Junior Sinologues. Thomas Kampen has neatly dug up the remains of this informal organisation and told its story in the *EACS Newsletter* (Kampen 2004 and 2008). The Junior Sinologues, as well as the EACS, are a striking example of the productive blend of the Dutch seafarers' or merchants' daring and pragmatic spirit with the quest for an open-minded attitude, for real truth and trust, for peaceful and equal human relations that was typical of the 18th-century Enlightenment in France and other European countries.

The International Conferences of Junior Sinologues were initiated by a visit to Leiden, in the summer of 1947, by two young sinologists coming from England. One was Bill Dobson (1913–1982; see Biographical Note 1), from Oxford; the other, his good friend who had suggested the trip, was Piet van der Loon (1920–2002). Piet was Dutch, aged 27. In 1946 he had come to Cambridge as a research student under Gustav Haloun (1898–1951; see Biographical Note 2). He had started his Chinese studies in Leiden under the famous scholar Jan Julius Lodewijk Duyvendak (1889–1954), and when the German army occupied the Netherlands in May 1940, he registered as a Sinologist, not as a student, so that he escaped being sent to a work camp, and went on studying hard on his own with his girlfriend, since the university was closed down. Just after the war both of them managed to get to Cambridge University for further Chinese studies. Now Piet wanted to understand the situation at the Sinological Institute which Duyvendak had founded in Leiden in 1930.

In their talks and discussions in Leiden, the two visitors from Britain and their local fellow-students agreed on the deep isolation they were feeling in their field of scholarship, and on the need for regular meetings and exchange among them, together with all the young scholars engaged in Chinese studies in European countries, in order to pool and advance knowledge and training resources. They decided to convene a conference as soon as possible, giving notice to every known centre and scholar across Western Europe.

British sinologists were very supportive and the response from neighbouring countries was warm enthusiasm. Piet van der Loon was appointed as Assistant Lecturer in Chinese at Cambridge, so he was able to marry his girlfriend Minnie, an excellent sinologist, and play his role as an official host when, on 6 January 1948, eighteen Junior Sinologues met in Cambridge. Five came from Leiden, ten were from London, Cambridge and Oxford, two from Paris, one from Stockholm. Among them, Anthony Hulsewé (1910–1993), Robert P. Kramers (1920–2002), Edwin G. Pulleyblank (1922–2013), Jacques Gernet (1921–2018), and Hans Bielenstein (1920–2015) already ranked as lecturers or professors. In addition, more senior scholars participated in some events or presented papers: they were Gustav Haloun (Cambridge), Arthur Waley (1889–1966) and Walter Simon (1893–1981) from London, and Homer H. Dubs (1892–1969) from Oxford. At the final meeting, the delegates decided to meet again in Leiden, in the following year, to exchange materials and information.

For the next twenty years, the Junior Sinologues held a conference every year, with a growing number of participants, except in 1960 when the conference scheduled in Moscow was cancelled. Soviet scholars had participated in the conferences in the early 1950s, as had a few scholars from Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. The big event was the participation of four scholars sent by mainland China in 1956. They were Jian Bozan 翦伯贊 (1898–1968), dean of the History Department at Peking University, head of its Party committee and vice-president of the University; Xia Nai 夏鼐 (1910–1985), head of the Institute of Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Sciences; Zhang Zhilian 張芝聯 (1918–2008), assistant professor of history at Peking University, who had an excellent knowledge of French and English, was highly appreciated by his dean Jian Bozan, and served as interpreter; the fourth scholar was Zhou Yiliang 週一良 (1913–2001), a Harvard PhD with an excellent knowledge of Japanese, a specialist in Buddhism, Professor in the Peking University History Department, and member of its Party committee. The visit had been arranged through the Sino-French Friendship Association sponsored by the French Communist Party. It enabled Zhang Zhilian not only to renew his old acquaintance with the French diplomat François Geoffroy Dechaume, but also to get in touch with French Marxist historians, such as Jean Bruhat, a specialist on the Paris Commune, and Jean Chesneaux (1922–2007), a historian of contemporary China (Zhang 2000, 288–289).

The Chinese visit to Paris was reciprocated by an invitation to five French sinologists to visit China in 1957, and by scholarships at Peking University in 1958–1960 for two French students engaged in Chinese studies (see Biographical Note 3). The participation of mainland Chinese scholars in the Junior Sinologues conferences could not be continued because there was no more money on the Chinese side to pay for the travel, no funding from elsewhere, and increasingly conflicting views on both sides. Under the guidance of outstanding and energetic scholars, such as Piet van der Loon, Herbert Franke (1914–2011), and Yves Hervouet (1921–1999), the Junior Sinologues engaged in major projects that were substantive, collaborative undertakings. Let us just remember the *Sung Project*, to which so many scholars contributed with so many important publications, and the *Revue bibliographique de sinologie*, started in 1955, with a first volume in 1956 prefaced by Étienne Balazs (1905–1963), which enlisted contributors from all over the world, until its last volume for 2003, published in 2006. They served a strong, scientific development of Chinese studies everywhere outside mainland China, and perhaps even within mainland China. They also promoted easier communication among specialists and other scholars. Some conference volumes were published, for instance the volume from part of the 1965 Leeds conference, *Mouvements populaires et sociétés secrètes*, printed in Paris in 1970, partially translated and revised in a publication by Stanford University Press in 1972.

In the summer of 1968, the Junior Sinologues Conference was supposed to be held in Prague. However, the Soviet tanks invaded Prague, and our Czech colleagues all suffered times of

duress. The conference was cancelled. The papers which had been prepared on the topic of the May Fourth Movement in China were, nevertheless, published in Prague that year (by *Orientální ústav*, that is the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences). Italian colleagues offered to move the intended conference to Senigallia the following year. Few people came to attend, while discussions were heated by political standpoints. Subsequent conferences in Stockholm in 1970, and Oxford in 1971, were barely advertised. Originally, one of the bonds that helped Junior Sinologues to keep together and work together was the friendship or at least the common experience of living in China, as at least Hulswé, Wolfgang Franke (1912–2007), Maxime Kaltenmark (1910–2002), and Göran Malmqvist (1924–2019) had stayed for several years in China before, during, or just after the Second World War, and a few had come back home with a Chinese wife. Gernet, who was posted to Hanoi in 1948, at the French School of the Far-East (EFEO), had travelled to China and there met European colleagues. Hervouet, as a young Jesuit, had studied in Peking from 1947 to 1950, before leaving the religious order for an academic career, with full support from Paul Demiéville (1894–1979). For a full year, in 1954–1956, with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, he visited all the sinological libraries of Western Europe, including the East-Berlin National Library, to produce a three-volume record of their holdings and accounts of their resources. He also took that opportunity to make close acquaintance with many old and young colleagues in every sinological centre. Another bond among the younger generation of Junior Sinologues was that most of them had a rather positive view of the Communist regime in China, as compared to the plight of the whole Chinese population during and after World War II. They were equally eager not only to re-establish contacts among West European sinologists that had been interrupted by the war, but also to renew cooperation with their colleagues in Eastern Europe, now locked in by the Cold War.

These aims had been more or less achieved, although cooperation with Eastern European colleagues seemed in poor shape. However, the yearly conferences had become very difficult to manage efficiently without some kind of permanent structure which could allow the acquisition of predictable subsidies and resources, the planning of conferences and research projects with adequate coordination, and the provision of channels of regular information and communication to members of a sinological community that was growing, as a result of current affairs, and diversifying swiftly, while public demand and expectations upon it were just expanding, as a result of the current political and economic situation in the Western world, in Southeast Asia, and in China.

Personally, I never had any link with the Junior Sinologues. I even wonder whether I had ever heard about the organisation before I was invited by Kristopher Schipper (1934–2021) and Yves Hervouet to help in the founding of a European Association of Chinese Studies. That was the original English name, probably a direct translation of the French name (*Association européenne d'études chinoises*), the one that was statutory, declared at the Police

Prefecture in Paris, approved by the Interior Ministry, and published in the *Journal officiel* on January 22, 1976, on page 223 under the heading of Foreign Associations (Associations étrangères).

The English name was changed to European Association **for** Chinese Studies, surreptitiously, by Laura Rivkin in London, who was then in charge of the *Newsletter*, in the ninth issue of the *EACS Newsletter*, published in March 1996. But, surprisingly, the *Survey* no. 7, published in 1998 under the care of Michael Loewe (1922–2025), entitled *Chinese Studies in the U.K.*, has on its cover “European Association **of** Chinese Studies”, just like the other *Surveys*, two of which had appeared as issues of the *Newsletter*. *Chinese Studies in the U.K.* refers several times to decisions made at Board meetings of the European Association **of** Chinese Studies in Barcelona in September 1996. I must confess that I noticed the change in the English name of our association only two years ago. A young German scholar in charge of editing a collective volume in which I contributed an essay changed my “of” to a “for”. I protested, arguing “of” was the right wording, which I knew from being a founding member. He replied that all the documents issued by the EACS used “for” and that I should abide by the official standard. Looking at recent EACS announcements, I realised he was right, and agreed to the change, while putting in brackets the original name since my reference was to the very beginning of the association. I was, however, eager to understand when the change had happened. To my query our then president Bart Dessein replied he was not aware of any formal decision to change the English name and had always seen “for”. I then went on checking old files. Finding Laura Rivkin’s “for” in March 1996 made me suspect, at first, that her sense of sound British English had simply corrected a mistaken wording in our original French English. However, finding that most British scholarly associations were called “of”, not “for” a specialised study, and moreover that in 1998, in Cambridge, such an outstanding British scholar as Michael Loewe stuck to the “of” puzzled me further. I went on in my search and found the following evidence. Once Rudolf Wagner, who served as our General Secretary, was elected to replace me as president of the EACS in Barcelona, in September 1996, he himself used the wording “European Association **for** Chinese Studies” and extended it to all means of communication, such as the new website, as soon as November 1996 in the *Newsletter* no. 11. Only the printed application form for new members kept “of” for some time.

I believe Wagner’s changing “of” to “for” was simply in imitation of the American Association for Asian Studies, which he had very much in mind as a model for action in the European Union’s piecemeal and narrow-minded academic setting. He was a fighter, and wished to fight for the sake of Chinese studies, to enlarge the number of students and of teaching and research positions, and to increase the funding for libraries, research, and fieldwork. In his dreams, all that should be in accordance with the vastness of China, of its past history and culture. If necessary, one could limit spending on other less important fields of knowledge.

Hervouet and Schipper, in my opinion, had a completely different view of the importance or significance of Chinese studies for Europe. They saw these studies as a huge field that no single scholar could ever master, not even scores of scholars spread over centres supplied with the best libraries and equipment. In their eyes, Chinese studies were the most important for themselves personally, but they did not see them as above any other field of study in absolute terms. They thought that all fields of real scholarship were valuable. Their aim in the political and mental turmoil left over from the crushing of the Prague Spring, and from the students' and workers' revolts in France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Yugoslavia, Spain, Sweden, the U.K., was to bring together again responsible European colleagues in the field of Chinese studies in order to build a better organised association that could obtain funding from the European Communities (created in 1967), and would provide better training to students, as well as undertaking high quality research, taking advantage of diplomatic relations with the PRC.

Kristopher Schipper, born in the Netherlands in 1934, had studied Chinese, Japanese, art, and Chinese religion in Paris, from 1957 to 1962, attending courses and graduating at the École du Louvre, the School of Oriental Languages, the Sorbonne, and the Practical School for Higher Studies (EPHE), where he was trained by Rolf Stein (1911–1999) and Kaltenmark. From 1962 to 1972, he was a member of the French School of the Far-East in Taiwan, studying Taoism, even being ordained as priest, and establishing the first branch of the EFEO in the island. He went back to Paris in 1973, as he was elected as research professor (directeur d'études) at the EPHE 5th Section, History of Religions. He had a close friendship with Piet van der Loon, he had worked in Taiwan on the identification of the manuscript sources in the *Daozang* 道藏 and the exploration of its contents, and they wanted together to produce a comprehensive analysis and historical bibliography of all the 1,500 works and collections contained in the Ming edition of the *Daozang*. The work presupposed gathering an international team and obtaining funds for a long-term project.

I have not yet been able to find out how preparation for the EACS really started. According to a circular letter dated 1 October 1975, sent to me and “to all known sinologists in Europe”, on 22 and 23 February 1975, sinologists from twelve countries had met in Paris. They founded the European Association of Chinese Studies, drafted its statutes and voted in a provisional Board and Standing Committee, for which they requested approval at the first congress of the newly born association. That congress would be held from 5 to 11 September 1976 in Nanterre. It would include conferences of specialists and projects. The provisional Board included Søren Egerod (1923–1995) from Denmark as president, Hervouet as vice-president, Michel Cartier (1934–2019) as treasurer, Schipper as secretary, and Brunhild Staiger (1938–2017), of the Institute of Asian Studies in Hamburg, as vice-secretary. Other members were: Janusz Chmielewski (1916–1998) from Poland, Piero Corradini (1933–2006) then Professor at the Istituto universitario orientale of Naples, Barnabas Csongor (1923–

2018), chairman of the Department of Chinese and Asiatic Studies of Lorand Eötvös University in Budapest, Anna Dolezalova (1935–1992) from the Department of Oriental Studies at the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, Roland Felber (1935–2001), professor at Humboldt University in Berlin, Gernet, Tileman Grimm (1922–2002), professor at Tübingen University, Brian Hook (1935–), professor at Leeds University, Hulsewé, Robert Kramers (1920–2002), professor at Zürich University, Lionello Lanciotti (1925–2015), professor at Venice University, Piet van der Loon, then professor at Oxford University, Göran Malmqvist, professor at Stockholm University, Manfred Porkert (1933–2015), professor at Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich, and Robert Shih (Shi Jieyun 史接雲, 1926–1983), professor at Louvain University.

That first meeting had been funded with 2000 francs left over from the Orientalist Congress held in Paris in the summer of 1973, and 800 francs lent by the Société Asiatique, to be refunded on future grants to the new association. I could not ascertain, however, whether all the 20 board members actually attended. Paul Demiéville did attend.

The evidence I found from my 1975 datebook and my memory is that Schipper called me to invite me for lunch at his home. I knew who he was, a specialist of Chinese religion and a colleague of my husband at the EPHE, but had never met him. I had lunch at his home on 3 March 3 1975. He lived with his charming Dutch first wife Wendela and his two small daughters in a wonderful small private house with a garden in a quiet area of the 14th district in Paris, which had been built on the London model in the 1840s. He showed me his Taoist altar inside the house where he practised his ritual. He then explained the plan he had with Hervouet and some foreign colleagues to organise a new, legally recognised association that would hold conferences, the first one to be held in Paris in September 1976. The association should sponsor collaborative projects for which the European Science Foundation could provide funds collected in proportion to a percentage of the GDP of member states. He and Hervouet were dealing with classical China, so they needed help for modern and contemporary history. He then enlisted me on a “organising committee” of twelve French colleagues in charge of helping to prepare the actual programme of the conference.

The Standing Committee of the Association met on 5–6 September 1975 in Hamburg and held discussions with staff from the newly created European Science Foundation. A further meeting was held in Paris on 24 September 1975. Practical arrangements had then been decided: date and place of the Congress (5–11 September 1976 at Paris X University in the Nanterre suburb); accommodation, payments, information to European sinologists; participation limited to members of the Association, but sinologists of non-European nationality would be invited if living in Europe or passing through; a balance between panels and individual papers; the need for a general theme about the interaction of cultures in China, which the organising committee was in charge of defining, with full freedom to turn down paper proposals.

The organising committee met on 1 October 1975, made up of twelve members: Schipper and Léon Vandermeersch (1928–2021) in charge of religion; Jean-Pierre Diény (1927–2014) and Hervouet for ancient literature; Paul Bady (1941–) and Robert Ruhlmann (1920–1984) for modern literature; Vadim Elisseeff (1918–2002) and Michèle Pirazzoli-T'serstevens (1934–2018) for art history; Gernet and Cartier for imperial history; Marie-Claire Bergère (1933–) and myself for modern and contemporary history. It was decided on a suggestion by Gernet, further refined by Bady and other members, that the Congress theme would be “Popular and official traditions in China (interaction between different aspects of Chinese culture, in particular between *ya* 雅 and *su* 俗)”. Several eminent European colleagues were to be invited as speakers on various disciplinary and chronological aspects of the theme. We did our best to contact and convince them, and if possible to find some money for travel expenses. Financial support had been requested from the Foreign Ministry and the State Secretariat of Universities; further requests would be directed to the European Council and the European Communities. Some publishers and private donors would also be approached, while not a penny could be hoped from the French National Commission for UNESCO. The Musée de l'Homme and the Cernuschi Museum were preparing special exhibitions.

On the same day, 1 October, a circular letter signed by Egerod and Schipper was sent to “all known European sinologists” (some 200 names). It informed them about the foundation of the EACS, and included a copy of the statutes and the list of provisional Board members. It invited the recipients to join the Association and to attend the Congress of Chinese Studies, open to subscribing members only, to be held in Nanterre on 5–11 September 1976, where the general assembly would have to vote for approval of the statutes.

Proceedings were started with the French Ministry of the Interior to obtain legal establishment for the EACS. The status of “foreign association” was granted by an order of that Ministry dated 3 December 1975, registered at the Police Prefecture on 9 December 1975, and published in the *Journal officiel* of 22 January 1976. The acronym was AEDEC.

At the meeting of the organising committee on 14 January 1976, over one hundred scholars had registered for the Congress, half of them foreigners. All sinological centres had been contacted and posters sent advertising the Congress. Although Nanterre campus offered slightly cheaper accommodation (237 francs per person for the week versus 245 francs), it was decided to hold the Congress at the Cité Universitaire in Paris, which offered a far more convenient and pleasant location, larger spaces, and better lodging and food facilities. Bady had been able to secure grants of 20,000 francs from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and 8,000 francs from the State Secretariat of Universities. European authorities remained adamant in refusing. A registration fee of 50 francs would be required from all participants. Schipper had drafted a programme that provided for a mixture of fifteen guest speakers and fourteen individual papers, two round tables, two committee sessions for discussing future collective research projects, and two general assembly sessions. As he requested, Ruhlmann

would inform the Chinese Embassy that Chinese colleagues in the humanities would be welcomed as observers.

The circular sent all over Europe on 2 February 1976, together with a congress registration form and an EACS membership form, stressed again that only EACS members could attend, that is individuals active in teaching or research regarding Chinese studies, PhD students included, who had been sponsored by two earlier members, and had paid the subscription fee. It announced the change of location to the Cité Universitaire, the room price, and the required prepayment before 1 May of 150 francs for reservation. It gave the theme of the Congress, on which any participant was allowed to present a paper, a summary of which in less than a thousand words should reach the organising committee before 1 June. Since only a limited number of oral presentations could be accepted, early proposals would receive preference, but latecomers' papers would be published later on in the Congress volume. Several committee work-sessions were being planned. Participants' requests to set up a specific committee should be addressed to the organising committee before 1 May. An excursion, a visit to a special art exhibition, and the EACS General Assembly were also featured.

In a letter of 20 April 1976 to EACS subscribing members, Schipper sent the list of them (over 150), urged them to send in their congress registration form before 1 May, and asked them to think about a Chinese name for the EACS, which should be decided by the coming General Assembly, proposing three options: 歐洲中國學協會, 聯學會, 西學堂.

At the meeting of the organising committee on 29 April 1976, Schipper told us that beside about sixty registrations for the Congress, the Soviet Academy of Sciences had written expressing their wish to become a member of the EACS and to participate in the Congress with about fifteen delegates. As for non-Europeans, applications to attend came mainly from Taiwan and Singapore, but requested formal invitations, which could not be sent. Owing to the organising committee's collective networking, the Congress programme was taking promising shape. A number of prominent guest-speakers in leading fields had accepted the invitation. Several special committees had been formed and were planning their respective work-sessions, although a work-session still needed to be set up for librarians. Among individual papers, priority was given to foreign speakers, and adequate time would be given to Soviet colleagues even if their topic did not fit with the Congress theme. Following Ruhlmann's visit to the Chinese cultural attaché, who had expressed interest in the EACS initiative, the Association would write to request an appointment for Diény and Ruhlmann, who would ask for the participation in the Congress of Chinese lecturers and teachers currently in Europe.

A second circular letter was sent to all participants on 2 June 1976. It gave all practical details and listed entertainments at Chantilly, Royaumont Abbey, the Cernuschi Museum, and elsewhere. It promised the definitive programme to be sent in July, and mentioned fifteen paper sessions, and two round-tables, one introduced by Gernet on the Congress theme, and another on sources and methods of research on People's China, introduced by Marie-Claire

Bergère and myself. Seven “specialists’ seminars” convened by members of the organising committee would be held on linguistics, libraries, art history, classical literature, historical fiction, Taoism, and contemporary China; other seminars could be added according to participants’ requests. It ended by stating that the Chinese Embassies in Paris and Brussels (the Common Market) had replied to the invitation sent by the organising committee, stating that it was not possible this time to send a delegation from China, but that Chinese language teachers in our universities could attend the Congress.

Notification of the first general meeting of the EACS, to be held on 8 September 1976, was sent to all members on 29 June, with its agenda, relevant articles of the statutes, and the list of the outgoing provisional Board members who were proposed for reelection.

The Congress opened on 6 September 1976. Everybody on all aspects did their best. Almost 200 participant members of the EACS attended the Congress, plus many dependants and other participants, some of whom, such as Immanuel Hsu (1923–2005), had come from far away. The programme was very rich, with a good mixture of expert individual papers and many opportunities for group discussions and exchange on more general topics, sources, and methods, in a lively and friendly atmosphere. As Schipper wrote on 20 December, when sending around the minutes of the first General Assembly and those of the subsequent business meeting of the Board, the Congress was “a great success”. The death of Mao Zedong on 9 September brought in some diversion. On 6 September, however, the EACS members had approved the statutes of their association and voted to confirm the twenty members who formed the previous provisional Board, as well as to elect four more members, namely Girgin Girginov (Bulgaria), Mikhail Sladkovsky (USSR), Vladislav Sorokin (USSR), Bodo Wiethoff (German Federal Republic), and Erik Zürcher (1928–2008; Netherlands), who replaced Hulsewé among the former provisional members. At the Board meeting that soon convened, a new Standing Committee was elected, in which Sladkovsky (1906–1985) was added to the former members as second vice-president, and Demiéville, Bernhard Karlgren (1889–1978), and Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984) were elected as honorary members of the EACS.

At the assembly business meeting on 11 September a resolution was voted for, urging the *Revue bibliographique de sinologie* to resume publication at regular intervals. The publication of a *Newsletter* and of *Occasional Papers* was planned. It was agreed that the Board would try to get additional funding for the *T’oung pao* in order to demonstrate its sponsorship and that Brill would offer a reduced subscription rate for the journal to EACS members.

The Board proposed also to support several research projects as suggested by the work-sessions of “specialists’ seminars”. They were discussed at a meeting organised by the European Science Foundation in Munich on 12 May 1977, with Egerod, Kramers, Glen Dudbridge (1938–2017), Schipper, and Wolfgang Bauer (1930–1997). Zürcher was ill and could not attend. Only three projects were agreed upon as better designed, but needing further elaboration. They were the project on the State in China suggested by Stuart Schram (1924–

2012), who had been a brilliant guest-speaker on the first morning of the Congress and pushed his idea with the approval of Gernet, Karl Büniger (1903–1997), and others in a last work-session on 10 September dedicated to historical research and social sciences; the modern literature project suggested by Bady and Malmqvist, with large teams of potential contributors; the *Daozang* project suggested and long nurtured by van der Loon and Schipper with staunch support from dedicated colleagues and students.

The three projects lasted several years. They brought together many scholars of different fields and from different countries whatever their political regime: contributors from the Soviet Union, the United States, mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong exchanged ideas and were published together, a feature quite unusual at the time. It glanced back to the universalist faith of the European Enlightenment and also to its requirement of scientific accuracy, as evidenced by the high standards of the publications that boosted the fame of current European sinology on the international scene.

The full story of these projects supported by the European Science Foundation would deserve a special account. I shall just mention here their crowning achievements. The project on “The State in China: Concepts and Realities” was the speediest. It enrolled some seventy scholars who attended three conferences and published two volumes of selected revised papers in 1985 and 1987 (Schram 1985, 1987). The assignments of the literature project, the four volumes of *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature, 1900–1949* directed by Malmqvist, needed a few more years for completion (Malmqvist 1988). Over a hundred devoted scholars were brought together to work within a thoughtfully planned research framework and produce a unique, long-lasting tool for any study of Chinese society in the first half of the 20th century. In 1988 were published a volume on the novel edited by Milena Dolezalova (Dolezalova 1988) and a volume on the short story edited by Zbigniew Slupski (Slupski 1988). In 1989 was published a volume on poetry edited by Lloyd Haft (Haft 1989). The volume on drama edited by Bernd Eberstein came out in 1990 (Eberstein 1990). The *Daozang* project led by Schipper, who in 1991 received the dedicated collaboration of Franciscus Verhellen as editor, enrolled a host of talents everywhere in the world. Their aim was to classify and analyse in meaningful chronological and typological categories the numerous texts collected in the *Daozang*. The first thorny issue was to design a typological scheme that produced a consistent pattern of categories across successive periods of time. In 1979, on Zürcher’s insistence, the team pioneered the use of a computer to establish an electronic data bank. As Chinese character codes were not available at the time, the data were entered in *pinyin* transcription in the mainframe computer of the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) at Orsay, with much painstaking process, but efficient results. By the time that the support of the European Science Foundation and of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft came to an end in 1983, the working team had benefited from fruitful exchanges with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, with Taoist religious communities on the two

sides of the Taiwan strait, and with academics in Japan and North America. Among them was growing a renewed interest for historical studies of Taoism, as confirmed by the publication in 1988 of a corrected print edition of the Ming *Daozang* by the Wenwu Press 文物出版社 and, in 2004 by Huaxia Press 華夏出版社, of *Zhonghua Daozang* 中華道藏, a collection of all texts related to Taoist beliefs, including those of the Qing period and those from archaeological findings, under the care of the Chinese Taoist Association 中國道教協會. Grants and scholarships came in from various quarters; of special significance were the fellowships obtained in 1994–1995 from the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS). The monumental and groundbreaking three volumes of *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* edited by Kristopher Schipper and Franciscus Verellen were published in 2004 by the University of Chicago Press (Schipper 2004). This project had drawn together many more worldwide material and scholarly contributions than in the original plan.

To conclude on this initial stage of the EACS, I would stress that the first Board advocated a pooling of resources for research, training, and advanced training, in which the EACS would serve as a clearing-house for ideas and projects at the European level, in the spirit of really true cooperation, devoid of petty-minded competition or any infighting. Many other projects, workshops, and summer schools were later conducted by the EACS. Under Rudolf Wagner's presidency, from 1996 onwards, a very large programme for the digitalisation of our sinological library resources was launched. The Erasmus programme was deftly used to provide adequate tutoring for students who were trying to explore little-known fields. Hervouet and Schipper had initiated the EACS with a small group of trusted friends and colleagues at home and in the main sinological centres in Europe. Their aim was to cultivate sound and solid knowledge about China, to enlarge and deepen the understanding of the traditions and past of the Chinese world, and of its changes in modern times, with a keen sense of their responsibility to teach scores of young people about China and to prepare them to interact and work with Chinese people in a rapidly moving universe, where distance and boundaries were no longer keeping human beings far apart from each other.

Today our sinological centres in Europe have grown into very large academic communities almost everywhere, so that the biennial EACS conference is less of a rallying festival than it used to be half a century ago. Of course, specialists or students do meet on many other occasions. However, I hope that future organisers of our EACS conferences will try to convince colleagues in all centres to attend themselves and to send students to the EACS conference, in order to maintain that spirit of friendly and challenging scientific enlightenment which gave birth to our Association.

Biographical Notes

William Arthur Charles Harvey Dobson, born in London, went to China in 1938 with a missionary vocation that soon faded into passion for Chinese language and culture. He reported to Tianjin for military duty in 1941 and was sent to tough assignments in Hong Kong, Singapore, and along the Burma Road, joining Lord Mountbatten's personal staff in late 1942. He served as interpreter to Winston Churchill at the Cairo Conference in 1943, then as liaison officer in China until the end of the war, attached to Indian Viceroy Lord Mountbatten's secretariat, from which he resigned in late 1945. He entered Oxford in 1946, where he graduated in Oriental Studies and earned a doctorate of letters. From 1948 to 1952, he was a lecturer in Chinese there. Then, in 1952, the University of Toronto invited him to set up a programme in East Asian Studies. As professor and chair of the new department, he devoted the rest of his life to the task of building Chinese studies in Canada and to the publication of major works on ancient Chinese texts and the history of the Chinese language (Woodside & Brook 1982).

Gustav Haloun was a Czech sinologist, trained in Vienna and Leipzig, with a habilitation at Charles University in Prague, where he taught as *Privatdozent*, and later in Halle and Göttingen. In 1938 he was elected to the Chair of Chinese Language and History in Cambridge and later to a fellowship at King's College. Besides his research on philology and textual criticism, he secured the creation of further posts in Far Eastern subjects; he also enlarged the Chinese Library and recatalogued its whole collection, bringing it to a leading rank among European sinological libraries (Simon 1952).

The five sinologists were René Étiemble (1909–2002), Vadim Elisseeff (1918–2002), Jacques Gernet, Yves Hervouet, and Jean Chesneaux; the students were Michel Cartier (1934–2019) and Jacques Pimpaneau (1934–2021) (Chesneaux 1999, 76. Roux 2007). Chesneaux had joined the French Communist Party on his return from China in late 1948. He was among the founding members of the Sino-French Friendship Association in late 1952, and a member of its board, which was chaired by the Communist Party member and eminent geographer Jean Dresch, professor at the Sorbonne University. Dresch and other members had just been invited to visit China in the summer of 1952. The association campaigned for the diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China. It published *Paris-Pékin*, a four-page internal leaflet that, from 1955, changed into an illustrated 24-page journal available to subscribers, whose editor remained the anthropologist André-Georges Haudricourt (1911–1996), a close friend of Gernet (*Paris-Pékin* 1952–1958).

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EACS AT FIFTY: SPEECH

Why the 'European Association of Chinese Studies' Matters

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In this celebratory speech, the history of the 'European Association of Chinese Studies' is sketched against the background of the developments of world history since 1975, the year the Association was established. It is outlined how these developments have also impacted the nature of Sinology and Chinese Studies, the way these study domains have been organized at European universities, and the way scholars have, throughout these developments organized themselves in academic associations. The speech also outlines how the 'European Association of Chinese Studies' has defined and redefined itself in the course of its history.

本賀詞以 1975 年學會創立以來的世界歷史演變為宏觀背景，系統勾勒了歐洲漢學學會的發展脈絡。文章闡釋了歷史變遷如何深刻影響漢學與中國研究的學科本質、歐洲大學相關學科的組織建制，以及學者如何依託學術組織凝聚力量。同時，本文亦概述了歐洲漢學學會在發展歷程中，不斷界定與重塑自身學術定位的演進軌跡。

Keywords: global changes, academic profession, neoliberalism, tradition

關鍵詞： 全球變化、學術專業、新自由主義、傳統

When the ‘Association européenne d’études chinoises’ was founded in 1975, the world looked different from how it looks now. The following overview—a societal picture—of some major events of that year should serve to bring back to memory that year for those among us whose memories of that year have faded, and illuminate the backdrop for those of us who were not yet at the age of memory back then.

January 1, 1975: the Swedish monarch is stripped of all political power bestowed on him in the 1809 Constitution, and the country becomes a full parliamentary democracy. January 2: the United States Department of Interior designates the grizzly bear a threatened species. January 15: Portugal signs an accord for Angola’s independence. January 31: John Lennon releases his single ‘#9 Dream’. February 18: Italy broadens its abortion law. February 21: Watergate figures John Mitchell, US Minister of Justice, Harry R. Haldeman, Nixon’s White House Chief of Staff, and John D. Ehrlichman, White House Counsel and Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs, are sentenced to 2½ to 8 years in prison for conspiracy and obstruction of justice. March 11: a rightist military coup in Portugal under General António de Spínola fails. March 26: the Biological Weapons Convention enters into force. April 4: Microsoft is founded. April 16: the Cambodian Red Khmer occupies Phnom Penh and the next day, April 17, captures it, marking the end of the Cambodian civil war. April 18: John Lennon gives what would be his final public performance at the Grand Ballroom of the Hilton Hotel, New York City. April 19: the British rock band Queen begins a concert tour of Japan. April 21: Nguyen Van Thieu, the last President of South Vietnam, resigns after ten years in power. April 23: Harold Pinter’s play ‘No Man’s Land’ premieres in London. April 25: Mário Soares wins Portugal’s first free election since 1925 following the Carnation Revolution of 1974. April 30: North Vietnamese troops capture Saigon, ending the Vietnam War. May 21: Lowell W. Perry is confirmed as chairman of the ‘US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’. May 28: the ‘Economic Community of West African States’ (ECOWAS) is established by the Treaty of Lagos. June 5: the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat reopens the Suez Canal that had been closed since 1967. June 5: the United Kingdom electorate votes 67% to 33% in a referendum to remain part of the European Common Market. June 11: Greece adopts a Constitution. June 14: Janis Ian releases “At Seventeen”. June 25: Mozambique becomes independent as People’s Republic of Mozambique. July 5: Pink Floyd debuts their album “Wish You Were Here” at the Knebworth Festival in England. On the same day, the Cape Verde Islands gain independence after 500 years of Portuguese rule. July 6: Dmitri Shostakovich completes his “Sonate for alto”, opus 147. July 8: Israeli Premier Yitzhak Rabin visits West Germany. July 12: Sao Tomé e Príncipe gains independence from Portugal. July 17: NASA’s Apollo 18 and the Soviet Soyuz 19 make the first US/USSR linkup in space. July 24: the fashion house Giorgio Armani is founded in Milan. July 29: Gerald Ford becomes the first US President to visit the Auschwitz concentration camp. August 14: King Olav V of Norway opens Svalbard Airport near Longyearbyen, the northernmost airport in the world with scheduled public flights.

September 4: Egypt and Israel sign the 'Sinai Interim Agreement' (also known as the Sinai II Agreement). September 16: Papua New Guinea gains independence from Australia. October 9: Andrei Sakharov wins the Nobel Peace Prize. October 23: 90% of women in Iceland go on strike to protest the gender pay gap and the unequal distribution of unpaid labour, shutting down the country for a day. October 26: Anwar Sadat becomes the first Egyptian President to visit the United States. November 11: Angola gains independence from Portugal. November 22: Juan Carlos I is proclaimed King of Spain as the monarchy is restored after 36 years of dictatorship. November 25: the Netherlands grants Suriname independence. November 28: the Democratic Republic of East Timor is proclaimed. November 29: US President Gerald Ford signs the 'Education for All Handicapped Children Act' requiring states to provide free education for children with a disability. December 1: President Gerald Ford visits the People's Republic of China. December 3: the Lao People's Democratic Republic is proclaimed, and on the same day, an Order of the Minister of the Interior of the French Republic is issued concerning the establishment of the 'Association européenne d'études chinoises'. December 9: authorization for the establishment of the 'Association européenne d'études chinoises' is registered at the police headquarters of Paris. December 21: finally, Madagascar adopts a Constitution (see "Historical Events in 1975").

To avoid portraying a too optimistic picture, 1975 was also the year in which, on April 13, General Noël Milarew Odingar staged a military coup in Chad; members of the 'Rote Armee Fraktion' blew up the West German embassy in Sweden on April 25; and army officers in Bangladesh staged a military coup d'état, assassinating elected President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and installing Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad as President on August 15. Also on August 15, Miki Takeo made the first official pilgrimage to the Yasukuni Shrine by an incumbent prime minister on the anniversary of the end of World War II. On September 1, all political parties were forbidden in Bangladesh. On October 20, the US Supreme Court ruled teachers could legally spank their pupils following a warning (see "Historical Events in 1975").

This is a long and, admittedly, a very subjective list of events, but it should provide some counterweight to the currently dominant narrative that the changes on the global scene we are witnessing now are of a magnitude that is unprecedented in world history. What is different, however, is the general tendency of the changes we are now witnessing. The optimistic mood of decolonization, growing constitutionalism, democratization, equal rights, and hopefulness for the future, has given way to a gloomy mood characterized by renewed conservatism, an attitude of looking inwardly, democratic backsliding, and the questioning of equal rights. I will come back to this further on, but first let me elaborate on two important events from the year 1975 mentioned in the list above: the Order of the Minister of the Interior of the French Republic, issued on December 3, and the authorization for the establishment of the 'Association européenne d'études chinoises' on December 9.

Loyal to my erstwhile function as President of the ‘Association européenne d’études chinoises’, I have delved into some primary sources relating to the foundation of the Association. On its page 223 of its 22 January 1976 issue, the *Journal officiel de la République Française* states the following, under the heading ‘Associations Étrangères’:

“3 décembre 1975. Arrêté du ministre de l’intérieur. (Autorisation enregistrée à la préfecture de police le 9 décembre 1975.) *Association européenne d’études chinoises*. Objet: promouvoir et favoriser, par tous moyens, toutes activités scientifiques relevant des études chinoises. Siège social: 22, avenue du Président-Wilson, 75116 Paris”.

From this document, we also learn that the Association was established under the “Décret-loi du 12 avril 1939 et décret du 1er juin 1939”. The related document of the Ministère de l’Intérieur further stipulates the list of persons who are charged with the administration of the Association. The latter, so we read, is in accordance with the “Loi du 1er juillet 1901, article 5” and the “décret du 16 août 1901, article 2”.

That I refer to the founding documents of our Association in French and to the French name of the association is not without reason. I will come back to the contemporary significance of this name towards the end of this address. Moreover, until further notice, French is an official language of the Association.

That the tendency of the changes on the world scene we are now witnessing is fundamentally different from the changes back in 1975 is clear from some further reading in the *Journal officiel de la République Française* of 22 January 1976. Apart from the ‘Association européenne d’études chinoises’, under the rubric of ‘Associations Étrangères’ we also find the establishment of the ‘International American College’ in Aix-en-Provence, the ‘Club de football de la Banque de Bilbao’ in Paris, the ‘Association portugaise pour la culture, la récréation et les sports’ in Le Thillot, the ‘Association des amis de la langue polonaise’ in Aulnay-sous-Bois, the ‘Institut des hautes études talmudiques “Yad Mordekhai”’ in Paris, and the ‘Union sportive et culturelle des Portugais, Pontoise-Cergy’ in Pontoise.¹ This list shows how in the mid-1970s—along with the unification process of the then European Economic Community—the European mindset was open to the outside world.

The establishment of our Association was thus in line with a statement made by Joseph Needham (1900–1995), the famous historian of Chinese science and civilization, in the presidential address entitled “The Dialogue of East and West” he delivered in 1955 to the ‘Britain-China Friendship Association’. The opening lines of this presidential address run as follows:

¹ *Journal officiel de la République Française*, 22 January 1976, p. 223.

“For three thousand years, a dialogue has been going on between the two ends of the Old World. Greatly have they influenced each other, and very different are the cultures they have produced. We have now good reason to think that the problems of the world will never be solved so long as they are considered only from a European point of view. It is necessary to see Europe from the outside, to see European history, and European failure, no less than European achievement, through the eyes of that larger part of humanity, the peoples of Asia (and indeed also of Africa)” Needham (1969).

This statement testifies to how modern sinology had overcome the nineteenth-century paradigm that determined how the non-European ‘other’ was perceived. The endeavour to understand China from within was shared by many then young sinologists, and the ‘European Association of Chinese Studies’ (EACS) was, in 1975, founded as an Association of Friends, with exactly this purpose. Or, why the EACS matters.

The vicissitudes of world history since the founding of our Association have fundamentally changed the scope and approaches of China-related research. Philological research on the Confucian, Legalist, and Daoist classics, at the outset often confined to university departments of ‘classical studies’, was broadened into literary, historical, and linguistic studies. This domain of research that has become referred to as ‘classical sinology’, has further expanded into ‘area studies’, including such domains as economy, politics, social developments, and international relations. The growing importance of China on the world scene has further enlarged the scope of ‘China Studies’, with scholars from within the fields of economic, political, and social sciences. These developments have also impacted the way Chinese studies are organized in Europe, and these developments have been shaped differently in different European countries by the specific historical backgrounds of these individual countries. Throughout this period of specialization and fragmentation, the ‘European Association of Chinese Studies’ has continued to act as the overarching academic association for sinology and Chinese studies, and has incorporated the many voices in this academic field. Also in the contemporary period, characterized by, on the one hand, an increasingly assertive and vocal China on the world scene, and, on the other hand, a concomitant hesitance to engage with China on the part of European political leadership, the EACS has an important role to play. Or, why the EACS matters.

Moreover, the Association’s biennial conferences that have always been generously sponsored by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, have been an excellent venue to bring researchers from all these different backgrounds and engaging in all these different domains together. The Association’s conferences allow all of us an overview of what is going on—what remains and what is changing—in the field of Chinese Studies, and allow for cross-disciplinary fruition. The EACS keeps us all together. Or, why the EACS matters.

In light of increasing specialization in different sub-disciplines of Chinese studies and financial constraints, our university libraries can, generally speaking, no longer offer a comprehensive collection of all that is going on in the field of Chinese studies. The specialization of our faculty and department libraries has, at times, made visits to different libraries necessary—despite the digitalization of lots of primary materials. Also here, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation has, for many years, been our financial supporter for the Library Travel Grants. Or, why the EACS matters.

One of the results of the professionalization of the academy in general has been that, also in the humanities and social sciences, specialized journals saw the light of day. Along with this process came the ranking of academic journals. Also in this regard, the EACS has been a trustworthy partner during the incipient days of this ranking system. Or, why the EACS matters.

Specialization has also resulted in the creation of more focused academic associations in our fields of study. Here, I can, among others, mention the ‘European Association for Chinese Linguistics’, or the ‘European Association for Chinese Philosophy’. These associations have complemented the pre-existing national and regional associations for Chinese studies in Europe—such as the ‘Association française d’études chinoises’, the ‘Deutsche Vereinigung für Chinastudien’, the ‘Nordic Association for Chinese Studies’, or the ‘British Association for Chinese Studies’. The EACS, however, remains the only overarching European association. Or, why the EACS matters.

Chinese Studies—seeing China from within—has shown that the globalization that has characterized the end of the twentieth and the first decades of the twenty-first century has not ruled out that there is no single, universal context for all of humanity. That is to say that literature, economics or politics might be universal, but that texts, economics and politics are not. Academic research in the humanities and social sciences is also confined by national and regional experiences, traditions, and conditions. It is with these observations in mind that the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* was launched in 2020, with one of its aims being to make studies on China in other languages than English known to the broader sinological world. Or, why the EACS matters.

I promised to return to the French name of our Association. In my foreword to the inaugural issue of the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies*, titled ‘The Dodgy Realm of Conventionality: On the Occasion of the Founding of the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies*’ I stated the following:

“For academia, it is important to add that whereas classical liberalism saw the individual as characterised by having an autonomous human nature and being able to practise (in) freedom, in neoliberalism, the state ‘seeks to create an individual that is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur’ (Olssen and Peters 2005, 315). In

neoliberalism, further, the market has become a useful technology for use by the state, a 'mechanism for the institutional regulation of public sector organizational contexts, [...] a technique of government's 'positive' power, acting deliberately through the vehicle of the state to engineer the conditions for efficient economic production' (Olssen and Peters 2005, 317–318). That is to say that what David Reisman called the 'productive state' (that simultaneously is active as participant in and as controller of the economic process), as opposed to the 'protective state' (that limits its 'interference' to the protection of citizens within a constitutional and legal framework) increasingly determines economic and academic life (Reisman 1990, 81). In the 21st-century global neoliberal world order, the 'productive state' extracts compliance from individuals in order to engineer a market order. In this sense, the 'productive state' threatens to restrict the rights of privacy and personal freedom, as well as of professional autonomy. And, indeed, 'entrepreneurship' and 'the market' have encroached on the academic 'profession' as well. Also academic teaching and research are increasingly coping with the logic of 'the market', with the introduction of concepts such as demand and supply, relevance to labour market conditions and prospects, targets and objectives, contract-based employment, and results orientation, all to the detriment of values such as 'professional autonomy' for the individual academic, and such as the 'common good' and 'public interest' for the society for whose edification (apart from the value of 'knowledge for the sake of knowledge' itself) the academic is supposed to work (Olssen and Peters 2005, 324–326)" (Dessein 2020, 5–6).

Five years have passed since I wrote this text. As many of you may have, or are experiencing, despite the increasing importance of China on the global scene, the *raison d'être* of sinology or Chinese studies is increasingly put to the question in many countries. It is here that I want to come back to the French name of our 'Association européenne d'études chinoises', that has as goal to: "promouvoir et favoriser, par tous moyens, toutes activités scientifiques relevant des études chinoises". For some reason—although to all grammatical rules of English, the correct English version of 'Association européenne d'études chinoises' should be 'European Association of Chinese Studies'—which remains obscure to me and to most of us, at some point some 10 to 15 years ago, we started to refer to our Association with the name 'European Association for Chinese Studies'. I will not develop on the administrative and legal issues this has caused when we also started to use the latter name in writing. In hindsight, however, stumbling into the 'for' instead of the 'of' may have been *prevoyant* (sorry for the French again). I admit that when, under my presidency of our Association, the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* was, after many years of debate, founded, our journal was indeed called 'for', not 'of' Chinese studies. The then Board of the Association merely used the name of the Association that had, by then, become current. It is, in the current timeframe maybe indeed time to advocate 'for' Chinese studies. Or, why the EACS continues to matter.

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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

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 Stumpfheldt (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

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 Herlee 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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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, disciplinary, 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

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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

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 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* 断代 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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EACS AT FIFTY: SPEECH

Chinese Studies in Romania After the Fall of Communism

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The fall of the Communist regime in Romania, in December 1989, triggered many changes, some of them huge and visible, such as the changes from a paranoiac authoritarian political system into a democratic multiparty one, and from a planned economy into a market economy, some with a less visible impact within the larger picture, but nevertheless important, such as redefining the relationship with former traditional partners such as China. On the one hand, the following paper comments upon the development of Chinese Studies in Romania in a context in which, for the general population, the association with a Communist regime would be perceived negatively, and on the other hand, it discusses the influence which international academic organisations, such as the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS), or the founding of the Confucius Institutes have upon China-related research and teaching.

1989 年 12 月羅馬尼亞共產主義政權的更迭引發了深刻的社會轉型。除政治體制向民主多黨制、經濟體制向市場經濟的宏觀轉軌外，羅馬尼亞對華等傳統夥伴關係的歷史性重構亦不容忽視。本文旨在探討在民眾普遍對共產主義政權持負面認知的社會語境下，羅馬尼亞漢學研究的發展態勢；同時，分析了歐洲漢學學會（EACS）等國際學術組織及孔子學院的建立，對相關領域的研究與教學所產生的深遠影響。

Keywords: Romania, Chinese Studies, EACS, Confucius Institutes

關鍵詞：羅馬尼亞，中國研究，歐洲漢學學會，孔子學院

Sinology or Chinese Studies

For those interested in the history of cultural relations between China and Eastern Europe it is not at all difficult to see that, unlike Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic, whose Christian missionaries reached China as early as the 17th century (Ding & Song 2015), direct contacts between Romania and China started quite late, and one can talk about Sinology or Chinese Studies in Romania only after the second half of the last century, and more specifically, after the founding of the People's Republic, in 1949.

Those eager to show that, in spite of not having sent missionaries, there was still a Romanian envoy who set foot in Kangxi's China would immediately mention Nicolae Milescu Spătarul (Nicolai Milescu Spathary, 1636–1708), a diplomat born into a Greek family in the Principality of Moldova. An erudite, Milescu was sent to China by the Russian Tsar Alexey Michailovich, in March 1675, arriving in Beijing a year later, in May 1676, and being received by the Kangxi emperor in June. As a result of his mission, besides his reports, Milescu wrote *Notes of Travel to China* and *The Description of China* (Ding 2008; Milescu 1975—timeline by the translator Bărbulescu), which are believed to have contributed to deepening Europe's understanding of China (Ding and Song 2015). Although Milescu's works eventually became appreciated,¹ Dumbravă (2023) shows that Milescu's writings remained basically unknown until the 19th century, when they were rediscovered by Yuri Arsenev, a geographer. The texts were first translated from Russian into Romanian in 1956 and 1958, respectively. Under these circumstances, even if there was someone who can be associated with present-day Romania and who travelled to China at the same time as the Polish or Hungarian Jesuits, one can hardly argue that his writings laid the foundations of Romanian research on China.

Another question that needs to be addressed when talking about research on China in Romania is whether it falls within the field of Sinology, or that of Chinese Studies. Dessein (2025) shows that Sinology (漢學 *hanxue*) started as the philological study of Chinese philosophical texts, mainly Confucian, and it was then extended to include historical texts and literature. In other words, a basic definition of Sinology would probably be “the philological study of Chinese texts, for which knowledge of both classical and modern language is compulsory”. On the other hand, Chinese Studies (中國研究 *Zhongguo yanjiu*) means approaching China from other fields, such as political science or economics, and analysing various phenomena by employing theoretical frameworks belonging to these fields,

¹ See John K. Baddeley's “Introduction” to *Russia, Mongolia, China*, initially published in 1919, where he appreciates Milescu's writings as “stand[ing] apart. His position and fame are, or should be, unique. Nor would it be easy to point a greater contrast amongst persons in the same employment than existed between this learned Wallachian-Greek and the illiterate “cossacks” who were his forerunners on the road from Tobolsk to Peking.” (1964: v)

while knowledge of the language (mainly modern Chinese) is desirable, but not compulsory, because research can be based on secondary language sources.

Chinese, as a BA programme, is currently taught in Romania in faculties of foreign languages and literature, and it has always been like this. Before the fall of Communism, in 1989, the only Chinese language programme that existed was called Sinology, and Chinese was approached through textual analysis. Even after 1990, it took a few decades for things to change, for scholars to start studying China from other angles than the philological and accepting that working with secondary sources does not necessarily mean that the results of one's research are less valuable.

Because until now research on China in Romania has been done mainly in philological centres, it seems to be closer to Sinology, rather than Chinese Studies. However, younger generations of scholars tend to go beyond the limits of philological study and approach China from an interdisciplinary perspective. These steps, together with courses on China offered by non-philological faculties, tend to redefine the way we approach the area, and move it from Sinology towards Chinese Studies.

Romanian and Chinese Relations Before and After 1989

Diplomatic contacts between Romania and China were very limited before 1949. In 1881, Carol I, king of the newly formed Romania, sent a diplomatic cable to the Guangxu emperor, asking for recognition (Budura 2005). Later, in 1939, the Romanian government established diplomatic relations with the Nationalist Party (KMT), but these lasted only until 1941, when Romania recognised Manchukuo and Wang Jingwei's government (Ding & Song 2015).

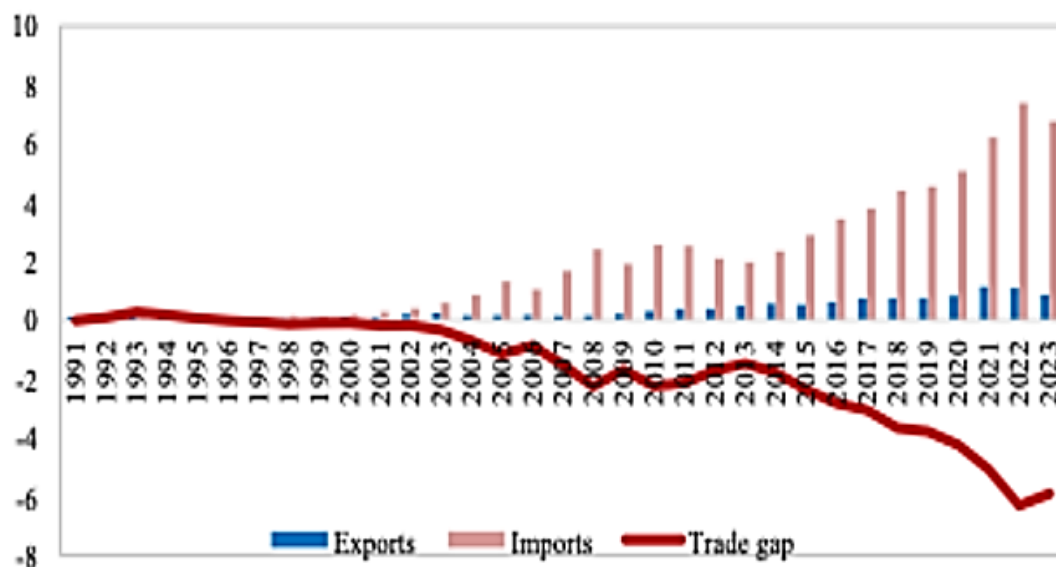
In 1945, after World War II, a Communist government was installed in Romania, and in 1947 the country was renamed the People's Republic of Romania. It was only natural that relations between Romania and China became much closer after the founding of the People's Republic of China and on October 5th, 1949, Romania was the third country to recognise the PRC, after the Soviet Union and Bulgaria.

Between 1950 and 1989, high-level visits were quite frequent, which translated to close political, economic, and cultural relations (see Ding 2008). In 1950, answering a call from Poland to allow student exchange, Premier Zhou Enlai decided to extend the exchange programme to all Eastern European countries, with the first batch of Chinese students arriving in Bucharest in August of the same year, and the first group of Romanian students arriving in Beijing a few months later, in November (Brînză 2022). Starting from then, Romania sent students to China almost every year, until 1966, and then again from 1974

onwards. In China, Romanian students took first a year of language, followed by a few years of specialisation in various fields, such as economics, agriculture, philology, history etc., depending on what the Romanian government deemed important. Upon their return, the former students were assigned posts in various institutions, sometimes totally unrelated to China or Chinese.

After the regime change in December 1989, China immediately recognised the new Romanian government, and, for a while, political relations continued to develop. In August 1990, the Chinese deputy foreign minister visited Bucharest; in 1991, President Ion Iliescu paid a visit to China. Premier Li Peng visited Romania in 1994, Secretary-General Jiang Zeming arrived in Bucharest in 1996, President Emil Constantinescu visited in 1997, and Premier Adrian Nastatse in 2002 (Gao 2017). However, political relations fluctuated depending on the governing party in Romania, warmer under the Social Democrats, more distant under the other parties.

Political fondness did not translate into deeper economic ties, with bilateral trade slowing down and the trade deficit deepening in China's favour. After reaching more than a billion US dollars in the 1970s, bilateral trade fell to a few hundred million in the 1990s, then it regained momentum in the 2000s and especially after Romania's accession to the EU in 2007, with China becoming one of Romania's most important non-EU trading partners (Petre 2025, Belu 2018, Roth 2018). Along with the increase in trade, the trade deficit also increased, reaching almost 6 billion euros in 2023 (Rădulescu 2024).



Romania-China Trade flows (Euro, bn) (Rădulescu 2024)

Chinese investment in Romania is not very high; the Romanian Embassy in China mentions that, in March 2025, the Chinese social capital registered has reached 487.6 million US dollars (MAE 2025). However, according to Drahokoupil et al. (2017), only two types of companies have entered the Romanian market: those undertaking simple industrial activities which benefit from close access to European markets, such as Eurosport DHS, a bicycle factory based in Deva, and companies that benefit from highly trained low-cost professionals, such as Huawei or ZTE. Besides these, there are also the small businesses owned by Chinese migrants, located mainly in Bucharest, in the Red Dragon market.

Located at the outskirts of Bucharest, the Red Dragon Market (紅龍市場) is the main Chinese commercial complex in Romania, founded in 2003 by the Niro Investment Group. According to their website (<https://www.dragonulrosu.ro/despre-noi>), it is the largest platform dedicated to selling Chinese goods in European markets, covering 63 hectares, with 10 pavilions and more than 4500 shops.

The Chinese presence in Romania, and especially in Bucharest, increased dramatically between 1992 and 1998, when Romania granted visa-free entry to Chinese citizens. The visa-free regime was valid at the beginning for all types of passports, but in 1993, the increased migration made the Romanian government wave visas only for those holding a work passport, and from 1998 onwards visas were required for all types of passport. Since then, the Chinese community has reached almost 10,000 individuals, of whom close to 90% live in Bucharest. It is the second largest Chinese community in Eastern Europe, after Hungary, with over half of them coming from the southern provinces of Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong, many engaged in small businesses in the Red Dragon market, retail trade in the city, or the restaurant business (Liu 2021).

Despite the substantial Chinese presence, there is little contact between locals and this community, many Chinese lacking proficiency in Romanian. A survey comparing two migrant groups to Romania – the Muslim community from the Middle East and North Africa and the Chinese – conducted by Amy Liu (2021: 142), shows that only 56% of the Chinese interviewed had daily interactions with locals, as opposed to 81% within the Muslim community; only 52% of the Chinese respondents had studied Romanian versus 91% of the members from the other group, and as many as 57% of Chinese respondents said they intended to go back home, while only 37% of Muslim respondents answered positively to this question. Also, a little over 14% of the Romanians interviewed in a different survey were opposed to having a Chinese neighbour, compared to 9% who were opposed to living next to a Moldovan (2021: 173).

The Beginning of Romanian Sinology

Sinology started in Romania at the University of Bucharest, in 1956, after the return of the first group of students from China. At the beginning, it was a 5-year programme, with 5 students admitted every fourth year, then every second year, until 1964, when Chinese was offered yearly, as a major.² Until 1974, Chinese as a major could be studied only in combination with Romanian as minor; after that, it could be combined with any minor offered by the university. Starting from 1978, Chinese was offered alternately, one year as major, the next as minor, and the number of students increased first to 7, then to 10 (Vişan 2006).

Lecturers were Romanians who had studied in China or, rarely, in the Soviet Union, helped by a native Chinese lecturer. The lack of materials and dictionaries made Chinese language teaching difficult, and the teachers had to make up for this by compiling the first grammars and histories of Chinese literature. Language was taught using textbooks published in China, which changed over time, but with many containing texts such as *Lenin's Overcoat* (列寧的大衣), *The Story of Norman Bethune* (白求恩的故事), *The army and the people are one family* (軍民一家) or *Visiting a people's commune member's home* (訪問社員家庭), supplemented with extracts from magazines and newspapers. The first generation of Romanian teachers compiled a language textbook; however, it was never published.

The return of the first group of Romanian students from China marked the beginning of literary translations from Chinese. Before 1966, when Toni Radian (the first Chinese language lecturer at the University of Bucharest) published a selection of stories by Pu Songling, all translations of Chinese literature and philosophy had been done from French, German, or English. After 1966, many works were translated directly from Chinese, although the practice continued of translating from a third language, this time mainly Russian. Most of the translated texts were either classical literature, deemed politically safe, or works by famous modern writers, such as Ba Jin or Mao Dun, and revolutionary novels (see Giţă and Wang 2022).

Besides translations or philological works authored by teachers at the University of Bucharest, there were basically no other academic articles about China. All other analyses and reports written by former students working in various institutions, such as those authored by Anna Eva Budura, the only historian specialising in China, who was employed at the Party's Institute for Historical and Socio-Political Studies, were not for public circulation.

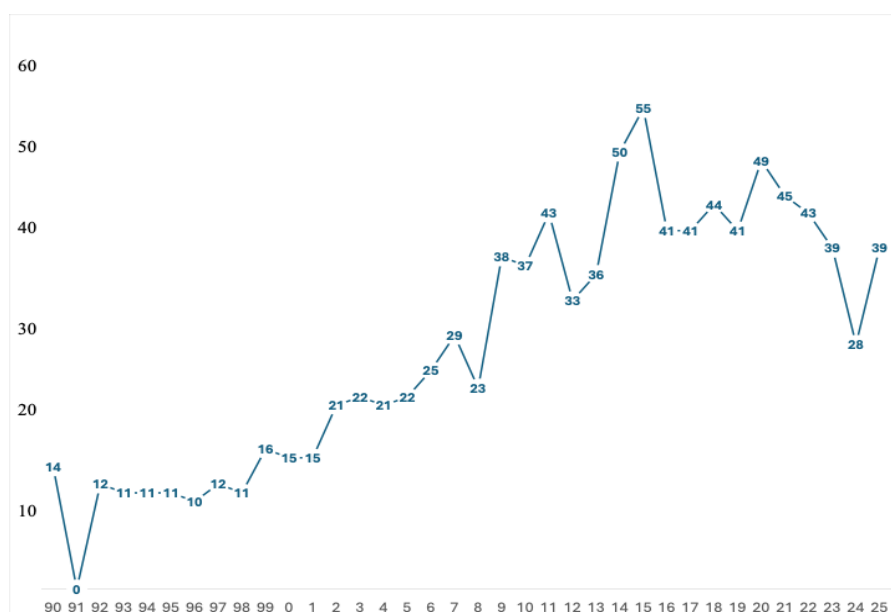
² Foreign languages in Romania are studied as a double degree. For example, Chinese needs to be studied together with another language; it cannot be studied as a single degree. The combination is always of two languages; one cannot combine a foreign language with a discipline from another field of studies (language and history, for example). The first language is called a major and the second one a minor because of administrative considerations; in fact there is very little difference between the curricula of the two languages.

Trapped in a paranoiac regime in which all contacts with the exterior world were forbidden, sinologists in Romania lived isolated, with no contacts with their peers, either in the other Communist countries or in the West, the only contacts being limited to a few books or magazines brought into the country by relatives living abroad and visiting occasionally. The programme benefited from occasional book donations by the Chinese embassy in Romania, especially after 1980.

Chinese Language Programmes After 1989

The *status quo* of Chinese Studies in Romania remained unchanged for a few years after 1989, and it was offered as a diploma programme only at the University of Bucharest, both as a major and minor, in alternate years until 1994. After 1994, it became only a major and it was offered to students every year, with the number of students enrolled in the programme limited to 10. Although only 10 places were available, sometimes more students were registered, because some of them, for example those winning first places in national or international philological contests, were not required to sit the entrance exam and could choose from any programme offered by the university in that particular academic year.

Tuition fees were introduced in 2000, and the number of students accepted increased, universities offering two types of places, state-funded and tuition-paying, depending on results in the entrance exam. The number of students accepted in the Chinese language programme also increased gradually from 10 to 15, then 20, and up to 40 or 50 students at present.



Students enrolled in the 1st year at the University of Bucharest (1990–2025)

Until 2008, the University of Bucharest was the only university in Romania offering a BA in Chinese, and, since 2005, an MA in East Asian Studies. In 2008, Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj also opened a Chinese language programme, followed by two more, at Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu in 2010, and at Transylvania University in Braşov in 2015. The new programmes were directly related to the opening of the Confucius Institutes at those universities.

There are currently five Confucius Institutes in Romania, four in general universities, one in a specialised medical university. The first Confucius Institute opened at Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu in 2007, three years prior to the BA programme, followed in 2009 by the one at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj. In 2012, a third institute opened in Braşov, at Transylvania University, and in 2015 the fourth was inaugurated at the University of Bucharest. The newest one opened in 2024 at the University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Iaşi. With the exceptions of the University of Bucharest, which already had a long-established programme in Chinese, and the University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Iaşi, where a BA programme in philology would have been somehow out of place, the opening of a Confucius Institute led very quickly to opening new BA programmes in the host universities. Even though the institute in Cluj was inaugurated one year after the programme itself, many of the courses offered in the programme were taught by teachers and volunteers at the institute.

The Romanian academic system is still quite rigid and does not allow for students from other fields of studies, such as History or Political Studies, to register for the philological courses. They can be accepted as auditing students or can register for elective courses offered for non-philological majors, if they exist. Depending on the (mainly) human resources available, faculties other than philological have also started introducing courses related to China, such as Introduction to Chinese Politics (University of Bucharest, Political Sciences), Cultural Politics and Economic Development in Taiwan (Bales-Bolyai University, Political Sciences), China and the World Economy (Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu, elective course), or Chinese Traditional Medicine (University of Medicine and Pharmacy, elective course), etc. (The courses mentioned here appear either in the timetables or on public posts available on the university website at the time of writing.)

The distribution of the Confucius Institutes in Romania is quite even, covering basically the whole country, with Bucharest in the south-east, Iaşi in the north-east, Cluj in the north-west, and Braşov and Sibiu in the centre.

One positive aspect derived from the presence of the institutes in Romania is the fact that they helped to establish new BA programmes. In theory, more programmes translate into a larger pool of China scholars who could produce more and deeper knowledge about China, no matter whether the knowledge is the result of competition or cooperation. The reality is slightly more nuanced.

All the four general universities mentioned above enroll students in their Chinese programmes every year, offering between 15 and 20 state-funded places, and more tuition-paying places. All programmes are accredited as philological programmes and offer the same courses, although the specific number of teaching hours assigned to each course could vary from one university to another. They all teach practical Chinese (which can be divided into grammar, listening, and speaking), literature covering both the classical and modern periods, linguistics – phonetics, morphology, syntax, lexicology, semantics and pragmatics –, history (sometimes called Civilisation, which leans more towards intellectual history), and a series of electives, depending on the resources available, which could be courses in translation, philosophy, visual arts, or popular culture. The University of Bucharest and Babeş-Bolyai also offer MA programmes in East Asian Studies, which bring together graduates from Chinese, Korean, and Japanese studies.

Obtaining scholarships or going as exchange students to a partner university in China is another way in which Romanian students benefit from the existence of the Confucius Institutes. Every year, students apply and most of them receive one-year full scholarships to various universities for language programmes; there are also a few who are given MA scholarships, although MA programmes available through the Confucius Institutes are limited to the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. The institutes also organise one-month or two-week summer camps at the partner university in China, which are very popular among the students. Transylvania University in Braşov gives its students the possibility of going to China for one or two semesters as an exchange student.

This being said, one cannot ignore the fact that the newly opened programmes are dependent on the institutes, and this makes them vulnerable to any changes of policies or financing rules in China. Financially speaking, it seems ideal for a university to have the teachers and volunteers at the institute teach the courses offered in the programme, since their salaries are paid by China; having most of the classes taught by native speakers could be also an element of attraction. On the other hand, the host universities have limited control over the Chinese staff. I am not talking here about political agendas that might be carried out by some; if such agendas really exist, having one's salary paid by one university or another would not make much difference. My point is about the background of the people teaching in an institute. It is true that those accepted as teachers or volunteers must go through a selection process, but most of them are trained to teach Chinese as a foreign language; they have limited knowledge of Chinese literature and literary theory and almost none of linguistics. Chinese history and culture can also be a challenging class to teach, especially when it comes to modern and contemporary China. Paper-cuts, knots, festivals, and calligraphy are an important part of Chinese culture, but equally important is to discuss in class historical events and cultural patterns that are still relevant in present-day China and help in understanding the country and its people. The reality is that not many of the Chinese teachers and volunteers can teach

these classes properly. Most of the classes are not taught in Chinese (it would be impossible to teach Chinese literature or history in Chinese to students in the first or second year), but in English. In a way, the Chinese programmes offered with the help of the Confucius Institutes are less philological programmes and more language courses.

One might argue that language skills are the most important factor when looking for a job involving Chinese. If this were true, then Chinese companies need not look for foreigners speaking Chinese; there are a billion people who speak the language much better than any foreigner. A foreigner must be able to bridge the two cultures, to understand not only the language but also the culture and the mentality of the people for whom he/she works.

However, not many graduates end up using Chinese in their daily work. For one, having more Chinese language programmes has not meant more job opportunities. Since the newly established programmes do not need local staff, there are only about 11 full-time Romanian Chinese-language teachers, of whom only one works in a high school; in addition to these, there are also a few PhD students teaching part-time. Confucius Institutes in Romania do not employ local staff. A few graduates work in research institutes, and, as I have mentioned above, Chinese companies are not very present in the Romanian market.

Literary translation is one field in which Chinese language graduates have become more active, especially in the last decade, after Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2012, which attracted the attention of publishing houses in Romania and ushered in a wave of literary translations. Some novels had been translated before 2012, not too many, among them one book by Mo Yan, translated by Dinu Luca, and one each by Ma Jian and Jiang Rong, translated by Roxana Ribu. After 2012, the number of translations increased, with six more books by Mo Yan, translated by Luminița Bălan, Florentina Vișan, and Dinu Luca, six by Yu Hua (one in print), translated by Mugur Zlotea and Luminița Bălan, two by Su Tong, translated by Dinu Luca and Ionela Voicu, four by Yan Lianke, translated by Roxana Ribu and Irina Ivașcu, three by Can Xue (two in print), translated by Luminița Bălan, Mugur Zlotea, and Paula Teodorescu, one by Ah Cheng, translated by Luminița Bălan and Florentina Vișan, to name just a few authors (see also Giță and Wang 2022).

It should be added that classical Chinese philosophy has also become very popular in Romania, with the most important texts already translated from classical Chinese: Confucius's *Analects*, *The Great Learning* and *The Golden Mean* translated by Florentina Vișan, *Xunzi* translated by Luminița Bălan, three versions of *Dao de jing* translated by Dinu Luca, Șerban Toader, and Su Yan, *Zhuangzi* translated by Luminița Bălan and Tania Segal, *Liezi* translated by Florentina Vișan and Irina Ivașcu, Sun Zi's *Art of War*, translated by Mugur Zlotea, and extracts from the *Zuozhuan*, translated by Romulus Ioan Budura. The one missing, *Mengzi*, is being translated at the time of writing.

On the bright side, when it comes to translations, there are more young people eager to translate; on the less bright side is that translation is more of a hobby, rather than a full-time job, since the number of titles translated is still limited and work as a literary translator does not pay much. The payment depends on whether the text chosen to be translated benefits from a translation and publishing grant offered by a Chinese institution. Not all authors chosen by Romanian publishing houses make it on the list approved by the Chinese side to receive translation grants, and some major Romanian publishers are apprehensive about publishing the authors promoted by China, afraid that lesser-known authors and their texts might not be so popular with Romanian readers. Even so, the European Idea Publishing House and Integral Publishing House have two heterogeneous collections dedicated to China, the “Chinese Culture Collection” and “China - Integral”, which bring together books translated from Chinese or related to China (at the time of writing, European Idea’s Chinese Culture Collection webpage contained 59 titles and the China - Integral webpage 28 titles.).

The Way Forward

Can Chinese Studies grow in Romania? Based on the trends I have seen so far, the potential is there, even if the pace is slow.

Romanian sinology has changed after 1989, turning shyly toward Chinese Studies. Attitudes have changed and now research done by scholars who do not know Chinese is no longer dismissed as superficial. China’s economic growth and its increasing presence on the international stage have led to the introduction of new lectures and courses; to judge by the profile of the students enrolled in language classes at the Confucius Institute at the University of Bucharest, more young people consider learning the language as an asset, especially those studying political science, history, or economics. Even the courses offered in the philological departments have changed, trying to bridge more disciplines, combining, for example, literature with visual arts and film studies. The generations have changed: younger colleagues who have studied in both China and the West are endeavouring to implement newer and more interactive teaching methods. Candidates continue to enroll in Chinese BA programmes, and up to now, none of the four universities have been in danger of closing their programmes due to lack of potential students.

International associations such as the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS) are very important. The few Romanian members active in the EACS might not mean much for the association, but the association means a lot to them. One of the most important roles the EACS has is in providing Romanian scholars with a feeling of belonging. It is through EACS that we join the larger academic community, the association being a vital link to other

colleagues in Europe, as well as in China, the US, or Australia. EACS helps us in keeping up to date with new research and perspectives in the field of Chinese Studies, and at the same time it functions as a platform where we can check the validity of our own findings. It is an incentive for our younger colleagues who can visit libraries and museums thanks to the travel grant, can meet their peers working on similar topics, and participate in events and workshops organised by fellow-members.

Chinese Studies in Romania, and probably elsewhere in the world, are also influenced by the geopolitical situation. Ever since Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, articles about China in the Romanian mass-media have fallen roughly into two major categories: positive, if they talk about China's economic success—Chinese electric vehicles, science and innovation, the manufacturing sector, etc. —, and negative, if the news item discusses political aspects, such as China's siding with Russia in the war of aggression against Ukraine, its increasing military budget, the unstable relations with the European Union, or lack of basic human rights. China's response to the economic measures taken by the second Trump administration has given birth to another image, that of a daring China, ready to confront the most powerful nation in the world. However, opinions are still very divergent in this matter, with many having not decided yet if this is a good or a bad thing. The conflicting images about China one gets from the national mass media might deter some potential candidates from enrolling in a Chinese Studies programme.

Even if the number of students registering in the first year is rather constant, the number of those graduating is much smaller, because close to one half of those initially enrolled either drop out or are unable to graduate. Many times, joining a BA programme in Chinese proves totally different from what the student envisioned initially. To enjoy Chinese language and culture as a hobby and to study them systematically are two different things. The complexity of the subject-matter, the demanding schedule and time one needs to spend to become a student of China prove too much for some people.

The huge gap between the imagined China, its economic power and global influence, and the reality, especially as regards China's presence in the Romanian market, may also be a hindrance. Learning good Chinese is not easy for Romanian students; it requires sustained effort and it is time-consuming. The difficulty in finding a very well-paid position in a company and in feeling that all the years spent on becoming familiar with the Chinese language and culture were not in vain could turn some people away. Even if some jobs requiring Chinese do exist, students are reluctant to take them, complaining of less-than-ideal salaries.

However, there is still hope. Chinese culture has not lost its appeal; the language is still fascinating. China is much more present in our daily lives than it used to be—in the things we wear and use, in the Chinese restaurants so popular with urban dwellers, in the media, its quarrels with the United States. As long as Chinese can be used to access both the East and

the West, Chinese Studies in Romania will continue to exist and develop, albeit at a slower speed than some of us would like to see.

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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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EACS AT FIFTY: SPOTLIGHT

Conditional Access and Epistemic Resilience in European China Studies

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This article argues that European China Studies is moving from an era in which access to the People’s Republic of China was widely treated as “normal” to a “post-access” condition in which field sites, archives, databases, and partnerships are increasingly governed as revocable permissions. Rather than treating access constraints as episodic misfortunes, I conceptualise them as a mode of governance that produces patterned missingness, redistributes risk onto interlocutors and early-career scholars, and shapes what kinds of claims can be made responsibly. The post-access condition is compounded by Europe’s own turn towards research security and by a synthetic information environment that shifts the burden from finding data to verifying provenance. Against this background, the essay develops the notion of epistemic resilience: the capacity of a research community to sustain critical, empirically grounded knowledge under uncertainty without confusing duty of care with intellectual timidity. Epistemic resilience requires plural data ecologies for triangulation, transparent “access-and-constraint statements” that render absences comparable, and verification routines for digital evidence, including provenance and authenticity checks appropriate to generative media.

本文指出，歐洲漢學正由“常態准入”時代轉向“後准入”境況，田野調查、檔案使用、資料庫訪問及學術合作日益被當作可隨時收回的許可加以管控。作者強調，准入限制不應被視為偶發困境，而應理解為一種系統性治理機制：它不僅造成結構性的資料缺失，也使學者更難提出穩健而有據的學術論斷。更兼歐洲對科研安全日益強化，研究重心亦從“獲取資料”轉向“驗證來源”，凡此皆使困局愈趨嚴峻。有鑑於此，本文提出“認識論韌性”概念，主張構建多元數據生態以實現三角互證，推行透明的“准入與限制說明”機制，並建立適用於生成式媒介的數位證據溯源與真偽核查常規，以在不確定中維繫嚴謹而具批判性的知識生產。

Keywords: access governance, data ecologies, epistemic resilience, research security, verification

關鍵詞： 准入治理，資料生態，認識論韌性，研究安全，證據核驗

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Introduction: An Anniversary in the Shadow of Conditionality

Anniversary moments invite retrospection, but they also sharpen a discipline's sense of vulnerability. As the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS) approaches its half-century, European China Studies confronts a paradox: the field is institutionally visible in public debate, yet the conditions of producing robust knowledge about the People's Republic of China (PRC) are becoming more unstable. For decades, European scholarship could treat "access" as a negotiable background condition—uneven and politically shaped, but often imagined as gradually improvable through exchange, language training, and sustained presence. That viewpoint was never naive: access was always stratified by topic and gatekeeping, and it was always entangled with power. Still, the default horizon was forward-looking: whatever today's restrictions, tomorrow might permit better access.

That horizon has fractured. Since the early 2020s, European scholars have faced a growing combination of mobility uncertainty, legal ambiguity around what counts as "sensitive" information, and infrastructural disruptions to the digital services that mediate access to Chinese-language sources. A concrete example of this transformation is found in a telling episode from April 2023, when the California Digital Library announced that select resources of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (Zhongguo zhiwang 中國知網; hereafter CNKI) would be temporarily suspended, citing a government audit of the platform (California Digital Library 2023). Access was reported to have been restored by April 2024 (California Digital Library 2024). The point, however, is not CNKI as such. It is that access to repositories and interfaces can be reclassified, audited, withdrawn, and returned through governance, making the means by which evidence is obtained part of the evidence itself.

I call this setting a condition of "post-access": access persists but is selective, revocable, and bounded by opaque lines. The epistemic consequence is not only fewer data but the politicised production of availability itself, which demands collective transparency and verification.

This contribution therefore treats access not as a technical precondition but as a governance modality that structures epistemic possibilities. In the PRC context, access governance is connected to the management of visibility and uncertainty and to a broader project of shaping external narratives and international discourse power, reiterated in state media reporting on Xi Jinping's Politburo study session on international communication (Reuters 2021). Against this background, I propose epistemic resilience as a collective capacity to sustain critical, empirically grounded knowledge amid uncertainty without confusing duty of care with intellectual timidity. Resilience, I argue, requires plural data ecologies for triangulation, transparent reporting of constraints through access-and-constraint statements, and verification routines for digital evidence in an era of synthetic media. The sections that follow trace how law, data governance, and platforms produce patterned missingness; then turn to

verification and provenance; and finally sketch institutional and ethical design choices that can turn vulnerability into a collectively managed condition rather than an individual improvisation.

Access as Governance: Law, Data, and the Production of Missingness

To speak of post-access conditions is to name a patterned configuration, not an episodic crisis. Access has always been governed: by host institutions, by political campaigns, by bureaucratic discretion, and by scholars' own positionality. What has changed is the salience of conditionality and the opacity of its boundaries. Post-access therefore does not describe an end-state but a shift in the default assumptions under which research is planned. Fieldwork, archives, platforms, and collaborations increasingly resemble revocable permissions embedded in security and compliance regimes rather than stable infrastructures for inquiry. In such a setting, routine access is not a baseline; it is a contingent arrangement whose fragility must be made analytically visible.

Three governance channels are particularly consequential: security and secrecy law, data governance, and infrastructural control through platforms and information services. They interact, and their interaction matters because it produces uncertainty as a resource of governance. Uncertainty is not only a by-product of complexity; it can also be a mechanism through which actors discipline themselves. When legal categories are broad and enforcement is discretionary, risk management shifts onto those least able to absorb it: interlocutors, local partners, and early-career researchers.

The expansion of security and secrecy regimes into everyday informational domains is the first channel. China's revised Counter-Espionage Law (*Fanjiandie fa* 反間諜法), which took effect on 1 July 2023, broadened the legal framing of what may count as espionage-related conduct, including acts involving the illicit provision of documents, data, materials, or items related to national security and interests (National People's Congress 2023). The revised Law on Guarding State Secrets (*Baoshou guojia mimi fa* 保守國家秘密法), effective 1 May 2024, reinforced the centrality of secrecy by updating a legal framework whose definitions are expansive and whose interpretive authority lies with state organs (National People's Congress 2024). Reporting on the revision highlighted stricter expectations for compliance and the additional category of "work secrets" (Al Jazeera 2024). For scholarship, the precise distribution of categories matters less than their epistemic effect: they make the boundary of "sensitive information" harder to map in advance and easier to retroactively contest.

Such legal uncertainty intersects with an economy of enforcement signals. The 2023 raid on the office of the US due-diligence firm Mintz Group and the detention of staff were not about

academia, but were widely read as messages being sent about the gathering of information and its potential reclassification as suspect activity (Reuters 2023a). These events contribute to a climate in which researchers and institutions must anticipate legal and reputational risk, often without clear guidance on what will trigger scrutiny. In a post-access condition, “security” thus becomes a diffuse background variable that structures practical decision-making.

The second channel is data governance. The Data Security Law (*Shuju anquan fa* 數據安全法) and the Personal Information Protection Law (*Geren xinxi baohu fa* 個人信息保護法), embed national security and public interest considerations into the regulation of data processing and, crucially, into the cross-border provision of data (Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress 2021a; 2021b). These frameworks matter for scholarship even when the research topic is not politically contentious in the ordinary sense. Research increasingly relies on digital traces, administrative datasets, and platform-mediated corpora. In such a setting, data transfer, storage, and publication become compliance problems as well as methodological choices. The social effect is not simply restriction; it is risk redistribution. Responsibilities for “proper” data handling are shifted from the state and from platforms onto individuals and institutions with limited interpretive capacity, including university administrators and doctoral students.

The third channel is infrastructural governance through platforms and information services. In a datafied research environment, access often means access to mediated interfaces—databases, archives, digital repositories, and commercially curated corpora—rather than merely to physical places. These infrastructures are vulnerable to audit, discontinuity, deletion, and selective reconfiguration. The CNKI episode is illustrative: the 2023 suspension was framed as a consequence of a government audit (California Digital Library 2023), and the platform itself was later fined following a cybersecurity investigation (Reuters 2023b). For scholars, the immediate issue is access to journals and theses; the deeper issue is that the infrastructures of evidence are themselves objects of regulation, audit, and political economy.

Infrastructural governance also includes the selective withdrawal or reconfiguration of state-produced information. In August 2023, China’s National Bureau of Statistics suspended publication of the youth unemployment rate, stating that it needed to review its methodology (Reuters 2023c). Whatever the methodological arguments, the suspension functioned as a reminder that official statistics are not only measurements; they are political artefacts embedded in governance priorities. Similarly, the manipulation of legal information illustrates how access can be reversed after publication. Liebman and co-authors document how court decisions previously available on China’s online database have been deleted, producing both analytical challenges and substantive insight into the governance of transparency (Liebman et al. 2023, 2417–2418). Such cases show that even when information is currently visible, its continued visibility cannot be assumed.

Taken together, these channels produce a core epistemic problem: “missingness”. In the language of causal inference, the post-access condition increases the prevalence of *non-ignorable missingness* (often termed “missing not at random” in later typologies), where the likelihood of absence is correlated with politically relevant attributes of the information itself (Rubin 1976, 581–583; Little and Rubin 2002, 5–7). When missingness is patterned, it cannot be treated as random noise; it becomes part of the object of analysis. Brussee’s analysis of policy document availability provides a concrete illustration: he finds that only about 80% of links remain available in two years’ time and that variation in transparency tracks whether policies relate to citizens’ daily lives versus national security (2025, 241, 244). The methodological implication is that scholars must be more explicit about what their datasets exclude, how exclusion is produced, and what forms of inference remain warranted.

A second epistemic problem is behavioural: anticipatory compliance and its chilling effects. Chestnut Greitens and Truex show that repressive experiences among China scholars—ranging from visa problems to intimidation—are “rare but real” and can generate subtle shifts in research behaviour (2020, 370). Truex’s later reflection on researching China in hard times underscores that even low-incidence events can be consequential because scholars adapt under uncertainty (2024, 146). The post-access condition amplifies these dynamics because uncertainty encourages risk-averse adaptation. Researchers internalise gatekeepers’ expectations; institutions translate reputational anxieties into partnership restrictions; and the safest questions begin to crowd out the most illuminating ones. These are not simply individual choices. They are emergent properties of a governance regime in which the costs of inquiry are unevenly distributed.

The politics of access also extends into publication and dissemination. European China scholars have long debated the role of commercial publishers in enforcing or anticipating Chinese censorship demands. Loubere traces how access to the Chinese market can create incentives for international publishers to remove or restrict content, producing forms of self-censorship that are difficult to detect *ex post* (Loubere 2020, 240–241). Here, too, access operates as governance: access to readers, distribution channels, and markets shapes what becomes legible as legitimate scholarship. From the perspective of epistemic resilience, the question is not only how to obtain evidence, but also how to preserve the conditions under which evidence-based arguments can be publicly articulated without pre-emptive distortions.

European China Studies has experienced access as governance through episodes of interference and signalling. The 2014 “Braga incident”, in which pages referring to Taiwanese institutions were removed from EACS conference materials, remains a reminder that informational artefacts mediating scholarly exchange can become targets (Greatrex 2014). China’s 2021 counter-sanctions in response to EU measures over Xinjiang, which also affected the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), illustrate that access can be withdrawn through political targeting as well as through visas and permits (Ministry of Foreign

Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021; MERICS 2021). Such episodes underline that conditionality operates through travel, platforms, markets, and reputational pressure, and that treating disruptions as isolated inconveniences misdiagnoses their structural character.

These dynamics invite two unhelpful responses. The first is nostalgia: the belief that “normal access” will return if scholars are patient, quiet, or politically “pragmatic”. The second is “substitution illusion”: the idea that an abundance of digital resources can simply replace fieldwork and language-based engagement. Both misread the problem. The post-access condition is not the disappearance of data; it is a reorganisation of the politics of evidence. Methodological innovation is necessary, but it must be organised around transparency and verification rather than around the promise of frictionless substitution.

Data Ecologies: Triangulation, Provenance, and the Verification Turn

If access is conditional, the strategic task is not to defend any single channel of evidence but to cultivate plural data ecologies. A data ecology is the ensemble of sources, methods, and infrastructures through which a community produces knowledge, including the standards by which it evaluates what counts as evidence. Such ecologies are never neutral: they are shaped by classification systems, platform architectures, and the institutional incentives that govern what is recorded and preserved (Bowker and Star 1999, 33–40). In a post-access scenario, the goal is redundancy without naivety: the capacity to crosscheck claims across different modalities so that the collapse or manipulation of one source does not force a retreat either into speculation or silence.

This is not to suggest that triangulation is a panacea or a post hoc label for rigour. Triangulation is a design principle with costs. It demands time, language competence, and methodological pluralism. It also demands ethical attention, because crosschecking can increase traceability and can expose interlocutors to risk if data are combined in ways that allow identification. Konken and Howlett's discussion of ethical considerations in digital and remote fieldwork captures a broader lesson for the post-pandemic era: remote methods can broaden access but also introduce new vulnerabilities and obscure the boundaries between public and private contexts (2023, 852–855, 858–859). Epistemic resilience therefore requires a reflexive stance towards the tools through which “distance” is operationalised as knowledge.

Practically, plural data ecologies often entail mixing in-person observation, remote interviews, archival work, and digital trace analysis. They also entail cross-validating official claims with external indicators where appropriate. China Studies has a long tradition of reading “official”

texts against the grain; the post-access conditions of today extend that tradition towards the infrastructures of data. When statistical series are paused, when court decisions are deleted, or when databases are audited, the change itself is analytically meaningful. Change signals shifting priorities and reclassifications within the state's informational order. The point is not to infer intent too quickly, but to treat temporal discontinuities as data that can be systematically archived and compared (Liebman et al. 2023, 2425–2427; Brussee 2025, 242–244).

Because platforms and archives can be altered, resilience also depends on time-sensitive archiving and on treating discontinuities as evidence. When a dataset disappears, when an interface changes, or when a corpus is retroactively edited, those events should not be treated only as nuisances; they can be tracked systematically as indicators of shifting governance priorities. Brussee's study of policy document disappearance shows how the fragility of availability can be measured and modelled rather than merely lamented (Brussee 2025, 241–244). Such work suggests a practical research ethic: preserve what you can, record when you obtained it, and treat absence as a variable instead of as a void.

The advent of post-access conditions has coincided with a “verification turn” that changes the epistemic labour of research. In many domains, the problem is no longer the scarcity of information, but rather the abundance of uncertain provenance. Synthetic media and generative AI sharpen this challenge by enabling rapid fabrication across text, image, audio, and video. This is not China-specific, but the PRC context matters for two reasons. First, China has rapidly developed a regulatory architecture for deep synthesis and generative AI linking content governance to national security, exemplified by Deep Synthesis Provisions (*Shendu hecheng guiding* 深度合成規定) and Interim Measures for Generative AI Services (*Shengchengshi rengong zhineng fuwu guanli zanxing banfa* 生成式人工智能服務管理暫行辦法) (Cyberspace Administration of China 2022; 2023). Second, China is a central arena for narrative contestation and for efforts to strengthen its international communication capacity (Reuters 2021). Verification is therefore a condition of credible public scholarship, not a technical afterthought.

Verification, in this sense, is an epistemological posture. It demands attention to metadata, publication pipelines, and the incentives of intermediaries. It also invites the adoption of emerging provenance standards. The Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA 2024, 7–8), for example, is developing specifications for attaching tamper-evident provenance information to digital media. Such standards are not a panacea; they depend on adoption and on trustworthy attestations. Still, they illustrate a direction of travel: credibility increasingly depends on showing how an artefact was produced, modified, and transmitted, not only on what it depicts.

Policy frameworks outside China likewise underscore the salience of provenance and risk management. UNESCO's guidance on generative AI in education and research warns that

these systems complicate the validation of knowledge and calls for institutional capacities to distinguish reliable information from fabrication (UNESCO 2023, 20). The EU AI Act also introduces transparency obligations for certain AI-generated or manipulated content, signalling that provenance is becoming a regulatory expectation (European Union 2024, Art. 50). For China Studies, the point is less their prescriptions than the horizon they articulate: responsible scholarship increasingly demands explicit workflows with regard to authenticity and provenance when digital evidence is central to claims.

What might such workflows look like in a scholarly register? At minimum, they require the systematic preservation of source artefacts and their contextual metadata: timestamps, access pathways, and, where possible, snapshots that can be audited later. They also require routine crosschecks against independent sources, including internal consistency checks across documents and comparisons across platforms. In digital research on the PRC, where platforms can be selectively edited or retrospectively altered, timestamped archiving becomes a methodological necessity, not a luxury. Verification routines also imply a willingness to treat uncertainty as part of analysis rather than as an embarrassment to be hidden. If a claim rests on an artefact whose provenance cannot be established, that limitation should be stated and weighed, not glossed over.

The verification turn is also a response to “information disorder”: the entanglement of mis-, dis-, and mal-information in polarised digital environments (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, 20–23). In China-related scholarship, information disorder is twofold. One layer is external: fabricated or context-stripped content that circulates internationally. The other is internal to research practice: the difficulty of distinguishing genuine documents from altered artefacts once materials move across platforms and languages. Verification routines mitigate both by making provenance and evidentiary status explicit instead of assumed.

Brussee’s work on missingness suggests what this might mean in a China-focused context. His analysis of policy document disappearance does not just diagnose fragility; it also points to mitigation practices, such as systematic archiving and explicit modelling of missingness mechanisms (Brussee 2025, 244–247). Translated into a broader methodological sensibility, this implies that scholars should treat “absence” as something to be tracked over time, compared across domains, and incorporated into inference rather than treated as an embarrassment. Tracking disappearance rates of documents, monitoring changes in platform interfaces, and documenting when and how sources were obtained can turn vulnerability into analysable variation.

China’s regulatory guidelines on synthetic content are instructive for method. The Deep Synthesis Provisions require measures such as content labelling and record-keeping and frame these duties as safeguarding national security and social order (Cyberspace Administration of China 2022). The Interim Measures for Generative AI Services likewise place responsibility on providers for preventing false information and for aligning outputs

with legal requirements (Cyberspace Administration of China 2023). Regardless of one's assessment of these regulations, they underscore a simple fact: the production and circulation of synthetic content is already being governed as a political and security issue. For researchers, this means that verification cannot be an afterthought. It must be built into the design of projects that rely on digital artefacts, and it must be communicated as part of the evidentiary status of claims.

Institutional Design and the Ethics of Staying Engaged

Epistemic resilience is easier to describe than to build because post-access conditions distribute risks unevenly. Senior scholars often have reputational capital that can absorb access disruption; well-funded institutions can purchase data substitutes; citizens and residents of the PRC bear far greater risk when they participate in research; and early-career scholars face career incentives that reward decisive claims while discouraging explicit expressions of uncertainty. If access is governance, then the governance of risk becomes part of the field's internal moral economy: whose safety is prioritised, whose careers are exposed, and whose labour of verification becomes invisible. Resilience therefore requires institutional design rather than heroic adaptation on the individual level.

Two ethical principles are central. The first is duty of care towards interlocutors and partners. In contexts where surveillance is plausible and boundaries of "sensitive information" are elastic, researchers must anticipate how the production, storage, and circulation of knowledge could expose others. Digital methods can inadvertently increase traceability, and cross-border data transfer can become a compliance risk for partners under China's data governance laws (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress 2021a; 2021b). The second principle is intellectual integrity. Duty of care must not collapse into a logic of *de facto* censorship in which entire domains are abandoned because they are difficult, or in which access itself becomes a reward for analytical compliance. Ethical care and critical ambition are not opposites; they require explicit design trade-offs.

Europe's policy environment lends an acuteness to this balancing act. A Commission staff working document on foreign interference in research and innovation maps risks such as undesirable knowledge transfer and covert influence and outlines mitigation practices (European Commission 2022, 4–8). The Council Recommendation of 23 May 2024 on enhancing research security asks member states to support organisations in addressing risks in international cooperation while preserving openness and academic freedom (Council of the European Union 2024, 1, 6–7). Together, these initiatives signal that research security is becoming an institutional expectation.

For European China Studies, there are dual dangers. One danger is complacency: the assumption that research security is irrelevant to work in the humanities and social sciences because it was initially articulated in relation to STEM and dual-use technologies. The other danger is overreaction: a security posture that treats collaboration, language acquisition, and empirical engagement as liabilities rather than as prerequisites of serious scholarship. A resilient field requires a third stance: institutionalised care without securitised epistemology. That stance begins with recognising that many China-related research risks are not “foreign interference” in the narrow sense but ordinary consequences of working with an authoritarian information order and with polarised domestic politics in Europe. Research security frameworks can provide tools, but they must be interpreted through the ethics and epistemology of China scholarship rather than imposed as external compliance checklists.

One practical implication is the need for shared infrastructures. Training on data governance, digital security, and ethical remote methods should be treated as a standard component of doctoral education, not as ad hoc advice transmitted through informal networks. Collective repositories for time-sensitive documents, including archived versions of policies, regulations, and platform interfaces, can reduce duplication and make disappearance itself observable. Shared expertise is particularly important because legal uncertainty encourages improvisation, and improvisation tends to reproduce inequalities of risk exposure. Resilience, by contrast, distributes learning; it makes the field less dependent on individual gatekeepers and more capable of collective adaptation.

A second implication concerns publication conventions. If missingness is patterned and constraints are consequential, then readers need a disciplined way to interpret the evidentiary status of claims. European China Studies should adopt access-and-constraint statements as a light-touch reporting norm, analogous to data availability statements in other fields but adapted to the ethical realities of China research. Such statements would briefly describe which forms of access were available, which were not, and how constraints shaped the evidentiary base: for example, whether certain archives were closed, whether key databases were intermittently unavailable, whether interviews were conducted remotely and under what protection measures, and whether certain quotations or identifying details were withheld in the name of safety. The goal is not exhaustive disclosure, which would often be unethical. Rather, it is relative transparency: to make it possible for readers and reviewers to understand why the evidentiary base looks as it does, and for future scholars to distinguish between the absence of evidence and evidence of absence when assessing research findings.

This proposal is not purely procedural. It speaks to the politics of credibility in a polarised public sphere. When access becomes conditional, accusations of bias proliferate: scholars are suspected of being co-opted if they have access, and suspected of being ideologically driven if they do not. Transparent constraint reporting can reduce the space for such insinuations by shifting attention from presumed motives to observable research conditions.

It can also protect researchers by making the costs of access visible. If access is granted under conditions that constrain inquiry, these restrictions should be part of the evaluation of the resulting scholarship. Conversely, if access is denied, the field should not quietly reward those who respond by lowering ambition; it should reward those who maintain analytic rigour through diversified evidence and explicit uncertainty.

A third implication concerns Europe's relative advantage. European China Studies is structurally multi-lingual and multi-institutional; it spans different archival traditions, funding regimes, and political contexts. That diversity can be converted into resilience if the field treats methodological variation as coordinated redundancy rather than as fragmentation. Collaborative projects that combine expertise across languages and regions can reduce dependence on any single access channel and can mitigate the risks of platform discontinuities. Resilience, in this sense, is a property of networks, not of individuals, and Europe's institutional plurality can be an epistemic resource if organised as such.

Finally, institutional design must keep sight of a basic normative orientation: the purpose of China Studies is not only to interpret the PRC but also to sustain a space for critical inquiry that is not reducible to geopolitical contestation. The PRC's pursuit of international discourse power intersects with European debates about de-risking and economic security. In such a landscape, scholarship risks becoming legible primarily as a position within strategic narratives. Epistemic resilience cannot depoliticise the field, but it can protect its intellectual sovereignty by making methods and evidentiary standards visible, by insisting on complexity against simplification, and by treating uncertainty as an analytical problem instead of as a rhetorical weakness.

Conclusion: Post-Access, Not Post-Knowledge

The post-access condition we see today is not a temporary disruption but rather an emergent norm of knowledge production about the PRC. Treating access as governance has the power to clarify why the challenge is structural and why responses must be collective. Conditionality is produced through law and secrecy regimes, through data governance, and through platform infrastructures that mediate digital evidence. These mechanisms generate patterned missingness, redistribute risk, and shape what counts as responsible inquiry. They also coincide with a verification turn in which information abundance cannot substitute for epistemic discipline, especially in an era of synthetic media in increasingly contested information spaces.

European China Studies can respond by reinventing its infrastructure rather than lamenting the loss of an earlier horizon. Epistemic resilience names that task. It calls for plural data

ecologies that enable triangulation across methods and sources; for disciplined transparency about constraints through access-and-constraint statements that render absences comparable; and for verification routines suited to volatile digital artefacts. It also calls for institutional design that protects interlocutors and early-career scholars while preserving critical ambition. With these commitments, conditional access constrains the field but need not shrink it; a discipline that treats constraints as data and verification as an ethic can remain engaged, rigorous, and publicly useful.

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EACS AT FIFTY: SPOTLIGHT

Beyond Chinese Studies: Where Chinese History Sits—and Why This Matters

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This essay examines the location of Chinese history in Europe from organizational and disciplinary perspectives and analyzes how this positioning has shaped the field's operation and reach. It addresses the question of where Chinese history is situated in Europe through a historical analysis of the past forty years (1985–2025) and, on this basis, develops recommendations for its future positioning for researchers and students in Sinology, Chinese Studies, China Studies, and history departments, as well as across the humanities and social sciences more broadly. Starting from the organizational and disciplinary configurations of European academic landscapes, the essay explains how these arrangements have influenced historical research on Sinophone societies and the teaching of Chinese history at European universities. It begins with a critical appraisal of the current placement of Chinese history—encompassing both pre-nineteenth-century and modern periods—across different departmental and programmatic settings. These are theorized as two models: place- or language-based positioning within area studies programmes, and period- or process-based placement within history departments. The essay evaluates the core claims associated with each model, including assertions of interdisciplinarity, transregional scope, and critical theory in area studies, and of historical methodology, global connectivity, and cross-regional comparison in history departments. It concludes by reflecting on how these forms of organizational and disciplinary positioning affect the academic visibility and public relevance of Chinese history.

本文從建制與學科的雙重視角，探討中國歷史在歐洲學界的定位，系統梳理 1985 至 2025 年間其高校院系歸屬與學科專業設置的演變脈絡。重點剖析區域研究模式與歷史學系模式各自的理論取向與學術訴求，並反思此種定位如何形塑中國史的研究實踐、教學形態、學術可見度及公共意義。在此基礎上，文章就未來數十年中國歷史在歐洲人文社會科學中的發展方向提出建言。

Keywords: area studies, Sinology, Chinese history, methodological nationalism, interdisciplinarity

關鍵詞： 區域研究，漢學，中國歷史，方法論民族主義，跨學科性

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Introduction

This essay examines the organizational and disciplinary location of Chinese history in Europe and analyzes how this positioning has shaped the field's operation and reach. Focusing on European academic landscapes, it explains how institutional and disciplinary arrangements have influenced historical research on Sinophone societies and the teaching of Chinese history at European universities. The question of where Chinese history is located in Europe is addressed through a historical analysis of the past forty years (1985–2025). On this basis, the essay develops recommendations for the future positioning of Chinese history for researchers and students in Sinology, Chinese Studies, China Studies, and history departments, as well as across the humanities and social sciences more broadly.

Concerns about the location of Chinese history in academia are not new (Zurndorfer 2017; Blue 2017). When one reads through any of the hefty tomes on Sinology, Chinese Studies, or more broadly Asian Studies that occupy the first few shelves that one will see upon entering East Asian Studies academic library stacks (especially those that have been organized according to the Harvard-Yenching system), one will likely encounter occasional commentary on Chinese history's lack of independence from Sinology and area studies, or on history departments' neglect of it. Some sound more caustic and bitter than others, but there is a shared sentiment across the last three generations of historians working on different periods of Chinese history that things don't sit well. For example, in the early post-WWII decades, the celebrated historian Étienne Balazs (1905–1963) who worked on medieval socio-economic and administrative history expressed unease with the limitations imposed on Chinese history by Sinological conventions and routines (Bastid-Bruguère 1995, 237). In the early 1990s, Hans Bielenstein (1920–2015), an authority on early imperial Chinese history, was even more outspoken about the general lack of training in historical methodology among students and scholars of Chinese history: “many European sinologists, as already stated, not only lack historical training but in all too many cases are not aware of this deficiency” (Bielenstein 1995, 241). More recently, modern historians like Christian Henriot (2020) and students of Chinese history like Adam Knight (2025) have issued calls to expand the presence of Chinese history in national academia and in secondary education. Nowadays this is done in public media rather than in obscure journals and hefty tomes with small print runs.

The location of Chinese history within academia, or, more accurately, the position of historians working on the history of Sinophone societies, has changed since the days of Balazs and Bielenstein. Whereas in the 1980s and 1990s Chinese history was still as a rule taught only in Chinese or other area studies units in Europe, by the 2020s Chinese history and historians specializing in it have also been included in the teaching and research of history departments. This essay takes stock of this trend and the duality in the location of Chinese history in European academia we see today. It begins with a critical appraisal of the current

placement of Chinese history—encompassing both the pre-nineteenth-century and modern periods—across different departmental and programmatic settings, theorized as two models: place- or language-based positioning within area studies programmes, and period- or process-based placement within history departments. I critically evaluate core claims made for both models, including claims surrounding the cross- and interdisciplinary, transregional, and critical theoretical nature of area studies anchored in a focus on place outside Europe, on one hand, and claims of historical methodology, global connections, and cross-regional comparative thinking anchored in temporal processes and thematic organization, on the other.

The matter of where Chinese history is is an urgent question in higher education and under the present geopolitical conditions. The question is posed here at a paradoxical moment in the history of Chinese history within European higher education: sharply declining enrolments in many universities in Chinese Studies and similar BA and MA programmes on one hand, and unprecedented interest in China-related courses, including Chinese history, among students enrolled in other programmes and departments, on the other. The essay therefore ends with reflections on the impact of organizational and disciplinary situatedness on the reach of Chinese history in terms of both academic visibility and public relevance. These reflections are offered as recommendations to position Chinese history within the humanities and social sciences at large more effectively and with greater regard for the autonomy of historians specializing in it.

Chinese History in Chinese Studies and the Limits of Area Studies Insularity

In 1995 Marianne Bastid-Bruguière observed that, after WWII, in line with the professionalization of history and in accordance with changing perceptions of Europe's role in the world, the position of Chinese history in academia began to change. Whereas it had long been difficult to consider Chinese history separately from Sinology (defined primarily as the study of language and literature, textual culture and to some extent visual and material culture), after WWII Chinese history emerged as a field with dedicated practitioners. In her estimation, Chinese history then began to function as a subfield of Sinology, not divorced from the latter field, but distinguished from other subfields under its umbrella such as the study of Chinese language or Chinese literature. Bastid-Bruguière saw the strong connection between the emerging subfield of Chinese history with Sinology as a fortunate situation, underscoring the need for in-depth language and text-analysis training for historians working on Sinophone societies (1995, 228).

In the 1980s and in the decades following the publication of Bastid-Bruguère's analysis, further changes took place both within Sinology or Chinese Studies and in Chinese history. First, for some, Sinology (and the Oriental Studies research units of which Sinology subdivisions were often part) had come to be equated with philology and traditional approaches to the remote past, and hence Sinology departments were gradually renamed Chinese or China Studies. Humanities researchers who had been at the core of Sinology departments were joined by researchers focusing their work on modern or contemporary China and teaching in areas such as economics, political economy, international relations, political science, sociology, anthropology, media studies, law, or business administration that are, when the research object is located in Europe or more broadly the West, housed in social science and professional faculties.

Second, in some parts of Western Europe the reform of Sinology subdivisions was accompanied by broader transformations in higher education, including the democratization of universities and thus rapidly expanding student numbers, and, more recently, the spread of a neoliberal management culture in which research, teaching, administration, and service have become increasingly subject to bureaucratic accounting, market-driven task descriptions and personnel assessment, and the entrepreneurial adventurism of self-styled university "leadership" (Collini 2012; 2017; Lorenz 2012).

Third, the transformations of the People's Republic of China since the late 1970s and the ways in which these have been reported on in European media have of course also been factors affecting the position of Chinese Studies and Chinese history in higher education, with record numbers enrolling in Chinese Studies in the mid-1980s followed by significant decline after 1989 and generally low enrolments in West European, American, Australian, and Japanese Chinese Studies programmes in the last two decades. Whereas most such programmes could count on large numbers of college students wishing to study Chinese language and various aspects of Chinese society around 1985, in 2025 enrolment in Chinese Studies was generally far below comparable programmes such as Japanese Studies and, sometimes, even Korean Studies. Even though significantly fewer students now envision dedicating years of their life to the study of Chinese society, significantly more are propelled by the position of China in the international order to enrol in courses on China—a demand that newer programmes in International Studies and Global studies have struggled to satisfy.

Fourth, and critical for an understanding of the present-day position of Chinese history within Chinese Studies, and more broadly history within area studies, is the definition of area studies in the places where it is practised. Despite a thriving critical literature about area and regional studies and their relations to other fields, this is not as straightforward as it may sound. In practice Area Studies is often understood to be self-explanatory; unlike the humanities and social science disciplines that were like Sinology formed in the nineteenth century, theory, methodology, and the history of the field are typically not explicitly and systematically

embedded in BA and MA curricula. We can get a sense of self-understanding and self-positioning during moments of crisis when the need to identify expectations and conventions is clearly pronounced. In the early 2010s, following major faculty-wide restructuring and responding to internal and external critiques, the Leiden Institute for Area Studies identified Area Studies as a field characterized by multi- and interdisciplinarity and animated by the need to respond to Eurocentric theory emanating from humanities and social science disciplines (van Crevel 2014). Following critiques of the imperialist and colonial origins of the area studies model, as well as the methodological nationalism of subfields such as China, Japan, or Korea Studies, Area Studies was, despite its anchoring in specific places and languages, reimagined as transregional and global. The mission statement crafted by the management was not only targeted at area studies researchers but also embedded in a mandatory undergraduate core course for students enrolled in any of its programmes, taught by researchers from widely diverging but usually smaller fields such as Assyriology and Egyptology.

What has the impact of these changes been on Chinese history teaching and research in Chinese Studies? More specifically, in what ways has its embedding within reformed Chinese Studies programmes shaped historical research and teaching? Below I approach this question from multiple angles, including staffing and teaching portfolios (how many historians are there and what do they teach?), as well as research and professional orientation. My observations are limited by my own experiences and exchanges, having taught in Chinese Studies for 14 years and history departments for 11 years in public and private research universities in Belgium, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US.

On the whole, the amount of Chinese history positions has not significantly increased within reformed and expanded Chinese Studies programmes; in some the trend has clearly been negative, with expansion into social science fields coming to some extent at the cost of history and other humanities positions. This is more strongly the case for pre-nineteenth-century history than for modern history. Whereas at Leiden Chinese Studies could in the 1980s and 1990s boast expertise in imperial economic, social, religious, maritime, and contemporary political and migration history as well as early Chinese thought and imperial literary and cultural history, by the early 2010s this had been reduced to one position for Chinese history in general, with one position in modern history added later on.

The impact of area studies reform and neoliberal management on teaching portfolios has been more strongly pronounced. Even in cases in which job titles in Chinese Studies departments in the UK or the Netherlands clearly indicated history as the disciplinary field, course loads and course contents expanded far beyond what had been expected even in traditional Sinology departments within which a certain amount of flexibility to teach across fields had not been unusual. To take my own case, at Oxford I was as Associate Professor in Chinese History asked to teach and examine in early Chinese palaeography, art history,

classical Chinese language, modern Chinese language, sociology, political science, anthropology, literature, philosophy, and linguistics. In Leiden unexpectedly high numbers of students enrolling in International Studies led for years to extra courses and BA and MA thesis classes in fields including modern Korean and Japanese cultural studies and evaluation of BA and MA research in political science, media studies, linguistics, philosophy, religious studies, and modern literature, film, and international relations. In this manner, so-called multi- and interdisciplinarity were not realities that emerged from research practice, but rather extra-contractual demands imposed by the uncontrolled and poorly managed expansion of new programmes. Such demands resulted in unevenness in the quality of course content and delivery as well as unusually high staff rotation.

Did the emphasis on multi- and interdisciplinarity and global studies in institutional mission statements lead to a new academic habitus and foster greater integration of the various subdivisions within area and particularly Asian Studies? If we are to go by participation in China Studies seminars and the quantity of interdisciplinary research projects and publications, there is little to suggest that area studies are at the forefront of interdisciplinarity. I would go so far as to suggest that the claim of the de facto multi- and interdisciplinary nature of area studies has become increasingly less valid, that this has become the stuff of myth rather than lived reality. Interdisciplinarity exists mainly in managerial rhetoric.

There are several reasons for this. First, multi- and interdisciplinarity presuppose disciplinarity. In all subdivisions of area studies disciplinary training is sparse to non-existent. In Chinese history it is up to one or two historians to embed disciplinary training into the small number of history courses that they teach to Chinese Studies undergraduates in the second and third year of the BA. No disciplinary training is typically required for MA students enrolling in Asian Studies programmes; and at this level too it is largely left to individual staff to devise theoretical and methodological training in the sole history course that they may teach at this level—if they are lucky. Cuts have led to graduate teaching in fields such as imperial Chinese history disappearing entirely when staff go on temporary research leave; in this way MA courses on premodern Chinese history disappeared entirely in the Netherlands between 2014 and 2022. In addition, mandatory courses for research skills in Sinology that used to be the international claim to fame of European Sinology departments have long disappeared from undergraduate and graduate curricula in several universities due to the lack of personnel to staff such sessions. Neoliberal management by student credit accounting has, most likely as an unintended consequence if we take management speak about interdisciplinarity seriously, raised further obstacles to cross-departmental collaboration. Area Studies students are not encouraged to take disciplinary training (or other courses) in other departments, because student credits accrue to departments and therefore students' taking courses elsewhere has an immediate impact on future departmental budgets.

Second, ever-expanding output in Chinese Studies, increasing specialization, and the growing interest in including China-related expertise in humanities and social science disciplines following China's return as a key player on the global scene have changed the professional orientation of younger and to some extent senior researchers in the last two decades. China seminars mixing various humanities and social science disciplines are no longer the place where a shared professional identity is expressed; such events are across the board poorly attended and often serve as a reminder of how much the Sinologists of the past have grown apart. In other words, researchers placed within Chinese Studies or area studies departments are at this stage inclining to become more disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary. Political economists want in the first place to work with other political economists, and historians with other historians.

The limitations put on disciplinary academic exchange within area studies departments have consequences on multiple fronts. Among them is the practical limitation on enacting real impact on the disciplines. While the goal to produce theory not based on the European experience from which to talk back to the disciplines and Eurocentric theory is worthwhile, it has in my experience not been what area studies in the main produces. More importantly, it is very questionable whether such a goal can be best pursued in isolation from the disciplines. Dissatisfaction with Eurocentric theory and methodology is still one of the main shared attributes of area studies researchers, but at this point we need to consider whether theory and methodology informed by the experience of societies across the world and across time could not be better and more effectively produced through day-to-day exchange in discipline-specific departments or thematic groupings rather than in nation- or national language-based area studies in isolation. In history at least it appears that the most impactful research, think of Kenneth Pomeranz' *The Great Divergence* (2000), has been undertaken by those with a firm footing in history.

Finally, and as the example of Pomeranz illustrates, talking back to the disciplines implies that one has to be able to speak beyond the Chinese nation. In spite of prominently featured aspirations to go global or transregional on websites and in promotional literature, nation-based area studies programmes remain on average stuck in methodological nationalism (Beck 2007; Chernilo 2006; Dietze and Middell 2019; Szanton 2004). As I have explained elsewhere, in the case of Chinese Studies, the object has expanded from China to "Global China" (De Weerd 2027); efforts to position China globally, that is in connective and comparative research, seldom feature in Chinese Studies and have at times been actively discouraged. Using my own experience as but one example, when working on the adaptation of medieval Sinitic political advice literature in eighteenth-century German political theory and state fiction I was cautioned during an annual review by an academic director that "German history is not part of your research duties as Chair Professor of Chinese History." I was able to finish this work aimed at showing how the translation and adaptation of Chinese

administrative technology shaped early modern and modern European administrative practice and political theory only after moving back to a history department, at KU Leuven (De Weerd 2023; 2026).

Chinese History in History Departments and the Need for Radical Decolonization

During the last two decades it has become more common in Europe to find historians working on Sinophone societies in history departments. This is still the exception rather than the rule, and in this regard European history departments differ markedly from history departments in the United States of America. The latter have a long history of including the histories of places outside the USA and Europe within their course offerings. Public and private universities alike include courses on Chinese, East Asian, South Asian, African, South American, and world history among core electives and history departments regularly issue distribution requirements so that all history students take a small number of courses outside of their geographic areas and periods of specialization.

In the case of Western Europe, we have mainly seen history departments expand in Chinese history at universities without a well-established prior tradition of Sinology or Chinese Studies. In the UK, for example, Robert Bickers calculated that since the past two decades “33 out of 83 research active [history] departments” now include historians working on Sinophone societies; that is indeed substantial progress and this is most likely unmatched anywhere else in Europe (Bickers 2020). Universities such as Aberdeen, Birkbeck, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Exeter, King’s College, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, LSE, Manchester, Newcastle, Royal Holloway, Southampton, Sussex, Warwick, and many more hired historians working on Chinese societies in history departments. Many of these were appointments in specifically Chinese history, but some were broader history searches in which a candidate with expertise in Chinese history was selected. This also implies that these are not necessarily lasting positions in Chinese history. One can only hope that this promising trend, mostly achieved within one decade, will not be undone by the restructuring that some of these universities have been facing in recent years. At universities with major East Asian or Chinese Studies departments such as Oxford, and at one point Durham, occasional appointments in history departments focused on modern Chinese history. That is also the case overall and very few history departments in the UK have made pre-seventeenth-century Chinese history part of their teaching of human history; a notable exception is the historian Naomi Standen, a medieval historian, who taught at both Newcastle and Birmingham. At Belgian universities Chinese history is mainly taught by staff in Chinese Studies, but in recent

years researchers in Chinese history have been hired in the history department of KU Leuven. In the Netherlands some universities made similar attempts, with Groningen, VU Amsterdam (Free University of Amsterdam), and Utrecht hiring in modern Chinese history, but here also the longevity of these positions has not been guaranteed. In the more centralized academy in France, the situation appears dire; there was “not a single recruitment of historians of modern China” in the two decades between 1999 and 2018 (Henriot 2020).

Despite the small steps taken in the UK and elsewhere, there is overall agreement that much more remains to be done to embed Chinese history as well as the history of other Asian, African, and American societies into history departments in Europe. The sense of urgency expressed by historians reviewing the field has become keener as it is felt that history departments are no longer preparing their students well for the world in which they find themselves and the challenges and opportunities they will face upon graduation.

History departments have during the past two decades not gone through the more drastic reforms that some area studies departments have experienced, but some of the critiques and challenges to which they have had to respond are similar. History departments have been facing calls from younger generations of researchers and students to decolonize and diversify, to cover a broader range of human experience from a broader range of human actors, to include global connective and comparative approaches, and, considering ongoing debates on eurocentrism, to place greater emphasis on non-European archives and voices. Revamped mission statements have typically included claims about global and transnational coverage, especially in early modern, modern, and contemporary history. As quantitative trends in positions have already been sketched above, the discussion focuses on the teaching portfolios, research orientation, and professional development of historians of Chinese societies who have worked for at least some years in history departments.

Academics working on Chinese history teaching in history departments often teach more than only Chinese history. In addition to national or regional (East Asian or Asian) history survey courses, they are often involved in world or global history courses and can offer methodological and thematic courses using historiographies on different societies. While teaching in history departments at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville (US), King's College London (UK), and KU Leuven (Belgium) I taught and co-taught general historiography courses, Chinese history surveys, Chinese intellectual history, world history and medieval history surveys, the history of intercultural relations, Sino-European relations, and thematic and comparative courses on authority, socialization, and material infrastructures. Since I was not trained as a historian, these experiences and regular exchanges with colleagues in the history departments where I worked shaped the work I have been doing, both in research and teaching, with a body of connective and comparative work slowly emerging as a result. The work of many of the historians listed in Bickers' overview

similarly suggests how becoming part of a history department shapes and amplifies the work of academics working on Chinese history.

More importantly, such exchanges normalize the inclusion of Chinese history in the perspectives of researchers and students whose interests predominantly lie in other areas. I was fortunate early on in my teaching career to experience just what an impact this can have on history students who had not anticipated learning about Chinese history. In 2003 a student training as an officer in the US Army made, after all grades had been submitted, the only appointment he made all semester simply to share that “had I been alive before 1600 I would have wanted to live in China.” Sentiment apart, this opportunity to learn about not only Chinese history but the history of other places through implicit comparison is currently still scarcely available to most history students in Europe.

Conversely, in history departments where the step to include historians associated with area studies has either intentionally or unintentionally not been made, claims about global coverage and attempts to counter colonialist historical narratives still mostly proceed through a critical engagement with colonial archives. For example, important work is done in the Netherlands in questioning the celebratory rhetoric of prior work on the “Golden Age,” but this is still mostly carried out through work on the East Indian Company archives with practically no attention to local Asian, African, and American histories before the sixteenth century. From the perspective of a historian trained in an area studies environment one would expect decolonization to start with, or at least to incorporate, the *longue-durée* histories of the world colonized by European (and other) powers prior to colonization and with local archives and sources in local languages. Similarly, comparative work or global history survey courses are in such history departments more often undertaken by European historians and even with the best of intentions tend to result in the confirmation of Eurocentric bias rather than in its questioning through current research on Chinese and other regional histories.

For historians of Chinese societies working in history departments there are also the kinds of challenges that newcomers and minorities are bound to face. Among them, fixed periodizations and predefined content for theoretical and methodological courses likely present the greatest challenges in research and teaching. First, periodization continues to pose a major problem for many historians working on extra-European histories. One might prefer to bracket this issue, but given that many history departments are subdivided into working groups based on period this is all but impossible. Medieval and early modern are not periodizations that are readily accepted by historians of China who often see them as Eurocentric constructs. As I have suggested elsewhere, it is up to historians working on Chinese and other parts of the world to question such constructs and contribute to debates about the temporal structuring of history at various scales; such discussions are no less

relevant to how periodization works in Chinese history and public discourse (De Weerd 2025).

Second, leaving aside the occasional flippant remark that history has no method, a cursory glance at history department curricula will show that historical and other methods are very much part of the training they offer. Source criticism is at the core of history training and critical data evaluation skills have become all the more important in the age of artificial intelligence. These courses, their textbooks and lab sessions, typically revolve around archives in European languages. Here it is obvious, as Bastid-Bruguière remarked, that for the training of historians whose primary focus will be on research in Chinese history, collaboration with Chinese Studies programmes remains critically important. Such collaboration should also pay off for Chinese Studies programmes and could result in the expansion of the training that is currently the preserve of graduate students in Chinese Studies with an interest in history. In my own experience in Chinese Studies programmes, substantial effort is devoted to text reading and translation; much research is devoted but also limited to explaining the text. Including expanded training in source and archival criticism in addition to a broad range of ancillary analogue and digital methodologies stands to benefit the further development of Chinese history, both within Chinese Studies and in history more broadly.

Conclusions

I have shown that we have seen an important shift in the last two decades in the history of Chinese history in Europe. Chinese history had already become a subfield in Chinese Studies or Sinology in the twentieth century as some Sinologists became full-time professional historians. In the last two decades historians of Sinophone societies joined history departments in unprecedented numbers, especially in the UK and sporadically in other European countries. The rich literature in various European and East Asian languages surveying the field of Chinese Studies in Europe has described trends in publications and includes biographical accounts of key figures and research organizations (e.g., Fogel 2023; Idema 2014; Łuszczkiewicz and Brose 2022; Schütte 2002; Singaravelou 1999; Zurndorfer 2017; and issues and histories of “International Sinology” [*Guoji Hanxue* 國際漢學] in Chinese as well as voluminous Chinese monographs and articles on national traditions of Sinology in Europe). These have not regularly treated Chinese history as a separate field of research (e.g. Idema 2014 or Martin and Hammer 1999). Moreover, to my knowledge, this work has so far not considered the impact of the location of historians working on Chinese societies within different academic environments on research and teaching.

I have outlined two models, evaluated the claims for them, and highlighted the affordances of each. Historians of Sinophone societies working in history departments can focus on historical research and contribute to a more rounded formation of history students, both in their own courses and through their interactions with other historians. Can decolonization and an understanding of the effects of colonization and imperialism really proceed without the inclusion of historians working on the histories of societies before European colonization took off, with local sources and in local languages? The inclusion of historians working on Chinese and other parts of the world may require gradual change within history departments and, as with training in historical research on periods and places with special linguistic requirements, also requires collaboration with Chinese Studies programmes focused on language and text analytical training. Historians are accustomed to the notion that change can take time, but, as the case of the UK shows, significant positive change can be realized within a decade. Where Chinese history remains in Chinese Studies, collaboration in research and teaching with disciplines such as history ought to be actively encouraged, facilitated, and institutionalized, and not, as is still too often the case, seen as a threat or breach of loyalty. Furthermore, if staff wellbeing truly is to be seen as genuine care and not another imposition by neoliberal university leadership, wild expectations of multi- and interdisciplinarity are best tempered.

In 2014, and in view of the fact that it turned out to be impossible to find three historians for a BBC radio show to discuss the so-called first industrial revolution in Song China, I expressed the hope that “the histories of non-European places” be “fully incorporated in universities and schools at all levels” (De Weerd 2014, 12). Ten years later, I’d like to express the additional hope that we start calling historians of Sinophone societies by their profession. After the “Sinologist” made a more regular appearance in the early twentieth century (the “Sinologue” was more common before if we go by google N-grams), the term stuck to the extent that I and other historians working on Chinese history are commonly referred to in academic events and the media as “Sinologists” even when job titles do not include the latter term and even when we explicitly introduce ourselves as historians. It matters to academic as well as public discourse that Chinese history is, just as the history of all other societies known to us, made an equal part of history; the substitution of “Sinologist” for historian to me connotes that on the whole the Chinese past is singled out for different treatment and exoticism, at a remove from the history of European societies. As the Chinese past has become in China and in global media a very productive site, and as Chinese history in the Sinophone world has become equally professionalized (Moloughney and Zarrow 2011), it has become ever more important for historians (and not just any “China expert”) to weigh in on academic, policy, and public debate on the representation and uses of the Chinese past. And that implies that only modern history amounting to a story of the rise of China following a century of shame will not do.

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EACS AT FIFTY: RESEARCH ARTICLE

The History Behind Jan Myrdal's *Report from a Chinese Village*

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This article reexamines the production and reception of *Report from a Chinese Village* (1965) by Jan Myrdal, one of the most influential Western accounts of Maoist China. Long regarded as a pioneering, quasi-anthropological portrayal of rural life in the People's Republic, the book shaped a generation's understanding of Chinese communism at a moment when the Soviet model had lost much of its moral authority. Drawing on previously unexplored archival materials in Sweden and China, this study reconstructs the political and institutional context in which Myrdal's report was conceived, researched, and written. Myrdal arrived in Beijing in 1962, shortly after the catastrophic Great Leap Forward, which resulted in tens of millions of deaths. Yet the famine is entirely absent from his account of Liulin village and from his later China writings based on the same visit. Using correspondence, diaries, and Chinese Foreign Ministry documents, this article shows that Myrdal's trip was carefully orchestrated as part of a broader effort to counter Soviet criticism and shape foreign perceptions. His access, travel, and interviews were mediated by state-controlled organisations, and the village he studied belonged to a model revolutionary landscape near Yan'an. The article further argues that Myrdal encountered rumours and signs of severe rural distress but chose neither to investigate nor report them, in order to avoid damaging China's international reputation.

本文重新考察瑞典作家揚·米爾達 1963 年出版的《來自中國農村的報告》的成書過程及其歷史影響。該書長期被奉為西方理解毛澤東時代中國農村的典範之作，在蘇聯模式信譽式微之際，塑造了一代人對中國共產主義的認知。借助新發掘的瑞典與中國檔案，本文揭示米爾達的寫作深受政治與制度框架制約：米爾達 1962 年訪華時正值大饑荒餘波未息，卻在其記述中全然回避饑饉問題。檔案顯示，其行程與訪談均由中方官方機構精心安排，所考察的村莊亦屬延安附近的“革命樣板”區域。儘管在京期間曾聽聞農村困頓之狀，米爾達出於維護中國國際形象的考量，主動放棄查證，轉而將官方及“友人”敘述奉為事實。本文由此揭示該書作為冷戰時代意識形態敘事的知識邊界與政治底色。

Keywords: Propaganda, Great Leap Forward, fellow travellers, Sweden, Sinology

關鍵詞：宣傳，大躍進，同路人，瑞典，漢學

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Introduction

When *Report from a Chinese Village* was published in English in 1965, it quickly became one of the most influential Western accounts of the People's Republic of China. Its author, Jan Myrdal, was widely regarded as a rare Western witness from within Mao Zedong's China; a mediator of a reality largely closed to outsiders. Translated into more than twenty languages and adopted in university courses worldwide, the book acquired remarkable authority. Readers travelled to the village of Liulin (柳林) with the volume in hand, and major newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *Chicago Tribune* praised it in their reviews. At a moment when Soviet communism had lost much of its moral legitimacy following the revelations of Stalin's terror, Myrdal's portrayal made China appear as a more humane and hopeful socialist alternative.

By the early 1960s, Myrdal was an established Swedish intellectual and a member of the Communist Party of Sweden (Sveriges kommunistiska parti). The son of Alva Myrdal and Gunnar Myrdal, both prominent figures in Swedish public life, he brought considerable symbolic capital to his engagement with China. After spending several years in what he termed "poor Asia," deeply affected by conditions in countries such as India and Afghanistan, he was invited in 1962 to spend a year in the People's Republic to produce a series of reports.

Myrdal arrived in China in the immediate aftermath of one of the worst famines in world history, triggered by the collectivisation drive of the Great Leap Forward (Da yuejin 大躍進). Yet this catastrophe, which had devastated the countryside between 1958 and 1962, is entirely absent from his depiction of rural life.

The book was received with enthusiasm, often with near-scientific authority. The historian Jacques Gernet described it as "the best book I have read on Communist China," while Claude Lévi-Strauss praised it as a pioneering anthropological account of contemporary history. For the Chinese authorities, Myrdal represented an ideal intermediary: a respected Western intellectual with anti-colonial sympathies who appeared to convey the Maoist development model in an objective and credible voice.

Blending reportage, ethnography, and social analysis, *Report from a Chinese Village* presented itself as a documentary account based on interviews with villagers who, in their own words, described revolution and socialist transformation. Myrdal cast himself as a spokesman for the rural poor, a mediator of reality rather than its interpreter.

Later on, however, doubts were raised about the book's claims to authenticity. It portrays a harmonious collective of peasants enthusiastically building socialism, yet makes no mention of the famine that claimed tens of millions of lives. The China specialist Nils Olof Ericsson argued that the account was scarcely distinguishable from official propaganda, and the historian David Caute asserted that "no Western writer embodied the fellow-traveller's

double standards more powerfully than the radical Swede Jan Myrdal.” Neither scholar, however, had access to evidence concerning the concrete circumstances under which the book was produced, and, as I will show, seems not to have read the book as carefully as it deserves.

This article reconsiders the making of the *Report from a Chinese Village*. On the basis of previously unexplored archival materials, it examines why Myrdal was invited to China in 1962, under what political and institutional conditions he worked, and how the book was actually produced. To what extent were the interviews conducted freely? Was Liulin selected by Party authorities? Did cadres supervise the conversations? The most important question, I would argue, is what did Myrdal know, or not know, about the recently concluded famine, and why does it remain absent from his narrative?

The analysis draws on extensive new archival evidence, including the Jan Myrdal Society's collections in Varberg, which contain tens of thousands of letters and documents, among them Gun Kessle's detailed travel diaries from China. Additional sources include papers held at the Labour Movement Archives and Library (Arbetsrörelsens arkiv och bibliotek) in Flemingsberg, materials from the National Library of Sweden (Kungliga biblioteket), and documents from the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive (Zhongguo waijiaobu dang'an 中國外交部檔案) in Beijing. By reconstructing the planning, fieldwork, and publication process behind the book, the article offers a more historically grounded account of how one of the twentieth century's most influential works on China came into being.

Asian poverty and the Myrdal family

It has been estimated that 30–40 million people perished in the politically induced famine of the Great Leap Forward (Dikötter 2010. Yang 2013). Several million more were beaten to death as “counterrevolutionaries” and “saboteurs (Dikötter 2010).” Yet the outside world remained unaware of the scale of this disaster. Amid the chaos, the propaganda and censorship apparatus functioned as intended. Instead of addressing the famine, the *Communist Party* concentrated on concealing that starvation and death were occurring.

The problem was compounded by the deepening conflict with the Soviet Union, which had warned against the Great Leap Forward and now viewed Mao as a lunatic causing a disaster (Radchenko 2009. Lüthi 2009). Since all of China's previous contacts with foreign communist parties and sympathizers outside East Asia had been mediated through Moscow, Beijing found itself with few direct allies abroad. A crisis of confidence arose as communists around the world heard from Moscow how disastrously the Chinese revolution had failed.

To present its own version of events and counter rumours of a total disaster, China began at the very height of the crisis to invite foreigners: students, language teachers, editors, journalists, and writers. Until then, the regime had been highly restrictive in allowing outsiders in. Forced to change course, it carefully selected invitees who were not only sympathetic communists but also ignorant of China and unable to speak Chinese (Becker 1996). This made it easier to control the country's image abroad and reduced the risk of espionage. It was also considered best if the longtime guests came as married couples, to avoid romantic entanglements between foreigners and Chinese citizens.

Neutral Sweden attracted particular interest. It had good relations with China and had been the first Western country to recognise and establish diplomatic ties with the People's Republic. Until the late 1950s, relations between the Chinese and Swedish Communist Parties had mostly been channelled through Moscow, but in 1952 China had sent an acrobat troupe on a month-long propaganda tour of Sweden to improve its image during the Korean War.

Within Sweden's Communist Party (SKP), many members viewed the People's Republic of China favourably. In September 1960, SKP chairman Hilding Hagberg was invited to a private meeting with China's ambassador, Dong Yueqian (董越千). Notes from the conversation, preserved in files at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs—briefly open to researchers affiliated with Chinese institutions—reveal that Ambassador Dong reported to Beijing that Hagberg did not believe the rumours of a famine disaster in China. Having visited the country the previous year for the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic, Hagberg had seen nothing of the sort (Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive). The ambassador assured Hagberg that Soviet claims of famine were in fact lies. Hagberg seems to have accepted this readily. The ongoing Great Leap Forward, Dong told his Swedish counterpart, “was a great advance on all fronts.” The Chinese ambassador claimed to have toured the countryside himself and seen how well everything was going.

This was, of course, a blatant falsehood. The Great Leap Forward had already turned into a catastrophe. Nor was the embassy unaware of this. The embassy cook, Hsiung Chang-shui, for example, received letters from relatives describing how desperately they were starving. When he read one of these letters inside the embassy, he wept openly in front of his colleagues (“Red Diplomat Defects”).

At the same time as Dong Yueqian's meeting with Hagberg, China was preparing for the National Day celebrations of 1 October 1960. Even as vast parts of the country starved, the regime launched plans to invite over 2,000 foreign guests. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, warned internally that “the task of providing food will be extremely burdensome. Recently, due to tensions in food supply, bad elements have broken into food trucks delivering provisions for foreign guests (Lovell 2015).”

Among the “foreign guests” arriving for the celebrations was C. H. Hermansson, who in 1964 would succeed Hagberg as SKP chairman. At the time, Hermansson headed the Party organ *Ny Dag* and travelled to Beijing with a Swedish cultural delegation that spent a month touring the country by air, train, and boat. The Chinese authorities took exceptional precautions to ensure that no visitor could suspect that the worst famine in human history was under way. “Reduce as much as possible the number of cities visited by foreign guests,” instructed internal directives. Any difficulties encountered were blamed on Moscow’s obstruction. “The Soviet embassy looked shuttered and closed,” Hermansson noted, as he was carefully shown incomplete steelworks and other facilities abandoned by recalled Soviet experts (Hermansson 1993, 168, 208).

China’s collaboration with the Swedish Communist Party continued that November, when Moscow hosted a major meeting of the world’s communist parties. During the conference, the Swedish delegation was approached by the Chinese delegation, which expressed dissatisfaction that Moscow wanted a passage in the final communiqué to be binding on all participants (Hagberg 1995). The Swedes sided with the Chinese, opposing Moscow’s demand and helping to have the wording removed. Possibly as a gesture of gratitude for this kinship, the Chinese delegates told Hagberg that they wished to invite Swedish communist writers and journalists to China. Hagberg found the idea excellent.

Plans to identify suitable candidates began immediately thereafter. Chinese officials from the Stockholm embassy visited the editorial offices of *Ny Dag* in person to look for journalists who might be invited. One staff member suggested his son, Per Olof Leijon, who subsequently became a student in Beijing for three years. The journalist Sture Källberg was invited, along with his family. Nils Holmberg—who would later break with the SKP and lead a pro-Beijing splinter party—had already been recruited by the Chinese the previous year, together with his wife. Officially, they were to assist with the Swedish edition of the propaganda magazine *Bildtidningen Kina* and with the translation of Mao Zedong’s writings into Swedish. Such work involved as much ideological training as linguistic assistance. Foreigners officially designated as “translators” or “editors” were permitted only to polish the Chinese texts, not to translate or write them independently.

China also needed its own language specialists for diplomacy and intelligence in countries where it had previously relied on Soviet help. Swedish was among the languages to be learned. Thus the couple Vivi and Jan Ingvar Löfstedt were invited to teach at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute. Yet the true prize of China’s campaign to establish Western contacts and promote international propaganda would prove to be Jan Myrdal.

Jan Myrdal was the only son of Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, two of the most influential figures of Swedish Social Democracy and foremost among the intellectual architects of the Swedish welfare state. Both also had international careers. Gunnar Myrdal, was professor of economics and a leading representative of the so-called Stockholm School. He had held

ministerial posts in the Swedish government, but in the late 1930s was invited by the Carnegie Foundation to the United States to direct a major research project on racial segregation. The result, *An American Dilemma*, became an international success and left a deep imprint on the American public debate. After the Second World War, Gunnar Myrdal was appointed head of a United Nations agency in Geneva, tasked with contributing to Europe's reconstruction and managing the growing divide between East and West in the conflict with the Soviet Union.

Alva Myrdal, Jan's mother, was among the first women to serve in the Swedish government. She pursued an international career within the UN system, holding leadership positions in agencies dealing with population and social policy. Later she became a specialist in disarmament issues and a prominent voice in the international peace movement. From the late 1950s she served as Sweden's ambassador to India. Gunnar lived with her in India during this period, working on his monumental study of the political roots of poverty in Asia. With parents like these it is not surprising that first Moscow then Peking invested heavily in getting Jan Myrdal on their side.

Jan Myrdal's education became difficult. He left school at the age of sixteen and joined the youth section of the Communist Party of Sweden (*Sveriges kommunistiska parti*, SKP) the same year. From an early age, he resolved to become Sweden's greatest author, but after four unsuccessful novels, although they were allegedly extremely well received in the Soviet Union, he abandoned that ambition. In 1958, together with his new partner, the artist Gun Kessle, he left Sweden (and his children with two former wives) instead heading eastward toward South Asia in a small Citroën.

In 1960, while SKP chairman Hilding Hagberg was in Moscow discussing with Chinese representatives, and as the international Communist movement was beginning to fracture, Jan and Gun, with Soviet support, toured Soviet Turkmenistan. Enthusiastic about what they had seen in the Asian Soviet republic, they returned to Sweden for the Christmas holidays more loyal to Moscow than ever. During this visit, Hagberg called Myrdal to the party headquarters on Kungsgatan 84. In consultation with the Chinese, Hagberg proposed that Myrdal be sent to the People's Republic of China to observe developments firsthand and write about the country (Myrdal, Jan. E-mail correspondence).

Myrdal had earlier been one of three members of the party's youth league who assisted the Chinese cultural delegation on its propaganda tour of Sweden in 1952. The Chinese ambassador's report to Beijing had praised the Swedish youths for their exemplary conduct; remarks that Beijing underlined approvingly in the margins (The Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive). Myrdal, however, had paid little attention to China since that tour. By the early 1960s, he still knew little of the country or of the ongoing revolution there. Yet he was clearly interested in the proposal: a year in China would allow him time to write and gather unique

material. Negotiations with the Chinese embassy followed, and Myrdal submitted his ideas for potential books and reportage projects he might produce during a longer stay.

Before their departure the couple had a farewell dinner with friends in New Delhi featuring both Swedish dishes and roast suckling pig (Jan to Alva, 2 April 1962, JMA). Soon after, Jan and Gun boarded a train to Calcutta, from where they planned to continue east. Alva had already informed the Swedish consulate in Calcutta of her son's arrival. Jan himself wrote to Consul General Tham requesting assistance with hotel arrangements (Jan to W. Tham, 30 March 1962, JMA). Unable to find a ship sailing directly from India to Beijing, Alva arranged passage from Calcutta to Hong Kong and from there onward to Tianjin, Beijing's port city. The couple thus spent several days in Hong Kong, enjoying food, drink, and shopping.

The Myrdals hoped to bring their car into China, intending to drive across the country as they had done in Afghanistan and India. Myrdal discussed this with the former leader of the Young Communists, Urban Karlsson, who appears to have been SKP's intermediary with the Chinese embassy (Jan to Urban Karlsson, 1 April 1962, JMA). The Chinese authorities, however, categorically refused. They would not allow foreigners to drive at all. In spring 1962, they set out from Victoria Harbour as M/S Poyang's only passengers. The cargo hold was nearly empty: as Myrdal later remarked, the People's Republic was facing economic hardship and could afford few imports.

Peking 1962

When Jan and Gun arrived in Beijing in April 1962, they were unaware that the so-called "Conference of 7,000 Cadres" (*qiantuan dahui* 千團大會) had just concluded. Dissatisfaction, indeed panic, was spreading throughout the country. Rebellions and banditry had followed in the wake of the deadly mass famine. Everything seemed to hang in the balance, while Chiang Kai-shek, in his exile on Taiwan, contemplated a counterattack. The Communist Party leadership urgently needed to rectify ideological deviations and rally local *cadres* behind the central party line.

To deflect criticism for the famine and sustain the now disastrous Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong drafted the main speech for the meeting, expecting President Liu Shaoqi to deliver it obediently. Yet Liu, having just visited his home village, had heard firsthand accounts of starvation and of peasants' hatred for the Party. Concluding that the Leap must be suspended to preserve the Party's rule, Liu set Mao's text aside and publicly blamed him and the party leadership, including himself, for the catastrophe. Mao protested, claiming that only "one-tenth" of the Leap had failed while "nine-tenths" were successful, but Liu's rebuttal humiliated him before the Party elite.

In Mao's propagandistic state, no one would, however, tell Jan Myrdal what was really happening in the country—neither about the masses of people dying of hunger nor the political struggle underway. Not even his “friends” from the 1952 Chinese cultural troupe, whom he now met again, said a word. But, as Myrdal recalled, “we had a wonderful evening together; we kissed and talked about these ten years (Jan to “Kamrat”, 20 April 1962, JMA).” In a letter to his old comrade Folke Eriksson, who had also taken part in the 1952 tour, Myrdal wrote that he had met Wang Dizi (王地子), Cheng Menggeng (張夢庚), and Wu Tong (吳佟) (Jan to Folke, 20 April 1962, JMA). “They send you their warm regards,” he wrote, “and greetings especially to our driver and to Vinnå.” Wang had been ill for a year, Myrdal noted, and came out of bed that evening only to meet Myrdal. “They were just as open and good as I remembered them from 1952,” he continued. Cheng Menggeng had been promoted to oversee all cultural affairs in the capital.

Encouraged by these reunions, Myrdal wrote to friends in Sweden that everything in China seemed fine and that rumours of famine were false. Within ten days, he and Gun had been assigned housing and began planning travel across the country. The couple were some of the first Westerners to reside in the People's Republic for such an extended period and, as Myrdal was keenly aware, to receive “permissions that others did not (Jan to Lasse Bergström, 3 May 1962, JMA).” He was even approved to work in a *people's commune* (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 21 May 1962, JMA). As he explained to his parents, he had obtained these permits “not by intrigue, not through ‘pull,’ but by speaking plainly and justifying my requests (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 21 May 1962, JMA).” “I have a devilish contempt,” he continued, “for all those cowardly hacks who demand caviar and champagne for their private lives but dare not demand anything of their own work. Of course, working on a commune will be hard. Pushing wheelbarrows and digging ditches for a month in the heat is no joke. But one meets people that way!”

Wu Tong, one of the political officers responsible for the 1952 cultural delegation, now worked for the Chinese People's Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (*Zhongguo renmin duiwai wenhua xiehui* 中國人民對外文化協會), was assigned to assist Myrdal during his visit (Jan to Urban Karlsson, May 1962, JMA). Jan found this reassuring: knowing each other, he thought, would prevent misunderstandings.

After a few weeks, during the May Day celebrations, they partook in the crowds saluting Mao Zedong. “The city had burst into green,” Myrdal wrote, “and hundreds of thousands thronged the streets. The people dance without police or soldiers, perfectly disciplined without command.” That evening's fireworks display impressed him deeply, and he was told that discussions with Mao might follow (Jan to Lasse Bergström, 3 May 1962, JMA).

The welcome was overwhelming. Even the National Library had prepared for his visit. Swedish literature, he noted, was underrepresented. But, to his amusement, they had a copy of his failed 1957 novel *The Bathroom Faucet* (*Badrumskranen*), which had even been

checked out (Jan to Lasse Bergström, 3 May 1962, JMA). “Imagine,” he mused, “there they sit under the wall reading *Badrumskranen*—peculiar indeed.”

Myrdal's “Indian depression,” as he called it, now lifted completely. He admitted that “things are difficult here; the disasters are immense. But people work, struggle, make mistakes and succeed. The situation is far better than described in the world press. Rationing is strict, but no one starves to death like in India (Jan to Gunnar and Alva, 30 April 1962, JMA).” China felt “fresh and healthy, has no corruption, and people walk upright.” Even the highest officials lived simply. “It was, of course, a blessing for the Chinese that they could physically sweep away the corrupt bureaucratic class,” he wrote approvingly. Above all, China was a “rational society,” unlike India (Jan to Alva och Gunnar, 21 May 1962, JMA). “India lies behind us like an evil dream. This nightmare, this Asia's Weimar just before the July elections of 1932, if you know what I mean,” he wrote to his mother, who had just completed her posting as ambassador in New Delhi. “There are no flies in China,” he added. He and Gun felt they had “escaped the Swedenborgian excremental hell that is India.”

What made Beijing seem so clean and orderly—a fact Myrdal never reflected on—was that cities and countryside were separated by watertight administrative barriers. There were simply no truly poor and severely starving people in the cities. Internal travel permits (*hukou* 戶口) confined the impoverished rural population to the countryside. The *hukou* system not only kept slums, excrement, and flies out of the capital; it also confined hunger and death to the exploited countryside. In much of the rest of the developing world, as in India, cities served as a safety valve where rural migrants could survive famine. But in Beijing, as we shall see, the train stations were guarded by soldiers with submachine guns. Those who managed to sneak into the city were coldly sent back to the realm of famine from which they had fled. Why did Myrdal not apprehend this fact?

The Small Foreign Enclave

When Jan Myrdal and Gun Kessle arrived in Beijing, there were scarcely more than a hundred Westerners residing in the People's Republic (Hooper 2016). Most, like Myrdal, had been invited as part of the ongoing ideological struggle with the Soviet Union. But some had lived there and worked as paid propagandists longer. Among them Sidney Rittenberg, Rewi Alley, and Israel Epstein. Perhaps the most significant of all. Alley, a New Zealander, had arrived in China already in the 1930s and acted as a kind of unofficial ambassador, receiving various foreign friendship delegations in Beijing (Brady 2003). Myrdal and Kessle socialised frequently with “Rewi,” but they also came to know “Sid” and “Epi (Jan Myrdal in conversation with the author, summer of 2016).”

Myrdal was not the only Swede in Beijing there to learn and write about the country. His friend Sture Källberg, whom he had met in Gothenburg in 1951, worked as correspondent for *Ny Dag*, the Swedish Communist Party's newspaper. Another Swede, Per Olow Leijon, was studying art history in Beijing. On Sundays, Jan and Gun would often join Leijon at the Xinqiao Hotel restaurant to discuss Chinese art (Kessle, Myrdal 1983). Another Swedish communist, Karl Staf, had arrived in the summer of 1960 to work for the newly launched Swedish edition of the propaganda magazine *China Pictorial*. Staf had previously served for ten years as *Ny Dag*'s Moscow correspondent and had once been Myrdal's editor on the newspaper's night desk in Stockholm.

Also present in Beijing was the writer Sven Lindqvist, accompanied by his wife, Cecilia. Both initially studied Chinese at Peking University. Later, Sven took a post at the Swedish embassy as translator and interpreter—though under the more dignified title of “cultural attaché.” The small Swedish community of communists and sympathisers in Beijing was, relative to Sweden's size, unusually large. Källberg, Leijon, and Staf were all key party members. Vivi and Jan Ingvar Löfstedt, who were teaching Swedish at the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages (*Beijing Waiguoyu Xueyuan* 北京外國語學院), had arrived before Myrdal who knew Vivi from earlier youth-communist activities.

Sven and Cecilia Lindqvist were something of an exception within this Swedish enclave. Though socialists, they were not members of the Communist Party of Sweden (SKP), and were therefore not briefed by the Chinese on political matters (Myrdal 2008). Myrdal found it difficult to relate to his more polished compatriot. “He is younger,” Myrdal wrote, “and belongs to the well-groomed, smooth-faced academic types with their thin blond Jesus beards (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 19 April 1962, JMA).” Myrdal resented much about Lindqvist: not only did he enjoy a steady income and a comfortable position, but he was also employed by the Swedish Foreign Service, just as Myrdal's own mother had been in India. “I have looked more closely at Lindqvist. He is so happy. He earns so well and mingles with fine people. We cannot talk to him. He understands no allusions, no irony. He is one of those unreliable fellows who speaks well of everyone,” he wrote home to his mother (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 21 May 1962, JMA). “He speaks Chinese passably,” Myrdal reported bitterly, “but works at the embassy and is not allowed to speak with people (to Folke from Jan, 30 July 1962, JMA).”

Sven and Cecilia had studied Chinese already in Sweden and continued their studies in Beijing. Myrdal himself never attempted to learn the language. “We considered studying Chinese,” he later wrote, “but decided against it. It would take terribly long before one reached a usable level, and besides, the languages and dialects differ so much (to Folke from Jan, 30 July 1962, JMA).”

Rumours, Lies, Silences

That the world remained largely unaware of the catastrophic famine death unleashed by the Great Leap Forward was due to the hermetic isolation of the People's Republic—much like that of present-day North Korea. The few independent journalists in China had no access whatsoever to affected villages or rural populations. Those allowed into the young People's Republic were confined to Beijing and could not expect travel permits to places beyond the four designated showcase cities: Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Other permits were issued only to trusted sympathisers, like Myrdal.

Myrdal himself described the situation in a letter to party comrade Folke Eriksson. Even compared to the Soviet Union, he wrote, there were “very few foreign journalists in China. A handful from the Eastern bloc, three left-wingers from the West, one from Reuters, one from AFP, and one from Tanjug (to Folke from Jan, 30 July 1962, JMA).” He mentioned social democratic *Stockholms-Tidningen's* correspondent Håkan Hedberg, who had been based in Beijing a few years earlier: “He sat at the foreigners' hotel here and was treated as if he were air (bad air) by the Chinese and developed a foreigner's paranoia.” Journalistic work in China is extremely difficult, Myrdal concluded (to Folke from Jan, 30 July 1962, JMA).

Few foreign reporters even made it through the first needle's eye of obtaining a visa to China. The American Edgar Snow had provided one of the Chinese Communist Party's greatest propaganda coups with his 1937 book *Red Star over China*, which managed to create an image of the communist guerrillas in Yan'an as foremost agrarian reformers and not part of any world communist threat. Yet despite his service to their cause, Snow was repeatedly denied re-entry after 1949. Only in 1960, when rumours of famine began circulating internationally, did the Chinese once again seek him out. But even then, the authorities were wary. In internal reports, they speculated that Snow's motives were “first, to win fame and fortune by writing a book; second, to carry out strategic espionage (Lovell 2015).”

The Chinese Foreign Ministry thus laid down a strategy for Snow's 1960 visit: “In hosting him, we should be superficially friendly...On the surface we should seem relaxed; inside, we must be tense, to increase our vigilance. We should intensify our control of his activities (Lovell 2015).”

The Chinese officials continue to describe to those involved who will guide, lead and supervise Snow during the visit that: As regards his interview and writing requests: “We should satisfy them according to our needs: we will let him see some of the things that we allow him to see, to bring him to understand a few things that we have prepared for him to understand (Lovell 2015).”

The main goal, they specified, was to “propagate the dazzling achievements of socialist construction in every area and the great victory of the General Line, the Great Leap Forward,

and the people's communes (Lovell 2015).” There is little reason to believe that Myrdal's treatment differed in substance from Snow's.

From much of the literature about the famine it seems China had managed to dupe the world about the severity of the situation. So what did the Swedes living in China experience of the deadly tragedy played out in the countryside? Nothing directly of course since they were not allowed to go there and find out for themselves. But, according to Karl Staf, who was then working for *China Pictorial*, rumours of “hunger marches” began circulating in spring 1962, just as Myrdal arrived (Staf, 1973). Authorities had secretly expelled an estimated twenty million peasants who had fled to the cities in desperation. Staf later recalled seeing, near railway junctions, “columns upon columns of emaciated, apathetic men and women carrying their few belongings in small bundles (Staf 1973).”

Cecilia Lindqvist recorded similar impressions in her private diary. Soldiers armed with submachine guns patrolled railway and bus stations, preventing rural refugees from entering the cities. From her classroom window she could see students climbing trees “to pick the newly sprouted leaves and eat them as delicacies (Lindqvist 2015, 5).” When she protested that they were damaging the trees, her teacher replied simply: “There is famine in the country. Since last autumn, none of us have had any fresh vegetables (Lindqvist 2015, 6).” The foreign students, like herself, were given vitamin-B injections to prevent their hair from falling out.

Myrdal, of course, heard such stories but dismissed them as the “miserable gossip” of prejudiced Westerners. He refused to take sides in what he perceived was mainly a Sino-Soviet dispute: “I will not get involved in this,” he wrote. “And damn me if I admit that one must be either one or the other (Jan to Urban Karlsson, 3 maj 1962, JMA).” The Chinese “friends,” he reported, had not raised the subject of famine but assured him that they would be happy to give an “explanatory discussion” if he had any questions (Jan to Urban Karlsson, 3 maj 1962, JMA). Three weeks later, he received such a briefing and summarised it in a four-page letter to his party leaders back in Stockholm (Jan to “kamrat”, ND, 1962, JMA).

For four hours, the Chinese cadres had explained the economic situation in what Myrdal considered a “completely open and honest” conversation (Jan to “kamrat”, 1962, JMA). They claimed that the introduction of communal kitchens—the so-called “free meals”—should be seen in the light of China's “millennia of peasant hunger.” In 1958, they told Myrdal, “hundreds of millions of peasants had moved forward with a single thousand-year-old wish in mind,” making it politically impossible to refuse them (Jan to “kamrat”, ND, 1962, JMA). “It was the peasants themselves,” they concluded, “who decided this.” Myrdal accepted the explanation and repeated it faithfully in his reports home.

This all placed him in a difficult position. His sympathies lay with the poor of the Third World, yet he was also a member of a Moscow-aligned communist party. The Soviet Union had furthermore always treated him well and rewarded him generously. “You know how it is

when loyalties are divided,” he wrote to his Soviet friend Pavel Toper, “I try to keep a clear head (To Pavel from Jan, 23 May 1962, JMA).” He detected racism in Western criticism of China and stopped associating with other foreigners in Beijing. “Their behavior is childish,” he told Toper. “Never will I, laughing, tell that the Chinese have a new famine (To Pavel from Jan, 30 Juni 1962, JMA).”

In his letters home to Sweden and also to his Eastern European contacts, Myrdal was uniformly optimistic. “Hard rationing and they work like hell. Western reports are exaggerated,” he wrote to one communist friend (to Knut from Jan, 23 July 1962, JMA). “Corruption, flies, and rats are gone”, Myrdal reported to another (Jan to Nils, 25 May 1962, JMA). He insisted in the letters that the Chinese had faced floods and droughts but had managed through “strict rationing and solid planning (to Knut from Jan, 23 July 1962, JMA).” “It is not as bad as the Western press claims,” he reassured his politically influential parents. “China is hungry, but not starving (to Alva and Gunnar from Jan, 22 July 1962, JMA).”

Myrdal maintained that he never believed in rapid progress and that difficulties were natural in a vast country like China. His old acquaintance and now minder Wu Tong told him he was glad Myrdal had come “during our hardest time since Liberation (to Pavel from Jan, 22 July 1962, JMA).” Wu wanted him to witness “how difficult, yet how successful, the rebuilding was.” “The time in China has taught me much,” Myrdal reflected. “Above all, nothing is more harmful than cheap optimism. If one begins instead with a tragic awareness and compassion within a long-term optimism, even the great difficulties appear natural (to Pavel from Jan, 22 July 1962, JMA).”

Wu Tong proved a diligent minder. His task, beyond concealing the famine, was obviously to convert visitors from Moscow-aligned parties like Myrdal. In autumn 1962, in the small frontier town of Mangshi in Yunnan, Myrdal recalled a late-night argument with Wu: “Until then,” he wrote, “I had maintained that the Soviet Union was still socialist at its core (Myrdal 1964). But Wu argued that the West, including the Soviet Union, instilled in us a false superiority, teaching us to believe that Western civilization was always higher, and China, or Asia or Africa, always lower.”

By the end of his year in China, Myrdal was fully won over. He showed little understanding of the fact he was simply a brick in a rhetorical dispute between two sides. What most impressed him, he later wrote, was the “honesty and firmness” of the Chinese (to Alva and Gunnar from Jan, 22 July 1962, JMA). The Chinese, he now believed, possessed “self-respect and national consciousness” and had achieved all their transformations “without the harsh (shooting) Soviet methods of the 1930s.” In Myrdal’s view, there was no corruption in China; citizens lived simply and equally, and “democratic possibilities” existed (to Alva and Gunnar from Jan, 22 July 1962, JMA). “I am often at home with Chinese families sharing their turnips,” he added; an embellishment at best.

The Village of Liulin

The first assignment given to the Myrdal couple outside Beijing took them to Inner Mongolia. Shortly after their return, it was decided that they would be allowed to remain for a longer period to study a village named Liulin, “carved into the yellow loess hills west of the Nan River, just south of Yan’an in northern Shaanxi.” Several pages in Edgar Snow’s 1960 book had been devoted to his own visit to this very village; a fact of which Jan Myrdal was fully aware. Even so, the experience at Liu Lin would prove transformative.

The journey to Liulin went by way of the ancient imperial city of Xi’an. After several days there, they flew on to Yan’an, and from there took a short car ride to the village. It is often said that Myrdal spent a full month in Liulin; a claim of symbolic importance, since he was sharply critical of Western writers who, as he put it, “fly to some place in Asia and stay there at most three weeks, then write as if they truly knew the place.” Yet, if one follows Gun Kessle’s travel journal, the couple arrived in Liulin on 20 August and left again on 9 September (Gun’s travel diary from 1962, JMA). Including both arrival and departure dates, their stay lasted only nineteen days. Not a full month, as Myrdal himself always claimed and as nearly every later writer on *Report from a Chinese Village* or on Myrdal has repeated. Not even three weeks.

The Chinese People’s Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries initially wanted the couple to conduct their interviews in Liulin during the day and return each night to stay at a hotel in Yan’an. But the Party Secretary of the commune, Li Youhua (李有華), proved hospitable. He insisted that his village could accommodate the two foreigners as well as any hotel in town (email correspondence with Myrdal). When Myrdal added that he also wished to work alongside the peasants, however, the village headman did not reply. He merely looked Myrdal up and down, then let his gaze wander across the steep hills where the village’s parched fields lay under the blazing sun (Myrdal in Gäst hos Hagge, SVT, 21 March 1986). Myrdal would never join in any harvesting work; neither in Liulin nor anywhere else during his many journeys through the socialist world.

Here, among North Chinese men and women, weather-beaten, austere, yet warmly welcoming, the Myrdals settled down to study rural conditions and gather material for a book. Gun wrote to their friend Sture Källberg in Beijing that they had been lodged in the village’s finest dwelling: one of the distinctive cave houses carved directly into the loess hillsides. “It is both functional and beautiful,” she wrote, “an upper-class cave with room for ten people on the great heated kang bed (Källberg 1964).” The Swedes were even given their own cook—an advantage, Gun noted, since his dishes were not as greasy as those they had been served in Beijing. Each morning breakfast was brought to them, including coffee which was a costly rarity that at the time could only be obtained at certain luxury hotels in China. During their

stay, they also made brief trips into nearby Yan'an to stay at a hotel, shop, wash, shower, and go to the cinema (Gun's travel diary 1962, JMA).

While Myrdal conducted interviews assisted by the female interpreters, Pei Kuangli and Jing Qi, Gun wandered the village with her camera. "Everything is perfect here," she wrote in a letter home to her world-famous parents-in-law, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal. Jan was hard at work, she explained, and had "a young girl who is as good and devoted as Gunnar's secretary (Gun to Alva and Gunnar, September 1962, JMA)." She admitted she had not been happy in Beijing, where the leadership "had not seemed very successful." But "here in the village everyone is cheerful, because everything is going well this year."

Myrdal sat with his interpreters and recorded the peasants' stories. They spoke willingly, at length, and in detail. At times someone began to cry, but Myrdal pressed on with his questions. The tales were harrowing, heroic, and uplifting all at once and he felt he now possessed entirely unique material. "This history has not been told before," he declared. In the evenings, he and Gun walked along the river, discussing how to structure the book he was to write about Liulin.

Myrdal had to fight, however, to obtain the commune's financial records and statistics. Throughout the stay he pressed for them, to no avail. As their departure drew near, the tougher Gun Kessle intervened. She bluntly threatened interpreter Pei Kuangli: unless the records were provided, Jan would write in his book that the figures had been withheld, perhaps even that no proper records existed (Gun's travel diary 1962, JMA). Pei looked shocked, Gun later recalled, but the next day, which was their last in Liulin, Myrdal was finally allowed to interview the commune secretary, and the ledgers were produced. He was satisfied. That evening, a surprise farewell banquet was arranged for the two Swedes. A goat was slaughtered in their honour. The following day came the final parting, and in Communist fashion Gun was asked to offer her "criticism" of what had not gone well during their visit (Gun's travel diary 1962, JMA).

Back in Beijing, Myrdal described what he had just experienced as something almost religious. "Something tremendous is happening here in China. It is the victory of socialism. Nothing can shake my faith in the Chinese Revolution now," he told Urban Karlsson, then the financial officer of the Swedish Communist Party (Jan to Urban Karlsson, 21 September 1962). He also replied to a letter from C. H. Hermansson, soon to become chairman of the same party, writing tersely: "Have been among the peasants. Am happy (Myrdal 1987, 227)."

Myrdal was now filled with confidence. Among the peasants, he believed, democracy was working. The peasants themselves had made the revolution. They were not lethargic, corrupt Party bureaucrats, but the real thing. He was convinced he had learned everything: "the kilos, hectares, yields, and who was executed by whom (Myrdal 1987, 227)." Myrdal was deeply inspired by what he called "the hard popular control in China, the totally de-bureaucratized

base,” which, in his view, concentrated real power in the hands of the people (Jan to Urban, 21 September 1962).

The Report Book

Soon after returning from northern Shaanxi, Myrdal wrote to his parents, Alva and Gunnar, that he possessed absolutely unique material. “No truly objective book about a Chinese village has yet been written,” he declared. “Now I have this village completely—all life stories, all aspects, everything. I’ll work like an animal to finish the manuscript by Christmas. Present it as it is, a report (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 19 September 1962, JMA).” He planned an introduction explaining how he had worked and what questions he had asked, but otherwise intended to refrain from commentary: “Let the peasants speak for themselves, with all their contradictions and differences.” Once published, he insisted, “no serious writer on China will be able to discuss Chinese agriculture without citing it.” It was essential, he urged, that the report be made available on the world market: “Russian/Polish and German editions are already arranged. But English etc. NECESSARY (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 19 September 1962, JMA).”

Together with Gun, Myrdal began drafting the manuscript in a wintry September Beijing. The air was dry, the yellow loess dust already sweeping into the low-built capital. The Myrdal couple had insisted they pay for everything themselves. Since the hotels were heavily overpriced to foreigners they were staying, against the authorities wishes, in the five-room flat of their friend Sture Källberg in the diplomatic quarter, and it was bitterly cold. The Great Leap Forward had wrecked the economy, and even coal was rationed. Gun worked in her embroidered Afghan coat, its long white dog hairs showing around the sleeves and collar. Jan wore a wool sweater and a knitted cap that could be pulled down over his ears. His large moustache provided some warmth. Still suffering from amoebic dysentery contracted in India, he could write only ten minutes at a time before needing to lie down and rest. But when he wrote, his right index finger hammered the typewriter keys like a machine gun. In his left hand, a cigarette always burned. On their travel gramophone, a Jimmy Rodgers record—the “yodeling brakeman”—played on repeat (Ekdahl and Floren 1973). As the pages accumulated, Myrdal grew paranoid that someone might steal his precious manuscript. He carried it with him everywhere, tucked inside his jacket (Hasse from Jan, 11 December 1962, JMA).

On 1 October 1962, at the National Day reception where select foreigners were invited to meet the leadership, Myrdal was drawn aside for a brief audience with Mao Zedong. He

immediately began to speak about Liulin. Mao, however, teased him for having chosen so poor and backward a village as his subject (Myrdal 1965, xxxii):

- Myrdal:** I have just returned from a trip to the Yan'an area.
- Mao:** That is a very poor, backward, and undeveloped part of the country.
- Myrdal:** I stayed in a village... wanted to study the changes in the countryside...
- Mao:** Then it was clearly a bad idea to go to Yan'an. Yan'an is only poor and backward. Not a good idea to stay in a village there.
- Myrdal:** But the area has a proud tradition—revolution, the war—I mean, in fact, the village is where it all began.
- Mao (interrupting, laughing):** Traditions—(laughter). Traditions—(laughter).

Among the villages offered to him, Myrdal had chosen one that had earlier served as a revolutionary model. Mao himself had first visited it in the 1930s, and, as noted, Edgar Snow had stayed in the same village just two years before.

In their study *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*, David E. Apter and Tony Saich show how the CCP used language, myth, and texts to recast Yan'an from a military base into a moral centre, constructing a "revolutionary simulacrum" that generated symbolic capital and underwrote the party's legitimacy. The villagers of Liulin, at the outskirts of Yan'an, had early been under the influence of this discursive regime and were able to reproduce convincingly their lived experiences in a way that fitted the morality of Mao's revolutionary discourse. On the other hand, here we also have the subaltern speaking, in the language of Maoism and Party-speak certainly, but also able to express things that had been before unspeakable or even unthinkable, and to appear to themselves, and others, like Myrdal, as real political subjects.

A photograph was taken of the brief encounter: Mao smiling slyly, Liu Shaoqi demure, Myrdal standing stiffly in a thick tweed jacket, slightly unkempt. Though broad-shouldered and tall, he still looked like a schoolboy beside the old guerrilla leader.

As he approached a final draft, the writing became increasingly difficult. He rewrote the book three times and at one point doubted he would finish it at all. A rash broke out on his hands from the strain—what he later called a "typewriter allergy (to Hasse from Myrdal, 11 December 1962, JMA)."

Yet the intellectual groundwork laid through his years of failure in India now bore fruit. "Two great books on India exploded—one in 1960 and one in 1962," he recalled. "Three years of

work yielded only a few articles and some pages in *Samtida Bekännelser*. But precisely because I failed so thoroughly and so often in India, I was now able to find the perfect form to render what would become my successful village book (Myrdal, 1983, 158)."

In a lucid and perceptive foreword anticipating the criticism he suspected would follow, Myrdal explained his motives and influences (Myrdal 1967, 7, 8). The method he had chosen "to depict an Asian reality for a 'Western' audience," he wrote, was the outcome of his experiences in Afghanistan and India. Literature about contemporary Asia, he argued, revealed "a terrifying gulf between reality and the described reality (Myrdal 1967, 7, 8)." The reports and portrayals of India had been inadequate—speculative, impressionistic—and had prevented him from drawing sound conclusions. Time and again he had been forced to set his Indian manuscript aside.

This reasoning echoed that of his father, Gunnar Myrdal, in *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*. That vast study, too, had stalled in India in the late 1950s, when Gunnar realised that the conceptual tools used by Western sociologists, politicians, and economists to describe development in the Third World were entirely unsuitable. They had been devised to explain a European reality rooted in utterly different historical foundations. At his father's direct urging, Jan added a note to the preface: Gunnar had told him that "the introduction must be as absolutely scientifically cautious and skeptical as possible." Jan had intended to reserve such discussion for his next book, *Chinese Journey*, but now saw he must hint at it already. "Put it in!", he instructed his publisher, Lasse Bergström (Jan to Lasse, 29 mars 1963, JMA).

In the introduction, Myrdal acknowledged his intellectual debt to both his parents. His perspective, he added, had also been shaped by long discussions in India with his friend Bertil Mattsson (Myrdal 1967, 7–8). He saw Kusum Nair's *Blossoms in the Dust: The Human Element in Indian Development*, published in 1962 with a foreword by Gunnar Myrdal, as written in the same spirit as his own *Report from a Chinese Village*.

The final manuscript, nearly four hundred pages long, was rich in people, politics, everyday life, revolution, history, and economics. It began with a portrait of northern Shaanxi's harsh natural conditions and its effect on the people: "The climate is severe, every third year brings crop failure, and the people are known to be tenacious, hardworking, and rebellious (Myrdal 1967, 16)." Through a sequence of autobiographical monologues ranging from two to fifteen pages each, the villagers told their life stories. Myrdal described the village's location, landscape, climate, dwellings, and population, and from the peasants' accounts reconstructed the "liberation" and how the revolution unfolded. He then portrayed daily life and the organisation of work as shaped by the Great Leap Forward's collectivisation. The village appeared through its production units: the Liulin work teams and the Liulin production brigade. There was an entire chapter on women, another on education, and a section on

“strangers”: urban middle- and upper-class people sent to Liulin to “transform themselves through manual labor and attain the working people’s outlook on life.”

The book’s strength lay in its portraits of individuals: short biographical sketches of agricultural labourers in one of China’s tens of thousands of small villages. Pai Yu-teh, an old *ganbu* (cadre), sixty years old and now director of the Yan’an Water Conservancy Bureau, recounted his own experiences of the revolutionary years, the civil war, and the heroic guerrilla struggle that, with meagre means but with the peasants’ wholehearted support, crushed the tyranny of the landlords (Myrdal 1967, 52–65). Tung Yang-chen, “martyr’s son, KMT deserter, aged 35,” described a working day that began at 4:30 a.m. and ended only at eight in the evening (Myrdal 1967, 86–93). The labour was hard, but, he said, the Party’s collectivisation policies brought ever greater productivity and prosperity. Feng Chang-ye, head of Liulin’s production brigade, explained how the people’s communes had been established in 1958, at the onset of the Great Leap Forward, and how the cooperative had been transformed into a brigade within the “The East Is Red” commune.

Throughout the book—even in its themed sections—it is the villagers who speak, while Myrdal’s own voice is largely absent, appearing only in the foreword. Yet, as he later acknowledged, he himself provided the style by reconstructing the interviews from terse notes, primarily to ensure factual accuracy. The result is a work that reads as oral history. Myrdal’s material for this was particularly compelling: North Chinese farmers recount lives marked by severe hardship in pre-revolutionary China, including beatings, humiliation, starvation, and loss. While the collectivisations beginning around 1956 are narrated in a largely passive voice, as processes that befall the village, the earlier agrarian reforms are presented with greater nuance, depicting debates among villagers and arguments both for and against, even if the narrative ultimately frames the outcomes as correct and beneficial.

Some of the most compelling passages described the historical conflicts with the regular Kuomintang troops and the rise of the Red Peasant Army from nothing to a force to be reckoned with. Mau Ke-yeh gave the following account (Myrdal 1967, 67–68):

“In 1935 an army came that called itself the Red Army. It was out in the countryside. In the towns sat the KMT. The Red Army made propaganda and said: ‘The Red Army is good; we will divide all the land and you will no longer pay rent or taxes to anyone.’ That was in February 1935 when I first met Communists. They were Li Wen-yuan and Wang Hsiao-kang, both in their thirties. I met them again later, but whether they are alive or dead I do not know. They came to us one night and said: ‘We are propagandists from the Red Army, and now you shall make revolution.’ We answered: ‘Yes, we shall,’ but we did nothing—we did not believe they had much power.

But in March they came again. They called us all to an outdoor meeting and said we must form a Poor Peasants’ Association and elect a chairman. The others pointed at

me and said: 'He is calm and sensible, never hasty.' So I was elected chairman. Li Wen-yuan and Wang Hsiao-kang gave speeches and said: 'Why do you pay taxes to the KMT?' We replied that we were afraid; that the KMT had real soldiers. But they said: 'Just stop paying taxes, and don't be afraid; the Red Army has its ways of dealing with the KMT.' Their headquarters was in Luochuan then, and the Red Army was led by Liu Chih-tan. At first people were afraid and said the Communists were killers, but when they came, they were ordinary people and said: 'Divide the land and fight the landlords and tyrants.' They held many meetings, and we would shout: 'Yes! Yes!' But in truth we did not believe them. Then in April 1935 the Red Army defeated a counterrevolutionary landlord militia ten *li* from here and killed the leader of the Southern District, Mu Hsin-tsai, taking a great haul. After that they came more often and killed other counterrevolutionaries. Then the people saw that the Red Army had power, and we stopped bringing taxes and goods into town. Instead we organized ourselves into guerrilla units—eight to ten men in each."

The book's distinctive method lay in how Myrdal allowed the villagers to recount their own lives, the revolution, and the transformation of the countryside. The *Report* could thus be read as a form of social anthropology, where China's previously silenced subalterns spoke for the first time to Western readers.

Myrdal was, at heart, a literary writer. He had also worked as a journalist and written a travel book, but now declared that travel writing was false and unscientific. With this *Report*, he sought something different—to be as objective as possible. As Agneta Edman has suggested in her study of Swedish travel writings, the criticism of Artur Lundkvist's China book as the work of "a parrot of the Chinese regime" likely spurred Myrdal's drive toward objectivity (Edman 2017, 196). Yet, as he explained in a letter to his parents, he did not see the *Report* as a departure from his fiction. "There is," he wrote, "no difference between lyric poetry, novels, and an absolutely sociological, field-study-like, if you will, representation of reality (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 19 September 1962, JMA)."

For a Communist regime such as China's, however, talented literary writers, just as in the early Soviet Union (Kenez 1985), were precisely those best suited to render the communist propaganda persuasive and credible.

Immediate Reception and Impact

Jan Myrdal's report ultimately became highly influential on the international stage. The Australian historian Colin Mackerras explains how Myrdal's report had a decisive impact on him and his entire generation, arguing that it was Jan Myrdal who revealed "the human face"

of Chinese communism (Mackerras 1991). After Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin's terror and mass killings, the Soviet model had been discredited. China, thanks in part to Myrdal's account, thus appeared as the saviour of the communist idea itself.

The book's success extended well beyond the community of China specialists, scholars, and journalists. It appeared at the coldest moment of the Cold War, in a deeply anti-communist Western world. Few could yet foresee the emergence of a radical counterculture, but *Report from a Chinese Village*—published in French in 1964, in Italian and American editions in 1965, and in German in 1967—arrived at precisely the right moment. It became one of the sparks that ignited the radicalism of the Third World movement in the West.

The reception in Paris, then the intellectual capital of the Western world, exceeded all of Myrdal's expectations. After visiting publishers and newspapers there in 1964, he could report to friends in East Germany that his book was regarded as "SCIENCE," praised not only for its empirical value but also for its literary and epic qualities (Jan to Willi and Maj Bredel, 14 October 1964, JMA). Myrdal was taken to be both a sociologist and an anthropologist and was even confused with his world-famous father, Gunnar Myrdal.

The English edition appeared in 1965 through Pantheon Books, whose back cover featured an excerpt from a review by *New York Times* journalist Harrison Salisbury. Salisbury compared Myrdal's report to three other works that had rendered new and complex societies intelligible to a puzzled and often hostile public: Alexis de Tocqueville on the United States, George Kennan on the Soviet Union, and Gunnar Myrdal's study of the political economy of American racism. Now, he wrote, Jan Myrdal had done the same for contemporary China—"making it credible and alive for the first time." "Just like his father before him," Salisbury concluded, "Jan Myrdal has created a classic of the social sciences."

Pantheon editor André Schiffrin was so exhilarated by the success of Myrdal's English edition that he launched an entire book series on village studies. The *Pantheon Village Series* appeared in collaboration with prominent publishers in England, West Germany, Italy, France, Sweden, and Denmark. The influence of Myrdal's report was therefore extensive. The acclaimed American writer Studs Terkel later credited *Report from a Chinese Village* with teaching him the oral history techniques that he would use so effectively in his own studies of the American working class.

Following the success of the English edition Myrdal was invited to a major China conference in Chicago in 1966; a three-day event held across several cities. Among the presenters were leading Sinologists such as Roderick MacFarquhar, Ezra Vogel, and C. P. Fitzgerald. After the conference, Myrdal embarked on a twenty-two-day lecture tour across the United States, holding seminars at various universities and appearing on both radio and television.

Conclusion

When Jan Myrdal travelled to China in 1962, he did so at a time marked by both personal and political reorientation. It was during the intensification of the schism with the Soviet Union. Chinese top leaders urged Sweden's Communist Party to send its members to work and live in China. In this way they could see for themselves that things were not so bad as Moscow claimed. Myrdal was a perfect choice for a long-time guest. Not only had the Chinese had first hand and close contact with him earlier and could trust him. His parents were furthermore incredibly important people both in Sweden and internationally. To get such a promising individual as Jan Myrdal on their side would be elite capture at its best.

Jan Myrdal's own journey expressed a growing desire to find a social system capable of reconciling equality with modernity—a system that could appear as an alternative to both Western capitalism and Soviet bureaucracy. In Myrdal's eyes, China offered precisely this "third way." Yet his journey took place under conditions that made independent observation effectively impossible. All his contacts with the People's Republic were mediated through organisations such as the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, whose mission was to shape foreign opinion. His itinerary was strictly planned, and those he met were carefully selected to convey the narrative the regime wished to project.

At the time of Myrdal's visit, China was in the midst of a profound crisis. The Great Leap Forward had resulted in one of the worst famines in human history. An event that could neither be mentioned publicly nor hinted at before foreign guests. Simultaneously, the Party leadership launched an intense campaign to restore an image of progress and national unity. The political and social situation was thus defined by a paradox: a society in ruins, striving by all possible means to appear successful.

Within this context, Myrdal conducted the interviews that would form the basis of the *Report from a Chinese Village*. Myrdal interpreted the conversations as authentic voices of the people, which they to a certain degree were, but they were also part of a pedagogical performance designed to confirm the official narrative of the new China as egalitarian and harmonious. His text, while based on real testimonies, drew on stories that the peasants had long since learned to adapt to the dominant discourse about liberation and progress under the Communist Party.

The absence of any reference to the famine in *Report from a Chinese Village* should not be understood as a mere oversight by an individual author but as the result of an interplay between censorship, selective perception, and ideological loyalty. Myrdal wished to see a China realising the liberation of the socialist man. Anything that contradicted this vision was dismissed as either temporary hardship or Western prejudice. His hosts, in turn, understood that a sympathetic foreign observer would be especially receptive to the version of reality they

had crafted. Silence about the famine thus became part of the tacit contract that made both propaganda and Myrdal's narrative possible.

Myrdal misunderstood, and misrepresented, what he saw in Beijing as evidence that suffering had been eradicated in China. During his long stays in New Delhi and Kabul, he had witnessed immense misery; beggars, even children, dying in the streets during winter or outbreaks of disease. Beijing appeared entirely different: there were no beggars, and the city was clean. Having lived so long in Asia and being familiar with conditions in other communist states such as the Soviet Union, he should have recognised that the difference lay in the regime's methods of social control. Beijing was guarded against its poor by armed soldiers stationed at rail junctions and roads; one needed a Beijing residence permit to enter the city, without which one was sent back to die in the countryside. In Kabul or New Delhi, the rural poor could at least migrate to the city slums to survive through work or begging. Western readers, lacking Myrdal's frame of reference, naturally overlooked such circumstances.

After the success of *Report from a Chinese Village*, Myrdal returned to Liulin repeatedly and wrote several subsequent books about the village. During some of his last visits in China, as from others reporting from the village it becomes evident that not everything had been as well as Myrdal reported in his first report.

As a privileged "friend of China," Myrdal was also granted, earlier than any other Western writer, permission to travel through Xinjiang to write a book about the Chinese Silk Road, a project in which he denounced the Soviet Union as imperialist, echoing Beijing's line. Myrdal was frequently featured in *People's Daily* and on Chinese state television. In 1975, for example, he appeared in a televised discussion with Tan Zhenlin (譚震林), one of those most responsible for the mass of deaths caused by the Great Leap Forward. As a trusted friend of China, he was also invited in 1978 to Cambodia, where he conducted a long television interview with Pol Pot.

Myrdal never acknowledged the famine for the horrendous catastrophe it was, even after the truth began to emerge in the mid-1980s. He instead distrusted Deng Xiaoping's capitalist reforms, seeing them as the cause of the 1989 student protests. Myrdal initially condemned the Tiananmen Square massacre as an act committed by a Communist Party that had, in his words, become "fascist." Later, however, after receiving an honorary doctorate in China in 1993, he changed his position and said he understood that using force had been necessary at the time. Myrdal remained a Maoist and supporter of Chinese nationalism until his death. The year before he passed away, China's controversial "wolf warrior" ambassador, Gui Congyou (桂從友), travelled all the way to Myrdal's home in Varberg to pay him a final visit.

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EACS AT FIFTY: RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conversations and Conflicts: The Encounter of PRC Scholars with European Sinologists in the 1950s

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Drawing on numerous primary sources such as memoirs, diaries, reports, and correspondence in multiple languages, this paper aims to offer a critical analysis of the encounters between PRC scholars and their Western counterparts at the two Conferences of Young Sinologues of Western Europe held in Leiden and Paris in 1955 and 1956. These conferences constituted the first and only contact between PRC scholars and European sinologists during the early Cold War era, between 1949 and 1978. This study situates this episode within the broader history of limited Sino-foreign academic exchange during the 1950s, a period when ideological divisions and diplomatic isolation constrained contact. Chinese delegates promoted Marxist historiography and presented new archaeological discoveries, while also navigating ideological tensions with Taiwanese, Hong Kong, and Western scholars. Social historians of China from Europe and America engaged in conversations with Chinese Marxist historians, focusing on the nature of Chinese society and the periodization of Chinese history. This study contextualizes the political, intellectual, ideological, and academic dimensions of this encounter. Against the background of the onset of the Cold War, the rise of the Chinese Communist revolution, and the aftermath of the Korean War, these early exchanges laid the groundwork for the globalization of Chinese studies and the formation of an international Sinological community. This study provides a vivid case for understanding the richness and complexity of the interplay between politics and academia in Cold War history.

本文基於回憶錄、日記、報告及多語種書信等一手史料，對 1955 年與 1956 年萊頓和巴黎兩屆“西歐青年漢學家會議”上中國大陸學者與歐洲漢學家的首次接觸進行多重解讀。在冷戰格局下，這兩次會議是中方與西方漢學界唯一的正式交流渠道。文章將其置於 1950 年代中外學術交流受限的歷史脈絡中，探討中方代表如何在推廣馬克思主義史學、介紹考古新發現的同時，周旋於與臺灣、香港及西方學者之間的意識形態分歧；並梳理歐美社會史學者與中國馬克思主義史家就中國社會性質與歷史分期展開的對話。研究從政治、學術與思想多重維度揭示此次交鋒的複雜性，指出其為漢學研究的國際化與全球漢學共同體的形成奠定基礎，也為理解冷戰時期政治與學術的互動提供了典型個案。

Keywords: European Sinology, Cold War, Marxist Historiography, Historical periodization, globalization

關鍵詞： 漢學，冷戰，馬克思主義史學，歷史分期，全球化

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Introduction

Nowadays, scholars of China from across the globe can easily convene for academic conferences and engage in intellectual exchange regardless of their ideological, political, religious, ethnic, or gender backgrounds. This openness resulted first from the “Open Door” policy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and, subsequently, from the end of the Cold War. When attending the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) or the biennial conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS), it is common to encounter scholars representing nearly every continent. Such collaboration should not be taken for granted given the constraints of the Cold War era. Interestingly, between 1949 and 1979, there were only three occasions when American or European Sinologists and scholars from the PRC attended the same conference: the VIII Conference of Junior Sinologues in Leiden (1955), the East Asian Studies Conference in Leipzig (1955),¹ and the IX Conference of Junior Sinologues in Paris (1956).²

Several seismic historical events, particularly the founding of the PRC, the Korean War, the death of Joseph Stalin, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and a series of political campaigns within China, profoundly shaped the development of Chinese historiography during the 1950s. In the early stages of the Cold War, although the Korean War and various decolonisation movements drew sharp boundaries between the Eastern and Western blocs, a unique space for confrontation, conflict, and conversation persisted. This was facilitated by the network established through the annual conferences of Junior Sinologues in Western Europe.

The involvement of PRC scholars in this network during 1955 and 1956 represents a singular exception in the period spanning from 1949 to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. The VIII Conference of Junior Sinologues in Leiden, where the PRC was represented by Jian Bozan 翦伯贊 (1898–1968) and Zhou Yiliang 周一良 (1913–2001), marked the first direct contact between historians from the PRC and the West since the onset of the Cold War. This momentum continued into 1956, when the PRC sent a larger delegation of four scholars including Jian Bozan, Zhou Yiliang, Zhang Zhilian 張芝聯 (1918–2008), and Xia Nai 夏鼐 (1910–1985) to the IX Conference in Paris. In a significant move of cultural diplomacy, this delegation also organised an exhibit on Chinese archaeology, showcasing recent finds to the international scholarly community. The most striking feature of this conference was the debate on the periodisation of Chinese history; initiated by Chinese and French scholars, it immediately drew in China scholars from around the world. This debate

¹ This conference was organised by the Sinology Department of Leipzig University and mainly hosted Sinologists from the communist bloc, though some Sinologists from West Germany were also invited (Chen 2022, 39–58).

² For a historical survey of these events, see Chen 2024.

centered on a central theme remains a unique instance of such a discussion occurring on a global scale in the history of China Studies.

Over the past three decades, as the older generation of Sinologists who established or experienced the early history of European Sinology have left the stage, their memoirs, diaries, and personal communications have become accessible through publication or public archives. Numerous new materials have surfaced in both Europe and China. For example, Frederick W. Mote (2010), Wolfgang Franke (1995), and Zhou Yiliang (1999) all published memoirs, and Xia Nai's diary (2011) has also been released. These materials supplement one another, offering rich information regarding their participation in these conferences and the political and intellectual contexts in which they navigated the conversations and conflicts of the 1950s.

This paper aims to recover a lost chapter in the early history of contemporary European Sinology by documenting the brief yet significant contact between European Sinologists and PRC historians in 1955 and 1956.³ To reconstruct this brief but pivotal engagement, this study employs a multi-dimensional methodological approach. By triangulating official records with private narratives and public discourse, the research accounts for both the formal diplomatic objectives and the personal intellectual exchanges of the era. The “skeleton” of this study is built upon the proceedings of the VIII and IX Conferences of Junior Sinologues. In addition, this paper draws extensively on the memoirs, diaries, and personal letters of key participants, such as Frederick W. Mote, Wolfgang Franke, Zhou Yiliang, and Xia Nai. These private records reveal the “hidden transcript” of the conferences—the anxieties, political pressures, and genuine scholarly curiosities that the participants felt but could not always express in an official capacity. These documents provide the objective data of the meetings: the official list of attendees, the titles of papers presented, and the formal resolutions passed by the body. In the meantime, the external perception of these encounters is captured through journal articles and media reports from the 1950s. By analysing how these meetings were framed in both Western and Chinese media at the time, we can discern the role of “cultural diplomacy” and how these academic gatherings were interpreted within the broader geopolitical context of the early Cold War. In sum, by examining the historical background, process, and implications from political, cultural, and intellectual perspectives, I argue that these conferences in Western Europe witnessed the rise and fall of a short-lived global community for Chinese studies—a community whose construction was prompted by a complex confluence of political and intellectual factors.

³ Many recent works in Western languages on the history of European Sinology seem to skip this chapter. For example, a series of articles on national Sinology in Europe were published in *Journal of Chinese History* vol. 7, no. 2 in July 2023 (Idema 2023, 327–347; Barrett 2023, 349–373; Paternicò 2023, 375–408; Standaert 2023, 409–442; Ess 2023, 491–524; Will 2023, 525–574; Guleva 2023, 591–611).

Globalizing European Sinological Community

Before World War II, Europe boasted several prominent centers for Sinology, most notably Paris and Berlin, where numerous scholars were trained across various institutions, and even students from China and America also studied there. For example, during the 1920s and 1930s in Paris, Liu Fu 劉復, Wang Li 王力, and Edwin O. Reischauer took courses with Paul Pelliot, Marcel Granet and Henri Maspero. Meanwhile, in Berlin, Chinese students such as Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, Mao Zishui 毛子水, Fu Sinian 傅斯年, Jiang Fucong 蔣復璁, and Yao Congwu 姚從吾, along with Hungarian-born Etienne Balazs, studied under Otto Franke at the University of Berlin, later becoming leading historians. However, as Martin Kern documents, the war severely interrupted the development of European Sinology, particularly in Germany. This disruption led many Sinologists to migrate to Britain before eventually settling in the United States (Kern 1998, 507–529). After World War II, the European Sinology community underwent a period of reconstruction, centered largely around the annual Conference of Junior Sinologues, which launched in 1948. As the Cold War intensified, dividing Europe into Western and Eastern blocs, these conferences were initially restricted to scholars from Western Europe. By the 1950s, however, these gatherings began to include Sinologists from the Eastern bloc, eventually evolving into a global forum for scholars from around the world.

The genesis of the European Conferences of Junior Sinologues (ECJS) was rooted in the profound sense of isolation felt by scholars in the immediate aftermath of World War II (Franke 1999). In the summer of 1947, a small delegation of British Sinologues traveled to Leiden University, a historic bastion of Dutch Oriental studies. This meeting was not merely social; it was a recognition that the “ivory towers” of pre-war European academia were no longer sustainable. The war had disrupted communication, scattered library resources, and decimated the ranks of young researchers. The Dutch and British cohorts realised that without a structured network for the exchange of information, personnel, and rare texts, European Sinology risked falling behind the rapidly advancing American scholarship of China Studies.

This collaborative spirit culminated in the first meeting from January 6 to 12, 1948, at the University of Cambridge.⁴ This inaugural conference owed its success to the significant backing of senior British Sinologists, including Gustav Haloun (Cambridge), Walter Simon (SOAS), Lionel Giles (British Museum), and Homer H. Dubs (Oxford). While the conference spanned six days, its primary focus was networking and institutional observation rather than a heavy schedule of presentations. The “Junior Sinologues” participated primarily as observers and discussants since many of them had not yet completed their doctorates and

⁴ “Introductory Note,” *Proceedings of the Conference of Junior Sinologues held at Cambridge, London, and Oxford*, January 6th–12th, 1948.

were intensively working on their dissertations. This cohort included future luminaries of the Sinological field such as Anthony F. P. Hulsewé, Edwin Pulleyblank, Mary Wright, Jacques Gernet, Hans Bielenstein, and Piet van der Loon. Beyond the formal sessions, the attendees dedicated considerable time to visiting the Chinese book collections at Cambridge, Oxford, and SOAS. They also viewed a specialised exhibition of Dunhuang manuscripts at the British Museum. A key highlight occurred on January 9, when the young scholars shared and exchanged details regarding their current research projects, fostering a sense of collaboration that would define the post-war Sinological community.

The second Conference, held at Leiden University from April 8 to 14, 1949, represented a transformative moment for the Junior Sinologues as the event's focus shifted decisively toward the younger generation of scholars. While the inaugural Cambridge meeting had been dominated by senior figures, this Leiden conference saw doctoral candidates and early-career researchers like Mary Wright, Piet van der Loon, A.F.P. Hulsewé, and Edwin Pulleyblank taking centre stage to present their dissertation research. Organiser R. P. Kramers highlighted this evolution, noting that while the previous year was dedicated to institutional planning, this second conference was designed to showcase the tangible academic fruits of individual and collective labor. Despite the absence of several invited "giants" of the field, such as Paul Demiéville and Bernhard Karlgren, the conference successfully expanded its reach to dozens of participants from seven Western European universities, including the notable addition of Herbert Franke representing the University of Cologne.

A hallmark of this second conference was its experimental interdisciplinary approach, which sought to professionalise the field of Chinese studies by looking outward. The organisers invited specialists from the realms of Classical Studies, History, and Biblical Studies to deliver reports on their respective methodologies for textual criticism and documentary analysis,⁵ providing the young Sinologists with a broader toolkit for rigorous scholarship. The only senior Sinologist to present a paper was J.J.L. Duyvendak, the conference host from Leiden, who provided a historical context for this conference by lecturing on the academic lineage of Dutch Sinology. This combination of interdisciplinary methodology and the rapid expansion of participating scholars signaled the successful reconstruction of the European Sinological community and its transition into a more structured, collaborative, and professionalised global network.

The third conference, organised by Edwin Pulleyblank at the School of Oriental Studies (SOAS) in London in 1950, saw a significant expansion in both institutional representation and individual attendance. Over sixty participants gathered from nine universities across the

⁵ *Proceedings of the Conference of Junior Sinologues held at Leiden*, April 8–14, 1949, 2–7; these papers included W. Den Boer, "The Struggle Against the Supremacy of the Philological Method in Classical Studies;" J. G. Locher, "On the Methods of Textual Criticism in the Field of History;" and J. de Zwaan, "On the Method of Textual Criticism in New Testament Studies."

United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden. This meeting served as a debut for several future leading scholars of the field, including the medieval China historian Denis Twitchett and the French scholars Yves Hervouet and Michel Soymié. Notably, the host institution provided a deep bench of talent, including Michael Sullivan, A. C. Graham, and John Chinnery.⁶ The presence of overseas Chinese scholars then studying in London, including Fu Le-huan 傅樂煥, Huang Xi-ling 黃錫齡, and D. C. Lau 劉殿爵, added a crucial transnational dimension. While Fu and Huang departed for mainland China and Hong Kong shortly after the meeting, D. C. Lau remained to take up a lectureship in Chinese Philosophy, later serving as a recurring bridge between Western and Chinese academic circles.

The fourth conference, held at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1951, provided an impressive showcase of the enduring strength of French Sinology under the leadership of Paul Demiéville, Etienne Balazs. This event was a nexus for both established figures and rising stars, such as Wolfgang Franke, Herbert Franke and Piet van der Loon. However, some active Sinologists, including Max Kaltenmark, Alexis Rygaloff, and Robert Ruhlman, remained stationed in Beijing at that time, highlighting the complex geopolitical currents that continued to influence the movement of scholars between the East and West during the early Cold War (Franke 1999, 4).

The fifth conference organised by Herbert Franke in Wahn in September 1952 truly achieved global reach. The academic program featured specialised research from doctoral candidates such as Liu Mau-tsai 劉茂才 on East Turkic history, Denis Twitchett on Tang economic history, and Wu Chi-yu 吳其昱 on Chinese grammar. However, the most striking development was the arrival of delegates from outside Western Europe. This conference welcomed scholars from Australia (Hans Bielenstein and B. McKillop), Canada (W.A.C.H. Dobson), Indonesia (Tjan Tjoe Som), and Japan (Tatsuro Yamamoto 山本達郎). This diversification transformed the conference from a regional European gathering into an international scholarly network, proving that even as political borders tightened elsewhere, the study of China was becoming a worldwide collaborative endeavour.

The Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO) hosted the sixth conference in Rome in 1953, which was marked by a significant increase in international participation and interdisciplinary prestige. Under the direction of Giuseppe Tucci, the organizing committee consisted of Luciano Petech, Mario Bussagli, Giuliano Bertuccioli, and Lionello Lanciotti. They welcomed delegates from twelve countries, including newcomers from Turkey, Switzerland, and Austria. The gathering facilitated crucial networking among established and emerging Sinologists such as Wolfgang Bauer, A.F.P. Hulsewé, Etienne Balazs, Walter Fuchs, Vadime Elisseeff, and Denis Twitchett, while also attracting Buddhist studies experts

⁶ *The Third Conference of the Junior Sinologues*, London, 1950, 16.

like D.T. Suzuki 鈴木大拙 and André Baret.⁷ This sixth meeting notably featured many contributions from overseas Chinese scholars, including Wu Shichang 吳世昌, then teaching at Oxford, and Wolfgang Franke's wife, Hu Junyong 胡騫詠, who presented a paper in Chinese on the performance techniques of Peking Opera.⁸ The presence of specialised researchers like James Hamilton, who was working on Dunhuang manuscripts, further underscored this conference's role as a vital hub for diverse scholarly inquiry into Asia's cultural and historical heritage.

The seventh conference, held at Hatfield College, Durham University, from August 28 to September 2, 1954, was a milestone with the first-ever inclusion of delegates from the United States and the Soviet Union. James R. Hightower represented the American contingent, while E. Kovalev and S. Tikhvinsky arrived as the pioneering Soviet representatives.⁹ Tikhvinsky's later memoirs reflect the geopolitical weight of this moment; after years of academic isolation following the Russian Revolution, the Soviet government's decision to re-engage with international scholarship was significant enough to be highlighted by *The Times* on August 30, 1954. Interestingly, Tikhvinsky boldly claimed that the Junior Sinologues formed specifically to challenge the "classical school" of the Russian scholar Vasily Alekseyev.¹⁰ It likely reflects a touch of Soviet academic nationalism rather than historical fact. In reality, the group remained an informal association of Western European scholars, primarily focused on professionalising the field rather than competing with specific Russian lineages. Despite the burgeoning Cold War, this conference remained largely free of overt ideological conflict, focusing instead on ambitious international cooperation. A major resolution was passed to support Piet van der Loon's project to compile a union catalogue of Chinese classical *congshu* 叢書 (collectanea) held in European libraries, marking perhaps the first formal international collaboration in the organisation's history. Etienne Balazs proposed his influential Song Project for an international handbook on Song dynasty history.¹¹ A new perspective was proposed. For example, Jean Chesneaux, a French scholar and Communist Party member, discussed the integration of Chinese history into world history. This conference also highlighted the rapid professionalisation of the discipline, noting Denis Twitchett's appointment at SOAS and the arrival of Joseph Levenson from

⁷ "The VI Conference of Junior Sinologues," *East and West* 4: 3 (1953): 181.

⁸ *VI Conferenza Sinologi Juniori*, Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1953, 26–28.

⁹ Raymond Dawson, "Preface," *VII Conference of Junior Sinologues*, School of Oriental Studies, Durham, Aug. 28–Sept. 2, 1954, iii.

¹⁰ Mu Dan and Li Junsheng, "Eluosi Zhuming Zhongguoxue Qihexuandisiji Fangtanlu (Interview with the Famous Russian Sinologist Tikhvinsky)," *Guowai Shehui Kexue* (Social Sciences Abroad), Issue 3 (2010): 142.

¹¹ In 1955, Balazs was appointed to be a "Directeur d'études" at the Sixth Section of EPHE and worked on socio-economic history of China with Lucien Febvre (1878–1956) and Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) (Will 2023, 39–40;). Many scholars have noted the scholarly collaborations between Balazs and Braudel (Zurndorfer 2004, 189–221; Aymard 2010: 37–65).

Berkeley as a visiting professor, signalling an era where Sinology was becoming increasingly integrated with the broader social sciences and global historical narratives.

The conferences of Junior Sinologues from 1955 to 1961 represent the peak of the development of European Sinology, as they transformed into a high-stakes arena where global geopolitics and academic idealism collided. The eighth conference in Leiden in 1955 was a watershed moment, marking the first time a delegation from Mainland China, represented by renowned historians Jian Bozan and Zhou Yiliang, participated in a post-war international forum. This session also drew prominent American scholars like John King Fairbank and Owen Lattimore, who overcame the restrictive pressures of McCarthyism to attend (McAuliff 1978). Wolfgang Franke described this as a brief window of Chinese “openness,” characterised by a mix of ideological struggle and genuine scholarly friendship. As I will show later in this paper, a highlight of the Leiden conference was the intellectual duel between Etienne Balazs and the PRC historians. Balazs, known for his multilingual fluency and sharp dialectical method, engaged the Chinese scholars in fierce debates that, while ideologically charged, were conducted with a level of mutual respect that left a lasting impression on both sides.

The momentum continued at the Paris conference in 1956, where the delegation from Beijing consisted of four high-level scholars. This conference, despite having two honorary chairs of the conference committee, namely Paul Demiéville and Robert des Rotours, was organised by a committee under the leadership of Etienne Balazs, along with Jean Chesneaux, Jacques Gernet, Vadime Elisseff, and Yves Hervouet. Due to the connection with Balazs, Fernand Braudel also attended this conference and met Sinologists across the globe. Despite the hospitality of organisers like Balazs, political tensions were unavoidable, leading to heated debates over historical interpretation and sovereignty. According to Jian Bozan’s report (Jian 1956), this Paris Conference was a major international gathering of 195 participants, with the largest delegations hailing from France, West Germany, and the United Kingdom. Jian specifically tracked the thirteen scholars from the socialist bloc—including representatives from China, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany—reflecting his focus on the ideological balance of the event. A more detailed breakdown by Italian scholar Lionello Lanciotti highlighted the conference’s global reach, including attendees from Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the United States (Lanciotti 1956, 262).

By the tenth meeting in Marburg in 1957, the conference of European “Junior Sinologues” had grown to over 100 participants from 15 countries, including scholars from Hong Kong (Jao Tsung-I 饒宗頤, Lo Hsiang-lin 羅香林) and Taiwan (Fang Hao 方豪). However, Mainland Chinese scholars were absent, largely due to Beijing’s refusal to participate alongside Taiwanese scholars—a condition the conference organisers rejected on the principle of academic inclusivity. This pattern of absence continued through the 1958

Venice/Padua meetings and the 1959 Cambridge session, often exacerbated by visa delays and the hardening of political lines.¹²

The limits of academic cooperation were reached in 1960. A meeting scheduled for Moscow—intended to follow the International Congress of Orientalists—was abruptly canceled as Sino-Soviet relations soured. This served as a stark reminder of how scholarship remained subordinate to political necessity. By the 13th conference in Hamburg (1961), the fragmentation was complete: scholars from the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany withdrew at the last minute, and Beijing ignored the invitation. Despite this, this conference maintained its global character with attendees from Poland, Hungary, and the West, including Albert Feuerwerker from the US and Wang Gungwu 王賡武 from London. Despite the fracturing of the Eastern Bloc, these years proved that a global community of Sinologists was indeed emerging, creating a vital space where, even under the shadow of the Cold War, the exchange of ideas remained a powerful aspiration.

As the Conference of Junior Sinologues expanded its geographic reach to include scholars from Asia, the invitation of representatives from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan became a natural progression. Despite the onset of the Cold War and the political “Iron Curtain,” Western scholars remained profoundly eager to engage with their counterparts in Mainland China. This desire cut across ideological lines; both left-leaning scholars sympathetic to the socialist bloc and those firmly rooted in the capitalist camp sought dialogue for two primary reasons. First, they were desperate to understand the latest academic developments within China. Second, they sought access to the wealth of new archaeological data and primary materials emerging from the mainland, which were essential for their own historical and cultural research. Consequently, the European and American Sinological communities viewed Chinese scholarship as an indispensable resource for both primary documentation and secondary analysis.

This period of academic curiosity coincided with a sharp ideological divide within the Western intelligentsia, which was then largely dominated by left-wing thought. The Soviet contribution to the victory at the end of World War II, the rise of socialist regimes across Eurasia, and the decolonisation of Asia and Africa were celebrated by many Western intellectuals (Jachec 2015; Tromly 2014; Bonfreschi and Maccaferri 2015). This pro-Soviet and pro-communist tilt was not merely theoretical but had practical institutional consequences; for example, UNESCO, based in Paris, moved quickly in 1950 to expel representatives of the Nationalist government after its retreat to Taiwan.¹³

¹² Lionello Lanciotti, “The X Conference of Junior Sinologues,” *East and West* vol. 8, no. 3 (1957), 281–282.

¹³ These representatives included Zhang Xinhai and Cheng Qibao. Zhang and Cheng were forced to exile as research professors at Long Island University afterwards (Chen 2023, 45–60). However, Cheng’s son Françoise Cheng refused to leave Paris and later became a student of Paul Demiéville and a celebrated writer in French. For a detailed study on the relations between

The U.S. State Department's China policy had previously been influenced by left-leaning Sinologists, and after the "loss of China" in 1949, these scholars faced intense scrutiny and federal investigations. China experts like John King Fairbank and Owen Lattimore had their passports revoked and were barred from international travel by the CIA and other agencies (Fairbank, 1982; Fried 1997, 1990; Lichtman 2012; Suanders 1999; Wilford 2003). By the mid-1950s, these restrictions began to ease, allowing Fairbank and Lattimore to travel to Leiden for the conference in 1955. Paradoxically, while these Americans were persecuted at home as "red" sympathisers, they were simultaneously being denounced in the PRC as "imperialist cultural spies" and also sharply denounced in the ROC for their betrayal of "Free China." Nevertheless, as Xia Nai revealed in his diary, the Chinese delegation adopted a strategy of "seeking common ground while reserving differences" to win over Western friends, leading to a surprisingly restrained and friendly interaction between the two sides (Xia 2011, 251).

When Jian Bozan and Zhou Yiliang arrived in Leiden in 1955, they formed lasting bonds with Western scholars like Jean Chesneaux and John Chinnery. Chesneaux, a member of the French Communist Party, went so far as to act as a personal guide for the Chinese delegation in Paris in 1956, even greeting them at the airport. However, as Xia Nai indicated (Xia 2011, 259), these interactions were often coloured by political motives; Chesneaux viewed these academic visits as prime opportunities for "political work" and propaganda, lamenting when other delegations failed to coordinate with the Franco-Chinese Friendship Association.¹⁴ Despite this ideological lens, the hospitality shown by French and British leftist scholars provided the Chinese delegation with a vital sense of support in an otherwise unfamiliar Western environment.

For American scholars like Frederick W. Mote, the Leiden conference in 1955 was a deeply personal reunion. A former student of Zhou Yiliang's wife in the Chinese language class for the Army Specialized Training Program at Harvard in 1944, freshly graduated with his PhD from the University of Washington, Mote was eager to reconnect with his old mentor. Invited by Hulswé to meet the Chinese delegation, Mote spent the duration of the conference serving as an interpreter for Jian Bozan. His memoirs capture the palpable excitement of Western scholars, including Etienne Balazs, who were desperate to integrate China into the international academic community. Balazs famously championed the Chinese presence, even intervening during a heated dispute between Zhou Yiliang and the translator for Hong Kong scholar Lo Hsiang-lin to ensure the "friends from China" had every opportunity to

China and UNESCO in the early Cold War era, see Barrett 2019, 1516–1542.

¹⁴ Chesneaux acquired a lot of academic information about the project of compiling historical sources on modern Chinese history from Chinese scholars and reported to the French scholarly community (Chesneaux 1955, 95–98, 1956, 274–282, and 1958, 384–411).

speak. This period represented a peak of mutual interest, where the desire for academic exchange temporarily outweighed the burgeoning tensions of the Cold War.

Frederick W. Mote's memoir provides a poignant, firsthand account of the human and psychological friction that characterised the Leiden Conference in 1955, illustrating how the geopolitical "Cold War" manifested in personal silence. Mote describes a chilling encounter orchestrated by Hulsewé, where his attempt to warmly greet his old acquaintance Zhou Yiliang was met with a calculated, dismissive coldness. Through Mote's eyes (Mote 2010, 185–189), we see a Zhou Yiliang who was paralysed by "class anxiety" and the watchful presence of Jian Bozan, the delegation's political-academic overseer. Mote perceptively notes that Zhou's desperate attempt to downplay his Harvard education and elite lineage, treating a former student as a mere passing acquaintance because of his American identity, revealed the immense pressure on the PRC's intellectuals to perform ideological purity. This narrative transforms the conference from a mere list of academic papers into a site of profound personal tragedy, where the "battle lines" of the era forced scholars to prioritise political survival over long-standing intellectual and personal friendships.

The presence of Mainland Chinese scholars at the 1955 and 1956 conferences represented a highly structured effort by the newly established academic bureaucracy in Beijing. Although the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) was not formally established as a separate entity until much later, its precursor the Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences within the Chinese Academy of Sciences was founded on June 1, 1955, specifically to oversee such intellectual mobilisations. Under the leadership of Marxist historians like Jian Bozan and Fan Wenlan, the Chinese historical community focused heavily on the massive undertaking of compiling the primary sources on Modern Chinese History in order to reshape the historical narratives of Chinese revolution. This period prior to the Anti-Rightist Movement saw a remarkable flurry of international exchange. Some leading Marxist historians in China reported meeting numerous cultural delegations from Europe and Oceania, though not much that was related to Sinology.

The logistical reality of the PRC's participation in the Junior Sinologues conferences revealed a tension between European academic individualism and the PRC's state collectivism. While European organisers addressed invitations to individual scholars, the Chinese Academy of Sciences acted as the centralised gatekeeper, selecting and organizing the delegations. For the Leiden conference in 1955, the Academy dispatched Jian Bozan and Zhou Yiliang; for the Paris meeting in 1956, the team expanded to include Xia Nai and Zhang Zhilian. This selection was politically strategic. Xia Nai, as Deputy Director of the Institute of Archaeology, was brought specifically to present the new archaeological finds that Western scholars craved, while Zhang Zhilian was selected for his fluency in French to manage finances and translation. The Chinese delegation to Paris in 1956 followed a rigorous travel circuit that underscored the geopolitical realities of the era.

The four-member team first traveled to the Soviet Union for several days of consultation before flying through Prague to reach Paris on August 29, 1956. Their twenty-day stay concluded on September 18, after which they returned via Russia, arriving back in China on September 23. This strategic route through the socialist bloc was a logistical necessity, reflecting the “leaning to one side” foreign policy that defined the early years of the PRC. Upon their return, the conference participants embarked on a high-profile domestic reporting campaign, publishing detailed accounts in major national and academic outlets such as *People’s Daily*, *Historical Research*, and the *Journal of Peking University*. These reports indicate that the mission was as much about diplomacy as it was about history. While Jian Bozan focused on disseminating the materialist view of history and advocating for Sino-French friendship, Zhou Yiliang emphasised the importance of mutual cultural exchange and institutional learning. Zhang Zhilian provided the academic community with a systematic overview of the international papers presented, effectively turning a single conference into a comprehensive study of global Sinological trends. Collectively, these writings transformed the Paris trip into a symbolic success, framing the delegation as a bridge-builder between the new China and the Western intellectual world.

However, the collapse of this “global community” was as rapid as its rise. After 1956, domestic political shifts in China, most notably the Anti-Rightist Campaign, it became nearly impossible for the PRC scholars to travel to the West. Regarding the 10th conference in Marburg in 1957, Wolfgang Franke noted that the Chinese authorities insisted on “official delegation” status rather than individual participation, a condition the European organisers found difficult to reconcile with their traditions of academic autonomy. Furthermore, the presence of scholars from Taiwan became a non-negotiable point of contention. The late 1950s signaled the end of the brief “thaw” in Sino-Western academic relations. For the 11th Conference in Padua in 1958, unlike previous years, the PRC scholars did not even send a congratulatory telegram. While a tentative delegation had intended to go, the decision to withdraw was made abruptly in late July.

The final death knell for this era of exchange was the Sino-Soviet Split. The 12th conference in Cambridge in 1959 saw no PRC representation due to “visa delays” which was a common euphemism for political blocking. The most fateful loss was the conference in Moscow in 1960. Following the International Congress of Orientalists, this meeting was intended to be the ultimate showcase of Soviet socialist Sinology (Kemper 2010, 170–210). However, as the ideological rift between Khrushchev and Mao Zedong widened, the PRC withdrew from the conference at the eleventh hour. As Roderick MacFarquhar noted, the international community had been led to expect a massive Chinese delegation, only for them to be met with a total absence. This “extreme disappointment” became the primary topic of conversation among Western delegates at the Hotel Ukraina, marking the end of a unique window of collaboration and the beginning of a long period of academic isolation for the

PRC (MacFarquhar 1960, 114–118). By the 13th conference in Hamburg in 1961, the boycott was nearly total since even Soviet Union, Czechoslovak, and East German scholars declined to attend. The “global Sinological community” that had seemed so within reach in Paris in 1956 had fractured along the lines of the Cold War’s deepest divisions.

The two-year window of 1955–1956 remains a “great pity” in the history of Chinese studies. For a brief moment, the Conferences of Junior Sinologues functioned as a truly global forum where Marxist, liberal, and traditionalist scholars could argue in the same room. These meetings allowed for a brief thaw where the humanity of the participants could, for a moment, transcend their ideological labels. The legacy of these meetings, however, did not entirely vanish. The networks established in Leiden and Paris survived in the form of bibliographical projects, such as Piet van der Loon’s union catalogue of Chinese books. More importantly, the young “Junior Sinologues” of the 1950s, such as Mote, Gernet, Zürcher, and Twitchett, became the senior leaders of the field in the 1970s and 1980s. When the PRC finally reopened during the “Open Door” era, these scholars were the ones who remembered the “gentle but firm” discussions of the 1950s. They provided the institutional memory that allowed the global Sinological community to rebuild itself, eventually leading to the massive, integrated gatherings of the AAS and EACS we see today. In this sense, the 1950s was not a failed experiment; it was a dress rehearsal for the globalised Sinology of the 21st century.

Conversations and Conflicts within the Globalised European Sinological Community

The main organisers of the 8th Junior Sinologues Conference in Leiden in 1955 were Hulswé and Zürcher. Hulswé, renowned for his rigorous work on Han Dynasty law, and Zürcher, then a rising star who would soon publish his Ph.D. dissertation *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, represented a bridge between classical philology and structural historical analysis. The Leiden conference in 1955 functioned as a high-stakes arena where multidisciplinary scholarship collided with Cold War cultural diplomacy. The academic program was remarkably broad, covering a wide range of topics, such as Tang Buddhist festivals and Shang jade carvings, and contemporary Marxist socio-economic analyses of Chinese warlordism and historical periodisation. For example, Cheng Te-k’ün 鄭德坤, an archaeologist from Cambridge presented “Jade Carving of the Shang Period;” John Fairbank presented “Problems of Teaching and Research at Harvard;” Jean Chesnaux presented “The Political and Economic Bases of Chinese Militarism 1911–1927;” K. Marks presented “Recent Chinese Theories on Slavery and Feudalism in ancient China;” and E. F. Kovalev presented “Periodization of Modern and Recent Chinese History.” However, the true “main

theme” of the gathering was the reintegration of the People’s Republic of China into the international academic community.

Through “state-of-the-field” surveys presented by prominent scholars like Jian Bozan and Zhou Yiliang, the Chinese delegation sought to assert the legitimacy of the PRC’s historical and archaeological progress. Jian Bozan was scheduled to give two presentations “On the General Conditions of History, Linguistics and Archaeology in the People’s Republic of China” and “Economic Background of the Hung Lou Meng.” Zhou Yiliang presented “On the History of Asian Peoples.” Apparently, as the first-time delegate from the PRC to the Junior Sinologue conference, Jian Bozan was granted a privilege for giving two presentations, which never happened to other scholars in the same conference.

Originally trained as a historian of medieval Chinese history and religions, Zhou Yiliang was assigned by the Chinese state to present on Asian history. Since the breakout of the Korean War, driven by ideological awareness and political pressure, Zhou had shifted his concentration of research to northeast Asian history, Japanese history, and Asian history in general. His expertise in Japanese culture was rooted in a rigorous early education under Kyoto University’s Makino Tatsumi 牧野巽 and deepened during his doctoral studies at Harvard under Serge Elisséeff. After returning to China, Zhou transitioned from teaching Japanese at Yenching University to a pivotal role at Peking University following the 1952 institutional reshuffling. Under state directives, he spearheaded the establishment of the Asian History Teaching and Research Section at Department of History, becoming the mastermind of Asian History as a new field. Consequently, by the time he arrived in Leiden, Zhou’s academic identity had shifted entirely toward the history of Japan and Asia, providing the professional authority necessary to represent the PRC’s new regional research priorities on the international stage with its ambition of leading revolutions across Asia and the development of the decolonisation movement across Asia and Africa (Chen 2022, 282–302).

During the conference Q&A, Jian addressed high-level ideological questions with a cautious but authoritative air. This posture of academic supervision created a rigid environment that directly contributed to the visible unease of his colleague, Zhou Yiliang, whose own expertise was forced to align with Jian’s mission of transforming Chinese historical studies into a unified tool for the state’s revolutionary narrative. At this conference, Jian Bozan functioned less as a traditional researcher and more as the ideological “guardian” of the PRC’s historiography, tasked with defending and disseminating Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy.¹⁵ As Wang Xuedian 王學典 noted, in the early 1950s, Jian posed as the primary interpreter of Maoist historical

¹⁵ Clifford G. Edmunds’ MA thesis at the University of Chicago in 1968, *“Bureaucracy, Historiography, and Ideology in Communist China: The Case of Chien Po-tsan, 1949–1958,”* offers a systematic look at how historical scholarship was integrated into the state apparatus; part of this thesis appeared in F. Gilbert Chan, Harlan W. Jencks eds., *Chinese Communist Politics: Selected Studies* (Asian Research Service, 1982), chapter 3.

theory, a position that shifted the focus of his contributions toward political propaganda and the “rectification” of Western academic inquiries (Wang Xuedian 2000, 11–22).

The Leiden Conference became a direct battlefield for the ideological struggle over academic freedom, centred specifically on the PRC’s domestic campaign against Hu Shih 胡適. Etienne Balazs and German scholar Tilemann Grimm launched a pointed critique against the Chinese delegation, with Balazs provocatively claiming that the PRC lacked the intellectual liberty to write its own history, going so far as to suggest that figures like Hu Shih would be erased from the record. Jian Bozan, acting in his capacity as the state’s ideological guardian, delivered a sharp rebuttal by drawing on the traditional Chinese historiographical precedent of the History of the Song Dynasty. He argued that just as ancient historians had written about both the hero Yue Fei 岳飛 and the traitor Qin Hui 秦檜, so modern Chinese historians would indeed chronicle Hu Shih, albeit with a “realistic evaluation” that might leave some to “stink for ten thousand years” (Zhang Chuanxi, 1996). This exchange illustrates how the domestic “Anti-Hu Shih” campaign in the PRC, which Zhou Yiliang had recently supported by publishing an essay “Western Sinology and Hu Shih 西洋漢學與胡適” in the *Historical Research* (Lishi yanjiu), the journal of the Institute for Historical Research at Chinese Academy of Sciences, was not merely an internal affair but a volatile point of contention that extended the Chinese political front line directly into the heart of European Sinology.

The interaction between the Chinese delegation and American scholars at the Leiden Conference, as detailed in the *Biography of Jian Bozan* (Zhang 1996, 280–283), reveals a landscape of calculated coldness and mediated diplomacy. Initially, Jian Bozan and Zhou Yiliang strictly adhered to a policy of non-engagement with American scholars Owen Lattimore and John K. Fairbank, whom they viewed as ideologically hostile and “unfriendly” toward the PRC. It was only through the persistent mediation of the host, Hulsewé, that a formal introduction was finally broken. During these tense exchanges, Lattimore specifically confronted Zhou Yiliang regarding his recent published critiques of Fairbank as a “cultural agent 文化特務” in his essay against Hu Shih. Lattimore indicated that Zhou’s harsh assessments of Fairbank were based on a “misunderstanding.” This standoff underscores that even in a neutral setting like Leiden, the personal and professional ties of the past were being systematically severed or re-evaluated through the rigid lens of Cold War political alignment. However, Jian Bozan intervened with a calculated defence, reframing the political attack as a standard exercise in “criticism and self-criticism,” a typical Chinese revolutionary rhetoric. Jian asserted that because Fairbank “spoke for American imperialism” and “attacked New China,” Zhou’s hostility was not a misunderstanding but a necessary ideological correction. By transforming a personal and professional grievance into a matter of national defence, Jian confirmed his role as the “guardian” of Chinese historiography, ensuring that the domestic campaign against Hu Shih and Western influence was projected onto the international stage.

as an uncompromising unified front. For many Chinese historians, the defence of Marxist-Leninist principles took precedence over objective historical inquiry.¹⁶

The Leiden Conference served as a transformative intellectual catalyst for the conference organiser Hulsewé, shifting his trajectory from a specialist in Han law to a key mediator between Western and Chinese Marxist historiography. Deeply influenced by his personal interactions with scholars like Jian Bozan and Zhou Yiliang, later Hulsewé published a landmark article in 1965 that systematically introduced Western academia to the debates of the first generation of Chinese Marxist historians—including Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Fan Wenlan 范文瀾, and Hou Wailu 侯外廬—regarding the social and political nature of the Qin and Han dynasties. While Hulsewé acknowledged the extensive use of newly unearthed bronzes by figures like Chen Mengjia 陳夢家 and categorised the divergent methodologies of non-Marxist scholars such as Qian Mu 錢穆 and Lao Gan 勞幹, his ultimate critique was one of theoretical stagnation. He concluded that these discussions rarely evolved beyond the framework established in Guo Moruo's early works and noted that even within China, scholars like Lei Haizong 雷海宗 had already begun criticizing this rigid historiographical model during the “Hundred Flowers” movement of 1956 (Hulsewé 1965: 78–105).

Interestingly, the Paris conference of Junior Sinologues in 1956 focused on the periodisation of Chinese History. The Chinese delegation presented a coordinated front to showcase the ideological and empirical advancements of the PRC's new scholarship. Jian Bozan delivered the address on the Periodisation of Chinese History, asserting that historical divisions must be defined by the Marxist framework of production relations to accurately reflect China's social nature. This theoretical stance was supported by Zhang Zhilian, who reported on new developments in modern Chinese history, and Zhou Yiliang, who provided a survey of ancient history research on the mainland. Complementing these academic reports, Xia Nai presented a detailed account of recent archaeological excavations, underscored by a massive exhibition of 150 photographs of unearthed cultural relics. Together, these presentations aimed to demonstrate that Marxist theory was not merely an abstract formula but was supported by a rigorous new wave of archaeological and historiographical evidence.¹⁷ This academic output did not go unnoticed across the Taiwan Strait. Li Ji 李濟, the preeminent archaeologist at Academia Sinica in Taiwan, closely monitored the mainland's activities despite Taiwan's absence from the 1955 and 1956 conferences. In a personal communication with K. C. Chang in December 1956, Li Ji asked to obtain a transcript of Xia Nai's presentation at the Paris conference. However, Li Ji's interest was tempered by

¹⁶ Some scholars have discussed the trend of Marxist theory over historical analysis in that era, see Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1996, 74–95; Wang Xuedian 2000.

¹⁷ Xia Nai's efforts extended beyond the conference; he published a paper “Our Neolithic Ancestors” in the Italian journal *East and West* (Hsia/Xia 1956, 162–167), maintaining a warm professional relationship with Giuseppe Tucci, and Lionello Lanciotti.

professional skepticism; while he was eager to track the data coming out of the mainland, he expressed doubt to Chang as to whether Xia Nai's ideological framing made the speech truly worth the effort of transcription (Li and Chen 2005).

The periodisation of Chinese history emerged as a central theme that engaged nearly every participant at the Paris conference, an occurrence that may be unique in the history of European Sinology. While the Chinese delegation insisted on a rigid periodisation of five-stage social history in China based on socioeconomic relations, a diverse array of international scholars presented counterarguments. Pulleyblank opened the discussion by tracing the terminology of "Ancient, Medieval, and Modern" from traditional Chinese historiography to the influence of Meiji-era Japanese scholars like Naito Konan, who first argued that these periods possessed distinct qualitative characteristics. Hulsewé and Benjamin Schwartz criticised the Marxist model as "formulaic," while Herbert Franke questioned the "meaningfulness" of the Marxist periodisation itself, favoring empirical facts over abstract labels. Hulsewé compared the rigid application of social stages to the "formulaic" error of forcing Chinese grammar into Latin rules. Schwartz launched a sophisticated intellectual assault on the Chinese delegation's ideological foundations and he argued that self-proclaimed Marxist scholars had backed themselves into two equally flawed corners, either viewing China as a stagnant "Asiatic Society" or forcing it into a universal five-stage progression identical to Western history. Most provocatively, Schwartz leveraged his deep knowledge of the Marxist-Leninist canon to argue that neither of these views actually aligned with the core tenets of Marx or Lenin. By citing the "Marxist classics" to dismantle Jian Bozan's claims, Schwartz effectively challenged the PRC scholars' monopoly on Marxist interpretation, transforming the debate from a clash of ideologies into a high-stakes battle over who possessed the true "scientific" authority to interpret history.¹⁸ Soviet scholar Kovalev asserted a "Soviet-centric" position, arguing that the 1917 October Revolution served as the definitive starting line for modern Chinese history. But British scholar Piet van der Loon quickly dismissed this claim by questioning whether such a "unanimous" opinion was based on genuine consensus or institutional coercion. In contrast, Wolfgang Franke argued for the central importance of the 1911 Revolution, which he viewed as a transformative break that swept away two millennia of Confucian monarchical thought. Franke proposed a more nuanced, continuous timeline of revolutionary change, spanning from the 1898 Reforms and the Boxer Rebellion through the May Fourth Movement, culminating in the 1949 establishment of the PRC.

This clash revealed how Soviet academic hegemony sought to anchor Chinese historical progress to Russian milestones, while Western scholars like Franke sought to locate the

¹⁸ This presentation later appeared as "Some Stereotypes in the Periodization of Chinese History." (Schwartz 1968, 219–230 and also reprinted in Schwartz 1996, 18–29)

drivers of change within China's own long-term social and political evolution. Even among those who accepted the concept of stages in Chinese history, such as Lo Hsiang-lin and Wolfgang Franke, the definitions varied significantly from the PRC's orthodoxy claims based on Marxist-Leninist principles. The conflict was notably synthesised by Owen Lattimore during the closing session; he pointed out that papers like those by Arthur Wright (on Buddhism) and Liang Peizhen 梁佩真 (on poetry) proved that cultural and artistic timelines do not neatly align with social history. Lattimore's conclusion—that China's historical path need not mirror the West's and cannot be viewed solely through the lens of economic structures—served as a direct, sophisticated challenge to Jian Bozan's insistence on a singular, production-based historical narrative.

In the concluding discussion, Jian Bozan laid out a five-point defence of Marxist historiography, framing the debate over periodisation as a battle for "scientific truth." He began by dismissing the notion that periodisation was "meaningless" or purely political, arguing instead for a materialist standard of social development over "idealist" or "pluralist" Western theories. Responding to the "slander" that Chinese scholarship lacked freedom, Jian advocated the "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom" policy as evidence of a vibrant academic culture, while simultaneously launching a scathing attack on non-Marxist models, such as Lo Hsiang-lin's theories of "elective" or "civil service" societies. Despite this rigid ideological stance, Jian concluded with a strategic diplomatic overture, inviting international scholars to join the debate; he argued that while their political standpoints differed, a shared commitment to empirical "historical materials" and the pursuit of objective truth would eventually bridge the gap between divergent viewpoints.

It is worth noting that the periodisation theme was not new to the European Sinological community. Even earlier in 1953 when Edwin G. Pulleyblank inaugurated his chair in Sinology at Cambridge, he presented a paper "Chinese History and World History."¹⁹ In his retrospective analysis, Pulleyblank examined the contentious debates surrounding Marxist periodisation of Chinese history, focusing specifically on the evolving definition of the "Asiatic Mode of Production." Pulleyblank traced the lineage of this concept from Soviet scholars—who defined it by a lack of private land ownership and the presence of large-scale irrigation and "Oriental Despotism"—to the German-American scholar Karl August Wittfogel. Wittfogel developed these ideas into a theory of "total power" in his work, *Oriental Despotism* later published in 1957. However, Pulleyblank noted a significant divergence that Wittfogel's view of an "eternal" or stagnant East was rejected by Far Eastern revolutionary movements, including the Chinese Communist Party. For political and ideological reasons, the CCP transitioned from labelling Chinese society "Asiatic" to "Feudal," eventually aligning with Guo Moruo's view that China followed the universal five-stage

¹⁹ This speech was eventually published in 1956 and reprinted in Pulleyblank, 2001, 1–20.

Marxist progression from primitive society to communist society. This shift allowed the CCP to frame its struggle as an “anti-feudal” revolution rather than a fight against a stagnant Oriental system.

Pulleyblank’s overview demonstrates that despite his background as a philologist, he possessed a sophisticated understanding of how ideological frameworks shaped Chinese historiography, consistently striving to situate Chinese history within a global, comparative context. In his critique of Chinese historical periodisation, Pulleyblank aligns himself with Karl Popper’s critique of historicism, arguing that these Marxist models mistakenly treat human history as a single, organic organism following a predetermined path. He rejects any singular theory that attempts to unify Chinese and Western history under a universal formula, advocating instead for a more fragmented and comparative approach. He proposes two valid methods for integrating China into world history. First, comparing specific historical “fragments,” such as Max Weber’s analysis of the conflict between Confucian “gentleman” ideals and rational bureaucracy. Second, tracing the tangible historical links and influences between cultures, such as the global impact of China’s “Four Great Inventions.” In sum, by prioritising philological evidence and diverse historical contexts over rigid evolutionary stages, Pulleyblank asserts that the true value of Chinese history lies in its unique complexities rather than its conformity to Western-centric historical laws.

More broadly, the “Western” bloc’s interest in Chinese historical periodisation also had its own intellectual and academic foundations. As early as the 1940s, European and American scholars had begun to focus on the issue of Chinese historical periodisation (Cameron 1946, 171–177). With the start of the Cold War, the ideological struggle became more urgent. The globalisation of the capitalist world-economy and the dominant ideology of capitalism, served as the cornerstone of the ideological dome of historical capitalism, emphasizing modernisation, science and technology, and rationality (Wallerstein 1991, 29–36; Sitton 1996, 226–229; Amin 2009). Intellectually, there was also a “Marxist turn” in Europe and America at the time (Wang and Iggers 2015; Dworkin 1997). As Natalie Zemon Davis noted, after World War II, “The first social wave involved writing history where the main actors were the working people or lower classes—slaves, serfs, peasants, artisans, tradesmen, industrial workers, and more: the *menu peuple*, as they were called in France and as I named them in the 1950s when I started my doctoral research; ‘the exploited or oppressed classes’ in Marxist terms; the ‘subaltern classes’ as they were called by the school of social historians in India in the 1980s” (Davis 2010, 188–202). Although many European and American Sinologists did not politically accept the communist regime or the five-stage historical periodisation theory, their emphasis on economic, social, and labor history was extraordinary, and they achieved significant accomplishments. In the field of ancient Chinese history alone, there emerged a “golden generation” of economic and social historians. Etienne Balazs, Jacques Gernet, and Denis Twitchett, all devoted themselves to the study of medieval

economic history, while Zürcher's research on Buddhism also adopted a social history approach.

The theoretical discussions in the PRC's historical circles at the time centered on the so-called "five golden flowers," which were the periodisation of ancient Chinese history, the forms of feudal land ownership, the issue of peasant wars in Chinese feudal society, the sprouting of capitalism in China, and the formation of the Han ethnicity. Wang Xuedian suggests that these "five golden flowers" emerged from a "wartime historiography" system, which was composed of a wartime historical framework, a wartime academic orientation, a wartime cultural psychology, and a wartime historical concept. This system was heavily influenced by the successive political campaigns of class struggle in China and the international Cold War situation.²⁰ Wang specifically and meticulously analysed the domestic historical background that produced the "five golden flowers," noting that the historical materialist school, as a historiographical school, has significance in both social and academic history, which echoed the global historical trends of the time, being characterised by the rise of economic and social history.

Based on the development of international academia, the issues of historical periodisation and peasant wars were also clearly influenced by Soviet historiography in Eastern Europe. The topic of historical periodisation, which Soviet historiography focused on based on the Marxist theory of societal development stages (Schlesinger 1952, 152–169; Yaresh 1957, 241–259), was also highly regarded in other socialist countries, such as Yugoslavia and Bulgaria (Vucinich 1951, 41–57; Pundeff 1961, 682–693). This situation was not unfamiliar to European and American scholars. However, among these "five golden flowers," only the issue of historical periodisation sparked sustained debate in international historical circles regarding the social nature and periodisation of Chinese history since the 1950s. This discussion also found a response at the European Conferences of Junior Sinologues. This may have been the first time in the history of Chinese academia that major theoretical and methodological issues received a huge response in the international academic community.

At that time, the debate on the historical periodisation of China can be also found in Japan. When Jian Bozan and Yin Da 尹達 visited Japan with a delegation from the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 1955, Jian Bozan spoke primarily on the issue of Chinese historical periodisation in a lecture organised by six Japanese historical societies on December 7. This sparked intense interest and discussion among Japanese historians such as Shun Suzuki 鈴木俊, Sadao Nishijima 中西進, and Noboru Niida 仁井田陞 (Zhang 1996, 286–287). Later,

²⁰ Wang Xuedian (2013, 265–279) reviews the origins and development of the major "five golden flowers" debates. He points out that these discussions were influenced by ideology, primarily from two sources: the central authorities' interest in historiography and the preferences and aversions of key leaders. However, he also specifically notes that the so-called Asiatic Mode of Production within Marxist-Leninist historiography was merely Orientalism in red clothing, and the theory of the five modes of production remains a Eurocentric way of thinking.

Suzuki and others edited *The Periodization of Chinese History*, published in 1957, which summarised the discussions with the Chinese historians (Suzuku and Nishijima 1957). On December 21, Jian Bozan and Yin Da held another discussion with Tatsuo Masubuchi 増淵龍夫 and Shigeki Toyama 遠山茂樹 on modern history and ethnic culture. Jian Bozan also gave a lecture introducing historical research in the PRC, mainly discussing the acceptance of the Marxist view of history in Chinese historiographical circles.

Thanks to the PRC's advocacy of the scheme as part of its political strategy, the simplified Chinese character reform was another interesting theme in the Paris conference. Zhou Yiliang presented the PRC's progress on language and literature, distributing pamphlets on the newly proposed simplified character reforms, while Jian Bozan acted as an official envoy for the Committee for Regulating the Chinese Language, delivering a letter—translated into French by Paul Demiéville—to solicit feedback from Western Sinologists. The response from Western scholars was decidedly mixed. On the one hand, many of Western Sinologists strongly opposed Simplified Characters, arguing that they doubled the burden on students who would still need to master traditional characters for classical research. On the other hand, they expressed support for Latinisation as it brought Chinese closer to Western linguistic structures. Jian noted with interest that this was the exact opposite of his experience in Japan, where scholars favored simplification but rejected Latinisation, illustrating how the international reception of China's cultural modernisation was deeply influenced by the specific regional and academic backgrounds of the observers.

Beyond academic exchange, the Paris Conference in 1956 served as a volatile arena for ideological warfare, particularly between the PRC delegation and ethnic Chinese scholars from Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. On September 4, a major confrontation erupted when Lo Hsiang-lin presented a paper on historical periodisation; during the subsequent discussion, Zhou Yiliang delivered an extensive critique centered on the Marxist definition of feudalism. This prompted a sharp intervention from the translator, Ho Kwang-chung 賀光中 from Malaya, who accused Zhou of using his rebuttal time to preach state ideology rather than address the paper's merits. Jian Bozan immediately escalated the conflict, framing Ho's attempt to limit Zhou's speech as an "unbearable" act of hostility against the PRC and threatening a delegation walkout unless the presidium intervened. While the session chair Schwartz and organiser Balazs ultimately allowed Zhou to continue, tensions remained so high that Ho, Lo, and Jao Tsung-i walked out during the following presentation. The political nature of the clash was further cemented behind the scenes as Jian claimed that Balazs privately disparaged Ho to the Chinese delegation, labelling him "extremely reactionary" and a former collaborator with the Japanese occupation, illustrating how personal histories and Cold War allegiances transformed a technical debate into a high-stakes diplomatic standoff.

In a significant shift of tone from his academic reports, Jian Bozan's article in the *People's Daily* published in October 1956 reframed the Paris Conference as a major triumph of

cultural diplomacy rather than a mere scholarly exchange. Moving beyond the fierce ideological debates over periodisation, Jian adopted a highly politicised and optimistic register, characterising the event as a bridge to restoring normalised relations between Beijing and Paris. He specifically lauded the “hospitality and warmth” of (leftist) French Sinologists—noting that regardless of their personal Marxism, they shared a collective desire for cultural and political rapprochement. By highlighting invitations for institutional cooperation from the CNRS and the Ministry of Education in France, Jian positioned the delegation as the vanguard of a new era in Sino-French relations. This strategic narrative suggests that while the academic front line remained rigid, Jian recognised the “friendship” of Western scholars as a vital diplomatic tool to break through China’s international isolation and secure future scientific collaboration.

While the Junior Sinologues conferences offered a rare platform for a global academic community, the Paris conference in 1956 laid bare the deep ideological fractures of the Cold War. These tensions were not merely binary clashes between the capitalist West and the socialist East; rather, they manifested as a complex web of internal and external conflicts. These included direct confrontations between the PRC and the Hong Kong/Taiwan delegations, friction between West and East Germany, and sharp disagreements within the Western bloc between leftist scholars and their more conservative peers. Furthermore, the relationship between Western scholars and their Asian political allies remained “subtle” and strained, while emerging Sino-Soviet rifts began to compromise socialist solidarity, eventually leading to Chinese boycotts of major congresses in Moscow. Ultimately, the conference served as a microcosm of global instability, where academic discourse was frequently eclipsed by the volatile politics of a divided world.

Conclusion

The early development of the Junior Sinologues conferences represented a remarkable anomaly in the Cold War landscape, evolving from a regional gathering of six Western European universities into a premier global forum. By 1956, the conference had expanded to include prominent scholars from the United States, the Soviet Union, Japan, and the PRC, briefly becoming the world’s largest platform for Chinese studies. This expansion hinted at the emergence of a truly global academic community, facilitated by a temporary “Golden Age” of Chinese outward engagement in the mid-1950s and a post-Stalin Soviet openness to international exchange. However, this fragile unity was soon shattered by geopolitical turbulence. The Sino-Soviet split led to the cancellation of the Moscow conference and Chinese absences in 1960, while the PRC’s internal Anti-Rightist Movement restricted its

scholars from traveling after 1957. Simultaneously, the ideological divide caused the Eastern Bloc to boycott meetings in West Germany, effectively stifling the momentum toward a stable, integrated global community.

Despite its short duration, the Paris Conference in 1956 stood as a “miracle” of international exchange, specifically through its focus on the periodisation of Chinese history. This theme reflected a global leftward tilt in academia that prioritised economic and social history, allowing Chinese Marxist historiography and new archaeological findings to exert a profound influence on Western and Japanese scholars. The resulting international debate on Chinese social history far surpassed the scale and depth of the 1930s debates (Dirlik 1989), involving a sophisticated cross-pollination of ideas between Marxist-Leninist frameworks and Western empirical methods.

This phenomenon was a unique product of the early globalisation of scholarship, where political, ideological, and academic forces converged to create a brief “dawn” for a global academic community. Though this dawn was fleeting, it served as a vital precursor to the large-scale international academic cooperation that would eventually re-emerge in the post-Cold War era.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Through the Prism and Back: The Poet Daozi and His Holy Ink

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The paper discusses the work of contemporary Christian author Daozi (1956–2025). Taking a postsecular approach, it focuses on interactions between his religious-themed experimental poetry and ink painting. The intersemiotic dynamic observed in selected poem-painting pairs is presented in a conceptual framework of “kenotheotic” writing inspired by theological language and resonating with the figure of hermeneutic circle. I argue that this dynamic is present at three levels: explicit, implicit, and “complicit”—meaning the reader’s participation in the spiritual experience facilitated by the textual-visual interplay.

本文以“後世俗”視角探討當代基督徒詩人島子（1956–2025）的創作，聚焦其宗教實驗詩與“聖水墨”繪畫之間的跨媒介互動。作者選取若干詩畫組合，分析其中的符際動力，並提出“虛己成神”（kenotheotic）這一概念框架——該術語源於神學話語，同時呼應“詮釋學迴圈”的意象，用以闡釋文字與圖像交織所激發的精神經驗。文章指出，這一符際互動機制運作於三個層面：顯性表達、隱性意涵，以及“共構”維度——即讀者在詩畫互文的引導下，主動參與並共同完成這一精神實踐。

Keywords: Daozi, experimental poetry, Christian poetry, ink painting, kenotheosis

關鍵詞： 島子，實驗詩歌，基督教詩歌，水墨畫，虛己成神

Introduction: A Poet Who Searched for God and Found Ink

‘And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love’ (Corinthians 13:13)—thus reads, in English translation,¹ four columns of Chinese cursive characters now hanging in my living room—my little sacred relic of Daozi’s 島子 ‘holy ink’. I received it from Daozi when I visited him in his home-cum-atelier in the outskirts of Beijing in July 2025, just six weeks before his death from leukaemia. A devout Christian, after retiring from his position as a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts & Design at Tsinghua University, he used to copy excerpts from the Bible as his daily prayer. This brought him peace and consolation.

Everything else in his work-and-living room testified to his commitment to ‘faith, hope, and love’: impressive paintings, some of them finished, some still in the making—among them the ‘Last Supper’ (最後晚餐) series and several pieces responding to Russian aggression against Ukraine; bookshelves bursting at the seams with all sorts of ambitious readings on art, literature, philosophy, and religion; scattered photographs of Daozi with his graduate students looking at him with affection and admiration; and Daozi himself—frail as he was, but generous, open-minded, and open-hearted, showing no signs of impatience and skilfully masking his physical exhaustion. We even started discussing a prospective exhibition of his works in Poland.

I had known Daozi earlier primarily as a poet and the translator of *Selected Poetry of the American Confessional School* (美國自白派詩選; 1987), which had had some impact on the development of Chinese verse in the late 1980s. He was one of the most original experimenters in the era of ‘cultural fever’, recognised as a proponent of what was referred to as ‘metaphysical verse’ (玄學詩). This was a highly conceptual type of poetry that drew on various religious traditions just as it did in other domains of human experience—an approach that Feng Tianhai 馮天海 associated with Lu Xun’s 魯迅 conception of ‘grabism’ (拿來主義); that is, a selective, pragmatic incorporation of elements of different cultures (Feng 1989, 72–73).

This tendency is exemplified by Daozi’s early poem ‘A Wall of Pines, Animal Bones, and Dusk’ (松、獸骨、冬日黃昏的牆), wherein the I-speaker ‘touches the limits of language’ (觸摸到語言的邊界) and seeks to push them through philosophical acrobatics learned, presumably, from Daoist *qingtán* 清談 (‘pure conversations’), set in ‘a metaphysical empty place in a pine forest’ (在玄思的松林空地; Daozi 2015, 10). This place is subsequently populated by shepherds from Bethlehem and soon turns into a forest of crosses: Golgotha.

¹ All quotes from the Bible are from the New International Version.

Overwhelmed by this quirky profusion, some critics asked whether he had gone too far in reinventing the genre (Feng 1989, 74; cf. Jian 1989, 111).

In the 1990s, after Daozi's coming to faith, this lay literary metaphysics gradually evolved into spiritual poetry par excellence. The transformation coincided with his turn to visual art, which became his main field of creative activity for the next thirty years. Although he continued writing, his poems never achieved the popularity of his paintings, created in the distinctive style he named *shengshuimo* 聖水墨—a term usually translated as 'saintism ink painting' but that I prefer to render as 'holy ink painting', which I explain below.

It was only in 2015, with the publication of *Selected Poems of Daozi 1982-2015* (島子詩選 1982-2015) that literary circles, especially those sympathetic to Christianity, renewed their interest in his verse and attempted to reintroduce it to a broader audience (e.g., Rong 2017, 2019; Chen 2018). Yet, as these scholars emphasise, such efforts faced difficulties due to the marginal status of religious poetry in contemporary China: on the one hand, it is suppressed by censorship for ideological reasons; on the other, it is dismissed by most critics as uninteresting or doctrinaire—two judgments that, as I hope to demonstrate, are certainly not applicable to Daozi's work.

In addition to thirty-nine of Daozi's poems, this beautifully designed black-covered volume, released by the Hong Kong-based China International Culture (中國國際文化), includes fifteen reproductions of his paintings from the 'God-Gold' (上帝與黃金) series, which further enrich the reading experience. Although the visual material does not directly correspond to the poems' content, the reader can get a sense of how these two modes of artistic expression complement each other. To facilitate such intermedial reading, Daozi had been considering another volume in which poems and paintings would be directly paired as they were in some of his exhibitions.² Sadly, he did not live to finish the project. That said, in 2019 the Maitian Theological Seminary released an exquisite album titled 'Passover' (逾越) featuring eighty-one religious paintings, among which an attentive reader will find several pieces that share titles and themes with his poetry.

Something that struck me at first was the contrast between Daozi's fragmented, impressionistic writing and focused, almost ascetic, meditative paintings. The poems seemed highly visual and spatial, as if they were sketches for abstract paintings, while the paintings, conversely, resembled lyrical micronarratives that could accompany confessional poetry. In other words, if he had painted the way he wrote and written the way he painted, everything would appear clearer. Yet for some reason, his spiritual experience was distributed between the two media in an opposite, utterly counterintuitive, and therefore incomprehensible, way.

² Personal communication with Daozi. Beijing, 22 July 2025.

Or so I felt until I read one poem that shed more light on how he understood poetry, painting, and the relationship between them.

‘Homage to My Mother Tongue’ (向我的母語致敬, 2002) is a poem that, as I try to show through close reading in the next section, refers to three different ‘mother tongues’. One is obviously Mandarin, Daozi’s spoken and written mother tongue in which he created poetry. The second is ink, a visual mother tongue of Chinese art, and with which he painted. The third is the Logos, a pre-language which underlies and nourishes the other two, albeit in distinct ways adapted to their respective affordances. These two are, obviously, anything but disjunctive and remain intertwined at various levels, ‘Homage’ itself being one example. Written in natural language, it speaks of ink, thus referring the reader to poetry’s ‘sister art’ and urging them to reconsider the relationship between the two.

Read along these lines, the poem also offers intriguing reflections on the long-standing debate about the (mis)alignment between Chinese culture and Western(ised) religion, dating back to the so-called ‘Chinese Rites Controversy’. Although this issue has been widely researched, it has not been adequately addressed in practice since it erupted in the seventeenth century. What seemed to have become an enduring silent consensus—a reasonable degree of acculturation in aesthetics and symbolism—has recently been repeatedly abused in Xi Jinping’s strategy of a systemic ‘Sinicisation’ (中國化) of religions, effectively amounting to political infiltration.³ Daozi (2018) himself prefers to speak of *chujinghua* 處境化—a term that can be translated as contextualisation, with ‘context’ understood as a particular situation be it of an individual or of a group of people—rather than ‘acculturation.’ Thus, he gives it a

³ Elaborating on this topic would easily lead us far beyond the scope of this paper and literary studies in general; therefore, I decided not to discuss it in the main body of the text. Instead, I refer the reader to a recent study (Klejnowski-Różycki 2024) published in *Studia Oecumenica* that discusses the modern reinterpretations and implications of the Jesuits’ method for the current relationships between the Chinese state and the Catholic church, in which Pope Francis’s (a Jesuit himself) consensual attitude toward the PRC authorities played a crucial role.

My experience confirms the author’s observations and his skeptical assessment of the situation. To illustrate the problem, let me briefly recall some conversations I had with Christians in different regions of China during my fieldwork between April and July 2025. Those representing the so-called “patriotic church” (in contradistinction to the illegal underground church) often invoked the Jesuit missions, with their focus on reconciling theology with local traditions and mentality, as a model for Chinese Christians to follow. A Catholic priest in Xiangtan showed me a photo exhibition on the church premises. It was mostly photographs of local clergy accompanied by slogans of indigenous religious education next to photographs of Chinese church leaders paying visits to state leaders with excerpts from the latter’s utterances on religion, expressing their support for the idea of freedom of conscience and recognising the religions importance in the development of the society. The church also preserved an old well built in the nineteenth century by French missionaries as an example of collaboration between the priests and local people. A prospective priest in Kunming, in turn, took me to an exhibition of Chinese Christian architecture in Yunnan, emphasising its “Chinese” style in which, reportedly, the government wants to rebuild many other churches across the country. At the entrance to all legally operating churches and Buddhist temples I visited, huge centrally placed posters and banners emphasised the necessity for the “Sinicisation of religions.” In unofficial situations, I heard many critical comments on this policy from both clergy and lay people. In underground or house churches, the opposite tendency is visible, with Westernisation seen as a way of maintaining ideological independence from the party’s ‘main melody’.

more pragmatic, and less ideological, dimension, making it more resistant to systemic manipulation, especially one driven by nationalistic sentiments.

Although Daozi was baptised in the Lutheran Church, which renders most sacraments as purely symbolic practices performed in remembrance of Jesus's acts, his work gravitates towards Catholic- or Orthodox-specific sacramental thinking. This means a belief in God's real presence in certain rituals, for example in the Eucharist, understood as the genuine transubstantiation of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. In a similar vein, Daozi argues that in truly spiritual art this blood of God transforms into ink (and vice versa)—a conviction whose aesthetic and poetological consequences we will trace further (see, for example, Daozi 2019, 2–5; 122–23). As one of the most explicit and most consistently repeated points concerning the connection between his faith and his art, present in almost every self-commentary, it is broadly considered his programmatic statement and discussed in numerous studies on his painting, including Ai's (2015), Zhu's (2015), Chen's (2018), and Dong's (2019).

This is why, instead of the theoretically and ideologically charged 'saintism'⁴ associated with Puritan practice and, on the other hand, a term that risks sounding too reminiscent of pharisaism, I have chosen to translate his *shengshuimo* as 'holy ink', a variation of *shengshui* 聖水, 'holy water' or blessed water used in the liturgy, and for sacraments and exorcisms in some Christian denominations. While Daozi's approach resonates with certain strands of Chinese traditional ink art including, for instance, Confucianist-turned-Buddhist-turned-Daoist Shitao's 石濤 (1642–1707) conceptions of *zunshou* 遵受 and *ziren* 自任⁵, the author himself maintains that Chinese painting, like Chinese culture as a whole, has always lacked this crucial transformative power because there is no real presence behind it to guarantee its vitality. He argues:

The absence of divinity is the greatest deficiency in China's Confucian and Daoist cultures. In neither tradition is there recognition of the one true God who created and completes the universe [...] The idea of redemption—of deification—originates in the mystery of the Word that became flesh. True religion, by contrast, is the only force that remains untouched by the decline of civilisation or by despair over society; it is the power that connects humanity with a greater ultimate reality, with the supernatural.

⁴ In a study included in *Passover*, Dong Lihui 董丽慧 (2019) derives his interpretation of Daozi's work from the multiple definitions of the English word "saintism" as the purported counterpart of the Chinese *sheng* 圣, which is certainly not the case: the counterpart of *sheng* in the Christian context is simply 'saint' or 'holy'. Although Dong makes some interesting observations, especially when he situates Daozi against the history of East-West interactions including the Jesuits' presence in China, his roundabout argumentation is flawed, if only because it suggests that Daozi conceived his project in terms from English, which were only secondarily and not very precisely translated into Chinese. Daozi himself approved of the term 'saintism', but his definitions of it hardly have anything to do with the meaning of this word in English. It is contemplative rather than ideological.

⁵ For a comprehensive explanation of these concepts, see Man (2019).

[...] In the Confucian, Daoist, and Chan (Zen) traditions, I see no such spiritual strength (Daozi 2018).⁶

This is, he believes, quite regrettable—especially since ink is a particularly efficient medium for transcendence, owing to its inherent performativity, as if ritual itself were perpetuated in it:

However, as a vessel—as a carrier of spirituality—the brushwork and brush techniques of the Chinese ink tradition can themselves embody the metaphysical, the transcendent, and the spiritual dimension of the soul. The interplay of black and white, dry and wet, dense and light, parched and moist, sparse and full; the ever-changing freedom of lines, their misty and ethereal qualities—all these can convey the sacred Way and manifest spiritual vitality. In its writing, in its movement, the brush allows light to clarify the realm of the unconcealed, giving form to the sublime of the spirit (Daozi 2018).

The perfect form was waiting for the ideal content, and Daozi saw his role as that of the one who came to bring them together, to fill the empty vessel with the only kind of substance capable of realising its potential.

At the same time, his poetry was also waiting for something. Already in 1992, as a Christian neophyte, in his ‘Ars Poetica’ (詩藝), he had written:

A poem: along the byways of meaning, tracking lost feet
 A poem: lifted high by ascending lifeblood, resounding as a dark river
 A poem: like a viper crossing the road—with each escape shedding a layer of skin

Beauty is not enough. A poem—
 Waits for her: grave trees, eaglewood, planed into an adorned zither: for no reason
 Waits for her: the face of an abyss, wind rising, a manger upholding the Holy Infant:
 groundless.

一首詩：沿著語義的歧路，追蹤丟失的腳
 一首詩：被攀登的血液高舉，響成暗河
 一首詩：像蝰蛇過路，逃一次脫皮一層

美是不夠的。一首詩
 等她：墓樹，沉香，刨成一案錦瑟：無端
 等她：淵面，生風，馬槽托起聖嬰：無稽
 (Daozi 2015, 17–18)

⁶ All translations of Daozi are mine.

After this work, Daozi fell silent, or at least failed to create a poem that satisfied him enough to include it in the anthology, for eight years. The next piece in *Selected Poems* is dated 2000, which indicates that he was indeed awaiting some kind of change.

We do not know the identity of ‘her’, but the image of the infant in the stable and the context of Daozi’s later work suggest that it is Holy Mary. She is the one who gave birth to the incarnate Logos—the eternal Word that became flesh and blood to redeem humanity and its confused language(s). As an ungraspable, unreasonable and ‘groundless’ reality (cf. the famous adage repeated by saints: *credo quia absurdum*), it feels too vague to constitute a consistent space of reference for humans.

Thus, the ‘sacramental’ ink painting representing the blood that ‘lifts high’, and in a way, helps bridge the distance between the two, facilitating communication between heaven and earth. But this is not its only function, and the dynamic that unfolds between the two arts, as we shall soon see, is far more complex and fascinating. The close reading of ‘Homage to My Mother Tongue’ paves the way for reflection on this relationship, followed by analyses of two text-painting pairs: ‘Annunciation’ (天使報喜, poem [2015], painting [2010]) and ‘Song of Consolation’ (安慰之歌, poem [2000], painting [2013]).

I will approach both texts and paintings in a postsecular way,⁷ engaging extensively with Daozi’s religious experience and the theological thinking that informs his artistic activity. This is, however, only partly a deliberate strategy and partly a natural response to the specific dynamic pattern that emerges within the universe of Daozi’s work in which a kinetics I identify as ‘kenotheotic’ unfolds at three different levels: explicit, implicit, and ‘complicit’. The last of these entails inviting the reader/viewer to participate in the peculiar sacrament of art, in which temporality becomes suspended, offering a foretaste of transcendence.

This, of course, does not mean suspending intellectual rigor. On the contrary, once we find ourselves inside, balance and restraint are required to remain clear-headed in the fast-spinning hermeneutic circles formed by the poems and paintings, the human and the divine, heaven and earth—as we follow Daozi in his attempt to carry out ‘an integration-within-deconstruction of existence with an ultimate concern suffused with religious sentiment’ (懷著宗教情感的終極關切，先對存在進行解構中的綜合), a goal he set for himself as a young poet, and for Chinese literature at large (quoted in Shen 1992, 109).

⁷ In Ni Zhang’s (2016, 51–52) definition: “Postsecular reading asks the reader to encounter the world and human lives as radically more than what secular modernity has made them—even more than what a text, given its inevitable limits and situatedness, may possibly imagine—and to embrace a rigorous openness to the wholeness of reality, including the multiplicity of faith commitments, the alterity of religious traditions beyond the model of confessional communities, and the intertwined power relations of religion and politics.”

Becoming Ink: 'Homage to My Mother Tongue'

Before presenting my translation of 'Homage to My Mother Tongue', let me anticipate the problem of (the absence of) reflexive pronouns that first appears in the second line and may disturb the reader's reception of the poem. This rendition mirrors the original Chinese phrasing, which, albeit less conspicuously than in English, suggests that the two 'you' (你) pronouns that appear in the same sentence as its subject and object may signify different persons or, alternatively, that the reality they represent may be non-self-referential. Thus, I encourage the reader to approach the text first through its hybrid imagery—which arguably holds the key to reconstructing a semblance of narrative within it and unraveling the mystery of 'you'.

Homage to My Mother Tongue

You nurture me, adrift, a word
You open you, show me: I become water

You nurture me, and I keep watch
on the square of your amniotic fluid

You split you open
you split open the good fengshui of mountains and oceans, call me, grant me
the Son of God, a mustard seed, and a vineyard.

You bore sand in the Yellow Springs
you break hairpins in the Azure Heavens
with water-sleeves you steady a bamboo horse

Wandering—
Wandering cornels bloom from every cornice

For in the beginning was you, and its fate was like yours

A grass-eating widowed mother wipes her wandering child in the mirror
On your chili-rubbed nipples, the law of hunger is abolished

Hateful blood through a thousand years, a protean fake eye—
how could it behold an aunt's broken soul, commemorate a nephew's desperate death?

Even if—
the tortoise shell of divination breaks apart
even if—
the beasts and hornets swarm to devour her

You nourish me, adrift, a word.
You open you, show me: I become ink.

《向我的母語致敬》

你懷有我，遊弋，一個詞
你打開你，給我看：我變成水

你懷有我，我便守在
你羊水的方塊上眺望

你掰開你
掰開山海的好風水，喚我，賜我
神子、芥子和葡萄園

你黃泉錐沙
你碧落折釵
水袖攙扶竹馬

流離-----
流離的茱萸遍插飛簷

可太初有你，其命如你

一個食草寡母，擦拭她鏡中的遊子
在你塗抹辣椒的乳頭，饑餓的律法廢止

恨血千年，一隻無常假眼
怎能見識姨母的斷魂，祭侄絕境

即便——
卜龜的脊背完全破裂
即便——
走獸，螞蜂哄然將她分食

你懷有我，遊弋，一個詞
 你打開你，給我看：我變成墨
 (Daozi 2015, 41-42)

The poem focuses on two key notions: water (*shui* 水) in the second line and ink (*mo* 墨) in the final line. Together, they form ink wash (*shuimo* 水墨). The boundary between the domains of water and ink runs through line 13, which builds on the opening sentence of St John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1). Here, it is transformed into a lyrical invocation to 'you', the clearest signal that the poem has more than one layer, and behind the eponymous 'mother tongue' more than just one reality is concealed. This line is like the gate of Eden, through which Adam and Eve left the garden, marking a sudden transition or retreat, as the verb *liuli* 流離 specifies—from bright, semi-mythical imagery to dark apocalyptic visions.

The first part seems relatively clear, at least at the beginning. It can be read as an account of the poet's intimate relationship with the Chinese language, which functions as his metaphorical mother. As *homo loquens*, he has been nourished in its womb, shaped by the surrounding discourse and his sensibility chiseled by it.

This is an idealised, innocent picture, with no signs of the broadly taken 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (in Paul Ricoeur's [1965] term) that has dominated Western modern and postmodern philosophy and was gradually permeating into the Chinese cultural discourse at the time. In this linguistic paradise, we will not sense, for instance, Lacanian mistrust in language's inherently oppressive 'fatherly' structures.⁸ Speech and script also seem to remain in perfect harmony—without any rupture, like those revealed by deconstructionists, to recall Derrida's (1983) interpretation of the invention of the script as an ambiguous *pharmakon*—a medicine and a toxin at once.

The little squares in amniotic waters are most likely an allusion to Chinese characters, which can be inscribed in square matrices, or perhaps even to early movable type carved on cubic blocks. 'Mountains and seas', in turn, evoke the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海經)—one of the richest sources of Chinese mythology, presented in the form of a quasi-geographical atlas. Yet something unexpected happens. When this atlas opens up, what springs out of it are not dragons or phoenixes, but biblical images: the Son of God—Jesus, the mustard seed—an allegory of powerful faith (Matthew 17:20), and a vineyard, symbolising the world which God 'rents' to humans (Matthew 21:33).

⁸ On Lacan's concept of the Father, see, e.g., his seminars *Psychoses* (Lacan 1993).

This is where we come close to the ideas of the Jesuit figurists and their conviction that all ancient civilisations contain dispersed threads of the History of Salvation, which began in Eden and culminated in the death and resurrection of Christ—the incarnated Logos. It is to Matteo Ricci and his successors, well versed in Chinese philosophy, that we owe, for instance, the translation of Logos in John’s Gospel as *Dao* 道. Performing imaginative operations on Chinese characters, they used to split them into components from which they read biblical stories. For example, *chuan* 船 (eight 八 people 口 on a ship 舟) was interpreted as an encapsulation of the idea of Noah’s ark, on which eight people were saved along with the animals. The hexagram Tai 泰 was said to resemble three angels with spread wings attacking the Triune Lord (represented by continuous parallel lines), thereby encapsulating the story of Satan’s rebellion, from which suffering on earth began. In their culture-bridging effort, they even managed to portray Jesus as a Confucian sage.⁹ All this was meant to convince the Chinese that they had been an integral part of the divine plan from the very beginning and peacefully bring them back into God’s embrace.

Obviously, one will not find any consistent argument of this kind in Daozi’s impressionistic poem. If anything, there is a vague intuition of some common, transcendental source of all languages, which renders each of them capable of expressing only a limited part of its all-encompassing message. It is, I believe, in many ways closer to Walter Benjamin’s metaphorical vision of pure language as a broken vessel whose fragmented pieces represent particular natural languages, than to the Jesuit’s laborious quasi-etymological constructions. Although, to my knowledge, he never explicitly credited Benjamin among his inspirations, echoes of—or, more safely speaking, resemblances to—Benjaminian thinking can also be detected in the next stanza, where references to calligraphy return.

Zhui sha 錐沙 (‘to draw on sand with an awl’) and *zhe chai gu* 折釵股 (‘folded hairpin’) are brush techniques.¹⁰ Daozi merges them with images from Chinese mythology into four-character quasi-classical idioms, translated here as: ‘[you] bore sand in the Yellow Springs’ and ‘[you] break hairpins in the Azure Heavens’. ‘You’ is an agent gradually drilling through these Chinese visions of the netherworld, as if attempting to reveal some deeper truth that lies beneath them and can only occasionally surface as ephemeral epiphanies. Still, even these transient epiphanies are suppressed by something—possibly Chinese culture itself or, more precisely, an aesthetic overlay that has accumulated over the centuries—lavish performances (the water sleeves of opera actors) and ornamental architecture (the particular shape of roof eaves) are two examples, obscuring the fact that ‘its fate’ has long been intertwined with the pre-existent ‘you’.

⁹ For a comprehensive study on Jesuits’ figurists and their engagement with Chinese classics, esp. *Yijing*, see Wei 2020.

¹⁰ Tutorials showing these techniques are available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAJZBm8xj2o&themeRefresh=1> (*zhui sha*);
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRUZaG-NU6U> (*zhe chai gu*).

Throughout the first part of the poem, the referent of ‘you’ subtly shifts from the oral/written mother tongue toward the prelingual Logos—a universal reality that precedes all forms of expression. Thus, the poem gradually evolves into a prayer, and the initial contemplation of Eden turns into a conversation with its Creator.

This interpretation may explain the absence of ‘self’ (自己) in the poem. Without delving into theological detail, God is often described by religious and non-religious philosophers alike as a simple being, in whom essence equals existence;¹¹ thus, there can be no split within Him that would create conditions for self-referentiality. In other words, God cannot even hypothetically stand outside Him(self) to speak of Him(self), because He is everything everywhere continuously.¹² Moreover, in Christian thought, He is immanently ‘extrovert’, that is, constituting permanent emanation, although there may be disagreement on whether this emanation refers to the way He has made the world as a ‘natural extension’ of Him(self), as Gnostics believe, or, in more orthodox Christian terms, whether it occurs only among God’s three hypostases known as the Holy Trinity.

In any case, even toward the end of the first part of the poem, we can see the I-speaker’s growing resentment toward Chinese civilisation—a sentiment characteristic of a large group of young intellectuals, Daozi’s peers, in the 1980s, which found its most explicit expression in the famous TV documentary *River Elegy* (河殤, 1986) created by Wang Luxiang 王魯湘 and Su Xiaokang 蘇曉康, this latter also sharing his strong interest in Christianity.¹³ Postulating the necessity of the Yellow (Chinese) River’s connection to the Blue (Western) Ocean, they highlighted China’s dormant passivity and vulnerability to totalitarianism. One of the reasons behind the crisis they pointed out was the nation’s mindset shaped by Confucian legacy, a claim that is also present in the afore cited utterance of Daozi diagnosing the cause of the weaknesses of Chinese tradition.¹⁴

¹¹ An extensive discussion of *Divine Simplicity* is found in Vallicella 2023.

¹² I use the capitalised pronoun ‘He’ with reference to God for convenience, since the English language does not yet have an efficient way to address God’s sexlessness. There is a tendency in theological publications not to replace God with pronouns at all, but this is often more confusing than helpful, and I doubt it can undo the masculinised image of God in most people’s minds, especially since the numerous references to God as the Father have stayed untouched.

¹³ Su Xiaokang speaks of his and his wife’s complex relationship with Christian faith after emigrating to the US in Su 2023.

¹⁴ The series can be watched at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZocZ1IfJQ4>. A shortened version with English subtitles is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_1PGq9NPxQ&t=2s. See also a related book published by the makers of the series: Su and Wang 1988. Studies discussing the work and its background and reception include: Chen 1992, Ma 1996, KasareHo 2020.



Fig. 1. *The Blue Rider* (source: https://www.m-artcenter.com/zh/artist/dao_zi/)¹⁵

His concern about the spiritual condition of the modern world is expressed through the Eliotean wasteland imagery in the second part of 'Homage', as well as in many other poems, which, Daozi admits, are extensively inspired by Eliot as a religious author and critic of modern reality (Daozi and Hao 2013, 36–37). These include 'Mental Asylum' (瘋人院) written in 1985 and revised thirty years later, wherein the reality of the 'red dream' (鮮紅的夢) is portrayed as a dystopian, ghostly grotesque, with notes of the national anthem 'Arise! Arise!' (起來起來) emanating from a water closet. Similarly, in 'Elegy on the Jinmen Explosion' (津門大爆炸挽歌) he offers an uncompromising report on the explosion in

¹⁵ Daozi's paintings were reproduced with permission of his daughter Wang Geshi 王歌诗. I thank Wang for her consent.

Tianjin in 2015. This is also evident in ‘Sayings of an Empty Chair’ (空椅子的諺語), which refers to the symbolic empty chair during the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in the absence of the imprisoned laureate, Daozi’s late friend, Liu Xiaobo 劉曉波. The chair evokes associations with symbols such as an hourglass, a kicking horse, and black hoofs that trample everything. Liu Xiaobo is like the Blue Rider, portrayed in the painting ‘White Horse and Blue Rider’ (白馬與藍騎士, fig. 1)—probably inspired by Vassily Kandinsky, the initiator of the Blaue Reiter group—bucked off a ghostly white, X-ray picture-like horse. This mysterious persona also appears in the poem ‘Sacred Image’ (聖像) as an ‘uninvited companion’ (未被邀請的同路人) on the battlefield between night and fog.¹⁶

‘Homage’ itself most likely refers to the Mao era, marked by the Great Hunger and the subsequent Cultural Revolution, which severed family connections, as well as to the later Tiananmen bloodshed, which left many mothers mourning their children. The broken turtle shells—ancient divination tools—signify a broken future. On the other hand, as the medium of the earliest forms of Chinese script, they may also hint at the end of (Chinese) language or at least its written form, which has exhausted itself and can no longer contain the gloomy reality; or, perhaps worse, it has been partly complicit in its poor condition. Over all of this, a ‘protean eye’ keeps watch—resembling the Orwellian Big Brother, whose gaze paralyses the society of the communist dystopia, a diabolic imitation the Eye of Providence that safeguarded Eden and—Daozi trusted—still has not turned away from humans. Asked when he had become attracted to Christianity, he gave a remarkable answer: ‘When I realised that Marxism can’t be a religion’.¹⁷

Read secularly, ‘Homage’ brings to mind a poem written by Czesław Miłosz during his exile in America, ‘My Faithful Mother Tongue’ (Moja wierna mowa), which Daozi had likely read, given Miłosz’s celebrity status among Chinese poetry circles in the 1980s and 1990s,¹⁸ although it is difficult to say whether the intertextuality was intended. Miłosz addresses the Polish language as the ‘only homeland’ that has remained to him away from his native land. He recalls how he loyally served it: ‘I set before you little bowls of colours / so you could have your birch, your cricket, your finch / as preserved in my memory’. He did so until one day he realised, just like Daozi, that: ‘you are a tongue of the debased, / of the unreasonable, hating themselves / even more than they hate other nations, / a tongue of informers, / a tongue of the confused, / ill with their own innocence’. Hesitant and resigned, in the end, however, he concludes: ‘Faithful mother tongue, / perhaps after all it’s I who must try to save you. / So I will continue to set before you little bowls of colours / bright and pure if possible,

¹⁶ Daozi 2015, 78.

¹⁷ Personal communication with Daozi, Beijing, 22 July 2025.

¹⁸ On Miłosz’s reception in China, see Krenz 2022, chapter 2.

/ for what is needed in misfortune is a little order and beauty' (Miłosz 1996, 201 – 204; trans. C. Miłosz and R. Pinsky).

And so, in a sense, does Daozi, although his bowls are not metaphorical but physical—filled with ink, which he seems to perceive as a more reliable medium, less affected by the omnipresent hate and confusion. In this, he resembles Anselm Kiefer, one of the artists he respected most,¹⁹ whose monumental works (especially) from the 1970s and 1980s were intended as a remedy to the hypocrisy of postwar discourse in Germany. Among Kiefer's most moving pieces are those dedicated to Paul Celan, a Romania-born Jewish poet who wrote in the language of his parents' murderers.

That notwithstanding, we cannot ignore that physical ink, in Daozi's conception, also has a metaphysical dimension. The I-speaker perceives this dimension when 'you'—understood here arguably as the incarnate Logos—opens up again. This lets us suspect that it is indeed nothing other than blood, flowing in God's own body. The water and (ink-as-)blood, set on the opposite poles of the poem, take us to the scene of Jesus's death on the cross. After he breathed his last, a soldier pierced his flank with a spear, and water and blood gushed from his heart. Daozi (2018) invokes the Letter of John to explain the relationship between the two:

This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement (1 John 5:6–9).

Still, although water and blood/ink share the same source—God or Logos—and remain in agreement, in Daozi's poem they do not flow out synchronously. The 'I' first becomes water, which we may interpret as his initial immersion in the element of language. One cannot simply liberate oneself from it by reaching for a different tool of expression. The ink, which came later (in the poem as well as in the author's life), will always be, to some extent, diluted by the discourse. It will always be 'telling' us something rather than relying on pure contemplation, which is unavailable to human consciousness, implicitly shaped by narrative structures. Although it has a vector opposite to water/language, which disperses, and instead pulls the dispersed threads toward the single point beyond the horizon, it can never achieve its ultimate goal. What it can do is give the viewer's mind momentum, driving it in that direction—that is, toward 'integration-within-deconstruction'.

We can see these different dynamics of the language (of poetry) and image (of ink art) at play in some poem-painting pairs that process the same motifs in contrasting manners. One of the most intriguing is 'Annunciation'. The eponymous poem is nearly symmetrical to

¹⁹ Daozi's lectures (text and video) on Kiefer are found in Daozi 2017.

‘Homage’ but much more concrete, describing the same themes in physical rather than metaphysical terms. The painting, in turn, is characterised by frugal imagery which condenses the theological-philosophical reflection into a moment of aesthetic illumination. Together, they allow us to trace the consequences of the poet’s ‘becoming ink’, which ‘Homage’ only vaguely foreshadows by narrating the process of the suspension of language by means of language itself.

Prism and Focus: ‘Annunciation’

This poem encapsulates the life of Mary. It begins with the image of a prism placed between the stable in Bethlehem and the Way of the Cross on Calvary, and it ends with the image of a heart, which functions like a focus. This focus gathers the diffracted bunches of her pain—as Simeon predicted shortly after Jesus’s birth in a prophecy addressed to Mary: ‘a sword will pierce your own soul too’ (Luke 2:34). Notably, these two images occupy positions analogous to water and ink in ‘Homage’. Halfway between them, like the line from John’s Gospel in ‘Homage’, runs a quote from the Gospel of Luke (1:38): ‘Let this happen to me according to your word’. What the famously obscure John’s Gospel phrased in mystical terms, Luke—the most ‘scientific’ of the four Evangelists and, as tradition has it, a physician by profession—renders as a clear human declaration: Mary’s fiat that made the incarnation of the eternal Word/Logos possible.

The full text reads:

Annunciation

Between the manger and Calvary, through
a many-faceted prism, He, constant in freedom,
stroke by stroke, traces—

Light passes through the white gate—His eternal
tangle of threads, cross-stitch upon cross-stitch, embroidering

the golden ring above the girl’s head.

‘Let this happen to me
according to your word’.

And let the truth be born
 through the hollow of her ear, like a spring river stretching a thousand miles
 to irrigate the desert: beauty, from her body,

unfurls lilies, cluster upon cluster,
 a fragrance of ten thousand arrows piercing the heart—

cluster upon cluster, of pain.

《天使報喜》

在馬槽和苦路之間，假借
 多面棱鏡，祂，恒定著自由
 一筆，一筆，摹寫——

光，穿過白門，祂永有的
 亂針繡，十字繡，繡出

那個女孩頭頂的金環

‘情願照你的話
 成就在我身上’。

而真理，情願從她的耳穴
 分娩，猶如春江千里
 灌溉沙漠：美，從她身上

漫捲百合，一束束
 萬箭穿心的芬芳

一束束陣痛
 (Daozi 2015, 79)

In the context of the rest of the poem, the prism in line two can be interpreted as a place in which the human and the divine meet. To interact with His creation, God—the simple being who contains all, like the purest white light—‘bends’ and ‘diffracts’ when touching the surface of the human world. The transparent white beam splits into single beams, each of a different colour, and thus becomes visible to our eyes. We perceive it as beauty and further process it, using the resulting colours to create our own art. In this sense, beauty is an epiphany, and

aesthetic experience is the way we share in the divine. The diffracted white light embroiders an aureole over Mary's head—an ornamental crown that is simultaneously a symbol of sanctity, the alignment of her will with God's will, and her voluntary participation in His plan of redemption.

This prismatic effect, however, seems to be a kind of beauty that is specific to one medium: namely, language. Notably, the making of the aureole lasts only as long as the angel's conversation with Mary and ends as soon as she pronounces the last sentence. After that key phrase, she falls silent for the rest of the Gospel, with three exceptions: the *Magnificat* she sings to her aunt, Elizabeth, shortly after the angel's visit (largely a compilation of Psalms); a few words of reproach when young Jesus disappears during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem; and later, during the wedding at Cana of Galilee, when she persuades her son who is already approaching thirty to do his first public miracle.

During the three years of his active ministry, Mary says nothing. It is as if she does not want to disperse the living Logos, diffract it into her own words, which, like drops of water, might turn it into eye-catching little rainbows that distract people, each pointing in a different direction. Instead, she transforms herself into a steady medium of truth, which flows through her body concentratedly—the closer to Calvary and the quieter she becomes, the denser it is, until it pierces the heart (both her son's and hers) when she stands under the cross, as we read in the final line. Thus, she radically interrupts the process of the ultimate diffraction of Logos.

Daozi simulates this process elsewhere—in a poem that, quite symptomatically, closes the volume. For, as he repeated after Wittgenstein in our conversation: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent' (Wittgenstein 1922, 90).²⁰ The work's title, *Chengming zhi jing* (澄明之境), should arguably be understood idiomatically as 'utmost transparency'. However, contrary to what the title suggests, it is one of the longest poems in the book, and arguably one of the least clear, consisting of scattered images such as the 'photograph' of Jesus on the Shroud of Turin, Moses's staff splitting the Red Sea, migratory birds, electronic chips, Jesus's cornea, and more. In other words, we encounter an intricate pattern of diffracted beams on paper—a full spectrum of God—but we are still unable to 'compress' it into a single Essence. We can at most rearrange it into different mosaics.

By contrast, consider the ink painting titled 'Annunciation' (fig. 2), which predates the poem by five years. In it, we see only two distinct elements against a deep blue background: Mary's head and the angel's wing. There's no sign of the soothingly 'diffracted' beauty found in the poem. Instead, Mary appears as if she were struck by the wing, or at least bent to avoid it, or slanted by the air current it caused. With a bright circle around her head, she resembles a

²⁰ Personal communication with Daozi, Beijing, 22 July 2025.

candle from other paintings by Daozi—especially the ‘Searching for God’s Heartbeat’ (尋找上帝的心跳) series—which could easily die down, but it will not, because God loves what is weak, ‘a bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out’ (Isaiah 42:3). This is, as Daozi noted in his reflection on Chinese civilisation, where God’s generous omnipotence can be revealed.



Fig. 2: *Annunciation* (source: <http://doc.sina.cn/?id=comos:fzihnep5314612>)

The image may alternatively be interpreted as the letter Omega, a frequently recurring motif in his work, symbolising the eschaton, but also—in his conception—the uterus, ‘containing within it the love of the Virgin who conceives Christ. In fact, the love of Christ and the love of the Virgin are one and the same: both are manifestations of God’s holy love’ (Daozi 2018).

The feathered upper limb of the divine messenger is the same as that attached to the book that soars above the boundless waters like the Spirit, *Ruah* at the dawn of the world in Daozi’s painting ‘Truth Will Set You Free’ (真理必令你得自由). In a single instant, we are confronted with both beginning and end. Everything in between, narrated in the Gospel and later, in Daozi’s own poem, is reenacted by the artist’s brush: the flow and thickness of the strokes trace his hand’s minute movements, making the painter’s body itself a medium.

Yet Daozi remains a humble medium. He does not claim to fully recreate the Source. Had he tried, he likely would have stuck to the traditional monochromatic style—whose perceived

modesty, seen in this light, becomes a paradoxical testimony to human hubris. After all, can a human being produce something as simple and self-contained—and simultaneously all-encompassing—as God? Or, even if one could, out of divine inspiration, will others be capable of ‘retrieving’ God out of it? Therefore, against the long-standing Chinese monochromatic bias, Daozi uses colours. He explains:

As for colour, since the time of Wang Wei, literati painters have tended to look down upon the rich gold-and-green palette. Thus, in Chinese painting, ink and water alone came to constitute the entire colour system. I believe the greatest problem here is that the ‘Southern School’ completely abandoned colour. Although it is said that ‘ink contains five colours’, these are, after all, only ‘five colours’, which can’t miraculously represent everything (Daozi 2018).

In his Bible-informed colour code, brownish red signifies wine transformed into Jesus’s blood, red signifies sacrifice, and blue signifies heaven (Daozi 2018). Sometimes these colours coexist in one painting; other times, the spectrum is spread across a series, emphasising the impossibility of fully undoing the ‘prismatic’ effect of perception shaped by language. Examples include ‘Red Martyrdom’ (紅色殉道圖), ‘White Martyrdom’ (白色殉道圖), and ‘Blue Martyrdom’ (藍色殉道圖)—blood assumes a new hue in each work, symbolically moving from human pain, through purification in Christ’s messianic act, to transfiguration into heavenly spirits.

That said, reading the poem ‘Annunciation’ alongside the so-titled painting, one can experience the (literal) floweriness of the literary narrative. The more precise the language tries to be in its description of the scene, supplementing it with sophisticated metaphors, the more interpretive paths it opens, therefore broadening rather than intensifying the vision. The painting, conversely, reducing the content to two elements and several colours, encapsulates the existent and possible narratives of the event, aiming—if imperfectly—to recreate the divine condition in which actuality equals potentiality.

Descending Words, Ascending Lines: ‘Song of Consolation’

It is certainly not my intention to argue for the superiority of ink painting over poetry or vice versa, and I believe Daozi himself never thought in such terms. The fact that, for a time, he almost entirely switched from writing to the visual arts likely reflects the latter’s better alignment with his changing circumstances and his assessment of reality.

The baptism of water—here, language—along with the symbolism of banishment discussed in the context of ‘Homage’, carries also an intrinsic hope for the spreading of life. It is like

bringing God to people, however flawed the linguistic measures may appear. The baptism of blood (represented by ink), also known as martyrdom—whether a brutal execution or a slow self-immolation—has the opposite vector. It points toward death, its role being to bring people to God: by moving the indifferent ones and paving a spiritual path for those who crave liberation from the earthly, carnal experience. Therefore, what in light of ‘Homage’ might be interpreted as an apophatic turn, phrased by Daozi in secular Wittgensteinian language, here acquires also another dimension: that of participation in the salvific mission.

This dynamic between two types of baptism—of water and of blood—is most clearly visible in the poem-painting pair ‘Song of Consolation’, in which it is a painting that speaks of poetry and not the other way around, as was the case in ‘Homage’ and ‘Annunciation’. The text, written in 2000, takes the form of a litany. Each exhortation begins with the verb ‘console’ (安慰), addressed to the Holy Spirit, also known in Christian tradition as the Consoler. God’s grace is invoked across a wide range of people and their physical and emotional landscapes. The litany begins with an allusion to the myth of Sisyphus: ‘[console] a huge stone’ (巨石), ‘[console] the brother that rolls the stone on the mountain’ (把巨石滾上山的兄弟), ‘[console] his and the stone’s nourishing of spring breeze’ (他和巨石齊心化育春風), and the spring breeze itself, before expanding to encompass the Milky Way, ferries, graduating students, bamboo forest, gardeners, ‘the choir of death’ (死亡合唱團), the ‘morning star of shepherds’ (牧羊人的晨星), withered grass, and ‘the eyes in the manger’ (馬槽裡的眼睛) (Daozi 2015, 37–38).

About a third of the way through the litany, the I-speaker inserts a prayer for the consolatory power for himself. He wants to turn others’ tears into joy and comfort mothers, the poor, and ‘diseases on the shore robbed by the poor’ (貧窮洗劫了岸上的疾病). From this point on, it becomes unclear whether the remainder of the poem continues to request God’s consolation for His creation or instead lists those whom the I-speaker himself would console if granted this spiritual power. The boundary between God and ‘I’ subtly blurs. The diffracted God spreads Him(self) very, very thin, casting Him(self) at the mercy of grammar and syntax, and allowing the stream of language to carry Him through the forking veins and capillary vessels of the world—until, in the last line, He ends up in a manger in Bethlehem and needs to comfort Him(self)...

The painting (fig. 3) depicts the moment when the pleas expressed in the litany are fulfilled: the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles at Pentecost, bringing consolation after the death of their mentor. Seven figures are depicted, who, Daozi (2018) clarifies, represent seven anonymous poets. From their heads, ascending lines (whose bottom-up brush direction is clearly visible) extend toward the upper edge of the painting. As Ai Lei’er 艾蕾爾 observes, this illustrates ‘the process of escaping from the visible world to the invisible world’ (Ai Lei’er 2015, 116). The poets-as-apostles, in a sense, internalise all the vast earthly landscapes they have traversed in their writing alongside the incarnated God, sublimating them within

themselves and becoming one with Him. Again, unlike the poem, the image directs attention toward a focal point beyond the horizon, where everything will ultimately be reintegrated.

In theological terms, the afore discussed works and Daozi's oeuvre at large, position poetry—and language more broadly—as inherently kenotic, whereas painting is theotic. Kenosis literally means the 'self-emptying' of God, here: the Logos's descent into language whose veins split and spread endlessly to nourish the human world. Theosis denotes the deification of the worldly, made possible by the death of the one who is believed to have nailed all past and future human sins to the cross—a messianic act in which Daozi seeks participation, sharing the love and the suffering of the crucified.



Fig. 3. *Song of Consolation* (source: <https://www.wkphc.org/9073/>)

In ‘Harvest’ (收穫), a poetic dialogue with a blind angel of apocalypse, the I-speaker notes that ‘everything that can speak / empties out’ (凡能說話的 / 都掏空了; Daozi 2015, 48–49). The notion of kenosis is thus extended to the entire human race, including the poet himself, emphasising the constant dispersion of language. Yet, it also suggests that each individual is a potential source from which the salvation of the world begins. Thus, speaking and writing constitute, in a sense, a continuation of God’s humble self-abasement, already foreshadowed in the grotesque scene from ‘Ars Poetica’ of a poem chasing its lost feet, which we may interpret both as physical body parts and as rhythmic units (詩腳). In ‘Sacred Image’, in turn, he writes: ‘Why do you have to paint Him? For / an invisible atonement’ (你為何要畫祂? 為了不可見的罪罰; Daozi, 78), hinting at the theotic dimension of the visual art as a necessary completion of the self-humbling verbal activity; again, as in ‘Ars Poetica’, where the mutilated poem can only be ‘lifted high’ by blood—that is, by ink in Daozi’s artistic universe.

This is not to say that language can never attempt to point upward, and Daozi makes such attempts occasionally, too, albeit skeptically. The best example is arguably one of his most popular poems, ‘Crane’ (鶴), which builds on a relatively straightforward (compared to other writings by Daozi) symbolism, with the crane—in Chen Yun’s (2018) interpretation—being a reference to Jesus. Ironically, though, on the content level, this very poem explicitly speaks of kenosis, or even a kind of hyper-kenosis: a cycle of multiple incarnations in variously gendered bodies, and the downward movement between heaven and earth to “drive the bright moon toward the grassy slopes that sleep naked” (正把皓月驅向裸睡的草坡; Daozi 2015, 66). So, even if the language indeed might have some degree of theotic potential, the author does not appear to be particularly keen on exploring it, seeing the language’s significance elsewhere.

Kenotheosis

Kenotic writing is not a new concept. It has been identified in outwardly religious authors such as Geoffrey Hill (Merriman 2011), as well as those indebted to Christianity in less ‘confessional’ ways, including Dostoyevsky (Sengupta 2021) or Petrarch (Yocum 2013). Nevertheless, it can arguably also be seen as an element of more general secular ‘cryptotheologies of the late modernity’, to use Agata Bielik-Robson’s (2014) term referring to the philosophers in whose work echoes of Jewish worldview can be identified, including Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Emmanuel Levinas or Jacques Derrida. Many postmodern philosophers, influenced by Derridean deconstruction and the Critical Discourse Analysis informed by it, aim to dismantle the Logos as the source of symbolic

violence, seeing language—especially written language—as their ally in the battle against the so-called metaphysics of presence. Others who more or less openly identify as religious thinkers acknowledge the findings of the ‘cryptotheologians’ but tend to perceive them not as the decline of the said metaphysics, but, contrariwise, as a precious, albeit unintended, discovery of Logos’s self-banishment into language, and build a radically kenotic weak theology on it.

This is what Gianni Vattimo did, for example, in reinterpreting Benjamin, whose conception of ‘weak messianism’ constituted one of the crucial inspirations for early postmodern thinkers. (Recall, for instance, Derrida’s famous ‘Tours de Babel’, a creative interpretation of Benjaminian thought on language and translation). In Andrzej Zawadzki’s (2003, 177) words, commenting on Vattimo’s book *Credere di Credere*,

The incarnation of God is an act of ‘weakening’ and unavoidable secularisation inscribed in the very structure of Christian religion [...] Sacrum loses its ‘strong’ character of the absolute otherness, its radical transcendence, as well as its natural—or, rather, naturalistic and violence-based—dimension, as it is seen, in contrast, in the invoked conception of Rene Girard (from *Violence and the Sacred*).

An implication of such a reinterpretation of religion is the adoption of ‘weak’ ethics of mercy, which Vattimo equalises with charity, giving them ‘a new significance of tolerance of plurality’ (Gołąb 2022, 32).

Daozi, however, seems to be neither on the side of the ‘desecrators’ nor of the ‘re-secrators’. While he acknowledged the general spiritual-intellectual mechanics of the postmodern condition, once aptly described by poet Tadeusz Różewicz as ‘falling in all directions simultaneously’ (Różewicz 1976, 119; trans. M.J. Krynski and R.A. Maguire), his poetic kenosis always carries an unassuming mustard seed of painterly theosis, and vice versa. They unlock each other and set each other in motion, creating a complex kenotheotic dynamic.

This semi-neologism is obviously not meant to put forward any theological or doctrinal claims, which far exceeds my competence, and even less so—to impose them on Daozi. Rather, it is a heuristic category which tries to capture the inseparability and concurrence of two dimensions of his oeuvre: its descending and ascending movements. The two are understood here both vertically and horizontally, with ‘descent’ often manifesting itself through expansion of text and associated contexts and its steering away from the Source, while ‘ascent’—through condensation of the image, meant to approximate the Source. They also have their temporal aspect, with kenotic ‘descent’ chronologically preceding theotic ‘ascent’, while being retrospectively interpreted and justified by it.

This dynamic could be translated back into secular poetological terms as a unique form of fusion between the arts. Daozi’s poem-painting pairs, as well as his poetry and art as a whole, can be inscribed in structures resembling the hermeneutic circle: the understanding of one

element adds to a better understanding of the other, which in turn feeds back into a fuller understanding of the first, and so on. This figure of understanding might be applied to many Chinese literati, in whose works text and image have always been connected in a more intricate way than mere ekphrasis—a typical intermedial practice in the West, where a clear distinction between source (painting) and interpretation (poem) is usually maintained.²¹ In ancient China, painting was considered poetry without words, and poetry was regarded painting without forms. Only by grasping both, along with the calligraphy—which allowed poetry to be inscribed into painting as a bridge between the two—could one fulfill the ideal of the literati. Also the work of many modern literati, including those discussed in Paul Manfredi's *Modern Poetry in China: A Visual-Verbal Dynamic* (2014), such as Yan Li 嚴厲 and Che Qianzi 車前子, arguably lends itself to such a hermeneutic-circular interpretation.

However, what is at issue here is not mere understanding in purely intellectual terms. While further reflection along these lines may appeal to literary scholars, it would be too reductionist and would do little justice to Daozi's thirty-year pursuit. A much more important aspect is the fuller spiritual experience enabled by the specific kinetics generated within this circle. Regardless of whether the painting or poem was created first, the number of years that separate them, whether they were intended as a text-image diptych (in most cases, as Daozi told me, they were not)²² or simply refer to the same biblical scene or motif, approaching them in this way mitigates the asynchrony between the kenotic 'descent' and the theotic 'ascent', and the linear temporality partially dissolves in the circular movement. Time becomes trapped and condensed, approximating what one might imagine as an atemporal state.

This, one may say, constitutes a conceptual upgrade to the idea of sacred time as circular 'primordial mythical time made present' (Eliade 1959, 68), in contrast to linearly progressing secular time—a distinction made by anthropologists following Mircea Eliade. In Eliade's conception, circularity allowed people to relive certain events repeatedly, always equally real and original, yet still confined within linear chronology for each cycle. In Daozi's artistic project, absorbing his poetry and painting, we get a foretaste, a simulation of the simultaneity of all events from the History of Salvation as the circle 'spins'—that is, when our mind travels circularly between the two.

Yet, this effect is only possible if the spinning is sufficiently fast, and if the entire energy of reception feeds into this movement rather than into the expansion of the circle, as often happens in a classic hermeneutic circle. It is easy to get carried away while reimagining the

²¹ Chen Yun (2018, 248–49), too, places Daozi's work against the background of the Chinese literati tradition, emphasising its difference from the Western-style thinking in terms of "text *and* painting" rather than the more integral "there's poetry *in* the painting, there's painting *in* poetry; there's language *in* image, there's image *in* language" ("画"中有"诗", "诗"中有"画", "象"中有"言", "言"中有"象").

²² Personal communication with Daozi. Beijing, 22 July 2025.

whole through its details and the details through the newly reimagined whole, and so on, producing interpretations that are increasingly diluted despite their appeal. In Daozi's project, this process is constrained: his circle has a distinct centre—one that gently reigns in escaping thought, keeping it in the same orbit. At this centre, there is nothing but Logos—metaphysically present, undisturbed by its own deconstructions and reconstructions.

The hermeneutic potential of mutual re-readings of poems and paintings is harnessed here to generate spiritual experience, a taste of participation in divine reality. One can scarcely extract more sophisticated constructions beyond 'faith, hope and love' from Daozi's mature work: his poetry is too scrambled to support consistent argument, and his paintings are too straightforward for that. Academic publications typically testify to this, usually limiting themselves to panoramic surveys.²³ Yet, instead of reading 'extensively', one can read Daozi's poems and paintings more intensively, allowing the two temporal dimensions they represent to blur and, potentially, cancel each other out.

Are we witnessing a return to what many see as the tyranny of logocentric structures? Obviously not. Daozi is not setting a trap in the middle of a public square to ensnare confused passers-by in a suspicious game; rather, he is unobtrusively inviting us into a private space of contemplation. It is almost ostentatiously flagged—like a biomedical laboratory or a nuclear reactor: 'Warning: God'. One may pass by unperturbed, wearing a condescending smile—or, one may choose to engage, taking a leap of faith to experience something more, and likewise, leap out whenever it feels appropriate.

Such a fleeting visit may feel awkward, much as it does to go sightseeing in a temple where others are praying, but Daozi probably would not mind hosting a tourist who does not share his faith, if only because he once travelled the same path. He used to explore different religions to collect 'substrates' for his poetic experiments in order to broaden the poetic language, push it beyond conventional limits of expression, and make it capable of addressing what had been not only unknown but also unknowable within the extant grammar of thinking, reflected in the grammar of language.

Undeniably, he succeeded in loosening the strictures of poetic diction, allowing it to embrace a variety of imaginative forms. In doing so, he paved the way for other authors who continued the reinvention of the genre, such as Zang Di 臧棣 and Ya Shi 哑石—two of the most experimental 'grabism'-style innovators. Yet, arguably, it was only an inversion of priorities that allowed Daozi to fulfill his goal, which by that point, ironically, was no longer his goal.

Once he began immersing himself in spiritual reality—a process catalysed by his 'up-lifting' painting—his language began to transcend itself spontaneously, not by expanding across the

²³ One exception is Chen Yun's (2018) discussion of the poem "Crane" (鹤), which is a very specific symbolic work with consistent imagery—a rare thing in Daozi's poetry—and referring, in Chen's interpretation, to Christ.

page, which offers only a flat, limited surface, but by reaching toward another dimension, gently inflecting the reader's mind and increasing sensitivity to diverse frequencies and impulses. This rewiring occurs subtly, each time one attempts to connect the dispersed dots of words, taking a complex detour through the unspeakable and interacting with it in one's own intimate ways.

Recapitulation: Three Dimensions of Kenotheosis

In sum, Daozi's work can be seen as embodying what I deemed kenotheosis in three ways, which I refer to as explicit, implicit, and complicit.

First, he explicitly addresses it in his poetry, reflecting on the incarnation of the Logos and, conversely, considers the deification of humans through Jesus's sacrifice. The former is most clearly pronounced in the poem 'Annunciation', discussed in section 2, where the author reimagines the moment of immaculate conception, when the word became flesh. More obscure references appear in 'Homage to My Mother Tongue' analysed in section 1. There, the incarnation is metaphorically inscribed in the spiritual history of humankind starting from the Christian myth of origins which the author intertwines with references to Chinese cultural symbolism. In 'Song of Consolation', investigated in section 3, it is, in turn, framed as a yearning and prayer for God's fuller and more tangible presence among the people through Holy Spirit. In the closure of 'Homage', a hope is voiced that one's 'becoming ink', that is turning to another form of artistic activity, may bring one closer to such a reconnection, whereas eponymous paintings paired with the other two poems can be seen as manifestations of this belief and attempts to reunite with the Source.

This takes us to the second way in which kenotheosis is present in Daozi's work. Namely, it is enacted formally, as the author immerses himself simultaneously in two types of artistic creation that embody these different mechanics of kenosis and theosis: in his poetry, the Logos confines itself to language, which increasingly diffracts like in a prism trying to convey the richness of the events from the History of Salvation, while in his art, these linguistic bunches are refocused. Both paintings, 'Annunciation' and 'Song of Consolation' offer almost ascetic representations of biblical scenes, whose richness, however, becomes revealed once we trace, for instance, the movement of the brush, thickness and structure of the strokes, colour, and texture.

Third, as the two aforesaid dimensions combine, Daozi's work imposes a kenotheotic dynamic on the reader, making them 'complicit' in it—offering a sense of participation in the transcendental dimension. This last level is, as far as I can credibly analyse my own writing, reflected in the present interpretation of Daozi's work. As I was trying to 'empty myself out',

to legitimise my experience of his oeuvre through intersubjective language that spreads horizontally across the page, splitting into ever thinner threads, my thought was simultaneously ‘lifted’, and thus significantly inflected by the element of the sacred, whose presence could not be ignored—unambiguously ‘re-presented’ in his holy ink. Although I made an effort to distinguish the secular interpretation from the spiritual one, setting them as parallel alternatives (as in section 2, where I differentiate three ‘mother tongues’), they immediately blurred, and the referents of key words (‘mother tongue’, ‘you’) shifted.

It is, I venture, not the kind of work for which analysis can be neatly layered, starting from the most obvious and progressing to the least obvious, as is often done in academic writing to guide the audience step by step through a text (following, in this respect, the old pattern of biblical hermeneutics that distinguished four types of sense: literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical, to be deciphered in that order). Daozi’s work simply does not function in this way. You must take it all at once, agree to stay in the same orbit, maintaining a dynamic balance, allowing the words and images to pull you simultaneously in different directions, and accept that you may not succeed in sharing your findings in a manner that satisfies your own and other people’s standards of literary criticism. Still, it is worth the risk. For if we write only about the kind of poetry we already know how to safely write about, we are doomed to miss a great deal.

The notion of kenosis that emerged out of my interactions with Daozi’s work to describe the visual-verbal dynamic in his oeuvre hardly does justice to its richness and complexity, which I tried to signal by opening other interpretive contexts and perspectives along the way, even though there was no room to elaborate on most of them properly. Yet, it is one that, I believe, captures his uniqueness on the Chinese cultural scenes, reflecting his more-than-artistic engagement in spiritual search through poetry and ink painting. The two streams of this search, integrated in the reader/viewer’s mind, accelerate their imagination and give it a momentum to overcome the limitations of its own spatiotemporal substance and peep, if only briefly and from afar, into the transcendental dimension.

It also demonstrates the power and versatility of the Chinese ink wash tradition, which transcends cultural boundaries. Born out of a non-theistic spirit of the Eastern religious-philosophical worldview, in Daozi’s hands, this art significantly enriches the experience of Judeo-Christian faith and, to some extent, deoccidentalises its idea of Logos, tapping into its liberating potential buried under thick layers of biased, overtly institutionalised religiosity.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Academic Journals and Canonization of Contemporary Chinese Poets – A Quantitative Study

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Canon formation remains a central yet difficult question in literary studies. Drawing on quantitative methods and the highly digitalised landscape of Sinophone academic discourse, this essay examines the canonisation of modern and contemporary Chinese poets through data from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). The corpus is based on articles from journals listed in three consecutive editions of *A Guide to the Core Journals of China* (2014, 2017, 2020), covering 23,692 articles in 21 periodicals published between 2015 and 2021. After systematic filtering, the target dataset comprises 19 journals, 608 papers, and 270 poets, offering a measurable version of what Boris Dubin calls the “present canon”. Through visualisation and quantitative analysis, the study identifies two major clusters of poets: modern poets born between the 1890s and 1910s, and contemporary poets born between the 1950s and 1960s. Both clusters are dominated by male authors. Mu Dan, Jidi Majia, Zhang Zao, and Hai Zi emerge as the most prominent figures. The analysis also shows that scholarly attention often correlates with special journal columns and commemorative occasions, while women poets remain significantly underrepresented in Chinese academia.

本文運用量化方法，考察中國現當代詩歌經典的建構。研究以中國知網（CNKI）為資料來源，選取《中文核心期刊要目總覽》2014、2017、2020年版所收錄期刊在2015至2021年間刊發的23,692篇文章為初始樣本，經系統篩選，構建出涵蓋19種期刊、608篇論文、270位詩人的“當前正典”資料集（該概念借自俄羅斯學者伯里斯·杜賓）。經多維視覺化分析，研究析出兩大詩人群體：一為生於1890至1910年的現代詩人，一為生於1950至1960年的當代詩人；兩個群體均以男性為主，如穆旦、吉狄馬加、張棗、海子。資料表明，詩人所獲學術關注，多與期刊是否為其開設專欄正相關，而此類專欄又常因紀念性事件而設。近年雖有個別女性詩人廣受矚目，但女性整體在經典化進程中仍嚴重缺席，於學界亦處邊緣。

Keywords: modern Chinese poetry, core periodicals, canon formation, digital humanities, quantitative analysis

關鍵詞： 現當代漢語詩歌，核心期刊，經典化，數字人文，定量分析

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Introduction

The controversy surrounding the idea of a “canon” arose almost simultaneously with the concept itself. Views of literature and art have changed repeatedly over time, but the need to preserve the most representative examples has persisted through all such transformations. The selection criteria, however, may also alter considerably. The echo of the Canon Wars still resonates in the field, forcing researchers not only to read texts mindfully, but to be critical of their own unconscious biases as well. At the turn of the third millennium, the related academic trends reached China, modernising the existing understanding of “classics”. Here, the lecture series held by Douwe W. Fokkema at Peking University in 1993 is usually regarded as the earliest highlight (Hui 2021, 627).¹

In the 2000s, a considerable number of critics became captivated by the ambition to find and announce a new canonical piece of literature. As Wu Sijing 吳思敬 acutely put it: “The Chinese poetry scene became infected with an anxiety to ‘discover’ classics” (2006, 129). For a fairly long period of time in the history of China, poetry enjoyed the highest status among all literary genres. And yet its position has been challenged profoundly by the arrival of postmodern relativisation and the advance of online communication. Heather Inwood, one of the widely recognised experts on Chinese Internet poetry, has formulated the problem rather succinctly: “For better or for worse, we are living in an age of widespread, unfiltered digital participation in the production and evaluation of culture” (2015, 45). In this perspective, Hölderlin’s line—or, to be more precise, its viral Chinese translation—should be inverted: now the question is not “詩人何為” or “Who wants poets at all in lean years?”, but “何為詩人” or “What is a poet?”² And the postmodernist answer may sound like: “詩人是普通人” or “A poet *is* an ordinary person”.³ Indeed, the theory of conceptual art teaches us: an artist is someone who is addressed as such. And, apparently, being a concept, a “classic” should follow a similar logic.

Given such a premise, how should academics approach the process of “canon formation”? A rather drastic solution might be borrowed from German-speaking academia, and particularly from the works of Simone Winko. Some two decades ago she adopted Adam Smith’s famous metaphor of the “invisible hand”, claiming that, at the extreme, the very notion of a “classic” is formed through the multiple actions of countless individuals. Hence, publications (books, reviews, articles, etc.), festivals, ceremonies, and many other events in

¹ This essay does not assess “canon” as a term and does not implement substantial “qualitative” expertise. For related topics see Tan 2014.

² English translation by Michael Hamburger; original: “...wozu Dichter in dürrer Zeit”. The Chinese version of the phrase became largely popular via Hai Zi’s 海子 essay “The Poet I love—Hölderlin” 我熱愛的詩人——荷爾德林.

³ 詩人是普通人 is the title of a recent anthology issued by Xiron Poetry Club 磨鐵讀詩會—a collective led by Shen Haobo 沈浩波 and Li Suo 裡所. The group is particularly renowned for its dedication to “vernacular poetry” 口語詩歌.

the literary field all together comprise a “resultant” that outlines an author’s or artwork’s “canonical” status (Rippl 2013, 73). In this perspective, names of poets and titles of their creations could be understood as “tags” within the literary system. And these labels potentially may appear in nearly infinite contexts, continuously shaping and reshaping the images in readers’ minds.

However, the exhaustive analysis of every single canon-forming activity could hardly constitute a realistic goal for the present study. At the preliminary stage, the enormity of the influencing factors should be situated within more tangible institutional boundaries. Arguably, one of the most convenient ways to navigate the field was proposed by the Russian sociologist Boris Dubin. Arranging the renovated literary system on the macroscopic scale, he identified three major domains for “classic” formation:

- the “institutional canon” (school syllabi, education textbooks, etc.),
- the “present canon” (mainly academic and literary journals),
- and the “popular canon” (mass media) (Dubin 2010, 68).⁴

Albeit limiting and mutually intersecting, this classification can still serve as an intuitive entry point (and some of its general assumptions will be revisited in the concluding part). For instance, these categories might be applied to existing studies on the different types of canonisation. Hence, the Eighth Pamphlet from Stanford Literary Lab allows a look at five lists of “best” literary works in the 20th century and the related gender/ethnicity inequalities—a perspective that clearly interacts with the “popular canon” in Dubin’s paradigm (Algee-Hewitt 2015, 8–14). Similarly, the analysis conducted by the research group in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln specifically discusses Graduate Reading Lists—i.e. part of the “institutional canon” (González 2021). The same applies for Wang Wenjing’s 王文靜 PhD thesis (2019) which provides author’s rankings according to a sample of 120 comprehensive works (histories, anthologies, textbooks) in the field of new poetry.

However, the contemporary Chinese context provides literary scholars with an even more attractive tool. China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI or 中國知網) is, arguably, the largest and the most authoritative Sinophone academic platform, with an almost bottomless repository. This research builds on its general database from which a smaller corpus has been extracted for the purpose of monitoring the “present canon”. In view of the

⁴ A similar tendency to treat magazines as a sub-field in “canon studies” may also be extracted from the Sinophone critical discourse. For example, Ding Fan 丁帆 suggests that writing literary history basically constitutes the second round of selection, while the initial filtering happens among periodicals’ editorial teams (2019, 30). In the same vein, Huang Fayou 黃髮有 evoked the notion of a “journals’ literary history” (期刊文學史), claiming that pivotal points in such narratives usually originate from the pages of magazines (2022, 57).

limitations of individual efforts, the current research aims not for an all-encompassing portrait of the poetry realm, but rather for some cautious methodological considerations. Thus, this essay will primarily address only one particular type of discursive behaviour: the inclusion of poets' names in the titles of papers and columns (further considerations on onomastic discourse analysis can be found in Rutkowski 2020). The following analysis will combine general calculations with visualisation patterns and selective interpretations of the most representative poetic phenomena.⁵

One more comment should be added here. The current paper was initially written in Chinese and was meant for publication in the PRC as part of the author's PhD project. Since the author of this essay does not specialise in programming, all source codes for scatter plots and network graphs (as well as partitioning of poets' names) were created by Huo Shitu 霍世圖. When the first version of the article was finalised, he was undertaking a master's degree in computational Linguistics at Beijing Normal University. By the date of the current submission (i.e. as of July 2025), he is no longer associated with academia and does not consider himself a substantial contributor. Nevertheless, it would not be fair not to thank him here for all the time he invested in the study. Since editing the graphs would require finding another coauthor and was hardly possible in the short term, English translations of the relevant labels have been provided in the captions as far as possible.

Designing a Corpus

First of all, the current study needed to determine the scope of the periodicals to be scrutinised. The idea of having an ultimate scientometric register is anything but new. In the PRC such initiatives can be traced back to the opening volume of *A Guide to the Core Journals of China* 中文核心期刊要目总览 (hereinafter referred to as "*Guide*"), which came into print in 1992 (*Guide* 2025). As the host institution of the *Guide*, Peking University Library established a powerful partnership with CNKI, and the updated record of core periodicals has now been published every three years since 2008. Following the accepted classification, the present essay limits its scope to one particular category marked by the capital letter "I". This group covers journals associated with literary studies. The data was extracted from three consecutive editions of the *Guide*: 2014, 2017, and 2020. Its scope was determined by several practical factors. As a single-authored project, the experiment had its obvious quantitative limitations. Additionally, the author had to consider online accessibility

⁵ The author of this essay consulted basic provisions of the celebrated actor-network theory (ANT), but preferred a different approach. For the related issues see Latour 2005.

of the material and the degree of digitalisation. Since the main focus is on Chinese modern and contemporary poets, the sample does not include journals specialising in foreign or pre-modern literature, nor magazines publishing creative work (e.g., *Foreign Literature* 外國文學, *Fiction Review* 小說評論, *Studies on "A Dream of Red Mansions"* 紅樓夢學刊, *October* 十月, etc.). Titles of the selected journals are presented below (in alphabetical order of English title):

Nº	Title (English) ⁶	Title (Chinese)	Publication cycle	City	Foundation date
1	Chinese Culture Research	中國文化研究	Quarterly	Beijing	1993
2	Chinese Journal of Literary Criticism	中國文學批評	Quarterly	Beijing	2015
3	Comparative Literature in China	中國比較文學	Quarterly	Shanghai	1984
4	Contemporary Literary Criticism	當代文壇	Bimonthly	Chengdu	1982
5	Contemporary Writers Review	當代作家評論	Bimonthly	Shenyang	1984
6	Contention in Literature and Art	文藝爭鳴	Monthly	Changchun	1986
7	Journal of Modern Chinese Literature	現代中文學刊	Bimonthly	Shanghai	1984
8	Journal of Nanjing Normal University School of Chinese Language and	南京師範大學文學院學報	Quarterly	Nanjing	1999
9	Literary Heritage	文學遺產	Bimonthly	Beijing	1980
10	Literary Review	文學評論	Bimonthly	Beijing	1959

⁶ For all selected periodicals, English titles are given according to CNKI translations. Exceptions are made for *New Literary Historical Materials* and *Contention in Literature and Art*, as their profiles either simply provide *pinyin* transcription, or suggest no international version at all.

11	Literature & Art Studies	文藝研究	Monthly	Beijing	1979
12	Literatures in Chinese	華文文學	Bimonthly	Shantou	1985
13	Modern Chinese Literature Studies	中國現代文學研究叢刊	Monthly	Beijing	1979
14	New Literary Historical Materials	新文學史料	Quarterly	Beijing	1978
15	Research of Chinese Literature	中國文學研究	Quarterly	Changsha	1985
16	Shanghai Culture	上海文化	Monthly	Shanghai	1987
17	Southern Cultural Forum	南方文壇	Bimonthly	Nanning	1987
18	Studies of Ethnic Literature	民族文學研究	Bimonthly	Beijing	1983
19	Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art	文藝理論研究	Bimonthly	Shanghai	1980
20	Theory and Criticism of Literature and Art	文藝理論與批評	Bimonthly	Beijing	1986
21	Yangtze Jiang Literary Review	揚子江文學評論	Bimonthly	Nanjing	2006

Table 1: List of target periodicals

Over the period from 2015 to 2021, these periodicals published a total of 23,692 papers. However authoritative it may be, CNKI does not replicate print issues with 100% precision. Thus, the author is aware that during the digitalisation process some omissions or discrepancies in content may have occurred.

After establishing the preliminary dataset, the next stage involved filtering the articles on poetry via two additional parameters. The primary tactic involved directly addressing past issues of the journals with the purpose of identifying relevant columns. These included “Poetry Studies” 詩論 in *Contention in Literature and Art*, “Poetry Research” 詩歌研究 in

Contemporary Literary Criticism, “Manifestations of the Poetry Scene” 詩壇萬象 in *Southern Cultural Forum*, and a few others. The CNKI navigating system provides a special option for “column browsing” 欄目流覽, so the initial sample was compiled rather quickly. However, the data obtained still barely covered the expected variety of the material. Thus, a second strategy was developed with regard to the integrated “specialised” search 專業檢索—another built-in function of CNKI. On November 6, 2022 (the final search date for both methods), the parameters were set to the following values:

- publication time 發表時間: 2015 to 2021
- search formula 檢索運算式: TI = (‘詩’ + ‘詩歌’ + ‘詩學’) AND JN = (‘文學評論’ + ‘文學遺產’ + ‘新文學史料’ + ‘民族文學研究’ + ‘中國現代文學研究叢刊’ + ‘當代作家評論’ + ‘當代文壇’ + ‘中國文學研究’ + ‘南方文壇’ + ‘現代中文學刊’ + ‘揚子江文學評論’ + ‘中國文學批評’ + ‘中國文化研究’ + ‘上海文化’ + ‘文藝研究’ + ‘文藝爭鳴’ + ‘華文文學’ + ‘南京師範大學文學院學報’ + ‘文藝理論研究’ + ‘文藝理論與批評’ + ‘中國比較文學’)
- source category 來源類別: “core journals” 核心期刊

As a result, 1,840 papers were collected, and all the data was transferred into Excel spreadsheets. A simple calculation shows that poetry-related papers in target academic journals account for nearly 8% (1,840 out of 23,692). This (dis)proportion may discourage some poetry enthusiasts, but a brief comparison with the ratio of the other thematic columns shows that these figures should not be interpreted as a signal of the genre’s insignificance. Articles on poetry are no less marginalised than some other sub-topics, such as “media studies” or “literary theory”.

At this point, the metadata on every paper in the current corpus included the title, author’s name, source periodical (and column), publication date (issue no.), plus the rates of citations and downloads on the search date. The number of papers on a topic could help to identify the general academic preferences of the editorial boards and contributors, while the number of downloads reflects, to a certain degree, the interests of the CNKI reading audience (albeit within the specified period of time).⁸ Tentatively, it should be assumed that the

⁷ These keywords were selected after experimenting with the CNKI Search Engine and learning its limitations. For example, an inquiry that contains only ‘詩’ will not automatically include ‘詩歌’ or ‘詩學’ into the results—such binomes will be presented rather sporadically. At the same time, adding more thematic markers—such as ‘詩人’ (“poet”) or ‘詩集’ (“poetry collection”)—to the formula does not help either. Combining ‘詩’ and ‘詩人’, most likely, will exclude the lion’s share of the entries that mention ‘詩’ as an independent word. Thus, after a series of trials, the formula that provides the most productive outcome was chosen.

⁸ Citation indices, arguably, are the most representative indicators of research impact. However, as the sample for this essay mainly encompasses recent work, the low quotation rates do not provide enough analytical space. For related studies based on citation indices see Shen 2016.

undergraduate students from the PRC comprise the largest users' group on the platform and thus could impact the selected metric.

However, since canonicity could only be measured for a particular phenomenon (such as the status of a writer or a piece of artwork), the designed Excel sheet still required a separate column indicating poets' names. Predictably, not all of the selected titles contained such "personal tags". To simplify the selection process, the collected data was first segmented through the HanLP COARSE_ELECTRA_SMALL_ZH language model and then input into the MSRA_NER_ELECTRA_SMALL_ZH model. Both packages were borrowed from the official page of the HanLP project—a multilingual Natural Language Processing library (HanLP 2025). Such pre-trained tools are usually utilised for lexical tagging, and thus could be smoothly adopted to serve the goals of this research. Tokens identified as PERSON were copied in the closest unoccupied cells. Yet, such "assisted" partitioning left numerous blind spots that had to be corrected manually. For instance, pen names of some poets were categorised as places (Bei Dao 北島—literally, "northern island"), adjectives or adverbs (Duo Duo 多多—"many" / "much"). Poets' gender and birth and death years were also supplied without the help of machine algorithms. To concentrate more precisely on the Modern and Contemporary periods, it was decided to remove entries on authors who had passed away prior to 1920 from the selection (here the May Fourth Movement was taken as a watershed). After another round of manual intervention, an updated target set was finalised. As illustrated in Figure 1, the final sample comprised 19 journals, 608 papers, and 270 poets.

Labels on the horizontal axis are titles of the selected journals (from left to right): *Contention in Literature and Art*, *Contemporary Writers Review*, *Modern Chinese Literature Studies*, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Southern Cultural Forum*, *Journal of Modern Chinese Literature*, *Yangtze Jiang Literary Review*, *New Literary Historical Materials*, *Literatures in Chinese*, *Literary Review*, *Studies of Ethnic Literature*, *Shanghai Culture*, *Research of Chinese Literature*, *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, *Theory and Criticism of Literature and Art*, *Literature & Art Studies*, *Comparative Literature in China*, *Chinese Culture Research*, *Journal of Nanjing Normal University School of Chinese Language and Culture*. Red indicates the number of papers and blue indicates number of poets mentioned in the corpus of a given periodical.

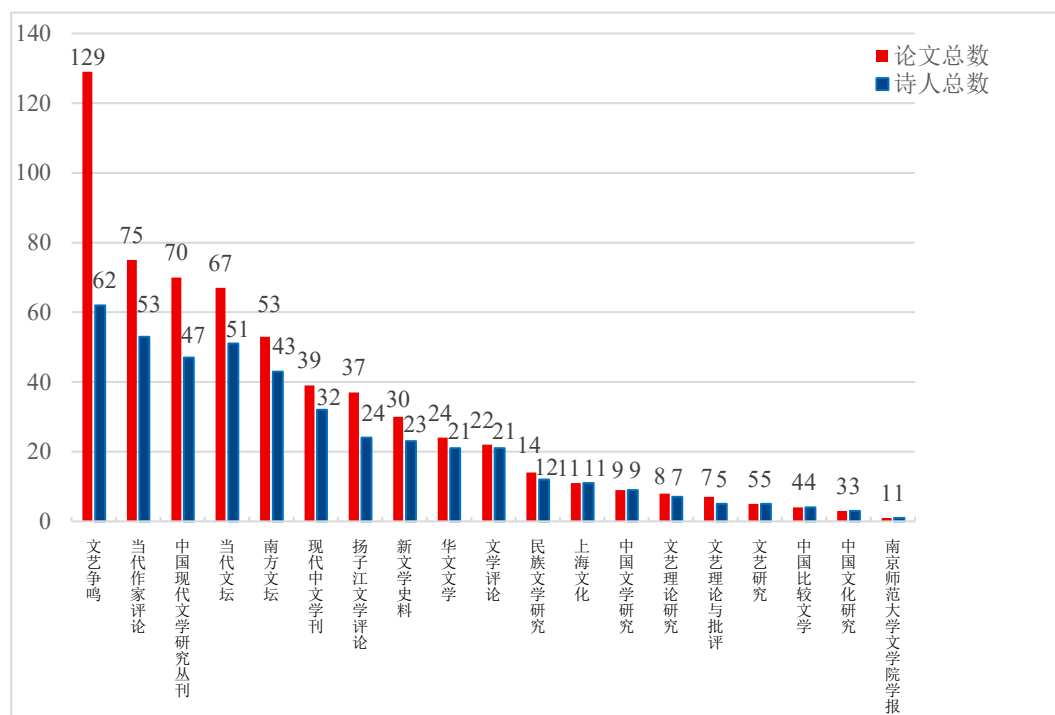


Figure 1: Numbers of papers and poets in the selected core periodicals

A few additional remarks here might be useful. The numbers of papers (論文總數) and poets (詩人總數) generally depend on the overall profile of the journal, its publication cycle, and/or the selected time period. In terms of the journals' profiles, the amount and frequency of poetry-related columns remain crucial factors. For example, judging solely by poets' entries, *Contention in Literature and Art* does not differ significantly from the other leading periodicals, whereas its figure for articles account for approximately one-fifth of the whole corpus. And the collective input of the first five journals, in turn, equals nearly half. Such a ratio is a rather predictable outcome of having more columns on the subject. By contrast, *Journal of Nanjing Normal University* ranks lowest in the current listing chiefly because of its broad thematic scope. Similarly, among the top five, the first and the third journals are issued monthly, and the other three follow a bimonthly cycle. And once again, the position of *Journal of Nanjing Normal University* comes as no surprise, since it is issued quarterly. Finally, it should be noted that the pool of core periodicals in the *Guide* slightly varies over the years. For instance, *Shanghai Culture* and *Journal of Nanjing Normal University* appeared only in the 2014 and 2017 editions respectively, and this fact alone has substantially reduced their contributions.

No	A Journal	B Issue	C Column	D Paper	E Author	F Poet	G Date of birth	H Gender	I Citations	J K	L	M Downloads
1	文學評論 Literary Review	2021.02	“文史互證”研究 Comparative Studies in Literature and History	“70後”作家的情感結構與敘事詩學——以蘇微創作為例 The Emotional Structure and Narrative Poetics of “Post-70” Writers — A Case of Wei Wei	曹霞 Cao Xia	蘇微 Wei Wei	1970	Female	1	12	533	1185
2	中國現代文學 研究叢刊 Modern Chinese Literature Studies	2021.11	詩學研究 Research on Poetry	“與世界之創造”：駱一禾詩學建構的存在主義路徑 “Hearing the World’s Creation”: The Existentialism of Luo Yihé’s Poetic System	王東東 Wang Dongdong	駱一禾 Luo Yihé	1961	Male	0	3	200	412
3	文學爭鳴 Contention in Literature and Art	2020.09	詩論 Poetry Studies	“世界性”的內在構成——論吉狄馬加的詩 Internally Composed “Worldliness” — On Poetry by Jidi Maqia	盧慎 Lu Zhen	吉狄馬加 Jidi Maqia	1961	Male	1	3	169	336
4	文學爭鳴 Contention in Literature and Art	2017.08	評論 Criticism Studies	“雲之歌不僅作美”：海華中冷的隱逸尋詩《雲之自語》 “No Longer is the Song of Clouds”: On Ye Zhongling’s Translation of “The Clouds”	張靜 Zhang Jing	葉中冷 Ye Zhongling	1880	Male	0	0	85	113
5	現代中文學刊 Journal of Modern Chinese Literature	2016.02	現代詩學研究 Studies in Modern Poetry	“他是屬於未來的詩人”——《婦人畫報》時期徐遲的“摩登”現代詩 “He is a Poet of the Future” — Xu Chi’s “Modern” Poetry During the Period of “Women’s Pictorial”	孫玉石 Sun Yushi	徐遲 Xu Chi	1914	Male	3	4	151	226
6	南方文壇 Southern Cultural Forum	2019.01	理論新見 New Theoretical Insights	“以文為詩”與打散詩體——簡論胡適白話詩學主張的形成及其中西理據 “Taking Wen as Shi” and Breaking the Poetic Form — An Overview of Hu Shi’s Vernacular Poetics and Its Chinese / Western Rationalisations	王光相 Wang Guanghe	胡適 Hu Shi	1891	Male	0	2	326	435
7	新文學史料 New Literary Historical Materials	2020.03	新詩學案 New Poetic Cases	“以現代為範，以中國為神”——論洛夫詩歌觀的蛻變 “Modernity as a Shell, China as a Deity” - Luo Fu’s Changing Views on Poetry	古遠清 Gu Yuanqing	洛夫 Luo Fu	1928	Male	1	6	265	446
8	當代作家評論 Contemporary Writers Review	2021.06	當代詩學論壇 Contemporary Poetry Forum	“以詩進入歷史，出入戰爭”——王公辛長詩創作論 “Entering History with Poetry, Out with War” - On Wang Junxin’s Long Poems	姚洪偉 Yao Hongwei 韓登科 Jiang Dengke	王公辛 Wang Junxin	1939	Male	0	0	113	206
9	揚子江文學評論 Yangtze Jiang Literary Review	2018.02	新詩研究 Studies in New Poetry	“保持整理老舍背上斑駁的痕跡”：再讀多多 “Keep the Madness of Ordering the Tiger’s Stripes”: Rereading Duo Duo	李章斌 Li Zhaobin	多多 Duo Duo	1951	Male	3	5	252	576

Table 2: Corpus layout (English translations provided for readers’ convenience). Data in columns J–M illustrates changes in citation and download rates between 06.11.2022 and 11.06.2025. The significant shifts are highlighted in pale grey.

Assessing Diversity

Approaching the “present canon” as a sociological literary phenomenon requires a suitable metric. On the most basic level, such parameters include poets’ age and gender.⁹ The relevant information can be represented in pie charts.

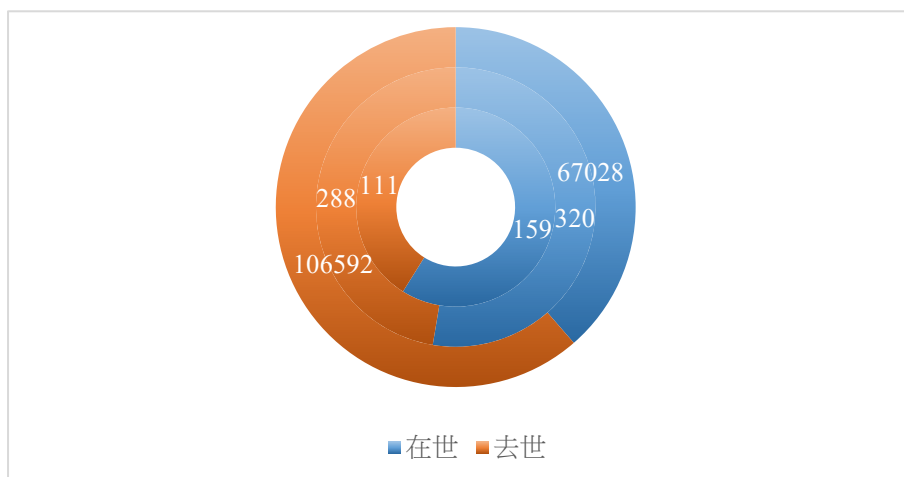


Figure 2: Ratio of deceased (red) and living (blue) poets

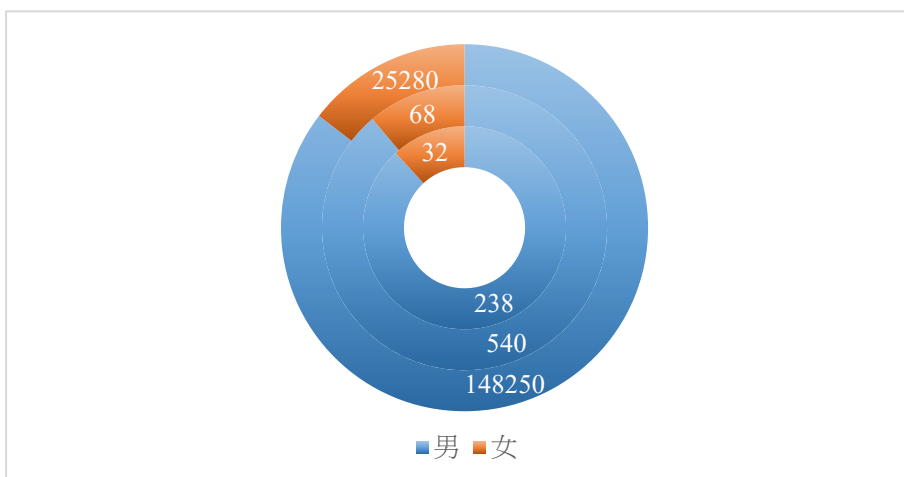


Figure 3: Ratio of male (blue) and female (red) poets

⁹ With no reliable criterion at hand, the author refrains from conveying an “ethnic breakdown” (as done, for example, in Algee-Hewitt 2015, 13). The other relevant information was extracted from open sources: chiefly, online encyclopaedias (Wikipedia, Baidu Baiken, etc.) or various authors’ bios accompanying their publications.

White digits on the three coloured rings (Figures 2 and 3) represent the total numbers of poets (internal ring), papers (middle ring), and downloads (external ring), respectively. A first glance at the pie charts confirms rather superficial expectations: both scholars and readers express more interest in dead authors. While these poets' ratio here comprises only 41%, the related download index swells to a solid 61%, occupying almost two thirds of the pie. To a certain degree, this disproportion could be explained in an aphoristic manner: "Glory is the sun of the dead." A finalised text—be it a piece of poetry or, indeed, a piece of one's life—is traditionally perceived as a more stable and accessible research object. For instance, some critics—especially in such a relationship-oriented society as China—may feel safer in speaking when they do not have to worry about invading the privacy of their target authors.

Figure 2 displays the proportion between the two genders. The masculinity of the Chinese poetry scene has been a widely discussed bias for a long time, and the current statistics prove this trend. Regardless of the selected criterion, women poets appear to be enormously under-represented: the highest percentage here barely exceeds 14%. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that among 32 women poets in the sample, as many as 25 are contemporary living authors—a situation that could be interpreted in at least two ways. On the one hand, the presence of active female poets in the sample may be interpreted as a sign of growing equality in poetry discourse. On the other hand, the small number of deceased female poets indicates that they have been overshadowed by their male contemporaries over the years and makes one wonder whether the same process of gradual erasure will also apply to the female authors who enjoy a significant popularity today.

Now it is time to switch to more elaborate methods of analysis. Three scatter plots below (Figures 4–6) visualise the dataset in a more detailed fashion. These graphs depict the relationships between poets' birth year (X-axis) and the total or average number of papers and downloads, respectively (Y-axis).¹⁰ On all the grids, dead poets are presented in pale and living in bright tones (blue palette for male and red for female authors). For authors whose numbers surpassed the specified threshold, name labels were also provided.

¹⁰ The average number of downloads was counted only for those authors who were mentioned in three or more paper titles in the corpus. Although this index could not reflect readers' demand for each individual paper, it still demonstrates a general tendency and rather intriguing shifts in the sample. Aside from the lack of interest in certain poets (or critics), a low average may suggest a predominance of repeated motifs among articles or simply that the demand is satisfied via a different platform (i.e. not CNKI).

No	Poet	Birth year	Papers	Downloads	Dead/Living Gender
1	東蕩子 Dong Dangzi	1964	4	529	在世 · 男 Living Male
2	於堅 Yu Jian	1954	3	792	在世 · 男 Living Male
3	于賡虞 Yu Gengyu	1902	1	151	已去世 · 男 Late Male
4	亞楠 Ya Nan	1961	1	203	在世 · 男 Living Male
5	任洪淵 Ren Hongyuan	1937	1	163	已去世 · 男 Late Male
6	任溶溶 Ren Rongrong	1923	1	667	在世 · 男 Living Male
7	何其芳 He Qifang	1912	6	2682	已去世 · 男 Late Male
8	何小竹 He Xiaozhu	1963	1	141	在世 · 男 Living Male
9	餘光中 Yu Guangzhong	1928	4	1161	已去世 · 男 Late Male
10	餘寶琳 Yu Baolin	1949	1	105	在世 · 女 Living Female

Table 3: Sample data for scatter plots

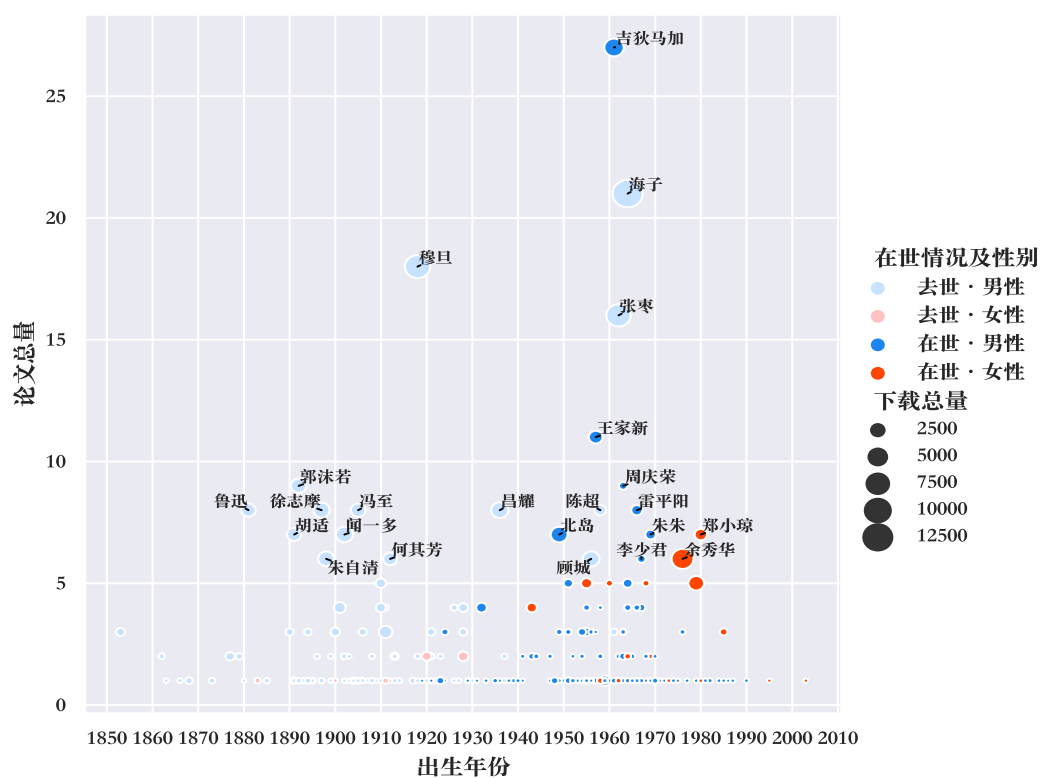


Figure 4: Correlation between poets' birth dates and number of papers (size of dot represents number of downloads)

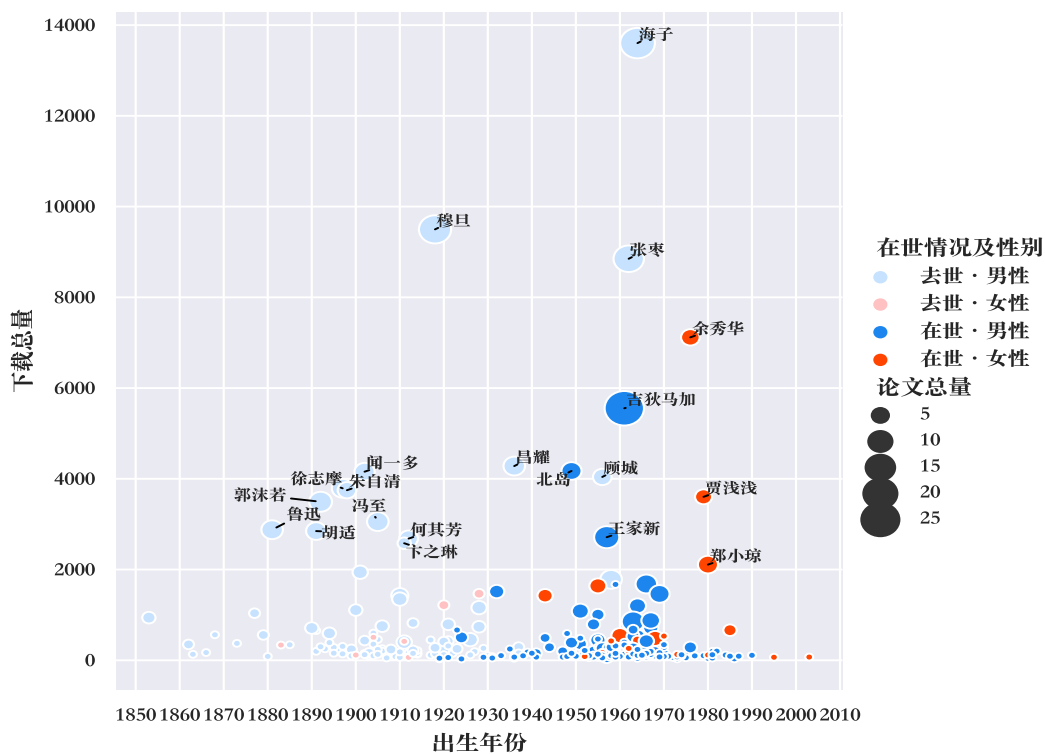


Figure 5: Correlation between poets' birth dates and number of downloads (size of dot represents numbers of papers)

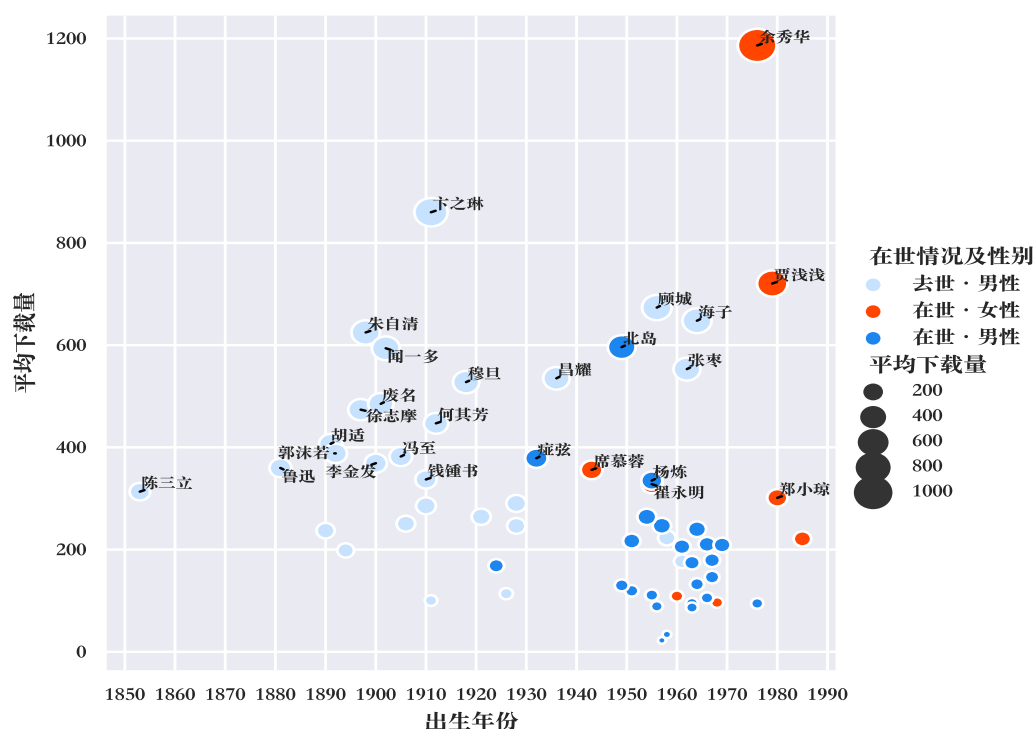


Figure 6: Correlation between birth dates and average downloads of a paper (size of dot mirrors this ratio)

As shown on Figure 4, in terms of critical attention, Jidi Majia 吉狄馬加, Hai Zi 海子, Mu Dan 穆旦, and Zhang Zao 張棗 surpass all other poets. Therefore, understanding of the “present canon” seems impossible without commenting on these four figures.

First, to reiterate the message above, it should be noted that Mu Dan (1918–1977), Hai Zi (1964–1989) and Zhang Zao (1962–2010) have all departed this life. However, it is even more important that each one of them is associated with a particular epoch in the modern history of China. Hai Zi’s case is, probably, the most representative. Over the years, his literary creation and tragic death have evoked a tremendous critical response, and thus will need no more advocacy than a link to the existing scholarship (Rui 2012). In the present-day academic community, it is common to link his suicide with the end of the 1980s—the “golden era” for contemporary Chinese literature (Guo 2018, 78). And judging by years of life, it is clear how Mu Dan and Zhang Zao “expand” the period in question towards the past and future respectively. Mu Dan is frequently viewed as a transitional figure between the May Fourth and post-Maoist iterations of modernism. For some critics, his metaphorical role in the literary hierarchy is nothing less than a “central node of the historical genealogy” 歷史譜系的中心節點 (Zhou Zhiqiang 2008, 28). Yet it appears that his position in the current sample is chiefly defined by papers commemorating the centenary of his birth. Compared with Hai Zi and Mu Dan, Zhang Zao has only just entered the initial stage of canonicity. At

the beginning of 2011, *Contemporary Writers Review* posthumously dedicated a column to him, and this event set a standard for further cooperative discursive actions (Lin 2011, 169). For instance, during the first research seminar on the poet's work held by *Southern Cultural Forum*, several scholars proposed that Zhang Zao had successfully created a mode of writing which allowed him to transcend the romanticised exaltations of Hai Zi and his epigones (Wang & Li 2018, 69–70).

As the author with highest number of papers, Jidi Majia's case deserves separate assessment. Among the academic community he is usually portrayed as a poet situated in between the Yi 彝 (or Nuosu 諾蘇), Chinese, and global cultural domains—a commonplace in the critical narratives that can be traced back to the mid-80s (Sun 1985; Xiang 2019, 136). Such a “triple identity” alone implies a multitude of possible research angles, but over the years of his career, Jidi Majia has accumulated even more valuable resources, serving as a Vice-Chair of the China Writers Association and Honorary President of the China Minority Writers Association (Jidi 2025). Even if the correlation between academic and political discourse remains somewhat speculative, the role of bureaucracy in the PRC should never be underestimated. At least, it is safe to say that holding a high post in China most definitely helps to channel cultural and social symbolic capital. And these resources, in turn, may be converted into conferences, seminars, and other literary activities related to the process of “canonisation”. Nevertheless, Figure 6 shows a trend quite different from the two previous diagrams. While the other three “leading” poets mostly maintained their positions, the dot corresponding with Jidi Majia did not reach the mark of 200 downloads per paper, and thus was left unlabelled.¹¹ Without further qualitative research, it may be only assumed that so far Jidi Majia's profile is not as visible to the CNKI reading audience as the images of Hai Zi, Mu Dan, or Zhang Zao.

Aside from inquiries into individual cases, the charts presented here could also be employed for macroscopic observations. For example, if we follow the horizontal axis, two clusters could be easily identified: one group covers authors born in the late 1890s up to early 1910s (plus Lu Xun 魯迅), and the other spans a similar period of thirty years from the late 1940s to the late 1960s. Again, we may see how these groups correspond with the May Fourth Movement and the beginning of the Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 era—two undisputed watersheds in modern Chinese history—while the decades in between are often associated with an opposite aesthetic course, dictated by wars, famine, revolutions, and other social disasters. It is, therefore, quite symptomatic that, from the current sample, scholars prefer to study Chang Yao—a poet consistently resistant to the political lyricism of his era (Zhao 2020, 23).

¹¹ In terms of the average downloads index, the case of Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 demonstrates an opposite metamorphosis. For some academics, the interest in his work intersects with Zhang Zao's poetics—a creative practice that integrates both “ancient and modern, Chinese and Western” traditions (Ya 2020, 201).

To a certain extent, authors born at the turn of the 20th century have defined the core values of modern Chinese literature. Thus, the high positions of Hu Shi 胡適, Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Xu Zhimo 徐志摩, and several others on the charts were more or less expected. By contrast, the years after 1949 tend to be more volatile, and hence more attractive for the goals of this essay. Of course, the contemporary period also has its obvious favourites: the fame of Bei Dao 北島, Gu Cheng 顧城, and Wang Jiaxin 王家新 spread beyond the borders of China many decades ago. The question then should be posed in a slightly different light: what happened to the other Misty 朦朧 and “intellectual” poets? Why are Yang Lian 楊煉, Ouyang Jianghe 歐陽江河, Xi Chuan 西川 and the rest not labelled on the scatter plots? While in-depth answers might require a separate paper, a more concise formula may be borrowed from Maghiel van Crevel’s work. In a recent study, he argued that in the process of literary translation, Zheng Xiaoqiong 鄭小琼 has become a “synecdoche” for all the group termed “battler poets”:

In sum, those looking for foreign work on battler poetry are going to find Zheng Xiaoqiong and Xu Lizhi before they find anyone else. And if their interest in poetry extends beyond its clichéd status as a romantic accompaniment to personal tragedy, they are going to find only Zheng Xiaoqiong. (Van Crevel 2023, 207)

This argument could easily be extrapolated to the process of canonisation at large: collective patterns are explored through the lens of singular phenomena. Of course, such a state of affairs does not necessarily imply that the interpretive potential of the less studied poets cannot be compared with that of their “luckier” colleagues. More often, it means that canonised poets are just better suited for explanation of some “surface” trends, or are simply more discursively active (not to mention the personal preferences of critics themselves).¹²

A few words should be said about the remaining labelled writers on the downloads graph. For the sake of brevity, this essay will single out only one trait for every author, thus consciously oversimplifying their discursive portraits. Chen Chao’s 陳超 (1958–2014) untimely death shocked the literary community four years after the passing of Zhang Zao. During his lifetime, he combined creative contributions with academic position, and this “double status” played a crucial role in the commemorative practice devoted to his name (Zhang 2015, 143). Somewhat similar to Jidi Majia, Li Shaojun 李少君 represents yet another example of beneficial networking in official circles. His experience in the magazine business—first at *Frontiers* 天涯 and since 2019 as the editor-in-chief of *Poetry Periodical* 詩刊—most certainly corresponds with his numbers in the corpus (Li 2025). To some critics, Zhu Zhu 朱朱 acts as a yet another “intellectual”—his poetic method calls for close reading

¹² The absence of studies on “vernacular writing” in the corpus is much more comprehensible. Among academics, the colloquial form of postmodernism is tacitly regarded as not being worth serious expertise. In this situation, such influential figures as Yang Li 楊黎, Yi Sha 伊沙, or Shen Haobo 沈浩波 rarely receive a welcome in the core periodicals. Even Yu Jian 於堅—arguably the most traditional among all of them—has only three articles mentioning his name in the title.

and deciphering (Li 2018, 56). Finally, the cases of Lei Pingyang 雷平陽 and Zhou Qingrong 周慶榮 illustrate the other two stylistic tendencies in the field. While the former practises so-called “regional writing” 地方性寫作, the latter continues a tradition of prose poetry—and both trends provide critics with unique entry points (Liu 2019; Sun 2015).

Next, if we step aside from the core clusters, a few words should be said about writers born in the 1970s–1980s. Among these poets, Yu Xiuhua 余秀華, Jia Qianqian 賈淺淺, and Zheng Xiaoqiong instantiate representative cases. Yu Xiuhua’s “viral” profile requires little introduction in the Anglophone context. Born with cerebral palsy, she gained her first recognition in public media in 2014. Since then, her volumes of poetry have sold thousands of copies (a more detailed introduction is available in Huerta 2018). In terms of the total number of papers, she is ranked outside the top ten, but her mean downloads index is absolutely unrivalled. While Yu’s and Zheng’s stories both involve under-privileged settings, Jia Qianqian’s background appears much more stable. The daughter of Jia Pingwa 賈平凹—one of China’s most popular contemporary fiction writers—she hardly lacked educational support. In 2020, *Contention in Literature and Art* dedicated a full column to her work, but there was also another incident that triggered a mass reaction. To summarise, some of Jia’s poems highlight vernacular terms for bodily secretions (for example, “shit” 屎 and “piss” 尿), and a large part of the Internet community regarded this artistic mode unacceptable for the daughter of a renowned writer (the case itself is meticulously covered in Negi 2024). Thus, one way or another, this topic went viral and presumably influenced numbers in the current sample.

A broader view on the place of women writers in the corpus reveals how evenly their birth dates are distributed over the mid to late 20th century: Xi Murong 席慕蓉 (1940s), Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (1950s), Ma Li 馬莉 and Mei Er 梅爾 (1960s), Jia Qianqian and Yu Xiuhua (1970s), Zheng Xiaoqiong and Feng Na 馮娜 (1980s). Among the listed names, each poet has a minimum of three papers. Additionally, the youngest target authors in the sample (far right untitled dots on Figures 4 and 5) are also female: Xing Ya 星芽 (b. 1995) and Li Hua 李華 (b. 2003). However, the deficit of studies on “re-discovered” women writers from the earlier periods does not give the author of this article enough confidence to speak of an explicit progression towards diversity. So far, the body of the observed “present canon” has resembled a forest where several tall and mature trees share their territory with occasional offshoots and dense thickets, while the names of some specimens are still waiting to be properly catalogued.

ID	Name	Node Type	Papers	Downloads
1	陳育虹 Chen Yuhong	女性詩人 Female Poet	1	83
2	趙麗宏 Zhao Lihong	男性詩人 Male Poet	2	123
3	毛子 Mao Zi	男性詩人 Male Poet	1	93
4	蕭開愚 Xiao Kaiyu	男性詩人 Male Poet	1	91
5	雷武鈴 Lei Wuling	男性詩人 Male Poet	1	74
6	冷霜 Leng Shuang	男性詩人 Male Poet	1	77
7	鄭小瓊 Zheng Xiaoqiong	女性詩人 Female Poet	7	2109
8	胡桑 Hu Sang	男性詩人 Male Poet	1	51
9	厄土 E Tu	男性詩人 Male Poet	1	90
10	江汀 Jiang Ting	男性詩人 Male Poet	1	32

Table 4: Sample data for network analysis (nodes)

Source	Target	Papers	Rating 1	Downloads	Rating 2
276	1	1	1	83	6
276	2	1	1	33	10
276	3	1	1	93	2
276	4	1	1	91	3
276	5	1	1	74	8
276	6	1	1	77	7
276	7	1	1	149	1
276	8	1	1	51	9
276	9	1	1	90	4
276	10	1	1	32	11

Table 2: Sample data for network analysis (edges)

Linking Poets and Journals

So far, the analysis has addressed the left (Table 2, Columns A–E) and right (F–M) parts of the original dataset individually. Hence, the current phase should focus on the links between the “subjects” and “objects” of canonisation, that is, respectively, periodicals and poets. Since the work of editors behind the scenes is hidden from external observers, this essay will generally target journals as institutional units. This new task requires a different visual layout: network analysis has proved to be a flexible and effective tool for various tasks in literary studies and digital humanities at large.¹³ This paper utilises an open-access platform called Gephi (v. 0.9.7; Gephi 2025). Numbers of articles and downloads remain two general metrics, but this time they are depicted separately (Figures 7–8). The size of nodes (journals and poets) and the thickness of edges (total amount of papers/downloads on a poet in the journal) were set in proportion to the corresponding items. The data from the original corpus was input into two Excel sheets: one for nodes and the other for edges (Tables 4–5). The first list included columns for the node’s ID, title, category (“male poet”, “female poet”, or “periodical”), plus total numbers of papers and downloads. In a similar manner, the second table encompasses the source and target nodes (journals’ and authors’ IDs respectively), the total numbers of papers and downloads for each entry (with an additional ranking column for both parameters). Then the sequenced data was processed via the Yifan Hu proportional layout algorithm. To keep the graphs concise, the finalised versions illustrate only poets with the highest digits in each periodical: the top three for the number of papers and top five for the number of downloads, all filtered through the “ranking” index.

Even with no explicit time indicators provided, the specialisation of the main contributors still allows us to draw an imaginary line between “modern” (1919–1949) and “contemporary” (post-1949) eras. This disposition is especially evident in Figure 7, where the five large dots associated with the latter period—*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Contemporary Writers Review*, *Contention in Literature and Art*, *Southern Cultural Forum*, and *Yangtze Jiang Literary Review*—are situated on the right side. Conversely, *Journal of Modern Chinese Literature* and *Modern Chinese Literature Studies* occupy the left flank.

¹³ Aside from the already mentioned pamphlet from Stanford Literary Lab, perhaps one of the most classic examples here belongs to Franco Moretti: the “Hamlet scheme” from his last essay in *Distant Reading* was even memorialised on the cover of the book (2013, 211).

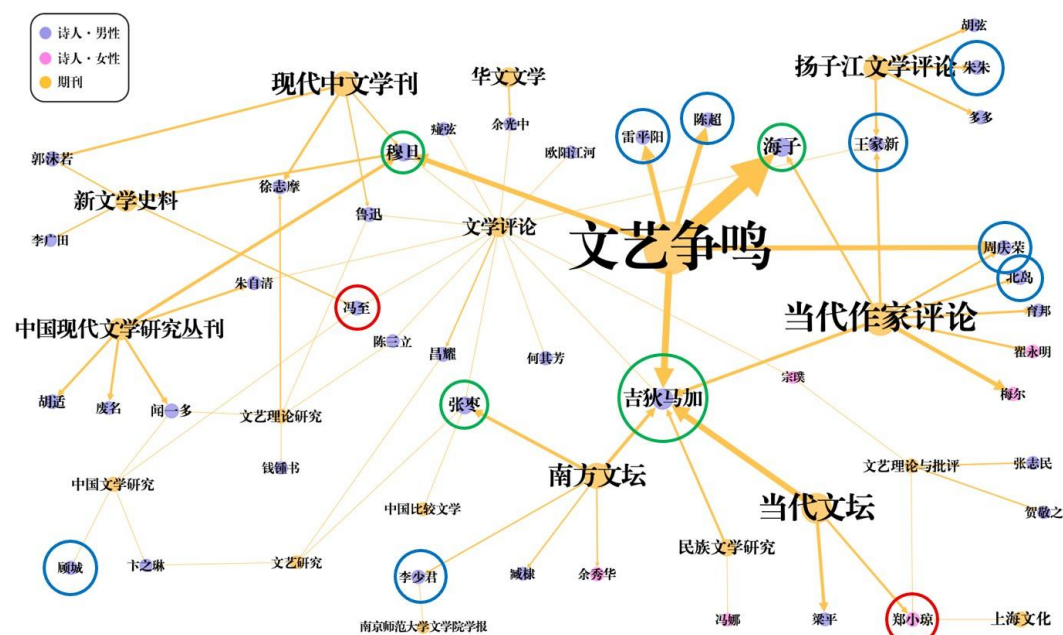


Figure 2: Poets' papers numbers in relation to periodicals

Labels of journals (yellow dots, grouped in five lines separated by semicolon, from left to right, from top to bottom): Journal of Modern Chinese Literature, Literatures in Chinese, Yangtze Jiang Literary Review; New Literary Historical Materials, Literary Review, Contention in Literature and Art; Modern Chinese Literature Studies, Contemporary Writers Review; Research of Chinese Literature, Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art, Comparative Literature in China, Southern Cultural Forum, Studies of Ethnic Literature, Contemporary Literary Criticism, Theory and Criticism of Literature; Literature & Art Studies, Journal of Nanjing Normal University School of Chinese Language and Culture, Shanghai Culture.

For the majority of edges, the thickness parameter does not translate into significant difference. Usually, the most accentuated vectors—those accessible to the unaided eye—correspond with special columns devoted to a target poet. Thus, the following analysis will be limited to the principal trends only. Once again, the former “leading” authors (encircled in green) here constitute the most representative group. For instance, Figure 7 depicts Jidi Majia as the key persona for six periodicals. By that index he outscores any other poet in the current dataset: in Figure 8 Zhang Zao has the same number of arrows pointing at him, but the links are much thinner. In that case, what discursive behaviour might be noted in the case of Jidi Majia? The substantial role of *Contention in Literature and Art* for the corpus has already been stated in the first half of this article, and journals such as *Studies of Ethnic Literature* are expected to publish works on writers from minority groups (the set of names connected to the node provides sufficient evidence). However, the profile of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* deserves a more detailed remark. Institutionally, this journal operates under the auspices of the Writers Association of Sichuan province, and Jidi Majia was born

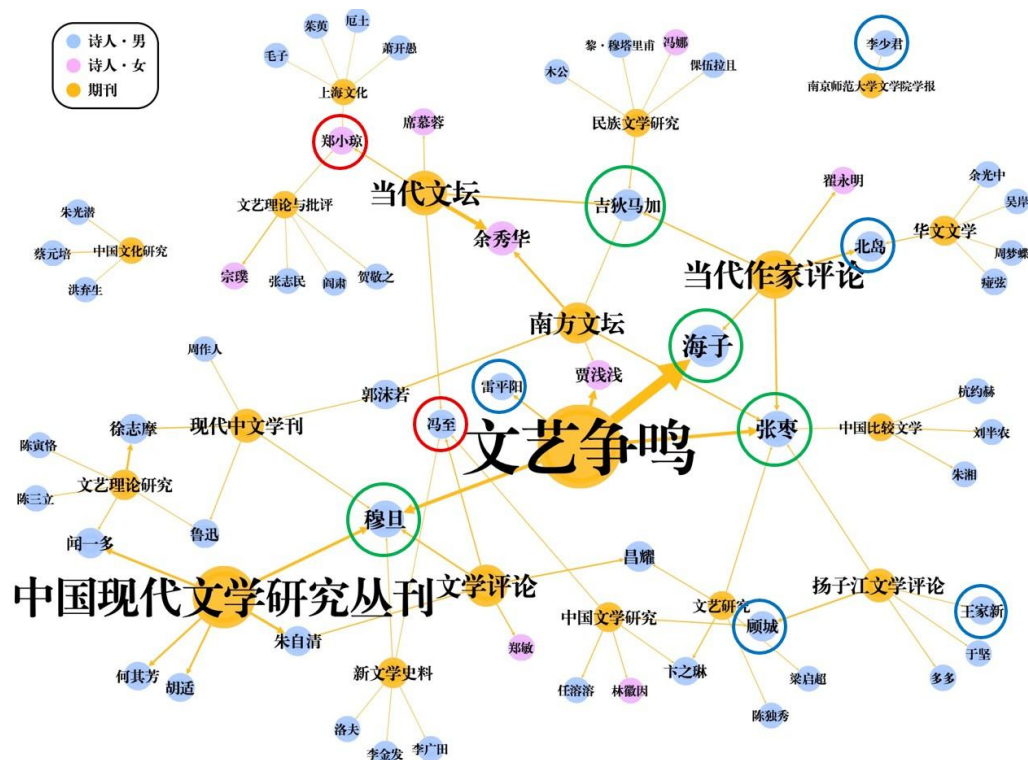


Figure 3: Poets' download numbers in relation to periodicals

Labels of journals (yellow dots, grouped in five lines separated by semicolon, from left to right, from top to bottom): Shanghai Culture, Studies of Ethnic Literature, Journal of Nanjing Normal University School of Chinese Language and Culture; Chinese Culture Research, Theory and Criticism in Literature, Contemporary Literary Criticism, Southern Cultural Forum, Contemporary Writers Review, Literatures in Chinese; Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art; Journal of Modern Chinese Literature, Contention in Literature and Art, Comparative Literature in China; Modern Chinese Literature Studies, New Literary Historical Materials, Literary Review, Research of Chinese Literature, Literature & Art Studies, Yangtze Jiang Literary Review.

¹⁴ In the same vein, this magazine published a considerable number of papers on Liang Ping 梁平, a former editor-in-chief of another important poetry periodical, Stars 星星. This only strengthens the correlation between the official status of a writer and the degree of academic attention given to them.

As regards the other three leading poets, their networks exhibit two general patterns. As was the case with Jidi Majia, Mu Dan's and Zhang Zao's nodes also have multiple vectors directed at them. For example, this form of visualisation makes Mu Dan's "transitional status" even more apparent: he acts as a central writer for both "modern" and "contemporary" periodicals. Similarly, Zhang Zao's "early canonisation" trend is reflected in scarce yet balanced contributions. The only noteworthy actor here is *Southern Cultural Forum* with the already mentioned coverage of the 2018 academic conference. In contrast, Hai Zi's status in the present corpus relies almost entirely on *Contention in Literature and Art*—the link between these two nodes presumably could put him on top all alone. Nevertheless, such a ranking appears to be a result of the 30th anniversary of his death, which was commemorated with a special section in the journal (see the third issue for 2019), rather than an illustration of regular attention levels.¹⁵

Among the remaining authors, attention should be paid primarily to those who have more than two edges on both graphs. Surprisingly, only two writers show that quality: Feng Zhi 馮至 for the modern and Zheng Xiaoqiong for the contemporary period (both encircled in red).¹⁶ However, the thickness of their vectors is hardly comparable to the above mentioned "leaders". And the same is true for the other "scatter-plot leaders" (selectively—in blue circles): even broadly recognised authors such as Bei Dao and Gu Cheng are placed outside the spotlight. As regards figures such as Chen Chao, Lei Pingyang, Li Shaojun, or Zhou Qingrong, their nodes are now much closer to the "unlabelled" poets. This situation points to one simple thing: the canonisation of most of the target writers could only be assessed separately with a closer focus, using more "traditional" critical methods.

The last but not least issue to be discussed in this section is the place of women writers. In terms of audience response, readers seem especially to favour papers on female poets published by *Contemporary Literary Criticism* and *Contemporary Writers Review*. Aside from the above mentioned cases of Zheng Xiaoqiong, Yu Xiuhua's and Jia Qianqian's positions were left unaltered: both show a high download index with quite a small total of articles. However, if we calculate all the unique names on the two charts, it can be seen that the gender ratio has changed positively. Almost a third of female poets are represented on the network (10/32), while for male authors this ratio is as small as 17% (40/238). Thus, although still heavily outnumbered, the women writers' share has climbed from 14% to 20%. Although still rough, these tentative figures may act as a signal for the academic community

¹⁵ Although this essay does not discuss the relations between critics and poets separately, a closer look at the corpus can still reveal a few key personalities for every leading poet. For instance, Jidi Majia relies on studies by Liu Qitao 劉啟濤, Tan Wuchang 譚五昌, and Li Qian 李騫 (3 papers each); Mu Dan's legacy is chiefly explored by Yi Bin 易彬 (4 papers); Hai Zi has two series of articles: one by Zhang Qinghua 張清華 (6 papers) and the second by Shao Ningning 邵甯寧 (3 papers); finally, Ya Siming 亞思明 acts as a leading proponent of Zhang Zao with two entries in the sample.

¹⁶ Some prominent figures of the May Fourth Movement—such as Guo Moruo or Xu Zhimo—also have columns dedicated to them, but their rankings were affected by the absence of the selected poetry-related keywords.

to start tracking the tendency. After all, the scope of the current paper is limited to a few specific indicators that are only suitable for a “present canon” and thus should not be over-extrapolated.

Conclusion

Somewhat contrary to Dubin’s classification, core periodicals and the *Guide* itself act as an expanded version of an “institutional canon” rather than its “present” version. Modern and contemporary poets tend to be treated as belonging to discrete historical categories (figures such as Chang Yao form rare exceptions), and the central positions on the contemporary side are predominantly occupied by male writers born in the 1950–1960 period. For the majority of cases, the presence of a dedicated section in at least one magazine decides whether a poet’s name will or will not appear on the graphs, and such bursts of interest, in turn, are often dictated by various commemorative reasons. For most of the living authors the only way to match these attention levels derives from unpredictable “viral” incidents. However, such activity alone can hardly conform to any commonly accepted definition of “canon”.

Among all the selected periodicals, *Contention in Literature and Art* stands out as an exceptionally influential node within the network. Combined data on scatter plots and network diagrams unambiguously show that this journal has substantially contributed to the popularity of three leading figures in the corpus: Mu Dan, Jidi Majia and Hai Zi. Indeed, poets like Mu Dan or Hai Zi have already become cornerstone figures in the account of modern Chinese literature, and thus presumably will enjoy similar academic recognition as long as the current historical narrative remains valid. However, the status of Jidi Majia seems less stable: a simple search query shows that in the comparable six-year period (2009–2014), there are only 9 papers that contain his name in the title (compared to 27 in the current sample). Therefore, the potential impact of official status on “canon formation” should not be over-emphasised. And similar caution, most likely, applies to the other dimensions of diversity: despite the rising visibility of female poets, their overall representation in core academic journals remains marginal.

Since the effectiveness of quantitative analysis generally relies on the amount of data processed, well-grounded research usually requires cooperative efforts. The present study has covered only the tip of the CNKI iceberg, and the extension of either the time period or the scope of periodicals may significantly impact our vision of the critical agenda in the PRC. However, while digging deeper into the recesses of the repository, scholars should not forget about its general conformity to official regulations. For contemporary poetry such limitations

may mean the omission of numerous sensitive authors or topics, and the assessment of a canon should always enhance the visibility of excluded individuals and their work. Further steps in research here might include access to digitalised collections of unofficial journals or gathering material directly from the popular WeChat poetry channels where there is less centralised control over information. Consequently, these findings might be compared with the non-Mainland body of scholarly articles—either on Chinese modern poetry, or, indeed, on other (translated?) cultural traditions. For instance, such inquiries may help us to see what types of authors and literary creations act as connecting links between nations, who made them such and through which contexts, as well as which artists deserve more attention and in what capacity. Thus, the author hopes that aside from more or less inspirational and controversial discoveries, this paper will also be read as an invitation to a collaborative search for further methodological syntheses.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Symbolic Exchange as Recognition: Tu Long's Social Strategies with Paintings and Calligraphy in Late Ming China

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In the late Ming dynasty, literati gift exchange extended beyond material transaction, becoming a sophisticated medium through which cultural capital was displayed and social recognition was negotiated. This article examines how paintings, calligraphy, and other literary-artistic objects circulated within Tu Long's (1543–1605) networks, arguing that these exchanges operated as acts of mutual recognition grounded in shared cultural and religious values, cultivated dispositions, and elite lifestyles. Through case studies of major works—including the Portrait of Master Tanyang and the Buddha-Mother Painting—alongside landscape paintings, calligraphic pieces, and fans inscribed with poetry, the study demonstrates how Tu Long strategically mobilised cultural objects to navigate overlapping religious and literati circles. Even ostensibly religious artworks were shaped primarily by literati cultural sensibilities and served to reinforce social belonging and to articulate individuality within distinct literati communities. The article further shows how Tu Long converted cultural capital into material support during his post-dismissal crisis, particularly through exchanges with patrons, revealing the entanglement of symbolic value and economic necessity. Ultimately, the circulation of literary-artistic objects emerges as a central mechanism through which late-Ming literati pursued esteem, sustained relationships, and positioned themselves within multiple, intersecting social spheres.

晚明文人的禮物交換，兼具社會功能與象徵意義，文化物品的流通成為爭取承認與地位的關鍵機制。本文以屠隆（1543–1605）為例，探討書畫等水墨藝術品如何超越物質交換，轉化為社會資本與文化資本，並成為一種爭取承認的實踐。此類交換植根於共享的價值觀與生活方式，從文化審美延伸至宗教領域。本文通過分析屠隆的策略性贈禮，揭示水墨藝術品交換如何建立並鞏固文人的關係，如何基於文人的文化品格在文人社群中踐行承認的博弈。

Keywords: social recognition, gift exchange, symbolic capital, artistic objects, late-Ming literati

關鍵詞： 社會承認，禮物交換，象徵資本，水墨藝術，晚明文人

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Introduction

In the late Ming dynasty, the expanding commodity economy reshaped social relations across different status groups, including the literati. Within this environment, literati increasingly established connections through the circulation of material objects—particularly refined cultural items such as paintings, calligraphy, fans inscribed with poetry, ink sticks, inkstones, and antiques. These object-based relationships were conditioned by the distinctive cultural disposition and cultivation of the literati, so that both the objects themselves and the modes of exchange bore the imprint of literati taste, aesthetic values, and shared cultural norms. Gift exchange thus became a means of reinforcing relationships grounded in shared values and norms.

To clarify why gift exchange held such significance for late-Ming literati, it is necessary to consider the deeper dynamics that structured their social interactions. Theories of recognition developed in the Hegelian tradition emphasise that individuals are not only “conditioned by a social context but constituted by and individuated by their social relations”, through which social acknowledgement is generated between subjects in the community, such that an essential human need is to recognise oneself in one’s environment. (Khurana 2021, 553) Recognition involves reciprocal relations in which “I” can not only recognise another person but another person can also recognise “me”, and “We” can recognise each other—what Hegel describes as “the I that is We and the We that is I”. (Hegel 2018, 177) Establishing and maintaining relations within a community grounded in shared values and norms therefore ensured that individuals could recognise one another appropriately.

This perspective helps clarify the function of gift exchange as an act of recognition among late-Ming literati. While Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic exchange illuminates how gifts operate as symbolic capital— “a sort of message or symbol suited to creating a social link”, representing the cultural and social standing of those involved (Bourdieu 1998, 104)—it does not fully explain why literati continued to rely on gift exchange as a significant mode of social interaction in a period when their social status remained relatively stable. Existing scholarship has emphasised the identity crisis produced by the rise of consumer society, as wealthy merchants increasingly shared the same spaces of consumption as the literati. (Chang 1994, 53–63; Zhang 2007, 130–132 and 2008, 125–130) Brook famously observes that “elites and commoners both could afford to buy their way out of simplicity and obscurity into pleasure and notoriety”. (Brook 1999, 151) Yet the implications of this crisis were uneven. Although the literati experienced material competition from wealthy merchants, the hierarchical structure of the imperial social order formally remained intact; the literati continued to occupy the highest position within the four essential occupational classes 四民秩序. At the same time, however, the social landscape was becoming increasingly fluid, as merchants and even certain groups of craftsmen rose in wealth and cultural influence while many peasants

faced downward mobility. These shifts created a sense of instability, even as the ideological hierarchy itself persisted.

For elite literati—those who held relatively high social status, belonged to influential lineages, and enjoyed strong reputations within the literati community due to outstanding talent and achievements—the primary source of anxiety did not arise solely from merchants or other external groups. Rather, it emerged from within the literati community itself. The fluctuation of official careers—often exacerbated by factionalism—, the instability of personal reputation, and the competitive social environment defined by literati values and norms meant that individuals were constantly negotiating how they were perceived, valued, and acknowledged by their peers. In this context, the deeper motivation behind gift exchange was not the pursuit of distinction from other social classes, but the pursuit of recognition within a community that shared the same cultural values and norms.

Honneth's theory of social recognition—particularly his account of esteem grounded in autonomy and individual achievements—offers a productive framework for understanding the deeper motivations behind late-Ming literati gift exchange. In the imperial social order, one's standing in society and one's status as a moral and political agent were traditionally fused within the concept of honour: rights and duties were attached to one's status group or estate, rather than to one's status as an autonomous individual. By contrast, modern theories distinguish "status as a person" from "social standing", generating different modes of recognition—self-respect and self-esteem—based on the equal moral status of autonomous agents and on the value attributed to their particular achievements within a community. (Honneth 1995, p.xiv; 22–23; 121–130; Miller 2016, 98; Iser 2019) Although late-Ming literati operated within a hierarchy grounded in honour (*rong* 榮)—a form of recognition rooted in social standing defined by the Confucian moral order and by the prestige associated with fulfilling literati roles—their interactions within literati circles increasingly reflected dynamics closer to esteem, which in literati discourse often appeared under the term *ming* (名): not mere "reputation" in a superficial sense, but a deeper form of acknowledgment grounded in cultivated achievement and the evaluative judgments of one's peers. Individuals sought acknowledgement not simply of their inherited or institutionally granted status, but of their cultivated virtues, aesthetic discernment, and personal accomplishments. (*TLJ*, 4.463)

Gift exchange thus became a medium through which literati could give and receive such esteem. By circulating cultural objects that embodied their literary, artistic, or religious commitments, they created and sustained reciprocal relations that affirmed their standing within the community. In this sense, gift exchange was not merely a symbolic act in Bourdieu's sense, but a means of securing esteem within a shared cultural world—an intersubjective process that recognition theory helps illuminate with greater precision.

Paintings and calligraphy were especially potent in this regard. Beyond their aesthetic refinement, these works embodied literary, cultural, or religious ideas in both content and

form, distinguishing them from other cultural objects such as fine paper or ink sticks. When exchanged as gifts, their social value was no less than their artistic and economic value; their cultural significance became a crucial component of their social value in maintaining literati relationships. Their circulation within the literati community thus constituted a distinct category of gift exchange, deeply implicated in the literati's pursuit of esteem.

Clunas's study of Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470–1559) demonstrates how paintings and calligraphy circulated as social currency within elite networks. (Clunas 2004) In *Superfluous Things*, he had already argued that material culture operated as a medium of distinction, as elite commentators sought to reaffirm their social and cultural status through connoisseurship and discourses on objects when the lower orders were adopting elite forms of cultural consumption. (Clunas 1991, 155; 8) Together, these works illuminate the role of material objects in shaping elite identity in the late Ming. Yet they also reveal the limits of interpreting literati gift exchange solely through the lens of distinction. Wen's exchanges, as Clunas notes, occurred among elite circles where status was already secure, and elite anxieties in cultural consumption concern the boundaries between social classes rather than the dynamics within the literati class itself. For literati, however, the significance of artworks lay neither in their artistic content alone nor in patronage or obligation, (Clunas 2004, 43–48) nor in distinguishing themselves from other classes, but in the capacity of these objects to embody and communicate cultured virtues and values. Their circulation within literati networks served above all to secure esteem and to affirm one's standing within a shared cultural world.

Studies of late-Ming material culture have illuminated how objects contributed to identity formation and anxiety, (Clunas 1991, 150–165; Brook 1999, 173–237; Wu 2008, 65–164) yet they have paid less attention to the interpersonal dynamics of recognition within the literati community. Cultural objects—especially paintings, calligraphy, and fans inscribed with poetry—played a particularly prominent role in literati interactions when exchanged as gifts. These exchanges functioned not primarily to distinguish individuals from other classes but to foster mutual recognition grounded in shared values and norms. Within the literati community, cultural objects also operated as social capital: possession of such items facilitated incorporation into networks of solidarity, in which members recognised one another through shared aesthetic values and moral expectations. Such mutual recognition did not merely affirm one's standing in the eyes of others; it also generated the internal self-relations—self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem—that, in Honneth's terms, arise when individuals see their own worth reflected and validated by their peers. (Honneth 1995, 25; Miller 2016, 98). Gift exchange of cultural objects thus constituted a symbolic act of recognition, reinforcing relationships within the literati community.

This article examines two major paintings—the Portrait of Master Tanyang (*Tanyang dashi xiang* 曇陽大師像) and the Buddha-Mother Painting (*Fomu tu* 佛母圖), mentioned in Tu Long's letters to Shen Maoxue 沈懋學 (1539–1582) and Wang Daokun 汪道昆 (1525–

1593) (*TLJ*, 4.325; 6.345)—together with landscape paintings, calligraphy, and fans inscribed with poetry that circulated among Tu Long's social relations. Tu Long serves as an illuminating example because of his fluctuating official career, his diverse forms of social interaction, and his active participation in Jiangnan 江南 elite cultural communities. His letters record extensive networks of elite literati relations, and, born into a distinguished lineage in Yin County 鄞縣, he also maintained close ties with local elite cultural circles. Combined with his outstanding literary talent and cultural cultivation, his interactions through cultural objects reveal representative patterns of gift exchange among late-Ming literati.

The paintings and artworks exchanged by Tu Long further illuminate how gift exchange operated as an act of recognition across cultural and religious spheres. The two major paintings were closely tied to literati religious practice and cultivation, particularly the Portrait of Master Tanyang, which reflects the literati's engagement with the Unity of the Three Teachings (*sanjiao heyi* 三教合一). At the same time, this painting also signalled Tu Long's pursuit of self-mastery within social spaces shaped by highly individualised forms of religious perception and cultivation, and by the interpersonal interactions that such personalised commitments generated. This analysis further demonstrates how literati maintained status and esteem within various literati communities and how they competed for greater recognition within these overlapping spheres.

Tu Long's Religious Practice and Social Strategies

During the late Ming dynasty, beyond the pursuit of success in the imperial examinations and hierarchical rank in officialdom, literati devoted considerable attention to self-cultivation—not only through daily practices of discipline and self-improvement but also through sustained engagement with religious doctrines, particularly Buddhism and Daoism. Through these practices, they gradually shaped a social sphere oriented by shared literary expertise, cultural disposition, and religious interests. Compared with lower-level literati, elite figures whose social status and reputations extended across local and regional networks found participation in Buddhist and Daoist communities an important arena for articulating how these traditions could be integrated into an elite identity grounded in Confucian learning.

This sphere provided a setting in which individuals cultivated relationships with others who shared similar commitments to self-cultivation and religious engagement. Within such communities, the effort to reconcile the Three Teachings—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—functioned not simply as an intellectual synthesis but as a means of establishing shared values and norms that enabled mutual recognition among participants. The flourishing of the Unity of the Three Teachings in the late Ming thus reflected both a pursuit

of self-mastery, which granted the literati autonomy in shaping their own spiritual frameworks, and a collective process through which they articulated a moral and cultural order grounded in their own judgement and needs.

The literati's deep engagement with the Unity of the Three Teachings stimulated significant developments in both its theoretical articulation and its practical cultivation, while also inspiring a wide range of literary and artistic production, especially paintings. Literati expressed their understanding of the Three Teachings not only through essays and treatises but also through visual representations that conveyed their interpretations of the relationships and hierarchies among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. As Brook observes, elite Confucian thinkers generally regarded their intellectual tradition as superior: "they were able to accept that Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism were different modes for grasping the same reality. But not all the Three Teachings were equal". (Brook 1993, 169) In their discussions, literati debated the primacy and subordination of the three teachings and how they could function as a unity, as seen in Wang Shouren's 王守仁 (Wang Yangming 王陽明, 1472–1529) School of Mind, Lin Zhao'en's 林兆恩 (1517–1598) Sanyi Teaching 三一教, and Tu Long's own writings. (Tang 2023; *Tu Long Ji*, 9; 10) In painting, these distinctions were often visualised through the spatial arrangement of representative figures—Confucius, Buddha (Sakyamuni), and Laozi—as exemplified by Ding Yungeng's 丁雲鵬 (1547–1628) Painting of the Three Teachings (*Sanjiao tu* 三教圖). (Shao 2022)

Scholarship on the Unity of the Three Teachings has largely focused on discursive treatises, epistolary essays, and literary works; even studies of paintings on this theme tend to concentrate on iconography. (See Langlois & Sun 1983; Berling 1980; Eichman 2014; Wang 2020; Shao 2022) Rarely has this discourse been examined in relation to literati recognition. Yet the elaboration and visualisation of the Three Teachings in late-Ming paintings were not only significant in literary, artistic, religious, and ideological terms; they also functioned as a key mode through which literati sought esteem within their social world. Visual art provided a primary vehicle for asserting one's cultivated religious understanding and for demonstrating participation in a shared value system, thereby enabling literati to secure recognition within a defined social sphere.

Amid this religious fervour, Tu Long—an accomplished and cultured elite literatus—was deeply engaged in religious cultivation and practice, encompassing self-cultivation, social interaction, and connections with Buddhist and Daoist figures and institutions. He achieved notable success in articulating the Unity of the Three Teachings and actively practised both Buddhism and Daoism. His *Hongbao Ji* 鴻苞集 is regarded as a compendium of his thought on the Three Teachings, including essays such as *Luyuan Lun Sanjiao* 鹿園論三教, *Sanjiao Zhichu* 三教至處, and *Sanjiao Yidao* 三教一道. (*TLJ*, 9.745–778) In letters to friends such as Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–1590), Wang Daokun 汪道昆, and Shen Yiguan 沈一貫 (1531–1617)—all prominent figures with high social status and strong reputations within the

literati community—Tu Long frequently referred to his writings on this theme. For example, in a letter to Zou Guangang 鄒觀光 (1556–1604), who held the rank of Vice Minister of the Court of the Imperial Stud in Nanjing, he wrote: “In recent years, having much leisure upon the meditation mat, I have surveyed the eight directions, compared the Three Teachings, and composed them into a single book. ... It is divided into more than twenty volumes, and is entitled *Hongbao* 道民年來以蒲團多暇，流覽八荒，參合三教，著爲一書。..... 分二十餘卷，名爲《鴻苞》”。(TLJ, 6.416).

Tu Long’s achievements in reconciling Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism were remarkable both in his time and in present-day scholarship. Consequently, studies of his engagement with the Three Teachings have focused primarily on his theoretical contributions, rarely addressing the circulation of religious paintings within his social relations or how such exchanges sustained his religiously oriented networks and pursuit of esteem—particularly after his dismissal from office in 1584 (having passed the Palace Examination in 1577), when the loss of official position heightened his reliance on religiously and culturally oriented communities as alternative sources of recognition and social support.

Tu Long’s pursuit of recognition in the religious sphere through the exchange of paintings took multiple forms. Beyond honour derived from hierarchical status as an elite literatus and official, he sought esteem through relationships grounded in individualised values and norms. This dynamic was not unique to Tu Long but reflected a broader trend within the late-Ming literati community, where the pursuit of recognition extended beyond honour to encompass esteem within a wider social environment. Influenced by the School of Mind—especially the concept of innate knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知) (Jiao 2021; Miura 2018; Marchal 2013) and its Left Wing of Wang Yangming Learning 王學左派, (See Ji 1934; Shimada 2005) including followers such as Wang Gen 王艮 (1483–1541) and Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602)—literati increasingly recognised themselves as “free legislators” of morality. (Honneth 1995, xiv) Wang Gen’s assertion that “the principles that structure the common people’s daily lives are precisely those upheld by the sages 百姓日用條理處，即是聖人之條理處” (Wang 2001, 29) further legitimised the individual as a moral agent whose everyday practices could generate valid moral principles. This view enabled literati to construct personalised value worlds and to form communities grounded in shared religious and cultural commitments, thereby creating new arenas in which esteem-based recognition could be pursued.

As literati increasingly viewed themselves as autonomous agents, moving beyond hierarchical honour gained through the examination system and officialdom, they sought a more self-mastered form of esteem. This was achieved by constructing a series of “individualised value-ideas” (Honneth 1995, 130) that redefined shared values and norms within their social community. The capacity of the “distinguishable ‘I’” to articulate the shared “We” meant that “We” could differentiate according to individual claims, producing multiple “We”s. (Khurana 2021, 556) Each “We” constituted a social sphere for recognition. Literati

connected by Buddhism and Daoism—or by a more specific concept such as the Unity of the Three Teachings—thus formed communities within the broader literati community. These communities could be organised around religious ideas and cultivation or oriented toward literature, art, and various social activities, including literati societies.

The overlapping nature of these communities meant that the literati's pursuit of recognition unfolded through diverse modes. Their elaboration of the Unity of the Three Teachings and its artistic expression—particularly in paintings—combined religious, artistic, and cultural preferences, creating distinctive connections and relationships within the social sphere. This interplay played a significant role in their pursuit of self-mastered recognition.

Portrait of Master Tanyang: Symbolism and Exchange

The worship of Wang Taozhen 王燾貞 (1558–1579), known as Master Tanyang (Tanyangzi 曇陽子), became a prominent trend within the late-Ming literati community, particularly the Jiangnan literati. Shen Defu 沈德符 (1578–1642) recorded:

Wang Taicang [Wang Xijue 王錫爵 (1534–1614)], having offended Jiangling [Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525–1582)] while serving as Vice-Minister, was granted leave to return home. His second daughter, known as Tanyangzi, attained the Way and passed away into immortality. Eminent figures of that time such as the Yanzhou brothers [Wang Shizhen and Wang Shimao 王世懋 (1536–1588)], Academician Shen Maoxue [沈懋學], Magistrate Tu Long of Qingpu, Academician Feng Mengzhen [馮夢禎 (1548–1605)], the Honourable Qu Ruji [瞿汝稷 (1548–1610)], and altogether no fewer than several hundred scholars, all bowed in reverence and styled themselves her disciples. Having already foretold the date of her apotheosis, on that day they assembled beside the tomb of her late husband of the Xu clan, and those who came to see her off thronged from across the southeast.

王太倉以侍郎忤江陵予告歸。其仲女曇陽子者得道化去。一時名士如弇州兄弟、沈太史懋學、屠青浦隆、馮太史夢禎、瞿青君汝稷輩，無慮數百人，皆頂禮稱弟子。先已豫示化期，至日並集於其亡夫徐氏墓次，送者傾東南。
(Shen 2012, 23.497)

This worship was led by Tanyangzi's father, Wang Xijue, and by Wang Shizhen (for detailed discussions of Tanyangzi's apotheosis and the power of her appeal among the literati, see Waltner 1987, Wei & Wang 2022, and Wei 2014). Within this circle, Tu Long ranked as Tanyangzi's follower second only to Wang Shizhen; indeed, Shen Maoxue and Feng Mengzhen joined the worship through Tu Long's introduction. (*TLJ*, 4.321) As the worship expanded, a community gradually formed in which members not only elaborated its doctrine but also competed for authority over its definition. (Xu 2012) This authority included

producing and disseminating materials related to Master Tanyang—such as her portrait, biography, and recorded sayings—and was largely monopolised by Wang Shizhen, who received full authorisation from Tanyangzi to compose her biography and establish a shrine for her worship (Wang 1970, 78.3830–3831). In his journal “Record of Setting Out from Qingxi 發青谿記”, Tu Long wrote: “After the Master’s passing, there were two occasions when her spirit returned; only Taiyuan [Wang Xijue] and Langya [Wang Shizhen] received her radiance, and no others ever heard of it 師化後，嘗神歸者再，獨太原、瑯邪得接光采，他人莫有聞者”. (*TLJ*, 3.283)

Despite Wang Shizhen’s dominance, Tu Long demonstrated ambition in elaborating and disseminating the doctrine of Tanyang worship (for Wang Shizhen’s control over the worship of Tanyangzi and Tu Long’s competition with Wang for power and status in literary and religious circles, see Xu 2012). He was eager to write Tanyangzi’s biography and to circulate her portrait among his friends, but although he composed a biography, he had to submit it to Wang Shizhen for approval multiple times, as detailed in his letters to Wang Shizhen and Shen Maoxue compiled in the *Collected Works of Baiyu* (*Baiyu Ji* 白榆集). (*TLJ*, 4.320, 322, 324, 325) While he secured some authority in narrating Tanyangzi’s ascent into immortality, his efforts remained constrained by Wang Shizhen’s influence within this social circle. The biography is not preserved in Tu Long’s collections, but his *Hongbao Ji* contains an essay titled “The Last Commandments of Master Tan 曇師遺言”. (*TLJ*, 10.1081–1082)

Tu Long’s commitment to Tanyang worship was driven not merely by religious belief but by the opportunity to shape a social sphere grounded in a self-defined value system, thereby satisfying his expectation of mastering relationships and his need for recognition. His struggle for the authority over Tanyangzi’s biography was less a competition for status than an effort to secure esteem rooted in individual autonomy. This contest exemplifies the process whereby the distinguishable “I” articulates the shared “We” through personal claims.

Tu Long’s struggle within the Tanyang worship community was expressed not only in his efforts to gain doctrinal authority but also in his attempts to circulate Tanyangzi’s portrait and the religious concepts embedded in her image. The Portrait of Master Tanyang was painted by You Qiu 尤求 (active 2nd half of 16th century) at Wang Shizhen’s request. You Qiu, who was also from Suzhou 蘇州—the same prefecture as Wang Xijue and Wang Shizhen—specialised in figure painting, particularly portraits of women, such as the depiction of Hongfu 紅拂圖 (1575), now in the Palace Museum. Wang Shizhen, as the principal agent in disseminating Tanyangzi’s image, controlled the portrait’s production, while Tu Long shared only the right to distribute copies. In a letter to Shen Maoxue, Tu Long wrote: “By chance I obtained two copies of the Portrait of Master Tanyang, which have now been mounted. One I have kept in my studio for veneration, and the other I respectfully send to you, knowing that you do not yet possess one 適貌得師真像二幀，裝潢已成。一留齋頭供養，一奉去，知兄處尚少此爾”. (*TLJ*, 4.325) Whether these two portraits were painted by You Qiu

himself or copied by others cannot be verified from existing sources. However, given Wang Shizhen's strict control over the elaboration and dissemination of Tanyangzi's image, the portraits Tu Long acquired were likely consistent with You Qiu's design. For Tu Long and his peers, the painting's significance lay less in its authenticity than in its symbolic function: what the image represented and its role as an object of exchange in their pursuit of recognition. Its social and cultural value outweighed its artistic value.

The Portrait of Master Tanyang, now in the Shanghai Museum, is a hanging scroll. Its inscription records the date—“On an auspicious day in the twelfth month [January 1581 in the Gregorian calendar] of the Gengchen year [mostly 1580] of the Wanli reign-period 萬曆庚辰臘月吉日”—and the artist: “Painted by You Qiu of Changzhou 長州尤求寫”, accompanied by two seals. The composition is divided into two sections: the upper part filled with inscriptions and the lower part featuring Tanyangzi's portrait. The calligraphy includes seven texts—*The Eight Precepts of Master Tanyang* 曇陽儒師八戒, *Triple Admiration* 三嘆, *At the Time of Her Passing* 臨化示, *Admonition to the Disciples* 訓戒弟子, *Farewell Poem* 辭世歌, *Gāthā* 偈, and *Portrait Eulogy* 像贊—all composed by Wang Shizhen and transcribed in small regular script by Zhang Zao 章藻 (1547–?), a disciple of Wang Shimao. The inscription concludes: “Respectfully inscribed by the disciple Zhang Zao in the twelfth month of the Gengchen year 庚辰臘月弟子章藻拜錄”.

Comparison of the portrait (Figure 1) with Wang Shizhen's textual descriptions reveals inconsistencies. For instance, the *Portrait Eulogy* describes Tanyangzi as follows:

She wears upon her head the Hengdou crown and is clothed in the Eight Trigrams robe. With her left hand she makes the Azure Dragon gesture, and with her right she grasps the Demon-Slaying Sword. Her brows rise like three mountain peaks, her eyes gleam like reflecting pearls, and her mouth shows tiger's teeth and square lips.

頭頂橫門冠，身穿八卦袍，左按青龍印，右執斬魔刀。三山眉，影珠目，虎齒方唇。

Yet in the painting, her hair is arranged in a left-side chignon—matching Wang Shizhen's reference in the *Gāthā* to “Tanyangzi of the left chignon 左髻曇陽子”—while the other side falls loosely. The sword appears in her left hand, placed over her right, which is concealed within a sleeve holding a fly whisk rather than making a mystic gesture. These discrepancies suggest that You Qiu's rendering diverged from Wang Shizhen's description. In fact, You Qiu likely based his work on Wang Shizhen's *Biography of Master Tanyang*, which states: “With her left hand making a mystic gesture she holds a sword; with her right she grasps the end of a fly whisk 左手結印執劍，右手握塵尾端”. (Wang 1970, 78.3835) The difference may reflect the simultaneous creation of the portrait and inscriptions, indicating that precise visual fidelity was secondary to the literati's aim of fashioning an image that fulfilled their symbolic and social needs.



Figure 1: You Qiu, Portrait of Master Tanyang, 1581, hanging scroll. The Shanghai Museum, Shanghai
<https://www.shanghaimuseum.net/mu/frontend/pg/article/id/CI00147237>.

The painting was therefore a collaborative creation involving two literati, Wang Shizhen and Zhang Zao, together with the professional painter You Qiu, whose participation reflected the literati's cultural virtues and values. This balance underscores that literati interpretations of Tanyangzi's ascent and their doctrinal elaborations were as significant as the figure herself. Tanyangzi's image was fashioned through their Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist values, serving as a substantial embodiment of the literati's practice of the Unity of the Three Teachings. It indicates the confidence of the literati in their own values and norms, expressed through a self-fashioned religious figure.

In the painting, Tanyangzi appears as a Daoist figure, yet her name derives from Bodhisattva Tanluan 曇鸞. As Wang Shizhen recorded, before her ascent, Tanyangzi declared: "I am the incarnation of the Bodhisattva Tanluan. It is because I wish to deliver and guide certain beings that I have been reborn, nothing more 吾曇鸞菩薩化身也，以欲有所度引，故轉世耳". (Wang 1970, 78.3835) Bodhisattva Tanluan (476–572), an eminent monk of the Northern Wei 北魏 (386–534), laid the doctrinal foundations of the Pure Land school. Yet Wang Shizhen also noted that Tanyangzi was enlightened by the Daoist Queen Mother of the West, from whom she received garments and bracelets, and that the secrets of immortality she transmitted to her followers were learned from this Daoist deity. Additionally, Tanyangzi was honoured as a chaste widow within the Confucian moral framework for preserving her fidelity to her deceased fiancé, Xu Jingshao 徐景韶. Her ascent ritual took place at Xu's tomb, where she had resided in "the offering chamber on the left side of the tomb 墓左享室". (Wang 1970, 78.3825)

Tanyangzi was fashioned into a figure embodying the literati's elaboration of the Three Teachings. In the *Eight Precepts of Master Tanyang*, bestowed upon her followers before her ascent, Confucian ethics—such as reverence for Heaven, Earth, Sovereign, Parents, and Teacher—are interwoven with Buddhist and Daoist principles. For example, the first precept, "to love and respect sovereign and parents 愛敬君親", and the sixth, "to be reverent and cautious in speech, and not speak of others' faults 敬慎言語不談人過", reflect Confucian morality, while the second, "to prohibit sexual misconduct and killing 戒止淫殺", and the fourth, "to soften one's glare and endure humiliation 和光忍辱", derive from Buddhist and Daoist teachings. Similarly, the *Admonition to the Disciples* declares: "loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and righteousness are the very foundations of the Great Way; you must surely uphold them yourselves 夫忠孝節義乃大道基本，汝等固當自持." These texts reveal Confucian norms as dominant in shaping literati conduct, while incorporating Buddhist and Daoist elements to construct a cult centred on a specific figure in the name of the Unity of the Three Teachings. As Tanyangzi herself stated to her brother Wang Heng 王衡 (1561–1609): "Only now do I realise that the Three Teachings are founded upon a single principle: if one seeks Buddhahood, one becomes a Buddha; if one seeks immortality, one becomes an immortal. Extending this further, Confucianism and Daoism too may be harmonised, for

all alike do not go beyond this very way of thinking 吾乃今知三教一理，欲佛則佛，欲仙則仙，推此，則儒道亦可通，俱不外此心耳”。(Wang 1908)

Tanyangzi's concept of the Unity of the Three Teachings largely echoed prevailing literati interpretations. Yet literati reciprocally attributed this idea to Tanyangzi, fashioning her as a transcendent figure to validate their own religious virtues and values. In a letter to his grandnephew Tu Benjun 屠本峻 (1542-1622), Tu Long affirmed his belief in Tanyangzi's synthesis of the Three Teachings: “Master Tanyang united the Daoist ideal of emptiness and stillness with the Buddhists' all-embracing insight, yet devoted her effort to the rigorous realisation of true reality. Her teaching was rooted in human ethics, while her principles embraced both inner nature and vital destiny. Truly she is my teacher 曇陽大師以道家虛靜兼釋氏圓通，而從精嚴實相處著力。教本人倫，理兼性命。真吾師也”。(*TLJ*, 4.324-325) This statement reflects Tu Long's personal understanding of the Unity of the Three Teachings and his aspiration to achieve distinction in reconciling them. In letters to friends such as Shen Yiguan and Wang Shixing 王士性 (1547-1598), Tu Long voiced concern over the fragmentation of the Three Teachings and his eagerness to harmonise them. (*TLJ*, 4.490; 5.244) Tanyangzi's image provided an ideal figure through which he could project these convictions. The fervour surrounding Tanyang worship among the literati also stemmed from her reputed attainment of immortality, (Waltner 1987, 108) fulfilling literati expectations regarding the ultimate goal of religious cultivation, whether Buddhist or Daoist.

Whether through Wang Shizhen's control over the creation of Tanyangzi's biography and portrait or through Tu Long's struggle to secure his rights to compose and disseminate these items, both sought to consolidate status within the community while constructing social relations grounded in religious values and norms. When Tu Long circulated Tanyangzi's portrait or biography among his friends, he did so not merely to reinforce bonds through shared belief but to elevate his standing within a cohesive circle, thereby gaining greater esteem. Waltner characterises this worship as “an elite cult”, within which Tanyangzi remained “a shadowy figure”. (Waltner 1987, 125) This observation highlights the fact that the cult's significance lay less in the deity herself than in the social dynamics among the literati who shaped her image; a community grounded in shared religious ideals and cultural cultivation provided a selective arena in which participants affirmed their belonging and secured esteem from one another.

The fervour for Tanyang worship peaked while Wang Shizhen and Wang Xijue were residing at the Tiandan Temple 恬憺觀 in Taicang 太倉, Suzhou, for Daoist cultivation associated with Tanyangzi's teachings, during which time “those who came to pay respects and receive instruction were as numerous as ever 往參承者多如故”。(*TLJ*, 4.323;325) As these two eminent literati had settled in the temple, it is difficult to determine whether followers sought Tanyangzi herself or the prestige of the two Wangs; more likely, they aimed to affirm their own identity and belonging within this social circle. Tu Long also recorded his

visit to the Tiandan Temple on his way to Beijing to make his annual report (*TLJ*, 3.283–293) while he was serving as magistrate of Qingpu County 青浦縣. However, the fervour gradually subsided once Wang Shizhen and Wang Xijue had returned to office, and Tanyangzi, as a symbolic but shadowy figure, faded from the centre of literati interactions. Although Tanyangzi's image did not undergo the long-term, multi-community reinterpretations which affected the cult of Guandi, (Duara 2008) the literati's construction of her persona similarly involved a layering of symbolic meanings within their cultural network.

The prominence of Wang Shizhen and Wang Xijue at the Tiandan Temple reveals that the cult of Tanyangzi operated not only as a religious practice but also as a socially visible performance of literati culture. As the previous surge in visitors suggests, the appeal of the cult lay as much in the prestige of its leading participants as in devotion to Tanyangzi herself. In this sense, the worship of Tanyangzi functioned as a stage on which prominent literati enacted shared religious values and displayed their cultured identities before a broader audience. Importantly, this audience extended beyond those committed primarily to religious or cultural cultivation to include figures within the official bureaucracy, for whom participation offered a means to display moral refinement and develop connections relevant to their careers. The pursuit of esteem within this community thus intersected with broader ambitions tied to reputation and advancement within official life. This dynamic is reflected in Wang Shizhen's moral discourse in the *Eight Precepts of Master Tanyang* and *Admonition to the Disciples*, in the public visibility of his and Wang Xijue's self-cultivation at the Tiandan Temple, and in the fact that both men returned to office shortly thereafter. Tu Long's own participation while serving as a magistrate further illustrates how engagement in this worship could reinforce one's cultured persona and sustain networks relevant to both cultural standing and official reputation.

Buddha-Mother Painting: Kinship and Recognition

Although the Tanyang cult was short-lived, religious practice and cultivation continued to play an important role in the literati's pursuit of recognition. While Tanyangzi represented a unique synthesis of the Three Teachings, most literati freely blended Buddhist and Daoist ideas, often emphasising their integration with Confucian principles. When these concepts were expressed through paintings and other objects, they became tangible forms of exchange, bearing the literati's cultivated virtues and values and reinforcing social ties in their pursuit of esteem.

Buddhist and Daoist paintings and artefacts were frequently exchanged as gifts among Tu Long and his friends. The most notable example was a Buddha-Mother Painting created by

Ding Yunpeng to celebrate Tu Long's mother's ninetieth birthday. In his letter to Ding, Tu Long conveyed heartfelt gratitude:

You have graciously undertaken to paint an Image of the Buddha-Mother for my aged mother. I and my mother, how could we possibly dare to accept such a blessing? Yet the artistry is of the highest excellence, standing alongside that of Master Longmian [Li Gonglin 李公麟 (1049-1106)] himself—a fact that all can readily discern. I respectfully bow my head and offer my thanks

承爲老母寫《佛母圖》，不慧某凡母子，其何敢當此祝？乃繪事精絕，方駕龍眠生，則人人能鑒定之矣！敬頓首稱謝。(TLJ, 6.344)

This painting had been commissioned by Wang Daokun, Vice-Minister of War and scion of a prominent elite lineage in She County 歙縣, who was also a leading literatus renowned for his leadership of the poetic society the White Elm Society (*Baiyu She* 白榆社) and for his extensive cultural networks. He also composed a prefatory inscription and sent the Tu family “baskets and hampers of fine cloth, and sandalwood of renowned fragrance 筐篚嘉幣、栴檀名香”. As Tu Long noted, the cloth would be used for garments for his mother, and the incense offered to the Buddha. (TLJ, 6.345) In his inscription, Wang Daokun likened Tu Long's mother to Tao Kan's 陶侃 (259-334) mother, one of the Four Exemplary Mothers recorded in the *Gujin Lienü Zhuan* 古今列女傳, celebrated for her strict moral teaching and frugality. (Xie 1778, 2.49b) Wang Daokun extolled her maternal virtue while praising Tu Long's moral character. Tu Long remarked: “I am ashamed that the son does not measure up, yet the mother truly resembles her 媿子不稱，母實似之”. (TLJ, 6.347)

This episode illustrates how literati virtue shaped family conduct, and how familial virtue reciprocally influenced literati social interactions, strengthening relational ties. In religious terms, Tu Long's deep commitment to Buddhism was mirrored by his family. In a letter to Wang Xijue, he wrote:

My elderly mother has been devoted to Buddhism for decades and has long abstained from alcohol and meat. My wife is simple and wears plain cloth, not caring for luxury. Now, my mother and wife spend their days before the Buddha's lotus seat, burning incense and candles, and studying and reciting the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*, with no other concerns.

老母奉佛數十年，久斷酒肉。荊人蕭然荊布，不愛繁華。今姑婦日向大師蓮座前，焚香燃燭而學誦《金剛》、《心經》，都無所事事。(TLJ, 4.327)

While Buddhist practice among women was not solely the result of literati influence—given its role in female sociability during the era—Tu Long's household, as an elite literati family, was deeply shaped by his religious commitments. In the late Ming, a popular routine of Buddhist cultivation known as “pure lessons” (*qingke* 清課), included fifty practices such as burning incense, brewing tea, cultivating stillness, visiting monks, venerating the Buddha,

performing rites, reciting scriptures, and releasing living creatures, as recorded in Yue Chun's 樂純 (dates unknown) *Xue'an Qingshi* 雪庵清史. (Yue 1614, 3.1-87) Under this influence, Tu Long's mother and wife embraced Buddhist cultivation, making the Buddha-Mother Painting and its inscription a fitting tribute to their virtue and piety. This act of gift exchange thus became a distinctive form of social interaction within Tu Long's relationship with Wang Daokun, a relationship structured by kinship ties through their family members.

The Buddha-Mother Painting embodied shared religious dispositions, while its presentation as a gift expressed the giver's cultivated taste. Together, these qualities transformed the painting into symbolic social capital—an act of recognition grounded in shared religious and cultural values and norms. Moreover, the painting and its associated interactions enabled Tu Long to fashion a virtuous image through the moral conduct of his mother and wife. In another letter to Wang Xijue, he wrote:

As for my poverty like Fan Laiwu's [Fan Ran 范冉 (112-185)], in thirty days we had but nine meals, and even coarse greens and bean-leaves were insufficient. Yet my mother is like Jie's [Jie Zitui 介子推 (7th century BCE)] mother, and my wife is like Lai's [Lao Laizi 老萊子] wife, accepting this willingly, without complaint. Our whole household have become Buddhist, and in this we nearly resemble the family of Layman Pang [Pang Yun 龐蘊 (?-808)]. To spend the rest of our lives in this way, that is enough.

所吾範萊蕪之貧，三旬九食，藜藿不充。介母萊妻，甘心無怨。一家悉知皈依三寶，庶幾類龐居士家，以此畢餘生，足矣。(TLJ, 4.489)

This letter was written after Tu Long's dismissal from office, when his pursuit of honour was abruptly curtailed and he faced a crisis of recognition. In response, he urgently sought to reaffirm his virtue and value within the literati community to preserve his self-respect and esteem. Rather than praising his own qualities, he reflected them through his family's conduct, forging more intimate and personal connections within his friendships. For instance, when Shen Maoxue composed three poems in the name of his wife, née Sun 孫, for Tu Long's wife, Tu Long replied: "Madam Sun's three poems were created by your hand. I read and explained them repeatedly to my wife, and she was visibly delighted 孫夫人三詩，是足下代爲之。.....爲寒荊回環讀而解之，寒荊喜形於色矣". (TLJ, 4.304) Such exchanges between literati families extended the cultural and moral dimensions of literati relationships. These intimate ties, mediated through kinship and gift exchange, significantly aided Tu Long's pursuit of esteem during his crisis of recognition.

From the creation of the Buddha-Mother Painting, we can discern the intricate connections among literati, shaped by diverse virtues and shared experiences. Wang Daokun, the initiator of this painting, was an eminent figure in literary circles and maintained a close relationship with Tu Long. Shortly after Tu Long's dismissal from office, Wang invited Tu to join the

White Elm Society. At that time, Wang had also withdrawn from office (in 1580) following discord with Zhang Juzheng. Their similar trajectories—elite lineage backgrounds, literary prestige, and careers disrupted by political conflict—created a strong basis for mutual sympathy and solidarity. Both men turned toward cultural and religious cultivation as alternative arenas for asserting their values and securing esteem, and their shared participation in the Buddha-Mother Painting reflects this shared orientation.

The painter, Ding Yunpeng, further illustrates the layered nature of these connections. Renowned for religious-themed works, particularly those depicting the Unity of the Three Teachings, Ding was deeply embedded in the same cultural world that shaped Tu and Wang. His oeuvre included ink paintings, illustrations for ink manuals such as *Chengshi Moyuan* 程式墨苑, and prints featuring Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist figures (for a detailed analysis of Ding's artworks related to the Three Teachings, see Shao 2022). Wang Daokun's choice of Ding Yunpeng for this commission was therefore not incidental: it reflected Ding's alignment with the religious and cultural ideals that Tu and Wang themselves cultivated. Through Ding, the painting became a point of convergence for multiple relationships—literary, artistic, religious, and personal—embodying the shared dispositions that bound this circle together.

Within this social circle, members shared a high degree of literary, cultural, and religious cultivation, fostering optimally reflexive self-relations through interaction. Thus, the creation and eventual donation of the Buddha-Mother Painting constituted a complete process of literati social recognition, grounded in mutual relations and shared virtues and lifestyle.

Cultural Capital in Literati Relations

While religiously oriented exchanges held considerable importance in the late-Ming literati community, the exchange of paintings and calligraphy—rooted in literary cultivation and cultural values—remained the dominant form of interaction among them. Literati identity was shaped through relations expressed in shared literary and cultural dispositions, refined taste, and connoisseurship. Consequently, when such cultural items were exchanged, they symbolised mutual acknowledgement of social and cultural value, ensuring that recognition was both conferred and received during the interaction.

Among the cultural objects exchanged between Tu Long and his friends, fans inscribed with poetry were the most notable. This form relied heavily on literary cultivation and the degree of recognition conferred by peers. Tu Long's letters reveal exchanges with seventeen literati, including prominent figures such as Wang Shimao, Wang Zhideng 王穉登 (1535–1614),

Zhang Jiayin 張佳胤 (1527–1588), and Gu Yangqian 顧養謙 (1537–1604). In a letter to Li Yangong 李言恭 (1541–1599), Tu Long described the exchange process:

Yesterday, a government student from our county arrived from Moling [Nanjing], carrying in his hand one letter and two fans from you. Recently I composed several poems, which I have written on the fans, and I also enclose two jade seals and a volume of my works to be sent as well.

昨邑中有一諸生至自秣陵，手持公一書二扇。……近作數章書扇頭，玉印二枚、小集一冊附往。(TLJ, 4.364–365)

Such exchanges were common among literati. Compared to correspondence, fans conveyed literary and cultural preferences in a more personal form because their materiality, portability, and visual presence made them intimate extensions of the bearer and donor's cultivated identity. Inscribed with poetry, calligraphy, or painting, they displayed one's taste, talent, and aesthetic judgement at every moment of social interaction, often expressing appreciation, longing, or the refined sentiments of both the inscriber and the recipient. Because they were handled, opened, and admired in social settings—during gatherings, visits, or leisurely outings—they became immediate marker of one's taste and one's connections. In a letter to Wang Zhideng, Tu Long sent seven poems inscribed on a fan, seeking Wang's critique. (TLJ, 4.342) In another letter to Zhang Jiayin, he noted that the fan carried his sentiments. (TLJ, 5.240) These fans were cherished as objects expressing affection.

Fans inscribed with poetry thus served as adornments that not only enhanced one's appearance but also conferred social capital. Their significance lay in the fact that a fan was a portable, highly visible object carried close to the body, functioning as an extension of the bearer's cultivated identity. To carry a fan inscribed by a renowned literatus was to carry a visible sign of recognition; it demonstrated that one had been acknowledged, esteemed, and included within a particular cultural circle. A telling example appears in a letter from Tu Long to Wang Shimao, in which he enclosed a blank bamboo fan and requested Wang to inscribe several recent compositions so that he might “carry them by my side day by day, and be ever refreshed by the pure breeze 庶幾哉出入懷袖，日披清風”。(TLJ, 2.234) The request reveals how an inscribed fan functioned not merely as an aesthetic object but as a daily, embodied remainder of one's literary affiliations and the esteem conferred by a respected peer.

This social capital was derived from literary cultivation, taste, and connoisseurship among the literati—qualities even more prominently embodied in paintings and calligraphy. Within specific communities, such cultural objects became symbolic capital: their value lay not so much in material worth as in the shared cultural dispositions they expressed. The act of exchange itself constituted a pursuit of recognition, for these objects materialised the values, sentiments, and lifestyles that bound literati together. Through such tangible, aesthetically

charged forms, literati affirmed one another's cultural worth and reinforced the reflexive relations that sustained their social world.

Although paintings and calligraphy were less frequently exchanged in Tu Long's relationships, they nonetheless featured in his gift-exchange practices. In his letters, Tu Long mentioned two landscape paintings: one received from the Daoist priest Wang Haxian 王哈仙, and another by the renowned 12th-century painter Zhao Boju 趙伯駒 (courtesy name Qianli 千里) sent to Qin Kun 秦焜, the scion of an elite family in Beijing. (*TLJ*, 5.308; 6.367) Tu Long also gave two calligraphic works: "four seal-script scrolls by the Princess Consort of Prince Yi 益王妃篆書四幅" sent to Qin Kun and "an autograph scroll by Su Changgong [Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101)] 蘇長公真蹟一卷" presented to Shen Maoxue. (*TLJ*, 6.367; 2.204) These persons represented distinct strategies in Tu Long's pursuit of recognition within the literati community, even though the items were uniformly paintings and calligraphy—a point that becomes clearer when we consider how the artworks circulating in these exchanges embodied different configurations of cultural and social value.

The artworks circulating in these exchanges possessed a convergence of values that made them especially potent within literati circles. Their aesthetic excellence, cultural pedigree, and social exclusivity were mutually reinforcing: works of exceptionally high artistic cultivation and esteemed provenance embodied the highest standards of brushwork, historical lineage, and identity. Because such objects could only be appreciated, authenticated, and circulated among cultivated literati, their cultural and social value was inseparable from the status of the networks through which they moved. At the same time, the very prestige that endowed these works with symbolic power also conferred substantial economic value. Their monetary worth—rooted in their artistic refinement and esteemed provenance—could be mobilised discreetly to secure assistance, reciprocate obligations, or stabilise one's position during the periods when loss of office or financial strain required support. Thus, in Tu Long's exchanges, paintings and calligraphy operated simultaneously as embodiments of elite cultural taste, as markers of social belonging, and as assets whose economic value was activated through the very relationships that conferred their symbolic significance.

This economic dimension becomes especially visible in Tu Long's exchanges with Qin Kun, where artworks and cultural objects were mobilised directly to obtain financial assistance and material support. Cultural items—particularly works by renowned calligraphers or painters—were not always exchanged solely on the basis of shared cultural refinement. Although, as Bourdieu notes, calculating the economic value of gifts functioning as symbolic capital was generally taboo in recognition practices, (Bourdieu 1998, 104) economic considerations could nonetheless enter the exchange process. Tu Long's interaction with Qin Kun exemplified this intersection, as Tu Long exchanged artworks and cultural objects for financial assistance, a practice referred to as "money for buying a mountain 買山錢". In one letter, Tu Long sent Qin a Zhao Boju landscape painting and four seal-script scrolls by the

Consort of Prince Yi, as noted above, along with “a copy of *The Collected Works of Han Changli* [Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824)], a copy of *The Collected Works of Luo Nian'an* [Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504–1564)], a roll of Hu silk, a fan inscribed with poetry, and a tripod from the first year [49 BCE] of the Huanglong period of the Han Dynasty [206 BCE–8 CE] 《韓昌黎集》一部、《羅念菴集》一部、湖羅一端、詩扇一柄、漢黃龍元年鼎一枚”。(TLJ, 6.367) He also requested peonies and herbaceous peonies from Qin to adorn his garden.

Tu Long's motive was pragmatic. Following his dismissal from office, he lacked the funds to resettle. Qin Kun offered farmland and a house in Liangxi 梁谿, near Wuxi 無錫. (TLJ, 4.482) Tu Long described Qin as “born of noble lineage.....Among the people of the world, how many, if any, could be compared with Junyang [Qin Kun] and found to surpass him 身為貴介.....世界中人試等君陽而上勝君陽者，能復有幾”。(TLJ, 4.484) Although their relationship was not purely transactional—Qin admired Tu Long's literary talent and virtue—financial assistance featured prominently. Across these letters, Tu Long repeatedly mentioned his hardship; he also acknowledged Qin's “profound kindness to me 與僕有深恩” in a letter to Wang Zhideng, who also helped arrange a boat for Tu Long's travel. (TLJ, 6.366)

The items Tu Long sent to Qin were not merely tokens of gratitude but responses to Qin's appreciation of his literary talent and cultivated lifestyle. These gifts carried layered meanings: Zhao Boju's painting and the consort of Prince Yi's calligraphy served as elegant decorations affirming Qin's taste; the two literary collections enriched his cultivation; and the antique Han tripod underscored Qin's status while embodying literati values. Tu Long also gave a Han tripod of the same kind to another literatus, Xing Tong 邢侗 (1551–1612), a prominent calligrapher and painter, explicitly stressing its authenticity while simultaneously requesting “money for buying a mountain” —in contrast to Qin's generosity. (TLJ, 4.481–482)

Tu Long maintained a small circle from which to solicit financial assistance, including Qin Kun, Xing Tong, Hu Congzhi 胡從治, and Gu Yangqian, as well as prominent literati such as Wang Shizhen, Zhang Jiayin, and Lü Yinchang 呂胤昌 (1560–?), who came from one of the most renowned families of theatrical connoisseurs in Yuyao 余姚 and helped to publish Tu's *Collected Works from Qizhen Hall* (*Qizhen guan jī* 棲真館集). Others from prominent lineages—including Dong Sicheng 董嗣成 (1560–1595), Zhuo Mingqing 卓明卿 (1538–1597), and Lu Guangzu 陸光祖 (1521–1597), Minister of Personnel—also provided financial support for daily expenses or travel.

Within this network, financial assistance did not always take the form of direct monetary gifts. Tu Long even asked Wang Shizhen to introduce clients for commissioned writings so that he could earn income through his literary labour. (TLJ, 4.486–487) This request reveals another dimension of recognition: Tu's cultural capital—his reputation as a writer—could be activated to generate paid work. Here, too, monetary compensation functioned as a measure

of esteem, commodifying recognition by converting cultural and social capital into economic value.

What unified this circle was not the material value of the objects exchanged but the recognition Tu Long commanded within the literati community. In these interactions, Tu Long exchanged his literary talent and cultural capital for economic assistance. Through these exchanges, gifts functioning as symbolic capital were transformed into social capital, which in turn enabled the acquisition of economic support. Crucially, this economic value did not derive directly from the objects themselves but from the esteem Tu Long enjoyed among his peers. The greater his recognition, the more financial aid he could secure. Money thus became a symbolic marker of literati values and norms: when Tu Long exchanged paintings, calligraphy, and antiques for funds, he effectively monetised his recognition (Greenbaum 2007), translating cultural and social capital into economic capital.

Whereas Tu's exchanges with Qin Kun reveal how cultural objects could be activated for economic support, his interactions with Wang Haxian illustrate a different mode of recognition—one grounded in religious cultivation and shared spiritual pursuits. In a letter to Wang, Tu Long noted that Wang had “entered the capital through Daoist arts, and received the present emperor's recognition and favour 以道術入京，業蒙今上知眷”，but later withdrew to refine elixirs in the mountains. (*TLJ*, 5.307–308) Tu Long added that Wang “showed profound regard for me 深有意乎不佞”，and during his own dismissal from office expressed a strong desire to join Wang in Daoist cultivation. (*TLJ*, 5.308) Wang initiated contact by sending his own landscape painting, prompting Tu Long to respond with a poem. Even in this religiously motivated exchange, literati cultural practices—poetry, painting, and the circulation of refined objects—remained central to the relationship.

Religious cultivation also facilitated further connections among literati. In 1587, Tu Long practised Daoism for a month with his friend Feng Mengzhen under the guidance of the Daoist priest Nie Daoheng 聶道亨 at Tongxuan Temple 通玄觀 in Hangzhou 杭州. (*TLJ*, 5.278; Feng 1616, 47.11b) Tu Long's access to Nie was secured through Long Defu 龍德孚 (1531–1602), as he acknowledged: “By the grace of your favour, I had the fortune to meet Master Nie 某籍先生寵靈，得遇聶師”. (*TLJ*, 5.254) Long Defu's son, Long Ying 龍膺 (1560–1622), a prominent member of the Jiangnan literati community, also invited Tu Long to join the White Elm Society alongside Wang Daokun. Tu Long's religious, literary, and cultural relations were thus deeply intertwined, sustained by shared practices of religious cultivation and the cultured lifestyle that shaped literati sociability.

Tu Long's Daoist engagements thus served as a medium for connecting literati with one another and with Daoist figures. These Daoist ties resembled his other religious affiliations—such as Buddhism and the Unity of the Three Teachings—where cultivation and practice were inseparable from the literary, cultural, and social lifestyles of the literati. Whether religious portraits or landscape paintings, such objects functioned as religious-themed items

facilitating cultural and social connections, or as cultural artefacts enabling religious interaction. Ultimately, they became symbolic items aimed at creating and strengthening relationships among literati, thereby generating recognition within distinct self-fashioned communities.

If Wang Haxian represents the religious dimension of Tu Long's social world, Shen Maoxue—recipient of the Su Shi scroll—exemplifies recognition rooted in literary talent, moral cultivation, and cultural affinity. Shen was the top graduate in the 1577 Palace Examination, the same year as Tu Long became a Metropolitan Graduate (*jīnshì* 進士). Another close friend, Feng Mengzhen, ranked third in the second group of graduates that year. Their enduring friendship originated from a memorial text Tu Long composed for a deceased friend while in Beijing. Shen and Feng admired the piece so deeply that they sought out its author, visiting Tu Long repeatedly. As Tu Long recounted in a letter to Ou Daren 歐大任 (1516–1596), renowned for his excellence in poetic and literary composition:

When my friend Mr. Wu died away from home, I mourned him with a written lament. Gentlemen such as Shen Jundian and Feng Kaizhi, having read it and finding it remarkable, inquired who had composed it. Someone named me, and they arranged to ride together to visit me. Though they came to my gate three times, I still lay obstinately in bed and would not rise. They pushed open the door and sought me out in my chamber; I had no choice but to rise, clutching my quilt, and sit upon the bed to converse with them.The gentlemen proved truly congenial, and from that day I would prepare wine, sweep the couch, and entertain these few friends. As they became more familiar with me, they grew ever more delighted, and not a day passed without their visiting.

會友人伍君客死，僕哀而爲文哭之，爲沈君典、馮開之諸君見而奇之，問爲何人作，或以僕對，相約聯騎過我。三及門，僕猶堅臥不起。諸君排闥尋我臥內，僕不得已，強起擁布被，據匡牀而與之談。……諸君信可人，自是日取酒掃榻而延此二三相知。二三相知稍習不佞，顧益喜，無日不見過。(TLJ, 2.226)

This friendship, rooted in Tu Long's literary talent, illustrates how recognition from high-ranking and equally gifted literati affirmed his cultural and intellectual virtues. Tu Long secured recognition not only through his status as a talented official but also through his personal value and achievements being acknowledged within the literati community.

In the letter to Shen Maoxue accompanying Su Shi's calligraphy, Tu Long urged Shen not to resign from office. Upholding Confucian ideals, Tu Long argued that an official of Shen's calibre—favoured by the court—should strive to render loyal service. After articulating his views on official duty, Tu Long shifted to literary matters, praising Shen's talent and expressing admiration. He enclosed several of his own recent poems, the Su Shi scroll, and

two seals engraved by the renowned Ming dynasty seal engraver Wang Youlang 王幼朗 (studio name Shaowei 少微), whose seals were highly prized among literati (further details on Wang can be found in Zhou 2012, 282). The entire letter reveals the shared values and lifestyle underpinning the literati moral and cultural system, encompassing official virtue, literary refinement, and personal cultivation, sustained and expressed through gift exchange. Objects such as calligraphy by Su Shi and seals carved by Wang Shaowei externalised these shared values, making the act of exchange a mutual recognition of status and personal cultivation.

Taken together, the three cases—Qin Kun, Wang Haxian, and Shen Maoxue—reveal the multiplicity of values embedded in literati gift exchange and the diverse modes of recognition which it enabled. With Qin Kun, cultural objects and literary talent were active as economic resources, demonstrating how symbolic and social capital could be converted into material support. With Wang Haxian, religious cultivation were intertwined with literati cultural practices, producing recognition grounded in shared spiritual and aesthetic pursuits. With Shen Maoxue, literary excellence and cultural affinity formed the basis of esteem among peers of comparable talent and status. These exchanges show that paintings, calligraphy, and other cultural objects were not merely aesthetic artefacts but versatile media through which relationships were forged, values affirmed, and recognition negotiated within the shifting conditions of late-Ming society. Gift exchange thus functioned as a central mechanism through which Tu Long fashioned and maintained recognition across multiple domains of his social world.

Conclusion

Gift exchange within communities grounded in shared values and norms can be understood as a process of recognition, in which the value of the gift is measured not in monetary terms only but through its social and cultural functions in sustaining relationships. In such contexts, the gift operates as symbolic capital, and the act of exchange becomes a symbolic gesture that affirms mutual relations and, in doing so, constitutes an act of recognition.

In the late Ming dynasty, the exchange of cultural objects was a central practice among the literati. Paintings, calligraphy, and other refined artefacts—embodying the literati's cultural disposition and cultivated taste—circulated within networks shaped by shared virtues, aesthetic ideals, and, at times, religious commitments. The exchanges undertaken by the literatus Tu Long reveal the diversity of these relationships and the distinct values they embodied.

The cultural objects associated with Tu Long played a vital role in his interactions across different literati communities, advancing his pursuit of recognition in multiple domains. Even when artworks took religious form, such as the Portrait of Master Tanyang or the Buddha-Mother Painting, their significance remained rooted in the distinctive culture of the literati. Religious imagery served as a vehicle for expressing shared values, while participation in practices such as the cult of Tanyang enabled literati to articulate individuality within collectively fashioned cultural identities.

Other exchanges reveal the strategic dimensions of Tu Long's gift practices. The paintings, calligraphy, and antiques presented to Qin Kun demonstrate how cultural objects could be activated as social and economic resources, enabling Tu Long to secure material support through the esteem he sought within his network. The landscape painting from Wang Haxian illustrates how Daoist cultivation facilitated relationships grounded in shared spiritual values and literati cultural practices. The gift of the Su Shi autograph scroll to Shen Maoxue strengthened bonds between elite literati whose recognition rested on literary talent, moral cultivation, and cultural affinity. Through these exchanges, literati navigated overlapping economic, religious, and cultural spheres, positioning their value through the circulation of artworks and artefacts that signified refined taste and shared norms.

In sum, these cases show that gift exchange among late-Ming literati was a dynamic mechanism for generating and mobilising recognition. Through the symbolic and material circulation of cultural objects, literati affirmed shared values, cultivated relationships, and activated different forms of capital across economic, religious, and cultural domains. Future research might build on this foundation by developing a more precise typology of strategic gift exchange—encompassing practices such as investment, solicitation, alliance-building, and reciprocation—and by reconstructing broader exchange networks centred on figures such as Tu Long. Such work would help to clarify the extent to which these mechanisms operated across late-Ming literati communities and deepen our understanding of the cultural logic that underpinned their social world.

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BOOK REVIEW

Mencius. A Cure for Chaos

Adapted and illustrated by C. C. Tsai

Translated by Brian Bruya

Foreword by Christine Gross-Loh

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關鍵詞： 孟子，新儒學，四書，民本思想，軟實力，道德修養，中國古典哲學，文化傳承

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Following his *Confucius, The Analects* (2018), *Sunzi, The Art of War* (2018), *Zhuangzi, The Way of Nature* (2019), *Dao De Jing* (2020), and *The Ways of Zen* (2021), *Mencius, A Cure for Chaos* is the fifth cartoon version of one of China's philosophical classics by the Taiwanese cartoonist C. C. Tsai (1948–). Provided with an English translation, these works that are published in the series *The Illustrated Library of Chinese Classics* of Princeton University Press, breathe new life into these classic works and encourage reflection on their significance for the contemporary period.

In his «Yuandao» 原道 (*On the Origin of Truth*), Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), a major protagonist of Tang dynasty Neo-Confucianism, stated the following:

“What I call the true *dao*, [...] is the one that was transmitted from Yao to Shun, and then to Yu; subsequently to Tang, then to Wen, Wu, and the Duke of Zhou. They transmitted it to Confucius, who transmitted it to Mencius. With the death of the latter, the transmission was stopped. Xunzi and Yang Xiong have derived elements from it, but not profoundly enough; they have spoken about it, but not precisely enough”

(斯吾所謂道也，[...] 堯以是傳之舜，舜以是傳之禹，禹以是傳之湯，湯以是傳之文武周公，文武周公傳之孔子，孔子傳之孟軻，軻之死，不得其傳焉。苟與揚也，擇焉而不精，語焉而不詳。)

From this passage, we can deduce that after a decline of Confucianism in the preceding period, and undoubtedly influenced by Daoist and Buddhist thinking, Mengzi 孟子 (372–289 BCE) started to gain importance in the Tang dynasty. The growth of this importance helps to explain why, when Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) reinterpreted Confucianism based on a small corpus of texts in the Song dynasty, *Mengzi* 孟子 was one of the four basic works—the so-called ‘Four Books’ 四書—along with *Lunyu* 論語, *Daxue* 大學, and *Zhongyong* 中庸 of this endeavour. Mengzi remained part of the standard Confucian curriculum until 1905 when the Confucian state examinations were abolished.

Also in 20th and 21st-century New Confucianism, the figure of Mengzi has maintained its prominence. This is related to the famous statement by Mengzi in the chapter ‘Jin xin’ (盡心) part II B, 14, that “the people are the most important; the spirits of the land and grain are the next; the sovereign is the lightest. Therefore, to gain the peasantry is the way to become a sovereign” (民為貴，社稷次之，君為輕。是故得乎丘民而為天子)—a passage that is referred to on p.xiii and quoted on p.104 of the present work. This passage is also not unrelated to such political phrases as ‘*yi ren wei ben*’ 以人為本 (the people as basis) that entered political narratives in the Hu Jintao period (2003–2012), a period characterized by a focus on social redistribution of wealth. As also contemporary Chinese political narratives abound with references to ‘traditional values,’ works such as *Mengzi* thus also have their

importance for understanding contemporary China. This bestows reading the selection of stories in *Mencius. A Cure for Chaos* with a value that goes beyond an appreciation of their historical-philosophical importance or their importance as illustrations of universal moral considerations.

Referring to the statement by Mengzi in ‘King Hui of Liang’ (梁惠王), Part I A, 1, that King Hui of Liang should not care about ‘benefit,’ but that all he should care for are ‘kindness and morality’ (何必曰利，亦有仁義)—a story included on pp.13–15 of the present work—Christine Gross-Loh, in her Foreword to the present work (p.viii), invites the reader to live “with an openness that comes from recognizing that everything in the universe is both connected and in constant flux”. Looked at against the background of the contemporary world that is rife with tension and conflict, this story can be interpreted as an early example of what would become known as ‘soft power’. The gist of this ‘soft power’ is also clear from the story taken from ‘Gongsun Chou’ (公孫醜), Part 1A, 3 (p.25 of the present volume), where Mengzi admonishes the king with the words that—in Brian Bruya’s translation— “If you win someone’s allegiance through coercion, it is not heartfelt—they just don’t have the power to resist. If you win someone’s allegiance through virtue, it will be sincere and gladly given” (以力服人者，非心服也，力不贍也；以德服人者，中心悅而誠服也)—to which C. C. Tsai puts the following words in the mouth of Mengzi (p.25): “a good ruler acts out of sincerity and concern for the people, without expecting allegiance, and therefore the people pay allegiance to him. The tyrant seeks to forcefully conquer people and deceives them with lies and hypocrisy, and therefore the people only feign allegiance to him”. A similar story is selected from ‘Gaozi’ (告子) Part I A, 18 (p.79 of the present volume). Here, Mengzi states that—again in Brian Bruya’s translation— “Kindness can overcome cruelty, just like water can overcome fire. But people who try to practice kindness nowadays do it like they’re using a cup of water to put out a cartload of burning wood. And then they say: ‘Water can’t put out a fire!’. Such talk only serves to feed the fires of cruelty, and in the end all kindness will be devoured in the flames!” (仁之勝不仁也，猶水勝火。今之為仁者，猶以一杯水，救一車薪之火也；不熄，則謂之水不勝火). C. C. Tsai renders the words of Mengzi (p.79) in the following way: “Some people fail to vigorously practice kindness and then denounce kindness as too weak to overcome cruelty. Therefore, one must practice kindness vigorously and not give in for fear of difficulty.”

The latter statement also is an appeal to the contemporary readership (and leadership) to take up responsibility. If not, as Mengzi teaches us in ‘Li Lou’ (離婁), Part I A, 8—again in Brian Bruya’s translation— “Only if you disrespect yourself, will others disrespect you. Only when family members fight among themselves will others dare to fight them. Only when countrymen attack each other will other countries attack them” (夫人必自侮，然後人侮；家必自毀，而後人毀之；國必自伐，而後人伐之). To which C. C. Tsai makes Mengzi state (p.39 of the present volume) that “Disaster and happiness are brought on by oneself. If

a country falls or a family goes into decline, it is because of a lack of kindness. Maggots grow on rotten meat”.

Knowing that—in Brian Bruya’s translation on p.89 of the present work— “Once, when Confucius looked down from a hill east of the Lu capital, the state of Lu seemed very small. From the top of Tai Mountain, the whole world looked small. It is difficult to talk about small bodies of water with someone who is used to looking at the ocean. And it’s difficult to talk about shallow subjects with someone who has been a student under a sage” (孔子登東山而小魯，登太山而小天下。故觀於海者難為水，遊於聖人之門者難為言), as ‘Jin xin’ (盡心), Part IA, 24 instructs us, it appears, in the current state of the world, indeed most important to acknowledge that, as ‘Jin xin’ (盡心) part II B, 20 informs us—in Brian Bruya’s translation on p.106 of the present work— “Capable and virtuous people of times past first endeavored to enlighten themselves, and then they enlightened others. Now, people who are all confused themselves try to go out and enlighten others” (賢者以其昭昭，使人昭昭；今以其昏昏，使人昭昭). This, as stated by C. C. Tsai (p.106), can only be compared to “climbing a tree to catch a fish”.

With this new edition in the series of retranslated and re-edited texts of China’s classical tradition, not only a well-selected, witty, and esthetically pleasant volume is presented, but also one that invites for a critical reflection on how we perceive of ourselves and of the world.



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BOOK REVIEW

Chinese Espresso: Contested Race and Convivial Space in Contemporary Italy

By Grazia Ting Deng

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Keywords: Chinese migration, convivial bricolage, ethnic entrepreneurship, integration, coffee bar culture, inter-generational dynamics, racialization, urban anthropology, ageing society, everyday resistance

關鍵詞： 華人移民，共處式拼湊，族裔創業，社會融入，咖啡館文化，代際互動，種族化，城市人類學，老齡化社會，日常抵抗

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A Chinese barista serving espresso to the local populace in Bologna is not a thought that comes intuitively when one thinks about societal change in 21st century Italy. However, it successfully captures a collision between globalisation and the ageing demographic challenges faced across Europe every single day. A complex and urgent social transformation has resulted in the continent from an increase of new arrivals from abroad who have often been brought in to compensate for local labour shortages. Their presence has contributed to changes in the landscape by filling in the otherwise abandoned labour-intensive industries, eventually extending to other ‘less desirable’ jobs. Roles with long hours and low pay abandoned by the locals *en masse* are coveted by the new arrivals who ironically see them as more desirable occupations. As a result, this dynamic changes the social landscapes in cities that had been largely homogenous for centuries.

Grazia Ting Deng’s monograph, *Chinese Espresso*, results from her doctoral work focusing on the Chinese-owned coffee shop in Italy. The work itself is based on Deng’s ethnographical observations spanning roughly a decade with intensive fieldwork conducted primarily between 2014–2015. Bologna serves as the main field site, complemented by observations in other Central-Northern cities, including Cesena, Milan, and Rome. To gain a close understanding of the context, Deng embedded herself in the Chinese coffee shop scene in Bologna, initially as an observer and later by undertaking barista training with one of her interlocutors. In order to gain a contextual understanding (p. 28) she visited more than 100 bars, of which 60 are Chinese-owned, focusing on a small number of named bars, such as Lanlan’s bar and Ailin’s bar. Her interlocutors consist mainly of first-generation Zhejiang migrants who operate these family businesses, alongside second-generation members who are often Italian-educated and play a key role in customer interaction. This immersion allowed her the freedom to interview owners and patrons alike, while maintaining a close observation of the daily operation of the enterprises. To further capture the dynamic of Chinese immigrant society in the city, she ingrained herself in the Chinese Church and interacted with a broader Chinese immigrant community. She terms the resulting concept, drawn from French theorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (bricolage as “making do” with available materials under constraints), Michel de Certeau (tactics of everyday resistance), and Deleuze/Guattari (desiring-production), “convivial bricolage”. Deng uses this concept to describe the everyday, improvised practices through which Chinese baristas and their diverse customers, both Italian and other immigrants, collaboratively create and sustain convivial spaces in Italian coffee bars despite underlying racial, cultural, and economic tensions.

In the past two decades, studies of Chinese migration to Europe have largely focused on their economic impact in the local community (Christiansen, 2013; Sanfilippo & Weinari, 2017; Thunø & Li, 2020). Often, this literature emphasises the formation of ethnic enclaves in major cities, which provide migrants with a degree of separation from local populations as well as access to dense diaspora social networks. Studies of Chinese industrial clusters in Italy

highlight the heavy reliance on so-called ‘Chinese networks’ as a source of competitive advantage (Ong & Freeman, 2017; Biggeri et al., 2022a, 2022b). However, as these communities mature, they move away from physically demanding sectors such as manufacturing, service and trade. Such transitions require the individuals to venture beyond the ethnic enclave and integrate into the local community. It often coincides with the emergence of a second generation that has grown up embedded in the host-country context. Compared to their parents, these second-generation individuals typically possess stronger Italian language skills and broader social networks outside the Chinese community. Within family-based microenterprises, this intergenerational shift can facilitate a transition from diaspora-oriented businesses to those catering to local clientele. Deng’s book contributes to this literature by foregrounding the role of intergenerational continuity within family businesses, showing how the transition to the second generation makes integration into local society not only possible but economically imperative rather than a purely cultural or normative process.

The book begins by providing the reader with a concise history of Chinese immigration to Italy. Although Chinese immigrants first arrived in Bologna during the interwar period in the early 20th century (p. 24), the larger wave arrived much later. Between the mid-1970s/1980s and early 2000s, Chinese post-Mao and Italy’s “Third Italy” industry boom especially among the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) saw an increase in outward Zhejiang-focused immigration from China to Europe (pp. 19–21, 49–50). Italy became the top EU destination aided by relatively permissive regularisation policies through a number of amnesties throughout the year, and was specifically a major destination for Southern Zhejiang (Wenzhou/Qingtian) immigrants due to the prevalence of a textile and leather industry. This is not coincidental but reflects the compatibility between the ‘Made in Italy’ business model, which relies on many subcontractors, often family-run, self-employed in small household-based workshops, and the Wenzhouese Model/entrepreneurial spirit (p. 50). Such roles were enticing for young immigrants since the job typically offered free board and lodging, allowing quick settlement amid language and cultural barriers (p. 50). As the post-2000s decade saw an ongoing decline of many “Third Italy” industries, many Chinese workshops closed down due to cash flow issues and youth exodus from *faticoso* (tiring) work (pp. 38–39, 54). They eventually branched into other sectors by entering the restaurant business (p. 51), market stalls/*maisan* (p. 45), small retail (pp. 18, 52), personal services (pp. 45, 52), and coffee bars (pp. 2–3, 39).

Chapter 2 further explains the reasoning behind the decision of Chinese immigrants to enter the coffee bar business. Deng outlines three primary aspects that motivated this move: economic vacancies, family fit, and low-barrier to entry. Post-2008 recession, many Italian family-owned bars closed down as owners retired and their heirs shunned the *faticoso* work. This created openings that the Chinese immigrants eagerly filled as they perceive them to be far less arduous compared to prior niches such as workshops or street vending. Coffee bars

perfectly matched family dynamics as they are not viewed as *xinku* (tiring) thanks to their indoor, air-conditioned comfort, and flexible hours dictated by customer flow rather than relentless production. Italian-educated children of the family supplied fluent Italian skills to provide a seamless service thus avoiding the need for an external hire. The barista skills emanated from social networks among the coffee bar owners within the Chinese community, contributing to the low barrier to entry. For those transitioning from workshop business due to order declines and labour shortages, coffee bars offered accessible cash-based sales with a modest startup cost, often financed through kin networks, while maintaining a strong resale value to cushion risks.

As the Chinese immigrants fill this economic vacancy caused by the departure of the Italian owners, their concern grows beyond the financial survivability. They become an integral part of what *Italianità* means. In Italy coffee bars are not merely Food and Beverage establishments, they are a shared public space where people of different ethnicities and social background meet. As such, the Chinese-owned bars become a site of convivial bricolage as defined by Deng. The Chinese bartenders must assume the role of Italian heritage keepers while maintaining their composure as people who are seen as invaders into spaces considered by many to be exclusive to Italians. They must preserve this conviviality amidst economic austerity, demographic change, and anti-immigrant narratives. In order to achieve this, the book outlines how the Chinese immigrants have achieved conviviality. The reproduction of the authentic espresso taste is crucial, while the adoption of Italian-sounding names, accompanied by good hospitality practices and the use of local dialects, aid in gaining acceptance. However, this does not mean that the conviviality does not come with a challenge. Baristas have to navigate asymmetry of power in the hospitality setting provided to ensure that the coffee bars space is only occupied by desirable customers, while overcompensating for their defects (i.e. language) with over-service which results in economic inclusion despite racism.

Although Deng's overall observation indicates that at least on the surface it seems as if the Chinese immigrants have succeeded in their integration to the Italian society through the coffee bars, this conviviality remains fragile and spatially confined, operating as a microcosm of broader racial and economic tensions. Italian media and patrons often racialize Chinese baristas as perpetual foreigners incapable of making authentic espresso or sustaining bars' "soul", despite evidence of successful intercultural encounters in everyday practice. Baristas counter through vigilant boundary-work by offering premium hospitality to desirable regulars while excluding "*banhe*" (literally brown immigrants, typically used to refer to North African, South Asian, and sometimes Eastern European) clients, and overcompensating perceived deficits like language barriers with relentless smiles and *bella figura* (meticulous presentation) small talk. This tactical bricolage secures economic viability but perpetuates internal strains: exploitative family labor models mirroring Italian generational rejection, second-generation

educational trade-offs, and ageing immigrants working into their seventies without welfare visibility.

Ultimately, Deng's analysis unmaskes convivial bricolage as precarious improvisation rather than harmonious multiculturalism, with profound implications for understanding immigrant integration in ageing societies. Chinese bars buffer urban decline by sustaining neighborhood economies and social hubs, yet their equilibrium hinges on fragile demographic, economic, and policy conditions—vulnerable to tightened migration controls or recessions. The ethnography challenges simplistic “migration-as-renewal” narratives, exposing how structural inequalities persist even in sites of apparent everyday coexistence. *Chinese Espresso* thus offers a nuanced lens on globalization's collision with local traditions, where racialized agency navigates, but rarely transcends, entrenched power asymmetries.

The book does a very good job in portraying the convivial bricolage of Chinese-owned coffee bars specifically in Bologna, and some parts of Central-North Italy (Cesena, Rome, Milan). However, it risks overgeneralising the findings to greater Italy by overlooking the regional differences, which are well documented in the Italian context, especially between North and South. The increase of Chinese-owned bars is visible in cities where there is a sizeable Chinese-immigrant community such as Florence (which neighbours Prato, a city with a significant Chinese community), Bologna, and Milan. Meanwhile, in other cities with a smaller Chinese immigrant population, the convivial bricolage takes different shape as racial diversity might be more moderate. However, within the sampled bars in Bologna, the book provides the readers with nuances based on different types of bars and their respective challenges. For instance, peripheral bars such as Lanlan's whose regulars are mostly pensioners (pp. 80–85) as opposed to passerby bars such as Ailin's whose patrons are largely middle-class office workers (pp. 89–92).

The concept of convivial bricolage as an analytical framework in this context can only be extrapolated qualitatively from an anthropological perspective. The foundation of this book is based on the ethnographic study performed by Deng herself, with some official statistics to provide a clearer picture of how prevalent foreign bar ownership is in Italy. However, it provides limited insight into the intensity of interaction which would be very useful for assessing the scale of conviviality. Although the book describes the segmentation of each bar type, it is difficult to completely understand how each bar differs in their role as a shared space. Quantitative measures, such as customer retention rates, dwell times, or interaction frequencies, could have grounded Deng's vivid ethnography in comparative scale, revealing whether peripheral bars truly sustain deeper community ties than passerby bars.

Finally, the book touches upon the issue of ageing. The topic of ageing is timely in Europe due to its impact on various facets of social life. Deng states that some bars have practically become second homes to the pensioners, typically Italian males, who spend their entire day playing cards. As of now, the Chinese immigrants are filling the vacancy caused by the ageing

population, but little is discussed regarding how the Chinese might navigate similar challenges in the future. For example, the Italian pensioners' reliance on social security. Will this also apply to the Chinese? In addition, issues related to gender such as care, emotional labour, and intra-family work allocation are present throughout the ethnography but remain analytically underdeveloped. A more explicit engagement with care and ageing, such as: who cares for whom, under what welfare arrangements, and with what long-term consequences for Chinese families themselves, would have further strengthened an already rich account of conviviality and inequality.

Overall, *Chinese Espresso* stands as an excellent ethnographic observation that reveals the paradox of Chinese migrants as grassroots agents of globalization by sustaining Italy's iconic coffee bars amid racial friction and economic precarity. Deng's immersive fieldwork, conceptual innovation of convivial bricolage, and vivid portrayal of the adaptation of the Zhejiang diaspora, all the way from Wenzhou workshops to barista artistry, render this an indispensable contribution to the study of Chinese diasporic communities in Europe. For scholars of transnational migration, urban anthropology, and Sinophone Europe, this book provides a valuable perspective on everyday integration of the Chinese immigrants that defies both romantic multiculturalism and alarmist narratives of invasion. This work invites further comparative inquiry into China's outward entrepreneurial frontiers and adaptation to the new home in a time when anti-immigration sentiment is on the rise.

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BOOK REVIEW

Making Mao's Steelworks: Industrial Manchuria and the Transnational Origins of Chinese Socialism

By Koji Hirata

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Keywords: Northeastern China, socialist industrialisation, Anshan Iron and Steel Works (Angang), Japanese colonialism, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), transnational socialism, late industrialisation, political campaigns, Soviet aid, capitalist-socialist symbiosis

關鍵詞： 中國東北，社會主義工業化，鞍山鋼鐵公司（鞍鋼），日本殖民主義，國有企業，跨國社會主義，後發工業化，政治運動，蘇聯援助，資本主義與社會主義共生

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In recent years, historians have become interested in China's three northeastern provinces Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning. Approaching the region's past from a variety of angles, they have discussed the region's experiences of war, colonialisation, resource extraction, as well as how it became known to contemporaries (Young 1998; Mitter 2000; Duara 2003; Seow 2021; Rogaski 2022). Koji Hirata's *Making Mao's Steelworks: Industrial Manchuria and the Transnational Origins of Chinese Socialism* is a new addition to this field of study. *Making Mao's Steelworks* shows that studying the history of Northeastern China can also shed light on the history of socialism in China. Focusing on the history of the Anshan Iron and Steel Works (鞍山鋼鐵公司), or Angang for short, Hirata highlights that, although China's northeast was a symbol of socialist industrial development during the Mao period, the region's industrial infrastructure was laid by Japanese colonisers and the Nationalist (KMT) government. Therefore, he argues that the relationship between capitalism and socialism was symbiotic.

Making Mao's Steelworks is organised chronologically. Part 1 discusses industrialisation in Manchuria before 1949. Hirata begins by analysing the Japanese Empire's efforts to industrialise the region before 1945 in Chapter 1. Japan's attempt began during the First World War, when the Japanese South Manchuria Railway Company established the predecessors to Angang, the Shinko Company (振興鐵礦有限公司) and the Anshan Ironworks (鞍山制鐵所). The Japanese-led industrialisation gained momentum after the establishment of the Japanese-controlled Manchukuo in 1931. With the puppet state pursuing state-led economic development, the Anshan Ironworks reorganised itself and expanded its size and production capacity. But this came with ethnic segregation and violence. The steelworks privileged its Japanese employees over its Chinese ones and used Chinese prisoners of war as forced labourers. Chapter 2 then examines the history of Northeastern China after the Japanese surrender at the end of the Second World War. Hirata discusses the consequences of both the Soviet occupation of the region in 1945 and industrial programmes of the KMT. The chapter points out that during the war with Japan, the KMT's economic policy learnt from Soviet, German and Japanese economic programmes, developing interventionist economic policies and setting up its own state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Thus, when the war ended, the KMT government reorganised factories that came under Chinese control into SOEs as well. For Hirata, the KMT's postwar economic policies were significant. Through collaborating with remaining Japanese managers and deploying Chinese engineers to Manchuria, the KMT nationalised Anshan's steelworks and reintegrated the region into China's national economy.

Part 2 covers the period between 1948 and 1957. Chapter 3 discussed how the new Communist (CCP) authority in Anshan cooperated with Japanese and KMT experts who remained at Angang. Diverging from previous chapters' focus on state activities, Hirata shifts his attention to the lived experiences of Japanese engineers in this chapter. Utilising both

Chinese and Japanese sources, he vividly illustrates how local authorities cooperated with Japanese residents, as well as how Japanese engineers lived and worked in the first years of the PRC. Although the Communist government established a working relationship with Japanese staff, the situation changed with the outbreak of the Korean War. Non-Communist employees became potential political liabilities, and the government repatriated most Japanese experts back to Japan in 1953. Coming to replace Japanese experts were Soviet advisors, who are the subject of Chapter 4. Hirata reminds readers that Soviet aid played an important role in China's First Five-Year Plan, and much of that went to Northeastern China. For example, in Anshan, investment diverted to Angang allowed it to upgrade and restore its facilities. Soviet aid also came in the form of technology transfer. During the 1950s, Angang received many Soviet advisors while also sending trainees to the Soviet Union to receive technical training. Based on these developments, Hirata argues that Soviet support made China's economy more independent—Angang managed to meet domestic demands in steel and became technologically self-reliant.

Beginning from Chapter 5, Hirata returns to examining Angang's relationship with the state and its experiences within political campaigns. Chapter 5 discusses the operation of Angang and its interaction with Anshan city's government and party committee. Hirata notes that SOEs were subjected to two lines of control, a vertical system that made them responsible to the central government and a horizontal system that connected them with local CCP organisations. Promotion of the one-chief system in SOEs, which would make enterprises responsible only to the central government, met with little success, especially after Gao Gang 高崗 (1905–1954), one of the system's chief advocates, fell from grace. Thus, operations at Angang involved negotiations with both the central authority and with local government. For example, when allocating goods produced, state planning, coordination with local governments, and the enterprise's own effort to find customers all played a role. In Chapter 6, Hirata assesses the effect of the political changes brought by the CCP on Angang's workforce through evaluating how they reinterpreted Maoist discourses to their advantage. Political campaigns outside and inside the steelworks educated employees about the CCP's political programme. But campaigns also created consequences not expected by the authority. During the Hundred Flowers Campaign, engineers at Angang who were affiliated with the KMT before 1949 raised grievances about preferential treatments given to their CCP colleagues and the enterprise's mistrust of them. To make their arguments, these engineers employed political vocabularies, such as class and left-wing patriotism, they learnt from political campaigns. For example, one engineer named Yuan claimed that engineers should not be considered accomplices of reactionaries by citing their own humble social backgrounds and their work toward strengthening China.

Part 3 of the book examines the period from 1957 to 2000. Chapter 7 follows the history of the Angang Constitution, a report by the CCP Anshan City Committee produced in 1960

about how Angang's output increased through mass mobilisation of workers. Tracing the Angang Constitution's trajectory through the Great Leap Forward, the Third Front Movement and the Cultural Revolution, Hirata believed that the Angang Constitution symbolised a new phase of Chinese socialism, categorised by 'an alternative model of socialist industrialisation' that decentralised enterprise management and relocated industrial enterprises away from regions with a high concentration of factories. However, with the beginning of Reform and Opening in 1978, the Angang Constitution gradually faded from public attention. Angang's experience during the period of market reform is examined in Chapter 8. On one hand, the enterprise tried hard to cooperate with Western and Japanese firms and learn about their new technologies. On the other hand, it continued to benefit from its status as an SOE, which gave it access to cheap raw materials and other kinds of benefits. While the enterprise retained its status as an SOE despite the wave of SOE privatisation, restructuring in the 1990s devastated Angang's workers. To resist the layoffs, workers developed many forms of protests, including redeploying political rhetoric they had learnt during the Maoist period.

Making Mao's Steelworks is a welcome addition to a number of recent studies that make Chinese industrial enterprises and lives in these worksites their focus (Hou 2018; Meyskens 2020). Hirata's ability to employ Japanese and Russian sources alongside Chinese and English ones allows the book to capture new themes and perspectives, as is the case in Chapter 3, where he uses Japanese sources to offer a detailed account of the lives of Japanese engineers who stayed in Angang after 1948. Another notable feature of *Making Mao's Steelworks* is Hirata's attempt to form dialogues with studies of industrial development outside China. The book's discussion of Angang history and the wider history of China's socialist industrialisation is informed by the concept 'late industrialisation', which is used in the book to describe how, from the late nineteenth century onwards, countries in the process of industrialisation, regardless of their ideological position, increasingly used state power to lead economic development (Hirata 2024, 8). As the PRC government also directed the country's industrialisation, Hirata believes that China's experience followed practices established, despite the fact that China during the Mao period regarded itself as a socialist state. This view parallels recent studies of industrial history and history of science that emphasise regional, or even global, convergences of developmental models (Links 2020; Seow 2022).

However, the argument that Hirata seeks to make with the history of Angang—the symbiosis between capitalism and socialism—requires more discussion. The view that socialism and capitalism interacted and shaped one another is not a new one. For example, the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm (1995, 275) argued that the construction of capitalism's 'golden age' after the Second World War owed to shifts in US trade policies made to prevent Communism from spreading to its allies. And recently, Oscar Sanchez-Sibony (2023, 8–9),

a historian of the Soviet Union, argued that the USSR actively participated in both the postwar Bretton Woods system and the development of the neoliberal global economic system after the 1970s. But the fact that real existing socialism interacted with capitalism did not mean that the two are necessarily 'both sides of the same coin' (Hirata 2024, 11). Studies examining the development of statistics and agricultural science in China during the Mao period have also argued convincingly that the Chinese approach to these matters was shaped by the particular historical context of the Mao period and Maoist politics (Schmalzer 2016, 4; Ghosh 2020, 16–7).

Making Mao's Steelworks could also benefit from the inclusion of more discussion of the long-term influences of Japanese and KMT industrialisation in Northeastern China on how Angang operated under the PRC. The book appears to be treating socialism and capitalism as characteristics of different governments, rather than two different social systems—Japan, the colonial state of Manchukuo, as well as KMT China were, in the most general sense, capitalist, while the PRC, particularly in the Mao period, was socialist. However, given that most of the book is dedicated to examining Angang's history under the PRC, the direct identification of socialism and capitalism with states may make how Angang's development showcased the interactions between the two systems difficult to discern. *Making Mao's Steelworks* notes interactions between socialism and capitalism on these occasions: imitation of Soviet Five-Year Plans by Japanese firms in Manchukuo in Chapter 1; the KMT plan to nationalise industrial assets in the Northeast in Chapter 2; the Communist authority's decision to retain Japanese and KMT engineers who remained at Angang after Communist forces took over Anshan in 1948 in Chapter 3; and Angang's outreach to Western and Japanese firms after market reforms during the 1980s in Chapter 8. However, the impact of state-led industrialisation under Manchukuo and the KMT, and of the continued presence of KMT and Japanese engineers after 1948, appeared to have disappeared from Angang after the early 1950s. As Hirata also notes in chapters 4, 5 and 6, Japanese engineers were expatriated back to Japan after the Korean War and replaced by Soviet advisors, while political campaigns made socialist ideas present in the daily lives of Angang's employees. The operation of Angang after 1949 also revolved around the planned economy and consisted of bargaining with central and local government authorities. Both phenomena could suggest that, contrary to the argument of *Making Mao's Steelworks*, the PRC made Angang distinctively socialist. Furthermore, interactions with capitalist firms in the 1980s ultimately did not save Angang from economic difficulties that led to the traumatic mass layoffs in the 1990s. Thus, although *Making Mao's Steelworks* convincingly shows that the CCP's industrialisation efforts built upon infrastructures set up by the Japanese and the KMT, it could have done more to examine Japanese and KMT influences on policies other than state-led industrialisation. For example, the monograph could benefit from also examining the ways that Angang's history before 1949 shaped the company's work culture, or how

engagement with capitalist firms after Reform and Opening affected the enterprise's management.

Nonetheless, by offering a comprehensive history of Angang, *Making Mao's Steelworks* is a valuable addition to the scholarship on PRC history. Employing Chinese, English, Japanese and Russian sources, Koji Hirata uses the history of the Angang to illustrate 'the messy history of Chinese socialism', and to remind researchers of the extent to which state-led industrial development shaped China's historical trajectory.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Poetry of Yuan Haowen

Introduced, interpreted and explicated by John Timothy Wixted

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Keywords: Yuan Haowen, classical Chinese poetry, Jin dynasty, poet-historian, shi poetry, literary translation, intertextuality, Mongol invasion, literati culture, poetic allusion

關鍵詞： 元好問，古典漢詩，金朝，詩史，詩體詩歌，文學翻譯，互文性，蒙古入侵，士人文化，詩意用典

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Reading classical Chinese poetry, either for its aesthetic appeal or as a historical source, is not always an easy task. This is particularly true of the poetry of later periods, much of which is outside the canon of Chinese literature as usually taught in Western university courses today. Thus, John Timothy Wixted's book is a most welcome contribution, as it helps to fill a gap, making accessible to a broad Western readership the later periods of *shi* 詩 poetry, which remained one of the most significant parts of literati writing up to the end of the imperial period. The author has many years of experience researching and teaching about Chinese poetry and poetry criticism (see his personal website: <https://johntimothywixted.com/china.php>). In addition to its contribution to Chinese literary history, the book also provides a rare insight into the perspective of the Sinicised cultural elite of the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1115-1234) during the period when it was weakened and eventually overtaken by the Mongols.

Yuan Haowen 元好問 (1190-1257) is regarded by Chinese historians as a great master poet, in some respects on a par with arguably the greatest of the Tang poets, Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770). While not all scholars agree with this high appraisal, Yuan was certainly a master poet, and in his oeuvre, he often enters into creative dialogue with Du Fu's poetry. Living during the later years of the Jin dynasty and witnessing its fall to the Mongols, he offers in his poetry a Jin scholar's authentic testimony about these turbulent events and the very identity of the Jin state destroyed by invading barbarians. There is indeed a parallel of which Yuan himself was aware between himself and Du Fu as a "poet historian" (*shi shi* 詩史) witnessing the turmoil caused by the An Lushan rebellion. The value of Yuan Haowen's recording of current events, his reflections on them in poetry, and his personal response to them is even greater due to a certain bias in sinology against the Jin state, which is perceived as the adversary of the "proper Chinese" Song dynasty rather than as a victim of Mongolian expansion.

Despite the undisputed importance of Yuan Haowen in the history of Chinese literature and the intellectual history of the Jin, he is not much studied in Western languages. The only other systematic book-length publication dedicated to him in English is a monograph on his literary aesthetics also written by Wixted nearly half a century ago (*Poems on Poetry: Literary Criticism by Yuan Hao-Wen* [1190-1257], Steiner, 1982). Recently, in 2019, a new revised edition of this book was published, perhaps signalling growing interest in Yuan Haowen and in later periods of classical poetry.

As the title of Wixted's current work suggests, Yuan Haowen's poetry lies at the core of the book. The author presents 150 *shi* poems of all kinds, including *yuefu* 樂府 ballads, which Yuan Haowen composed from the time he was an aspiring student preparing for the state examinations in his twenties until the last years of his life in retirement. The book is arranged chronologically into three large chapters further divided thematically into shorter sections. Given the historical situation in which Yuan Haowen lived and the fact that most of his poems

are autobiographical, in keeping with the genre conventions of *shi*, the chronology-cum-thematic classification is not rigid and poems on certain topics partly cross the borders of chronology. The abundance of material and the way in which it is presented offer readers a complex understanding of the poet's unique personal experience, perspective, and style.

Chapter One, "The Early Years", is largely devoted to reflections on aspirations and disappointments related to passing the state exams, the poet's success at the age of thirty-one, and his eventual disenchantment with his official career. This chapter also exams "socially conscious" poems rich in factual details about the hard life of the peasants, for whom the poet expresses compassion. Chapter Two, "An Ever-Darkening World", deals with the threat and realisation of the Mongol invasion, leading to the destruction of the Jin state and the poet's internment for two years by the new authorities. Besides a few earlier poems, most of the material presented here is from 1231 to 1235. The poems in this chapter are again rich in autobiographical detail, besides recording historical events and presenting reflections on the history and legacy of the Jin state to which Yuan Haowen remained loyal and emotionally attached. Chapter Three, "After the Storm", concentrates on poems written after the poet was released by his captors, when he decided to live a life in retirement. Among them is a cycle *In the Style of Su Shi's Poems on Moving House* (*Xue Dongpo Yi Ju* 學東坡移居), in which the poet turns to personal and intimate themes and speaks affectionately about his family. Landscape poems dedicated to the poet's visits to places near his new home are included, as well as travel poems, many of them related to Yuan Haowen's efforts to collect material for his two large projects—an anthology of Jin dynasty poetry and an unofficial history of the Jin.

Each section comprising a selected group of poems includes an introductory summary (two to six pages in length); shorter introductions accompany each poem as well. Here Wixted provides historical context and biographical information in addition to observations about poetic style and issues of literary history. The poems are in the original (both in characters and in *pinyin* transliteration) and in English translation, copiously annotated in the footnotes. The annotations are particularly important due to the allusiveness of most of the poems. Besides biographical and historical details elucidating topical allusions, the author pays particular attention to all types of intertextual references, and, in the footnotes, he includes relevant quotations from the source texts and Yuan Haowen's predecessors. The footnotes also contain cross-references to other Yuan Haowen poems if there are relevant correspondences.

The author explains his approach to interpretation and translation in a thoughtful introduction, in which he also points to recurring themes and motifs in Yuan Haowen's poetry. He discusses the importance of genre conventions and the biographical and historical context shaping the meaning of many of Yuan Haowen's poems which can be mediated to contemporary readers only with the help of commentaries and footnotes. In his translations

Wixted acknowledges inspiration by three of his mentors—Burton Watson for the unadorned style of translation, David Hawkes for the format he used to introduce Du Fu's poetry in his *Little Primer of Du Fu*, and William Hung (Hong Ye 洪業) who taught him many years ago how to look for meaning in difficult poems through their context and in broader perspective. In the Introduction the author also includes for the reader who is not a specialist in the history of Chinese poetry, basic information on the formal features of the poetic forms used by Yuan Haowen, and a summary of criticism, both traditional and modern, Chinese and Japanese, of the poet's work. The introduction concludes with pedagogically minded "suggestions for the reader", advising students not yet experienced in reading classical poetry on how to most effectively study the poems, especially the difficult ones, while at the same time enjoying their poetic beauty.

The book also features an appendix containing additional biographical material about Yuan Haowen, mostly consisting of primary sources, again in translation and in the Chinese original. The author also provides a list of Chinese and Japanese commentaries on the poems presented in the book which he consulted in his interpretations but for the sake of clarity did not refer to each time he used them. In addition to a rich bibliography, the book also includes a list of other published translations of Yuan Haowen's poetry.

The book can be read and enjoyed as an extensive collection of translated poetry offering an overall picture of the poet's work, as an exercise in the theory and practice of literary translation, as a monograph about one of China's great poets presented mainly through rich primary sources, and as supplementary material for historians interested in the Jin dynasty and the aftermath of the Mongol victory. It can also serve as a kind of a textbook for students of Chinese language interested in immersing themselves in pre-modern Chinese poetry, as it provides practical instruction even for those who have only just started to explore this subject. In his latest book Wixted shares with readers his knowledge about and enthusiasm for Chinese poetry, and he does so in such a way that it is a pleasure to read.



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BOOK REVIEW

State Building in Cold War Asia: Comrades and Competitors on the Sino-Vietnamese Border

By Qingfei Yin

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Keywords: Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, state-building, borderland agency, Cultural Revolution, cross-border mobility, grassroots negotiation

關鍵詞： 中越邊境地區，國家建設，邊疆能動性，文化大革命，跨境流動，基層協商

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Yin Qingfei's *State Building in Cold War Asia: Comrades and Competitors on the Sino-Vietnamese Border* is that makes a significant contribution to the study of twentieth-century China-Vietnam relations, Cold War studies, and borderland studies. Drawing on extensive Chinese and Vietnamese archival sources, it reconceptualises the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands (1949–1975) as dynamic sites of state formation, where central authorities, local actors, and transnational networks continuously negotiated power.

By foregrounding the borderlands as spaces of both ideological experimentation and administrative contestation, the book sheds new light on how the Chinese state navigated local realities and transnational entanglements in the socialist era. It invites scholars of modern China to engage with borderland perspectives and to reconsider the limits, variability, and contingency of Mao-era state power. Although the book has already attracted scholarly attention, the discussion that follows is informed by my research interests in Sino-Burmese relations and China's inland provinces. It offers an overview of the book's central arguments, followed by a selective critical discussion of aspects most relevant to my research concerns.

The early phase of state-building at the Sino-Vietnamese border was marked by a fundamental asymmetry in how the two regimes understood and utilised the frontier (p. 34). Chapter 1, "Asymmetric State Building (1949–1954)," shows that this divergence was not only a matter of uneven state capacity, but also of differing strategic priorities. For the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), the border functioned as a crucial resource, enabling access to Chinese aid and supporting revolutionary warfare during the First Indochina War (1946–1954) (p. 40). By contrast, leaders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) approached the Guangxi-Vietnam border primarily through a security lens, treating it as a vulnerable frontier where external threats and internal instability might converge (p. 40). This contrast reflects a broader distinction between a revolutionary state seeking expansion and survival, and a consolidating state focused on territorial control and internal stability.

This asymmetry gradually gave way to a more coordinated phase of state intervention during the 1950s. Chapter 2, "Joint State-Building (1954–1957)," demonstrates how the PRC and the DRV sought to regulate mobility, restructure trade, and consolidate authority within a shared socialist and Cold War framework. These efforts included the institutionalisation of border policing (p. 85), the repair and integration of railway systems linking China and Vietnam (p. 89), the tightening of social controls along transport routes (p. 92), and the marginalisation of spontaneous cross-border trade (p. 93). The two states tried to build an inward-oriented, socialist society on their respective sides while preventing permitted cross-border movements from hindering their carefully forged communist partnership (p. 116). Despite this apparent alignment, the implementation of policy revealed significant constraints. State authority remained limited by local conditions, administrative fragmentation, and the resilience of long-standing cross-border networks, including marriage ties and cross-border farming practices. Rather than passively accepting these interventions, border communities

adapted to, negotiated with, and at times circumvented official policies. As a result, state expansion did not proceed smoothly but instead unfolded as an uneven and contested process of early socialist state formation.

Chapter 3, “Negotiated State Building (1958–1964),” investigates the coercive measures adopted by the two states to extract resources from the border, as well as the strategies employed by border populations to resist state encroachment of the porous international boundary, at times even “voting with their feet” to seek better conditions across the border (p. 34, 150). Under these conditions, border populations increasingly relied on cross-border mobility and informal networks to sustain their livelihoods, compelling local officials to adopt more pragmatic and flexible approaches. “Negotiation” thus emerges not simply as a governing strategy, but as a structural condition of rule, highlighting the fragility and contingency of state authority at the frontier. In the Chinese case, the mass migration of border villagers into Vietnam during the Great Leap Forward risked undermining the PRC’s self-image as a model and mentor of socialism (p. 156). At the same time, the “backfiring of Vietnamese land reform,” discussed earlier, contributed to growing doubts among leaders of the Workers Party of Vietnam about the applicability of “the Maoist revolutionary model.” (p. 115) These tensions, combined with ongoing border disputes, later fed into the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations, eventually providing part of the justification for China’s punitive invasion of northern Vietnam during the Third Indochina War (1975–1991).

This dynamic becomes even more pronounced when the analysis turns to the maritime frontier of the Gulf of Tonkin. Chapter 4, “Thwarted State Building on the Sea (1954–1964),” examines coastal state-building efforts, showing that attempts to extend state control encountered stronger resistance as coastal societies operated according to fundamentally different economic and social logics. The chapter demonstrates that tensions between internationalist, nationalist, and transnational local agendas were more acute at the maritime border than on land (p. 34). High mobility, dense transnational networks, and dependence on open maritime resources rendered agrarian-based policies such as collectivisation and centralised regulation largely ineffective. Efforts to impose these models often led to economic disruption and social discontent, forcing local officials to adapt state directives.

From 1965, with the escalation of the Second Indochina War (commonly known as the Vietnam War) against the United States the trajectory of state-building. Chapter 5, “Reversed State Building (1965–1975),” explores this dynamic in detail. On the one hand, the border region was drawn into global Cold War dynamics, leading to extensive infrastructure development, intensified military cooperation, and large-scale mobilisation of local populations, which expanded the state’s physical and strategic presence. On the other hand, the disruptions of the Cultural Revolution (p. 215, 222–24) and the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations (p. 205) weakened administrative coherence and strained local

governance (p. 227). As a result, both states struggled to maintain consistent control, and previously suppressed cross-border interactions re-emerged as practical necessities (p. 237, 239, 241). While Yin characterises these joint state-building efforts as having been “aborted,” the evidence also suggests a more complex dynamic in which state authority was simultaneously expanded and undermined.

Building on these empirical chapters, Yin’s conclusion highlights the broader theoretical significance of the study. By tracing the “wax and wane of state power” at the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands (p. 248), the book demonstrates how state-building in frontier regions was neither linear nor coherent but deeply shaped by the interaction between geopolitical conflict and local social dynamics. Yin’s concept of “joint state invasion” is particularly innovative, capturing both the vertical expansion of centralised authority and the horizontal collaboration between corresponding Chinese and Vietnamese institutions across the border (p. 253). At the same time, the book underscores the persistence of “transnational localism” (p. 7), as cross-border networks resurfaced whenever state capacity weakened, revealing the limits of attempts to impose a “hard boundary” on what had long functioned as a “soft boundary” (pp. 253–54). In this sense, the book makes an important contribution by bringing the state back into borderlands studies without reducing border societies to passive recipients of state power. More broadly, Yin argues that the Cold War should be understood not only as a geopolitical confrontation, but as a “social mechanism” that reshaped local societies and state practices across Asia (p. 257).

While Yin’s theoretically ambitious framework is one of the book’s major strengths, the organisation of the chapters around a series of conceptual labels, such as “asymmetric,” “joint,” “negotiated,” and “reversed” state-building, can at times give the impression that the analysis is guided more by a conceptual scheme than by the organic unfolding of historical processes. In addition, the placement of the maritime chapter 4, which overlaps chronologically with earlier sections, introduces a slight structural discontinuity, suggesting a thematic insertion rather than a fully integrated component of the overall narrative. These concerns, however, are minor when set against the scale of the book, the breadth of its empirical material, and the complexity of the issues it addresses.

As a historian of Mao-era China, with a particular focus on social and political history and on political campaigns examined from a bottom-up, micro-level perspective, I find that Yin’s book offers valuable inspiration for rethinking both Sino-Burmese interactions and borderland studies more broadly. Rather than suggesting direct parallels, Yin’s analysis provides a useful lens for examining the dynamics of state-building and local agency in frontier regions. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Sino-Burmese frontier during the period when the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) controlled parts of northern Burma, where it established county-level administrative structures, implemented land reform, and imposed taxation, including attempts to regulate long-standing practices such as the opium

trade, smuggling, and local market exchange. In this context, the book encourages a more nuanced understanding of how state power interacted with pre-existing social and economic networks.

At the level of political mobilisation and borderland instability, Yin's discussion of the Cultural Revolution further illustrates how such dynamics unfolded in practice. She shows how political radicalism spilled over into the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, intensifying tensions between local communities and state authorities while exposing the vulnerability of individuals engaged in cross-border activities. These insights also help illuminate developments along the Sino-Burmese frontier, where, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, thousands of Chinese Red Guards (sent-down youths) crossed into Burma to join the CPB's armed struggle. Unlike the more explicitly discouraged attempts by Red Guards to enter Vietnam (pp. 201–02), Chinese authorities did not openly prohibit such movements into Burma, nor did they formally endorse them. Instead, they adopted an ambiguous stance of tacit tolerance. This ambiguity had long-term consequences, as many of these individuals, upon returning to China, faced prolonged processes of negotiation with state authorities to have their status recognised and regularised.

At the level of everyday practice and social survival, Yin highlights how borderland populations relied on cross-border mobility to navigate periods of political upheaval and economic hardship. The book documents cross-border marriages, informal economic networks, and the movement of refugees who fled to escape political campaigns or to survive the Great Leap Forward famine (p. 114). Along the Guangdong-Hong Kong border, for instance, the famine years witnessed the first major wave of Cantonese migration to Hong Kong since 1949 (p. 150), underscoring the role of border crossing as a survival strategy. These practices also resonate with a longstanding ethical principle expressed in the traditional saying *jun bu zheng; chen tou waiguo; fu bu zheng, zi ben taxiang* 君不正,臣投外國;父不正,子奔他鄉 ("When a ruler is unjust, his ministers may seek service under another ruler; when a father is unrighteous, his sons may leave home"). The saying articulates a broader moral logic that those subjected to unjust authority may legitimately leave in search of protection elsewhere. According to Gao Wangling 高王凌, archival records from Hunan document peasants fleeing during the Great Leap Forward invoking this saying to legitimise their departure (Gao 2011). Similar patterns can be observed along the Sino-Burmese and even Sino-Soviet frontiers, where cross-border movement provided refuge for individuals fleeing famine and political turmoil. By tracing these movements, Yin demonstrates that borderlands functioned not merely as sites of state control but also as spaces of circulation, refuge, and adaptive survival beyond the full reach of the state authority.

Beyond highlighting the importance of mobility, Yin offers a rich and nuanced account of how local actors mediated and reshaped the implementation of socialist state-building projects. Fishers, farmers, traders, migrants, and grassroots cadres did not simply submit to

state policies such as land reform, agricultural collectivisation, or the radical campaigns of the Cultural Revolution. Rather, they developed a wide range of strategies to negotiate, adapt to, and at times evade state intervention. Particularly significant is Yin's attention to grassroots cadres, who occupied an intermediary position between central directives and local society, and whose practices often mediated, softened, or selectively implemented state policies on the ground. These dynamics were not unique to border regions. They resonate strongly with situations in inland China, especially those identified by Gao Wangling, who characterises such peasant behaviour as *fan xingwei* 反行為 ("counteractive practices"), referring to everyday practices that subtly resisted or reworked state directives. In both contexts, local actors were neither fully subordinate to nor entirely outside state structures; rather, they capitalised on the gaps between state aspiration and social realities. These dynamics can also be understood through the lens of James Scott's (1985) notion of "weapons of the weak", highlighting how everyday forms of negotiation, evasion and adaptation that shaped the practical limits of state power. In this sense, although Yin frames the book as a project that "reemphasises the role of the state" in borderland studies (p. 7), her analysis simultaneously demonstrates that state power was always contingent, mediated, and refracted through local practices. By bridging borderland history with studies of inland China, the book ultimately reveals that the reach of the socialist state was never absolute but continually reshaped by the very actors it sought to govern.

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