

## Briefs | Analyses

### The state of Chinese studies in Europe

Italian, German, French and Dutch perspectives

France: a long tradition of research on China

## CHINESE STUDIES, A EUROPEAN DISCUSSION



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**Hilde De Weerd** is professor of Chinese History at Leiden University. She works on imperial Chinese intellectual and political history focusing on the question of how elite networks shaped Chinese politics.

### What is the situation of Chinese Studies in your country?

*Barbara Mittler, Germany:* Most German universities teach Chinese Studies within an area studies context. Few universities have colleagues with a specialisation in Chinese Studies (including Chinese language and cultural competence) in the disciplines as such (history, geography, musicology). This situation leads to various difficulties: some colleagues in the disciplines working on China are not able to use Chinese-language sources or some China-specialists who have specific disciplinary training, but perhaps not as a major, are not allowed to teach China in the disciplines. One of the aims of the Center for Asian and Transcultural Studies (CATS) in Heidelberg is to cross established borders between disciplines and areas and to train students who combine strong cultural, linguistic and disciplinary competence.

*Hilde De Weerd and Philippe Peycam, Netherlands:* The only university that has a full-fledged programme in Chinese Studies is Leiden University. There has been some effort in recent years to expand expertise in Chinese Studies at Groningen University and the University of Amsterdam, but overall expertise is mostly clustered in area studies programme and the Dutch government has opted to centralise Chinese and Asian studies expertises in one university i.e., Leiden University.

*Tiziana Lippiello et al.\*, Italy:* Chinese Studies in Italy have developed within two disciplinary fields. The first

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one focuses on the knowledge of language and reflects the legacy of the philological tradition, so-called sinology, characterised by an empirical approach. The second one is mainly tied to political science, more theoretically oriented, but often without a specific linguistic and cultural expertise. In the last twenty years, the distance between the two approaches has been shortened, as the field of sinology has been widened to include the study of Chinese politics and society from the perspective of social

sciences, whereas the political science approach has been enriched by the study of Chinese language. Currently, Chinese studies are quite widespread across several Italian universities, though often more focused on the teaching of language.

*Alain Peyraube, France:* Chinese Studies in France have developed considerably over the past decades, without coordination measures having been taken to avoid too great dispersion. A better geographical distribution on the French territory is desirable, but my main concern here is the scattering over the same area. In the Paris region, for example, small teaching and research units coexist, deliberately ignoring what the others do, sometimes even within the same institution. This being said, language teaching is generally considered to be of high quality. As far as basic research is concerned, it depends on the domains, but the overall situation can be characterised as satisfactory, when compared to that carried out in other European countries. Unlike Italy, the gap that exists between the two components of Chinese studies that Tiziana has identified and which also characterises the French situation, namely the “sinological” component and the “policy studies” component dealing with contemporary China, is far from being reduced.

**How do you think Chinese Studies can be strengthened, including in its relation to cross-disciplinary scholarship as well as policy studies?**

*Alain Peyraube, France:* Better coordination should be promoted between the various units, a move that would also promote cross-disciplinary research in France. However, such coordination will need to be scientific and not just administrative. One should not hesitate to operate groupings when they seem necessary from an academic

point of view—especially to remove research activities which have no chance of becoming competitive within the international scientific circles. To do this, it would be necessary to carry out a large-scale evaluation of Chinese Studies with all the units concerned, an evaluation based on international standards. In France, this task could be entrusted to the Haut Conseil de l'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur (High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education).

*Tiziana Lippiello et al., Italy:* The most urgent need is to define and affirm that a cross-disciplinary approach is the basic nature of Chinese studies. In Italy, research on China and Chinese humanities is still divided from an institutional point of view. As Chinese studies are not a discipline from a strict point of view, they are not clearly organized and recognisable as a field. However, it is worth noticing that a deep reflection on the relationship between area studies and disciplinary knowledge is still missing at an international level, too. Adopting a cross-disciplinary approach requires linguistic and philological competences in order to deeply understand Chinese society. It will help develop a critical approach based on objective knowledge and understanding of Chinese civilisation and society.

*Barbara Mittler, Germany:* In order to strengthen a “China competence” in and beyond the university context, inter- and trans-disciplinary work is extremely important. It is for this reason that the European Institute for Chinese Studies (EURICS) might consider adopting the model of “tandem fellowships” so as to bring together China specialists and specialists in different disciplines or activists/professionals/artists. Open dialogues among those working on China from different disciplinary perspectives and with the general public can heighten public awareness of the importance of broadening our knowledge about China.

*Hilde De Weerd and Philippe Peycam, Netherlands:* China expertise should become more broadly distributed across the academy. While it will remain necessary to support and grow capacity in China Studies (ensuring in-depth language skills), China and the “China factor” should be covered more broadly in other disciplinary programmes across the board. This is particularly true since a number of “specialised” Dutch universities are already strongly involved in China (e.g. Technical University Delft, Erasmus University).

**How do you see the need for a European approach to China?**

*Tiziana Lippiello et al., Italy:* It is necessary to face and understand the fast-changing reality of China. If we foster the integration between the different national traditions and histories of Chinese studies, Europe can become an intellectual space where the humanities and social sciences constitute the most fertile ground for dialogue and exchange on China. In the complex period we are living in, scholars' cooperation on China could help build

further bridges between EU countries. Besides, any effort to discuss and share knowledge and strategies on China at the European level will enrich each EU country perspective and may highlight common views or objectives, contributing to defining priorities in EU countries' agendas with regard to China. Moreover, a European approach to China would be beneficial for at least three reasons: (i) it would enhance intra-European mobility of students and scholars; (ii) it would promote understanding of China's shifting strategies towards Europe as a whole and towards single European countries; (iii) it would stimulate synergies between the academic world and policy-makers at a supranational level.

*Alain Peyraube, France:* China has become a major player in world affairs. European countries can no longer operate with an individual approach to China with the geopolitical strategy of sino-globalisation set up by Xi Jinping after his accession to the presidency in 2013 (and this does not only concern the so-called silk routes). The current Sino-American rivalry is likely to continue in the coming years with a Chinese superpower that will not weaken but further develop. This situation today requires a European approach to the Chinese problems, so that Europe could keep a certain weight. And this obviously applies to high-level research which is needed to study and analyse the rapid and multifaceted transformations of China as well as their massive impact at the global level.

*Barbara Mittler, Germany:* I agree and would add that not only in times of strained relations between the US and China it is important to offer alternative perspectives on China. European Sinology has a very different tradition from the North American Sinology and might therefore offer an alternative model of engagement with China.

*Hilde De Weerd and Philippe Peycam, Netherlands:* Some countries have strong programmes but they tend to be clustered in individual university programmes. Professional networking has a strong national bias, inhibiting the circulation of knowledge and expertise across Europe. There is a European professional organisation (European Association for Chinese Studies) but it has not sufficiently evolved over the past years when compared to its equivalents elsewhere. There is a need to give European scholarship on China a higher profile both within Europe and externally.

### **How do you see EURICS' contribution to a better understanding of Chinese socio-economic and cultural issues in European societies?**

*Alain Peyraube, France:* The European dimension of EURICS, based on the indisputable expertise in the field of Chinese studies which exists in such or such field in such or such country, will undoubtedly make it possible to launch an attractive invitation policy for the best scholars in the world, whatever their disciplinary roots or their specific research theme (socio-economic issues, as well as cultural, religious, linguistic, literary, artistic ones). This European

dimension, currently starting with four Western European countries (France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands), will have to quickly expand to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe where sinological research is also active.

*Tiziana Lippiello et al., Italy:* Studies of contemporary China require cross-disciplinary perspectives to trace and analyse complex historical and globally relevant processes. Nonetheless such perspective is partially hindered at the local level by the rigidity of disciplinary boundaries, sometimes influencing projects' evaluation and funding. By boosting academic networking on criteria of excellence and merit, EURICS can contribute to addressing key challenges related to Sino-European interaction in European societies, such as issues of social inclusion, health and wellbeing expectations, food security, cultural and religious identity, migration, international cooperation. The most important contribution would be to help scholars to cross the disciplinary boundaries building on European tradition of knowledge beyond specialisation and different national educational training.

*Hilde De Weerd and Philippe Peycam, Netherlands:* A number of concrete options are currently discussed such as online research seminars connecting several European universities, summer schools focusing on specific themes, young fellows research groups to support the new generation of China-related specialists, joint events to raise awareness about China in Europe. All these initiatives have to take full advantage of new communication technologies to reach the highest virtual profile possible.

*Barbara Mittler, Germany:* EURICS has the aim and the potential of becoming an innovative European think-tank for China. In bringing the best scholars together for short periods of intensive exchange, punctuated by interactions with the general public and with professionals from various sectors (economy, technology, media, culture, arts) engaged with China, it will increase knowledge about China. EURICS will thus enable European societies to address China issues in a more sophisticated manner than before.

*\*Tiziana Lippiello's contribution benefited from inputs of Patrizia Carioti ("L'Orientale" University of Naples), Federica Casalin (Università La Sapienza Rome), Laura De Giorgi (Ca' Foscari University of Venice) and Bettina Mottura (University of Milan)*

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### **To go further**

Read this interview in French and English and turn to additional references on [eurics.eu](http://eurics.eu)

## France: A long tradition of Chinese studies

France has been a major actor of Chinese studies in the Western world for a long period. In 1927, Paul Pelliot and Marcel Granet created the Institute of Advanced Chinese Studies (IHEC) which was incorporated into the Collège de France in 1972 and which houses one of Europe's largest sinological libraries (250,000 volumes and 1,300 periodicals).

Much of this research and teaching in the Chinese studies in major French institutions has been concentrated in the Paris area, in well-known institutions such as Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Université de Paris, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes and the aforementioned Collège de France.

These institutions gather more than one hundred academics (CNRS researchers as well as university associate professors and professors) and prominent research centres such as the Centre Chine-Japon-Corée, the Centre de Recherches Linguistiques sur l'Asie Orientale, the Centre de Recherches sur les Civilisations d'Asie Orientale, the Institut Français de Recherche sur l'Asie de l'Est, to name only the largest ones. This reflects the French "centralisation" but two major research centres on China located outside Paris have successfully developed: the Institut d'Etudes Orientales in Lyon and the Institut des Recherches Asiatiques at Aix Marseille University. Over the past few decades, the growing interest in China has also triggered the development of Chinese studies in most of the French universities, and reinforced long-existing departments of Chinese studies that might enjoy less visibility. For instance, the pole of Chinese studies of the University Bordeaux Montaigne, which dates from 1959, has today the third largest number of Bachelor and Master students in France. All the aforementioned research centres are jointly run by CNRS and one or several universities, a model that is characteristic of the French academia. CNRS as the largest national research organisation has significantly largely supported the domain of Chinese studies, with regular recruitment of full-time researchers.

Of course some academics are active outside these research centres specialised in area studies, because they belong to disciplinary research centres in the humanities and social sciences. The growing interest in China also results in many research projects that are funded directly by universities and regions, which goes along with the increasing number of students trained in Chinese studies. Several networks are meant to bring together these scholars, departments and research centres: the Association Française des Etudes Chinoises; and the French Network on Asian Studies (GIS Asie), the latter bringing Chinese studies under the larger umbrella of Asian Studies. The GIS Asie is currently preparing a whitepaper on Chinese studies: based on data collected from various sources, it estimates between 150 and 200 the total number of French academics in the Chinese studies with permanent positions, a figure that would be higher if postdocs and PhD candidates were to be included. France therefore hosts one of the two or three largest teaching and research communities in Europe. It would benefit enormously from EURICS as it will foster its internal and external connections as well as and boost its international visibility.

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**Aurélie Varrel**, CNRS senior researcher,  
director of the French network of Asian studies (GIS Asie)  
**Alain Peyraube**, CNRS research director emeritus,  
EHESS director of studies.

EURICS is an institute working to strengthen the European research and analysis capacities on China. It works to enhance cooperation at the core of a network of European research centers and think-tanks with focusing on Chinese studies, and to help forge a common European understanding of China.

Inspired by the model of the Institutes for Advanced Study in Human and Social Sciences, EURICS hosts high-level scholars for a period ranging from three to ten months. EURICS supports a multidisciplinary research approach, aiming to seize both mechanisms and motivations of the evolution that marked not only the traditional Chinese culture in its diversity, but also the political, economic and societal transformations that shaped China's long history.

Moreover, EURICS encourages collaborative research and analysis on current dynamics such as environmental transition, population ageing, urbanisation, migrations, social inequalities, learning society, cultural change, economic transformations, as well as on China's international and regional role.

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