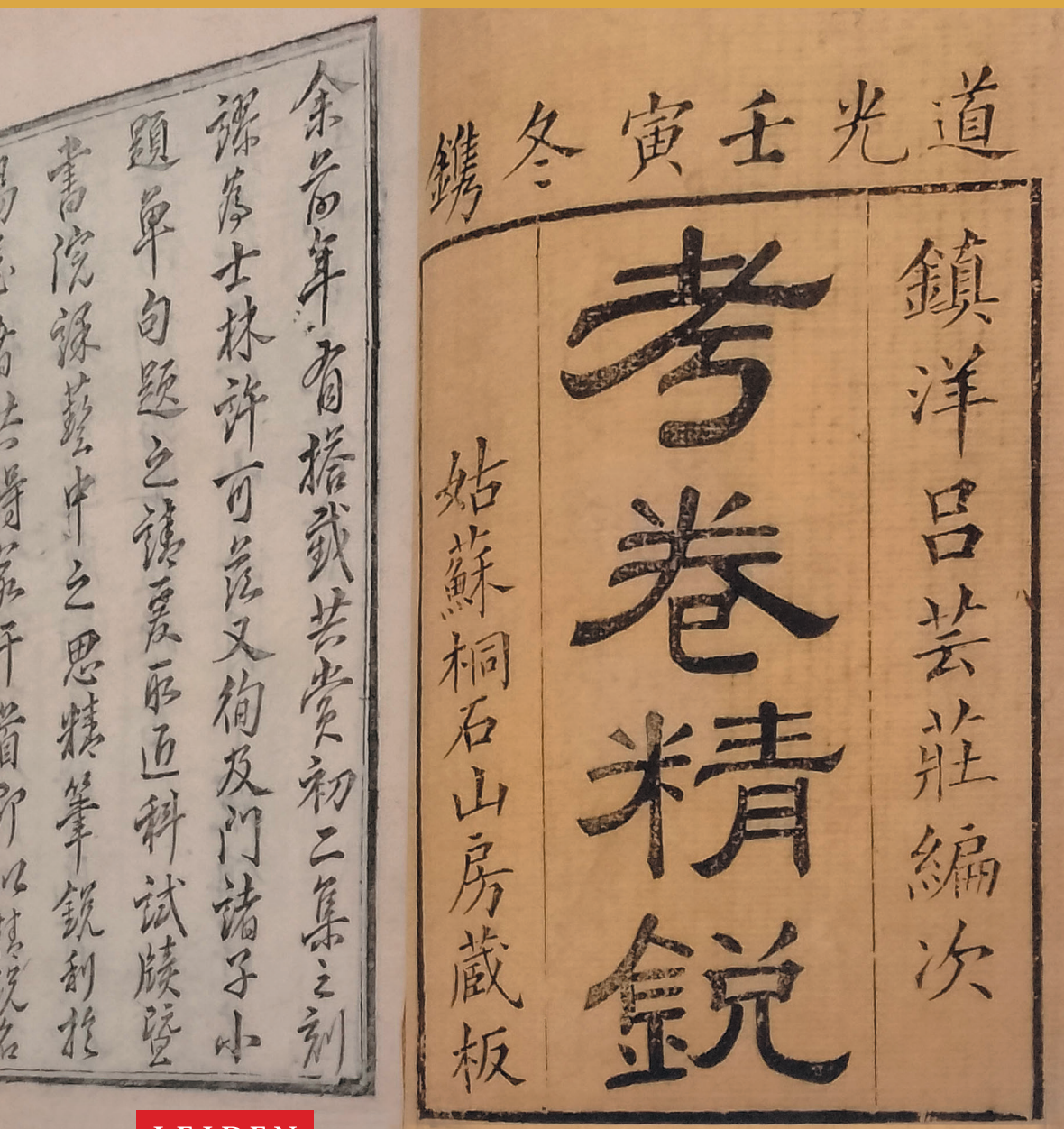
Global Knowledge Production about China

JULIE YU-WEN CHEN



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Cover design: Andre Klijsen
Cover illustration: A Chinese book in Matteo Ripa archive. The origin of Western sinology or Chinese studies began with Western missionaries wishing to spread Catholic Christianity among the Chinese people, an effort that dates back to the 16th century. For example, in 1732, the missionary priest, Matteo Ripa (1682–1746), created the first Sinology School on the European Continent, 'The Chinese Institute,' the first nucleus of what would become today's University of Naples L'Orientale (Università degli studi di Napoli L'Orientale). Ripa had worked as a painter and copper engraver at the Kangxi emperor's imperial course between 1711 and 1723. He returned to Naples from China with four young Chinese Christians and established the Institute, sanctioned by Pope Clement XII to teach Chinese to missionaries in 1732. This is a book entitled Kao Juan Jing Rui (考卷精銳) preserved in Matteo Ripa's archive at the University of Naples L'Orientale; the book was used to help Chinese learn about the essentials of Christianity. The image is the first page of the book. Today, researchers specializing in the Latin and Chinese languages are working to sort out ancient documents preserved at the Matteo Ripa archive.
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For my family

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List of Abbreviations

ASAIHL	Association of Southeast Asian Institute for Higher Learning
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BKPBM	Badan Koordinasi Pendidikan Bahasa Mandarin (Indonesian Coordinating Board for Mandarin Language Education)
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CABAR	Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting
CI	Confucius Institute
CIEF	Chinese International Education Foundation
CLEC	Centre for Language Education and Cooperation
CNKI	Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure
CPEC	China–Pakistan Economic Corridor
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
EAI	East Asia Institute
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FLACSO	Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociale)
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IIR	Institute of International Studies at National Chengchi University
NSF	National Science Foundation
NSP	New Southbound Policy (of Taiwan)
NIAS	Nordic Institute of Asian Studies
PBM	Pusat Bahasa Mandarin (Mandarin Language Centre/Confucius Institute in Indonesia)
SBKRI	Official Letter of Indonesian Citizenship
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London
SSRC	Social Science Research Council
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
USSR	Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic

Preface

This book is a testament to my personal struggle as a researcher on China, a teacher who imparts knowledge about China and a public person who must express my views on it. My occasional appearances in local Finnish TV documentaries that expose 'Chinese influencing activities' in Finland, have led me to question how I, as a researcher in the ivory tower, got drawn into the *realpolitik* of the so-called China threat in Finland. I strive to comprehend the intersection of *realpolitik* and the knowledge realm that people like me may face in our profession. China in this book mainly refers to the People's Republic of China (PRC) as we know it today, but I do acknowledge that the meaning of China can be broader than this. Taiwan and Hong Kong are also subjects of exploration in this book.

Another burning issue that I seek to problematize is how to treat the fact that the field of China watching and the studies of things 'China' has a colonial and imperialist root. Inter-imperiality is a common problem facing many countries' production of knowledge about China. Brazil, for instance, has historically been affected by European colonialism to treat China as part of its broadly perceived 'Orient.' In more recent decades, American epistemology has also affected Brazil's perceptions of China. In addition, readers can find ample examples of Russian and then Soviet imperialist influence on its former republics and satellite states' development of sinology or Chinese studies in this book. Another notable example of inter-imperiality would be Taiwan with its different layers of colonial imprints on the island's development. Selective attention to decolonize either European, Chinese, Japanese, or American (neo-)colonial influences would lead to the incomplete decolonization of knowledge production. I also complicate the matter by checking the rising political currency of the term 'Indo-Pacific,' both as a *realpolitik* reality and a knowledge realm to be imagined and constructed. When Indo-Pacific intersects with Taiwan, it exacerbates Taiwan's selective approach to decolonization in several ways.

With that original sin of China watching's imperial root(s), and with so many researchers and intellectuals' efforts before me to confess that sin and find ways to redress it, very often, the question of how we can decolonize Chinese studies or other relevant sub-fields while still doing it comes to mind. If we place too much criticism on the discipline, it might turn against our profession or calling! So, the subversion from within the field does have its limits, just like decolonization has its own.

Concerning decolonization, technically, we cannot undo what has been done in the past. Because colonization has left legacies and marks on different generations

and layers of cultures, decolonization always has its limits. Another limit of decolonization is that if the decolonial project is strongly identity based, it might create new kinds of epistemic injustice and inequality. Using the example of Taiwan again, the rising awareness of the so-called Taiwanese identity and the ensuing intellectual and political endeavors to form the so-called Taiwan subjective sovereignty in producing knowledge about Taiwan prompts different kinds of Taiwan-centric worldviews or imagination. The locals in Taiwan (in reality, this mostly means the political and intellectual elites) were presumably given more power to reclaim knowledge production about their history. This resulted in educational reforms that revised curricula and textbooks; locals were given the chance to view themselves and their relationships with China and other countries in Asia in a new light. Nevertheless, in this process, a new kind of Taiwanese nationalism might be formed. Nationalism always has its positive and negative sides. Towards the end of this book, I mention that I am worried about the anti-Chinese-based de-sinicization reforms taking place in Taiwan. Treating Southeast Asian countries and Pacific Island countries and their peoples purely functionally for Taiwan's diplomatic and political gains is not in line with the decolonial spirit. The political and intellectual elites in Taiwan are confronted with different kinds of priorities here, which might contradict one another to some extent: geopolitical interests (that can be vital for survival), decolonial values (which support local agency-based knowledge production), and epistemic equality and justice.

The PRC is undergoing a divergent kind of transformation but similarly wishes to reclaim knowledge production about China. This goes hand in hand with China's desire to have its perceived 'correct' narrative about China, to counter what it perceives as the dominance of Western knowledge production and thus biased narratives about China. While there are PRC scholars who are writing continuously about China and publishing internationally, a parallel trend that is occurring in China is some institutions' preferences to encourage Chinese scholars to write more in the Chinese language and publish in domestic publications. Being able to publish in journals listed in the English-dominated social science citation index is no longer rewarded in these Chinese research and educational institutions as before. This may be read as a kind of decolonial effort, that is, to decolonize China from Western knowledge and practices. However, overly scientific nationalism, motivated partly or entirely by *realpolitik*, is not conducive to the healthy development of knowledge production.

My teacher, Shih Chih-yu, is a giant with visions. Shih is currently Visiting Chair Professor of Tongji University and Professor Emeritus of National Taiwan University. He has published prolifically about the intersections between *realpolitik* and knowledge production on China. The global oral history project, which he started decades ago and to which I have partly contributed, has inspired me tremendously while penning this book. Although our perspectives do not always

align, Prof. Shih's generous support and guidance have been a beacon of light for me. His data was funded by the Research and Educational Center for China Studies and Cross Taiwan-Strait Relations, Department of Political Science, National Taiwan University.

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The University of Helsinki and its faculty of humanities (formerly faculty of Arts) have also provided funding for the research and open-access publication of this book. Considering that Finland is now facing a financial and geopolitical crisis, leading to severe cuts in support for education and research, I am exceptionally grateful for my university's incentive funding that has made this publication possible.

My work on Southeast Asia benefits more than from the visiting scholarship that Mahidol University has endowed me. Without the friendship of Morakot Meyer, her colleagues, and assistants, including finding books for me in local libraries, I would have been lost in the Thai language. Morakot's kindness always touches me.

Special thanks are expressed for Donatella Guida and Federico Brusadelli's invitation to visit Matteo Ripa's archive at the University of Naples L'Orientale in 2023, which deepened my understanding of the origins of European sinology. I also wish to thank the anonymous external reviewers, colleagues at Leiden University Press, Dusica Ristivojević, Martin Lavička, Kristina Kironska, Gerald Jackson, Obert Hodzi, Duncan McCargo, Muhammad Tayyab Safdar, Sara Park, Al-Sharmani Mulki, Bokyung Kim, Wasiq Silan, Chingduang Yuyayong, Sami Honkasalo, Andrew Logie, Melani Budianta, Mu Pirvali, Zion Qin, Sara Van Hoeymissen, Dana Dūda, Liyu Chen, Malika Issabayeva, and Yevgeniya Ni for offering help both great and small during my research. Lastly, this book could not have been completed without the backing of my dear family members, my husband, and son! Their invisible support is highly appreciated.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract

If all the world is a stage, and if what is happening in China and between China and other countries constitutes a spectacle, China watchers spend significantly more time than laypeople watching this, documenting it, and presenting it to other China watchers and laypeople. China watchers are not objective spectators. By narrating China, they contribute ideas about how the world should interact with China.

Keywords: China watchers, knowledge production about China, narrating China, comparative epistemological approach

Mizoguchi Yūzō (溝口雄三) is emeritus professor of history and sinology at the University of Tokyo. Born in 1932, his generation experienced the Sino-Japanese War while they were in elementary school. When he was a child, he saw a photo of Japanese troops slaughtering Chinese people. That memory still remains in his mind. In his personal account, he said that the memory of that photo was suddenly awakened when he was at college, twenty years later. There he started to engage in Chinese studies. He read a book series on the development of Japanese capitalism published by a Japanese publisher, Iwanami Shoten (岩波書店), and learned about the brutal behavior of the Japanese army in Asian countries and China and the situation of the Anti-Japanese War. As Mizoguchi (2007) recalls,

> I have always been concerned about the awakening of this memory. Memory is based on ideology. Therefore, in my subsequent Chinese studies, I have been very concerned about the issue of 'subjectivity'. This is how I understand myself. But please don't misunderstand me. I don't mean to say that I am also responsible for the war of aggression against China, so I conduct research on China from the perspective of apologizing. I am particularly opposed to including political motives in research. I just regard it as a conscious lifestyle and call it the 'origin.'

This book is about that origin. But it has differed from Mizoguchi's view in that I believe that politics and the study of China have been intertwined more closely than we think, leading to perpetuated interactions between them. I do not mean to argue for means to liberate knowledge production from politics because I do not

think that this can be completely achieved. But I believe in the value of awakening and self-consciousness towards the knowledge that we produce, re-produce, and consume. It is with this motive in mind that this book is written.

1.1 The perpetuated interactions between politics and knowledge about China

The rise in the importance of the People's Republic of China (PRC, primarily called China as shorthand in this book) has increased the numbers and diversity of China watchers in our contemporary era. China watchers comprise a variety of experts, primarily university scholars (some of them are called sinologists), think tank analysts, journalists, activists, and government officials in various countries worldwide (Solin 1975; Keller, Dornschneider-Elkink, and Tung 2025). Although each profession has its own duties, in general these China watchers observe, document, analyze, present, narrate, provide comments, and may offer policy advice on China. If all the world is a stage, and if what is happening in China and between China and other countries constitutes a spectacle, China watchers spend significantly more time than laypeople watching this, documenting it, and presenting it to other China watchers and laypeople (i.e., 'non-China watchers' or 'casual China watchers'). Not all of them would see themselves as having a social or political impact (e.g., Janhunen 2016; Lodén 2016) but there are indeed some China watchers in epistemic communities with networks of like-minded professionals who may have authoritative claims to policy-relevant knowledge (Haas 1992).

The term 'China watcher' might have a negative connotation in the contemporary world. This is because this term is associated with the Cold War, when the US dedicated significant resources to gather information about the communist world (Wong 2016a, 2016b). Not only people working in the intelligence circle but also journalists and researchers were recruited formally or informally to join the China watching business. Their work included laborious documentation and deciphering of what was going on inside the communist world. In addition to China watching, Kremlin watching or Kremlinology was also part of the US's mission. Western media had received great benefits from these groups of China watchers in generating knowledge about China, although the information provided by China watchers was not always correct, and the politically driven motive might induce bias and civilizational stereotyping in the knowledge produced (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b; Shih 2019). The term 'China watching' has been used in derogatory ways due to its service to politics and thus China watchers are not considered neutral and objective providers of knowledge about China (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b).

In this context, it might not be adequate to equate China watching with a formal academic discipline like Chinese studies or sinology. A sinologist most likely

would not like to be called a China watcher. In Paternicò's (2023) documentation of Italian sinology, for example, she mentioned that some sinologists believe that they are not 'influencers' in politics. Another way of looking at this issue is that there are different generations of China watchers. Those in the Cold War era were conditioned and restricted by their political context to watch China for political purposes. In the post-Cold War era, as the political needs to observe China waned, researchers could study China in various ways beyond the traditional focuses on politics and economies. Post-Cold War China experts have also had more access to fieldwork in China and could have benefited from the availability of newer and more sophisticated methodological tools to advance their data collection and analysis. This is a view shared by both Western and non-Western scholars (Shim 2023; Lodén 2016). Thus, the post-Cold War China watchers might in some contexts become closer to China scholars or sinologists.

Knowing that the term 'China watcher' might carry negative meanings due to its Cold War connection, I still decide to use the term widely in this book. This book examines university researchers, think tank researchers, journalists, and sometimes politicians who have studied China in their professions. Sometimes a person's career could straddle along these different professions while naturally, there are also people who have stayed solely in their professions all their lives.

China watchers are not objective spectators. By narrating China, they contribute ideas about how the world should interact with China. Although not all of their ideas can have real impacts on changes in China's relations with the world, some do. In recent years, the Chinese government felt increasingly uneasy about China watchers and even created legal and regulatory frameworks that might impact them, such as the Hong Kong National Security Law. Their capacity to continue to watch China has become an issue of contention in the media, academic debates, and policy discussions. In the process, China watchers have become part of the spectacle.

This book is essentially about the local, regional, and global politics of China watchers from the 20th century to the present, with a focus on the past and its connection to the present. There is a burgeoning body of literature on the challenges facing China watchers and the institutions where they work in the contemporary era. However, this study differs by showing the longue durée perspective of China watchers' conditions and the enduring interactions between politics and the knowledge about China being produced. Politics created and conditioned China watchers and China watching, not the other way around. But China watchers may also exercise their own agency to defy the circumstances imposed on them. This is what this book aims to illustrate.

Historically, there have been various ways of viewing, understanding, and narrating China. These predate the contemporary ascension of power of China. It is necessary to study and compare different societies and countries to see how

so-called China knowledge has been formed and continues to be formed in different contexts. The approach that this study will use is to give examples of various countries, particularly but not exclusively from Central Asia and Southeast Asia, to illuminate the evolution of China knowledge in these societies. While countries and societies are compared, I aim to tease out commonalities, differences, and inter-connections between the myriad societies and China watchers.

It is important to acknowledge that as historical evidence will be examined too, the definition of 'China' in this book is rather comprehensive, including also other 'China' than the PRC. The Republican China both on the Chinese mainland and later on the island of Taiwan are also considered. Taiwan and Hong Kong are actually Chinese societies where knowledge production about China is generated from within. There is also a plethora of outside 'watchers' who study, observe, and narrate about Hong Kong and Taiwan too. As China watchers' interests and focal points do not align, this book treats the term 'China watcher' in a rather flexible way. Primarily, my focus is on the PRC, but I do keep Hong Kong and Taiwan in mind as one cannot exclude these two places' unique roles in the China-watching business.

China knowledge, being a constructed product conditioned by objective circumstances and subjective narrations, has existed for a long time. Professor Chih-yu Shih (石之瑜), Professor Emeritus at National Taiwan University and Visiting Chair Professor at Tongji University in the PRC, leads a global project that has recorded the oral histories of China experts and/or sinologists around the world. His comparative epistemological approach has enabled researchers to understand how research and knowledge about China have been constructed and have evolved in different countries (Ayrodiguno and Shih 2023). My study is largely indebted to the data from his project to exemplify the entanglement of China watchers and China knowledge production across the world. The transcripts of oral history interviews used in this study can be found on the website of Shih's project, situated at the Research and Educational Center for China Studies and Cross Taiwan-Strait Relations at National Taiwan University (2025).

While historical examples are drawn in this book, this book is strictly not a book about the history of China studies or sinology. Rather, this is a book that shows how the current China field came to be and how some contemporary challenges remind us of old challenges that the field has encountered.[1] There are other publications that aim at detailing the history of China studies or sinology, such as *Sinology during the Cold War* edited by Antonina Łuszczykiewic and Michael Brose in 2022. In Łuszczykiewic and Brose's work, they also have discussed the definitions

[1] This book is multidisciplinary in nature. It speaks closely to the fields of China/Chinese studies and cultural studies. Chih-yu Shih often refers to his work as an anthropology of knowledge (Shih 2012), which I consider related to this book too.

of sinology, Chinese studies, and China studies (Łuszczykiewic and Brose 2022: 5), which are not exactly the same but sometimes have been used interchangeably in some contexts (Łuszczykiewic and Brose 2022). While acknowledging these terms' differences, for the purpose of this book, I do not differentiate them and use the terms interchangeably.

This book will highlight current political changes and how they are affecting China watchers in various parts of the world as well. In 2021, the European Union's (EU) Horizon Europe program called for a grant competition under the title 'Upgrading Independent Knowledge on Contemporary China in Europe' (European Commission 2021). The call specified that the EU aims to sponsor consortia that can enhance 'independent European knowledge and expertise on contemporary China.' It also mentioned that the ultimate objective is for Europeans to have the independent capacity to bring forward coherent and fact-based analyses of China that can impact policies. The EU's desire to craft 'independent' knowledge of China, expecting that this would improve the European capacity to form better policies toward China, raises many questions. What is 'independent' knowledge of China? What is it meant to be 'independent' from? Is it independent of the knowledge produced by the Chinese government and its agents (e.g., scholars, think tank analysts, and officials)? Who is allowed to produce and narrate China in the EU? Can ethnically Chinese experts or watchers narrate independent knowledge about China in the EU?

On the other side of the Atlantic, in 2022, the New York-based Social Science Research Council (SSRC) conducted a scoping study of how China knowledge is researched and produced in what they called the 'Global South' of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.[2] The aim was to comprehend the research capacities of various institutions and countries in these regions. Resources and research capacity are closely associated. Richer countries, such as Singapore in Southeast Asia, shine in all measurements of research capacity and in producing knowledge about China (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022; Zheng and Carayannis 2023). Excluding Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Brunei were reported to have considerable research capacity, while Vietnam and the Philippines have moderate capacity, and Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia have limited capacity to study China in the overall Southeast Asian region (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022). The latter three countries are now known to have a much warmer relationship with the PRC and have reportedly experienced surging Chinese economic and political influence. However, they lack sufficient capacity to conduct research on China.

In South Asia, India was reported by the SSRC to have managed to attain critical mass in China studies, while there is still a lot of uneven development in nearby

[2] The contentious nature of the term 'Global South' will be mentioned in a later part of this chapter.

countries (Zheng and Carayannis 2023). In Africa, unevenness has been observed, with visible expertise clustered in major urban institutions in Johannesburg (South Africa), Accra (Ghana), Dakar (Senegal), and Nairobi (Kenya) (Zheng and Carayannis 2023; Bolin, Carayannis, Niewenhuis, and Vlavonous 2022). In Latin America, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile fare better than the rest of the region (Zheng and Carayannis 2023; Jauregui, Gutierrez, Armijo, and Zheng 2022). Central Asia and West Asia reportedly lagged behind all other regions in the Global South (Zheng and Carayannis 2023; Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022).

The SSRC project has produced good although not exhaustive lists of key China knowledge producers in various parts of the Global South. Its aim is to contribute to policy advice to strengthen weaker regions' capacity to research China. Capacity may include a financial budget to hire and educate teachers, conduct research, organize events for exchanges of views and debates, and support the development of teachers, students, and others. However, as the aforementioned EU grant competition indicates, concerns about a lack of capacity to understand China do not exist only in the Global South. European institutions face similar challenges. Comparatively speaking, European institutions may have greater capacity than some countries in the Global South, but there is still a fear that there is not enough capacity or not sufficient 'independent' capacity among European institutions themselves. A lack of resources, either in the Global South or in more developed parts of the world, has led to such challenges.

While institutions in these regions can try to obtain external funding, who is funding them has become a topic of heated debate in local, national, and international politics. There has been much discussion about the issues regarding Confucius Institutes (CIs), which are largely financed by the Chinese state and placed in educational institutions outside China to produce knowledge about China. The overly one-sided Chinese contribution to the operation of CIs—and thus knowledge production about China—has raised serious concerns in many countries. But there are also scholars who understand that CIs are a kind of 'risky' projects. If managed well, however, CIs can add value to host institutions' Chinese teaching capacity (Janhunen 2016; Lodén 2016). Issues about CIs have been well covered in other academic writings (Li 2025; Li and King 2024; Repnikova 2022; Franceschini and Loubere 2022; Hubbert 2019; Hartig 2015). Some of these works examined CIs through the lens of the PRC's exercise of soft power outside of China (Jardine and Lemon 2025; Hubbert 2019; Hartig 2015). In 2025, Jinghan Zeng, a Professor at City University of Hong Kong, released a memoir detailing his experiences as the Director of the CI at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom (UK). This type of publication, based on personal experiences, is relatively uncommon. Indeed, both Zeng's memoir and many Western academic publications express similar perspectives regarding the oversimplification of the complexities surrounding CIs

in the West. This study will not discuss them in detail but will only highlight the parts where they are relevant to the kernel of its arguments. That is, there is a trend for China watchers outside the PRC to have to show their distance from the Chinese state and other affiliated Chinese institutions to convince their audiences of their credibility and independent capacities to study China, even though not all China watchers can professionally and privately disentangle themselves entirely from their study subject of China. China watchers have been pushed to choose between keeping a distance from their subject or being questioned about their integrity and professionalism. This book will show that this is not just a trend in contemporary Western societies. From a longue durée perspective, we see similar patterns in both Western and non-Western societies, as exemplified by empirical cases in Central Asia and Southeast Asia, which we will delve into in Chapters three and four.

This trend has resulted in, and is also part of, a series of securitization efforts in the EU and the United States of America (USA) in the contemporary era. Some (albeit not all) ethnically Chinese or China-originating China watchers face greater challenges than non-ethnically Chinese China watchers. Western institutions' desire for 'independent' knowledge of China poses a significant challenge for those whose knowledge of China is underpinned by their ethnicity and their inseparable personal relations with China. There are ethnically Chinese China watchers who do not face such pressures as their peers if they have proven their distance from China. Ironically, their proven distance or decision to distance themselves from China might hinder their actual ability to study China. This book provides an update and analysis of this challenge from the past to the present. Although the scope of my examination is global, I make no pretence that I can cover all countries around the world. As much as I can, I try to provide reasons for choosing certain cases for comparison throughout the book. My ultimate aim is not to pretend that I can have a comprehensive evaluation of intellectual systems or knowledge systems about China in the world. Rather, I wish to offer a humble invitation for discussion and continuous reflection on this subject. As noted at the outset of this book, I believe in the value of awakening and self-consciousness towards knowledge production about China.

As this book will reveal, although China watchers are conditioned by the larger political climate to produce a certain situated knowledge of China, China watchers are not just passive individuals constrained by the political climate and structure. China watchers may exercise individual agency to make choices regarding what they wish to present about China to their audiences. These choices may not be underpinned solely by scientific principles of neutrality. Many attributes of a China watcher, ranging from family ties, personal ideologies and beliefs, and intellectual journeys to career considerations, can also influence the outcome of a particular path taken. Sometimes lack of choice could also accidentally lead to the creation of a China watcher. For instance, many sinology graduates have not been able to

find jobs related to the study of Chinese classics and thus have had to move on to work on contemporary political issues, becoming diplomats, government officials, or think tank analysts.

As the individual agency of a China watcher does matter, the author of this study has decided to follow anthropologists' practices in disclosing her positionality at the outset of this study. I believe that our knowledge is situated and affected by the context of its production. It can never be free and subjective. I acknowledge my dual role of being both sometimes an insider and other times an outsider with regard to this subject. In my role as an insider, I am a Taiwan-born professor of Chinese Studies, so a kind of China watcher, based in Finland with seven years' of leadership experience of being the Finnish director of a CI (January 2016–January 2023); I led a failed European consortium to bid on the aforementioned EU Horizon competition and have been a participant-discussant in the aforesaid SSRC project. I have also participated in several national and international networks to discuss the risks of higher education cooperation with China. These insider experiences have endowed me with rich resources to study this subject. I am also a participant in the above global oral history project 'Comparative Epistemology of China Studies,' which has allowed me to interview various sinologists and China watchers in Central Asia and Nordic countries.

In the process of writing this book, I have presented different versions of my work formally or informally to academic audiences in Germany, Finland, Kyrgyzstan, Sweden, Czechia, USA, and Thailand. There is a common bond between me and my audience, as we share similar (but not the same) experiences in dealing with the development of Chinese studies or China studies in our own institution. My insider role permits me to create a conducive environment where scholars feel comfortable revealing information to me that would otherwise be silenced and thus help improve my research. But to prevent my insider view from creating biased pictures of my subject due to over-familiarity, I have adopted an outsider approach when recording, documenting, and analyzing the collected materials and data. There is a constant self-reminder that I need to reflect critically on how my insider and outsider positions could affect the collection and interpretation of the data. Switching between insider and outsider roles is a process that I have gone through with the aim of presenting a balanced and holistic picture of the subject.

1.2 Geographic scope

I am not a historian, but I have written this book in a way that can speak to scholars working on global history, exploring commonalities, deviations, and inter-connections between the myriad societies and China watchers on Earth. Other than North

America, Europe, Australia, Southeast Asia, and India, China Studies as a field is largely missing everywhere (Zheng and Carayannis 2023). This book strives to be global in spirit, but it does not include empirical examples from every corner of the world. Southeast Asia has to be covered because even though there is uneven development among Southeast Asian countries, the region has benefited from its unique bond with China to produce a lot of publications and networks. Some would even argue that Sino-Southeast Asian studies is already an alternative paradigm to conventional studies of China (Liu 2001).

Central Asia[3] is covered here as the author happens to have conducted research in the region for several years. Central Asia, as will be shown in Chapter four of the book, has struggled to develop its own school of sinology. But this does not mean that there have not been experts in the region who have worked in their own capacity and sometimes with institutional support to contribute to knowledge production about China.

Another motive to include Central Asia is to show cognitive limitations of how the world conceives the region and how a region such as Central Asia, as part of the broader post-Soviet space, is cognitively made invisible from the global knowledge production system by scholars from the rest of the world (Tlostanova 2015; Müller 2020; Kuzhabekova 2020). Economically, Central Asia may be considered like many so-called Global South countries, but geographically it is located in the Global North. The simplistic North–South dichotomy is rather a colonial construct, treating the North as the developed part with advanced knowledge production systems in contrast to the South, which is inferior in comparative terms. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union somehow made the broader Eurasian region as a post-Soviet space cognitively obsolete as the old Soviet enemy disappeared from the West's radar. Situating in an interstitial space that does not fit easily into any Global North or Global South conceptualization, Central Asia often becomes invisible to the world's scholarly communities. Plus, as Soviet research is sometimes perceived as inferior by the West, Central Asia is thus regarded as even more backward because it inherits much of its research and innovation system from the Soviet system. This broader context has affected how China experts, China watchers, and sinologists from the rest of the world look at Central Asia. Basically, most of them do not see any Chinese studies developed in the region, and even if some do, they only vaguely guess that there are some sort of Chinese studies, but they do not believe that it is worthwhile to look at research results and talk to

[3] Geographically, Central Asia covers the post-Soviet countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. But more broadly, some use the term 'Greater Central Asia' to include even Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. This book covers the first five countries in Chapter four and touches upon Mongolia, Iran, and Pakistan sporadically.

scholars in the region. This reluctance prompts me to create a stand-alone chapter on the study of China in Central Asia.

Aside from Central Asia, there are two other regions that come to mind: Africa and Latin America. These two regions do not have vibrant China studies as a field, as in India or other Southeast Asian countries. But their development is ahead of Central Asia's. So, comparatively speaking, among the Global South regions, Africa[4] and Latin America[5] are in the middle in terms of networks and capacity in conducting studies on China. These two regions' focuses on China are also rather limited, with a strong emphasis on international relations and thus their relations with China, and may lack in-depth knowledge or specialization in China itself (Jauregui, Gutierrez, Armijo, and Zheng 2022). Some scholars might not think that the academic discipline of international relations would be related to conventional Chinese studies. But as scholars from Africa and Latin America are highly concerned about their countries' relations with China, these topics naturally cut across the studies of China and their countries. I call them China–African studies and China–Latin American studies. They have to be included in this book too.

Lastly, the development of China watching in West Asia or the Middle East is reportedly weaker than in Africa and Latin America. But I have sought to include examples from Israel, Egypt, and Iran to show what is currently available. The Pacific Island countries are of interest to me too, but either due to the lack of indigenous Chinese studies or my inability to find such studies, I have omitted the region from the book.

1.3 Methods and datasets

As noted earlier, for more than two decades, Chih-yu Shih has run a global project at National Taiwan University attempting to document the oral history of these

[4] One can find institutions that produce knowledge about China in big cities in the African continent. Most of them are located in anglophone countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Botswana (Hoeymissen 2021; Zheng and Carayannis 2023; Bolin, Carayannis, Niewenhuis, and Vlavonou 2022). In francophone countries, some operate bilingually (i.e., English and French), such as in Senegal, and others solely in French, such as in Cameroon. International research on China remains largely influenced by English-speaking scholars, which can lead to francophone researchers working in isolation. Consequently, they may need to navigate their work in both languages (Zheng and Carayannis 2023; Bolin, Carayannis, Niewenhuis, and Vlavonou 2022).

[5] Latin American countries have different levels of capacity and networks to support the production of knowledge about China. Mexico has some capacity (Ciglič 2016), but less so in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. As Jauregui, Gutierrez, Armijo, and Zheng (2022) point out, there are individuals in Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Venezuela doing work on China–Latin America relations, but they lack institutional support.

various China experts. The author of this book, as a professor of Chinese studies at the University of Helsinki in Finland, has been in charge of the Nordic and Central Asian part of this project, conducting oral history interviews with senior China experts in these two regions.

The transcripts of oral history interviews used in this study can be found on the website of Shih's project, situated at the Research and Educational Center for China Studies and Cross Taiwan-Strait Relations at National Taiwan University (2025). As the ambition is to cover the world, Shih's project is long term, beginning in 2004 and continuing today. For each country, he had to find funding and interviewers willing to help. Thus, one should view Shih's project as a mega project that includes many individual projects. Today, Shih is continuing his piecemeal efforts to get more countries included (Shih 2012). As of August 2025, there are four hundred thirty-six interview transcripts on the website. Interviews have been conducted in sixty-three countries around the world. Japan was the first country to be focused on. The largest number of completed interviews, fifty, were conducted in Russia.

The local interview partners are mostly researchers conducting research on China or imparting knowledge about China. These partners help identify local China experts to be interviewed and implement the interviews. The China experts in the studied countries range from scholars, think tank experts, public intellectuals, and journalists to diplomats. The primary focus is on senior experts who produce knowledge about China through their work. Accordingly, most of these interviewees are scholars, but in some countries, other types of professionals may also be included. The assessment of who is to be interviewed is grounded in the local reality, and the outcomes depend on the willingness of the selected potential interviewees.

Seniority is a vital criterion, as the assumption is that we are racing against time to capture the life stories and intellectual journeys of the most senior China watchers in the studied countries before they pass away. The project hence also has the objective of preserving the local and global heritage of the Chinese studies discipline by interviewing, ideally, senior China experts in the world.

Although senior China experts or China watchers are the primary focus, sometimes, local partners will make compromises in terms of finding interviewees. For instance, in some countries, the development of Chinese knowledge production might be relatively more recent, and there may not be a significant number of senior experts. Hence, middle-career experts have been included, too (e.g., in Uzbekistan and Pakistan). There are also countries in which no real China expertise exists, but there are experts of other more general Asian disciplines (e.g., Tajikistan) or even other science fields (e.g., Guinea) who have dealt with China in their professional capacity.

Shih has a template of a list of questions that interviewers should adjust for their local conditions when conducting interviews. In general, these questions

cover educational background, origin of interest in learning about China, career development, self-perceived contributions, networks, and perceptions of bilateral relations between the studied country and China. Transcripts have been publicized in different languages on the project's website depending on the available resources for each local project. There are indeed clear variations of transcripts in terms of length, style, and languages due to the available resources and style of the transcribers. Some transcripts are not made public at the interviewees' request. If I felt that an existing transcript lacked certain information, I sometimes (re) contacted the interviewee to ask for further information, even if I was not the primary interviewer. Some local partners provided notes about their interview experience and results, and these notes are on the website. I consulted these notes during my analysis, too.

I also conducted separate interviews for this book when I felt that the existing information was insufficient (e.g., in Costa Rica and Zambia). For instance, I tried to collect new data to explore the situation of knowledge production about China in countries that Shih had not covered. Some of these interviews are kept anonymous at the wish of the interviewees. These new interviews were not oral history interviews. They were unstructured interviews. Unstructured interviews allowed me to adjust the conversation based on the interviewee's responses, exploring countries of which I have lacked knowledge of and where I needed experts to help me grasp the relevant China watching communities on the ground and potentially uncover unexpected insights. In some developing countries, for example, this kind of approach is better because China studies programs have not yet been developed. Although I did consider Shih's semi-structured interview questions when I conducted these interviews, I found some of his questions irrelevant for certain developing countries. Hence, an unstructured approach led to more meaningful conversations.

Similarly, I included some younger generations of experts to compensate for the lack of them in Shih's project (e.g., in Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Latvia, and Iran). Like Shih, I was not strict regarding the exact ages to decide who qualified as a senior or young scholar. A lot of judgments had to be made, taking each studied country's conditions into account. Because young generations were never Shih's focus, and neither are they mine in this book, I used unstructured interviews with young researchers (from PhD students to assistant professors) to cross-check if their views align with those of the senior experts in Shih's data. Interestingly, I found that when juxtaposed with current circumstances and the perspectives of younger scholars, one could unexpectedly observe similar challenges encountered in the field of Chinese studies or China watching from the past to the present. The politicization of knowledge production regarding China and the polarization among stakeholders are consistent features throughout history.

Because I did not conduct all the oral history interviews in Shih's project, it was not always straightforward for me to assess the quality of the oral history data across different countries. My partial involvement in data collection in some countries, while not being involved in most, allowed me to navigate between insider and outsider perspectives to provide an honest evaluation of these interviews. I believe that quality does vary from one country to another. In certain countries, I am confident that local partners made commendable efforts to select the clearest and most experienced experts available at the time for the interviews. However, in a limited number of countries, I believe that the absence of the most suitable local partners may have led to questionable interviewee selections. In other words, the positionality, networks, and relationships of local partners with local scholars could have influenced the choice of interviewees. Selection bias was indeed present in some of the countries in which oral history data was collected. Nevertheless, this selection bias allowed me to investigate the context in which the bias arose. Without specifying these countries, I would assert that this phenomenon typically occurred in countries where the political establishment of the elites is closely tied to the Chinese state. These countries tend not to be democracies. Local partners and interviewees may excessively demonstrate their close affiliation with the Chinese state, potentially producing perspectives that outsiders might perceive as those of a Sinophile and 'not critical enough,' as one anonymous observer whom I asked to help cross-check the data commented. I would argue that 'not being critical enough' is not a criterion for Shih's local partners to exclude any interviewees. In fact, the value of his data and why I used his data was exactly because his data covers a diversity of known China watchers in different countries, whether or not they are critical of China. In this way, I was able to learn about the context in which the China-watching field has developed in different countries. I could also use the data to test my hypothesis to see if it is true that experts increasingly prefer to show their distance from the Chinese state (and thus try to show that they are critical) with less 'sinological Chineseness' these days. I will elaborate on the concept of sinological Chineseness in Chapter three.

Another type of possible bias is that the interviewees, who are the most senior experts in their respective countries, may have withheld information that did not favor them or may influence the way in which they narrated their experiences during the interviews. Consequently, transcripts were examined critically and are presented with appropriate reflections and interpretations from my side to illuminate potential issues within the data. Additionally, I consulted some anonymous experts to cross-verify the data when I had questions. My positionality as Shih's former student and thus strictly observing our teacher–student relations according to Chinese norms certainly restricted the ways in which I have been willing to openly criticize the data. What I aim to convey to readers is that careful consideration has been applied in utilizing the data critically for the analysis.

Lastly, although interviews constitute the primary data source for this book, I have also incorporated existing literature, including academic publications, policy documents, newspapers, magazines, and podcast episodes, to gather information and enhance my analysis. Depending on the purposes of some sections of this book, I do not always use oral history data but rather these other sources to write up certain sub-chapters (e.g., the first section of Chapter eight on Indo-Pacific politics).

1.4 Structure of the book

1.4.1 Three major parts

This book is divided into three major related parts. The first part, 'CHINA WATCHERS: THE AGENCY AND DIVERSITY,' comprises Chapters two to five. In the first part, I discuss the diversity of knowledge producers of China in the world and the difficulty in finding satisfactory definitions and categories to conceptualize them. Although some traits may be common among certain individuals, variance and outliers do exist. I have not written this book to follow a clear structure of theory, hypothesis, and empirical testing. However, if any empirical social scientist is looking for traces of a theoretical or interpretative framework, as well as methodology and data to test the hypotheses in this book, they will find clearer evidence in the first part of this book. More evidently, after Chapter two's description of the diversity of individuals in creating their own routes or being forced by conditions to undertake several intellectual journeys to understand China, Chapter three begins with an interpretative framework laid out by Chih-yu Shih to conceptualize different types of China watchers. The most relevant framework might look simple, but it is very pertinent to this book: the contrast between China watchers who exhibit extensive scientific Chineseness versus those who exhibit sinological Chineseness. China watchers with scientific Chineseness tend to see China as 'the other' that must be objectively studied and handled. Differently, China watchers with sinological Chineseness tend to value having a solid grasp of China, starting from understanding its language, culture, history, and society (Shih 2018a, 2018b) (see Chapter three for more information).

There is a hypothesis that China watchers tend to decide to show more of their scientific Chineseness regardless of their sinological Chineseness. China watchers have agency to adjust their different manifestations of Chineseness due to concerns of personal ideology, belief, career development, peer pressure, or other reasons. I test the hypothesis using cases of China watchers in Southeast Asia (Chapter three) and in Central Asia (Chapter four). Chapter five further gives examples of different individuals and institutions to show the diversity of examples that cannot

be bound by the rigid conceptual framework that I use here. In Chapter five, I also demonstrate that it is challenging to establish a normative position regarding whether sinological Chineseness or scientific Chineseness is better, as even experts are unable to reach a consensus on this matter.

The second part of this book, 'THE STRUCTURE WHERE CHINA WATCHERS OPERATE,' is composed of Chapters six, seven, and eight. The second part seeks to deepen the discussion that agents cannot act in a vacuum, even if they have their own agency. The context, structure, or political conditions in which they operate affect their work in producing knowledge about China. The openness of that structure for them to operate has changed over time. Chapter six looks at historical examples and paves the way for a discussion of contemporary developments in Chapters seven and eight. The politicalization and securitization of China knowledge is ultimately what I intend to bring up for discussion. To contextualize the contemporary issues, I spend time describing some relevant political and policy changes in recent years in various parts of the world. These descriptions might read like policy briefs, but the ultimate intention is to show how the production of knowledge about China is nowadays interlocked with some new political realities and knowledge realms (e.g., 'Indo-Pacific') and that China watchers may be restricted by these contextual changes in their own work.

The third and last part of this book, 'BACK TO TRANSNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION ABOUT CHINA,' comprises Chapters nine and ten. Although this book focuses a lot on the China that is the current-day People's Republic of China (PRC), it is undeniable that Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore have also been important sources of inspiration historically and in the contemporary era when it comes to alternative bases for imparting knowledge about China and for observing the PRC. Chapter nine particularly explores Taiwan as a place for China watching and for cultivating and hosting China watchers. I also discuss the Taiwan identity issue, which affects its development of Chinese studies and Taiwan studies. In light of the increasingly censored environment on the Chinese mainland and in Hong Kong, Chapter nine offers a timely discussion on alternative China watching.

Another focus of Chapter nine is the increasing interlocking of the knowledge realms of Taiwan, China, the Indo-Pacific, and Southeast Asia. Politics have driven the formation of these intersections. The key knowledge-producing nodes are certain think tanks, higher education institutions, and the media in Taiwan. The Ministry of Education has been the primary driver of educational reforms and allocation of resources to Southeast Asia-related fields, whereas the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, think tanks, and some research institutes have led the general development of the Indo-Pacific knowledge realm. Taiwan may have no choice but to be part of it in this irreversible trend. However, this exercise of bringing Taiwan further into the Indo-Pacific realm is challenging because Taiwan's international relations

and knowledge production are unable to move toward genuine decolonization. In this book, I propose that transnationalizing Taiwan studies might be a solution, although it cannot solve the entire problem. This is in line with the decolonial spirit in that it puts Taiwan in a much broader framework for analysis beyond binary thinking ('Taiwan is part of China' or 'Taiwan is not part of China').

In the final chapter, I propose that a similar approach, embracing the globalness of China, can also be implemented within Chinese studies. The context is how China can still be a knowledge co-producer of China on the world stage if there have reportedly been mounting challenges to accessing China. Even watching China from outside of China does not make all China watchers feel safe anymore because they fear the impacts of Chinese transnational repression. Chapter ten offers some ideas for coping strategies. I also stress that one solution is to recognize and re-acknowledge the globalness of knowledge production about China. China watching should reclaim its original global, transregional, transnational, and transcultural status. This would broaden the geographical pool of China watchers with whom we may interact and even collaborate to explore China. It is also in this vein that Chapters nine and ten constitute the third part of this book because both advocate for transnationalizing Taiwan studies and China studies.

1.4.2 Overview of the next nine chapters

Chapter two will give further examples of how knowledge about China is conditioned by a lot of political and social factors. The agency of China watchers is noteworthy. Where China watchers come from and how they are trained affect what they think the study of China and the narration about China should be like. When China watchers study and produce knowledge about China, the acts constitute efforts to (re)connect China watchers with China. Knowledge of China is produced through China watchers' (re)connecting efforts. In this vein, knowledge about China itself is epistemological.

Chapter three looks at Southeast Asian China watchers' endeavors and conditions in (re)connecting China, while Chapter four examines the situation in Central Asia. These two chapters, to some extent, are compared because they both regions are neighbors of China. But Southeast Asia has been considered to have, to various degrees, a more advanced level of capacity for studying China than Central Asia. This makes the comparison edifying.

Chapter five studies individuals whose careers have straddled academia, politics, and journalism in Indonesia and Denmark. As individuals cannot operate in a vacuum, we also look at non-Western institutions that have fostered the flow between research and politics, such as the Pakistan-China Institute in Islamabad and East Asian Institute in Singapore.

Chapter six looks at the general trends in the evolution of Chinese studies and China watching in different societies, and points to the pervasive problems of orientalism and politicalization. Chapter six notes that the post-Cold War period allowed a more open and conducive development of Chinese studies and China watching in many corners of the world, which de-politicalized and normalized Chinese studies. But in Chapter seven, we will see a return of politicalization in our contemporary era. We will examine a new form of appropriation of risk in relation to higher education cooperation and knowledge production about China on European, North American, and Japanese and Indian soil, and their securitizing measures in educational sectors.

Following that discussion, Chapter eight investigates the situation when China and Chinese scholars are excluded from the knowledge production about China. I use the example of the creation of the so-called Indo-Pacific politics by the USA, Australia, Japan, India, and other countries and the relevant knowledge production of it to show that China appears to be at the core of the matter, but the PRC government and Chinese scholars find themselves missing or excluded from the knowledge production process. Chapter eight also includes a comparative case of Human Rights Dialogues with China where Chinese actors are involved in knowledge production about China, but they are not necessarily able to achieve significant transformation of China's human rights practices. The identities and strategies of socially engaged scholars in this context will be examined.

Chapter nine specifically examines Taiwan as a location for observing China and for nurturing and accommodating those who observe China. Chapter ten concludes the book by returning to the broader issue of knowledge production about China. I advocate widening the geographical locations of China watchers whom we may interact with to understand China. Cross-fertilization of China studies with Global South studies might promise new intellectual potential, although it cannot replace China studies ultimately.

China Watchers:
The Agency and Diversity

CHAPTER 2

Knowledge about China Is Epistemological

Abstract

Knowledge about China is produced by China watchers who come from many different disciplinary, social, political, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Where China watchers come from and how they are trained affect what they think the narration about China should be like. Their personal context influences what they think is important to study and what the necessary components for studying China should be. Generational differences also play a role because this impacts the training which China watchers undertake as human beings living within a particular historical and political context. When China watchers study and produce knowledge about China, the acts constitute efforts to (re)connect the China watchers with China. In this vein, knowledge about China itself is epistemological.

Keywords: China watchers, knowledge production about China, academic disciplines, re-sinicization, epistemology

> One of the privileges and dangers of youth, as I think, is over-estimation of yourself though the results of it are not always a total disaster. After reading almost everything in our family huge library, which included all the Russian and European classical literature, I came to an erroneous conclusion, that I had already understood the spirit of Russian and Western cultures … my choice in favor of Chinese studies was also an understandable continuation of the desire to understand the East, as China for me, was undoubtedly the quint-essence of all that you call East.
> (Russian sinologist Alexander Andreevich Pisarev (2017: 83–84))

Knowledge about China is produced by China watchers who come from many different disciplinary, social, political, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Where we come from and how we are trained affect what we think the study of China should be like. Our personal context influences what we think is important to study and what the necessary components for studying China should be. Generational differences also play a role because they impact the training that we undertake as human beings living within a particular historical and political context.

At first glance, acknowledging the unneutral production of China knowledge might seem somewhat controversial in academia. We like to think that our professors can produce neutral knowledge in their writing and impart neutral knowledge

to their students. Our current academic practices do give us guidance on how such neutrality and impartiality of knowledge can be produced, normally and in the name of 'science.' We, as human beings, can nonetheless never be 100% neutral. Our family, society, culture, the environment where we grow up, traveling experiences, the people we encounter in life, education, and so much more, contribute to who we are today. We follow scientific guidelines and ethics in order to produce valuable knowledge. But this still does not take away from the fact that our professors and researchers are human agents. Each of us has a unique story that makes us who we are—and leads us to study China from a certain perspective, which in turn leads us to present and teach about China in certain ways.

Beyond the narrow field of China, it is commonly known that the term 'research' itself is linked to European imperialism and colonialism, in which knowledge about certain studied indigenous peoples are collected, categorized, and then presented to the West. Edward Said's (1978) famous critique of orientalism rightly pointed out that our concept of the Orient as different from the Occident was forged through the process of imperialism. In that sense, Western scholarship about the Eastern world has always been servile to Western power, and hence knowledge production is political and conditioned in a certain historical context. This also applies to the development of sinology or Chinese studies in many countries (Bueno 2021; Vukovich 2012; Ryckmans 1984).

I should caution, though, that non-Western countries might have different experiences from the West. For instance, Korea has had a long sinological learning tradition dating back at least two thousand years, when Chinese characters and texts were introduced from China (Shim 2023). That was a time when the contemporary conceptualization of nations and nation-states did not exist. During that long period of time, Korean intellectuals conducted academic studies that would belong both to Korean studies and sinology. There were also transnational scholars at that time, such as Korean Buddhist scholars who would travel to the West, to China and India, to learn about Buddhism and even help develop sinology (Shim 2023). Korean intellectuals did not perceive Chinese culture and history clearly as the 'other' as Western scholarship did. In fact, it was not until Japan's colonization of Korea in the early 20th century that prompted Korean intellectuals to look at China as clearly as the other (Shim 2023).

Differently, the origin of Western sinology or Chinese studies began with Western missionaries wishing to spread Catholic Christianity among the Chinese people, an effort that dates back to the 16th century. These Jesuit missionaries are often considered as proto-sinologists who facilitated cultural exchanges between China and Europe (Paternicò 2023). In 1732, the missionary priest, Matteo Ripa (1682–1746), created the first Sinology School on the European Continent, 'The Chinese Institute' or 'a College of the Chinese,' the first nucleus of what would

become today's lay institution, the University of Naples L'Orientale (Università degli studi di Napoli L'Orientale). Ripa had worked as a painter and copper engraver at the Kangxi emperor's imperial course between 1711 and 1723. He returned to Naples from China with four young Chinese Christians and established the Institute, sanctioned by Pope Clement XII to teach Chinese to missionaries in 1732 (Paternicò 2023).

Orientology, born out of imperial actions, has been the predecessor of more regionalized terms such as 'sinology' and later 'Chinese studies' or 'China studies.' The discipline includes the study of the history, languages, societies, economies, and political systems of the 'Orient' and geographically covers any place that is opposite of the 'Occident,' such as even from the Maghreb (i.e., Western and Central North Africa) to Japan (Kemper and Kalinovsky 2015).

Fast forward to the 20th century: Paris's sinology dominated learning about China until the Second World War. Paul Pelliot, a French sinologist known for his exploration of Central Asia and discovery of many important Chinese texts, such as the Dunhuang manuscripts, was skilled not just in Chinese but also other Central Asian languages. This allowed him to engage in academic writings on diverse topics. Across the Eurasian continent, the Russian school of sinology was also reputable and focused on the impartation of classical Chinese, such as the work of Julian Konstantinovich Shchutsky (Юпиан константинович шуцкий) whose translation of the *I Ching* (or *Yijing*, meaning 'Book of Changes') was considered the best at the time of its production. As Senior Kazakhstani sinologist, Konstantin Syroyezhkin (Константин Сыроежкин) asserted, "it must be admitted that the Russian school of sinology was the strongest in the world […] this is recognized by both Western and Chinese scientists" (Syroyezhkin 2015).

The early days of sinology focused on historical phonology, classical religion, philosophy, and linguistics. For example, Latvian sinologist, Peter Schmidt (1869–1938), was a linguist and ethnographer (Dunajevs 2023). Swedish sinologist, Bernhard Karlgren (1889–1978), was a linguist. Someone who studied the 'contemporary issues' of China would have been considered shallow. Contemporary issues were only what diplomats and journalists were interested in: not at all "scholarly"! (Brødsgaard 1996; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2022). In West Germany's case, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (2022: 47–48) particularly notes that '*Sinologie*' was chosen as the name of the academic field and integrated into 'ancient studies' (*Alterumswissenshaften*) after the Second World War because of the academics' desire to show their separation from Germany's Nazi past, when academics were used for political purposes. The preference in sinology in West Germany was to engage purely with classical Chinese, and scholars were considered to engage solely in studying ancient China. Universities were not believed to be the place for teaching Mandarin Chinese nor researching contemporary developments.

However, as times changed, new generations of sinologists began to hold different views. In Germany's case, Hamburg and Munich, for example, have opted for starkly divergent approaches. The philological tradition of sinology is still preferred in Munich while some sinologists in Hamburg encourage the field to interact with other wider academic fields and do not exclude contemporary China as an academic focus either. In North America and Europe, as academic disciplines flourish and develop relatively well in higher educational and research institutions, there have inevitably been debates, reforms, and resistances against reforms over how the study of China should be organized at the academic level. Various paths were chosen and developed by different institutions accordingly.

As the times evolved, public interest in the contemporary issues of China grew. With sinology moving closer to the wider fields of social sciences in general, nowadays we can find China experts in various disciplines, including development studies, political sciences, sociology, anthropology, law, business management, economics, and cultural studies. Today, traditional sinologists still exist, but we also see scholars from other disciplines joining in a much wider exploration of China. In a way, such pluralization is in line with the general development of academic disciplines throughout history. Recalling the 17th century, when universities or similar institutions were set up in Europe and America, education was mostly focused on religion, particularly the Christian faith and training ministries. But with time, more disciplines were added and higher education became closer to various aspects of everyday life and social realities.

Traditional sinologists and China experts from other disciplines operate in different worlds with different theoretical, methodological, and empirical focuses. They are not necessarily in conflict with each other, but it is not easy for them to form a unified scientific community either. Take Germany again as an example. Berlin and Bochum have nurtured the birth of the study of contemporary China. In recent years, think tanks in Germany have also begun to fill the gap by engaging in policy-oriented research that is tied closely to the study of contemporary China.

In Europe, as different kinds of sinology develop, some adhere stronger to the philological tradition of sinology while others are bringing themselves closer to social scientific disciplines. One example would be French sinologist and sociologist, Marcel Granet (1884–1940), who used methods from Durkheimian sociology for his research. Similarly, in the United States of America (USA), there has been a trend to draw sinology closer to social sciences. The famous scholar, John King Fairbank (1907–1991), went so far as to dismiss the philological tradition and advocated developing the study of China using the 'area studies' approach (Blitstein 2017). One of the earliest American scholars of Cold War China and Sino-American relations was Chinese-American Tang Tsou (鄒讜, 1918–1999) of the University of Chicago. Tsou

stressed the importance of academic objectivity in sinology and the continuation of exchanges between China and the West in order for both sides to understand each other better. Tsou was seen as an authority on modern China in the fields of both China studies and political sciences in his time.

There is a tension as academic disciplines encounter each other, integrate, converge, and diversify. Scholars, having individual agency, also face the question of how they identify themselves with their discipline and their work. Whether one calls oneself a sinologist or a political scientist, for instance, shows that person's inclination. This tension is for example acute in the US academia where scholars conducting research on Chinese politics have increasingly become more integrated into the discipline of political science, particularly as part of comparative politics and international relations. With American political scientists having strong empirical and quantitative preferences, researchers can nowadays present much more sophisticated data, theories, and modeling to analyze and interpret Chinese politics. However, the general trend is towards contributing to political sciences rather than understanding Chinese politics. In addition, scholars tend to work on narrow topics within the political science disciplines, and this again leads to the questions if and how the research can speak to the larger questions of how Chinese politics would work. The tension between disciplinary boundaries is visible in other parts of the world such as Europe and Asia too. But the US's huge and vibrant China-watching community, particularly scholars working on Chinese politics, face the challenge after the discipline(s) become advanced and specialized, that the development might paradoxically lead scholars to see 'trees' clearly but not the 'forest' (O'Brien 2006, 2011, 2018).

A China watcher's identification with a particular discipline will affect how that scholar studies China and draws conclusions for his readers. In the US case, this is further complicated by the fact that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is an important country for the US politically and economically. The national strategic importance of China leads the growth of a plethora of China watchers in various professions. But as McCourt (2022) illuminates, their educational, personal, and career backgrounds influence these experts to harbor different stances on US policy towards the PRC. McCourt (2022) discerns four major types of China watchers in contemporary America: the Strategic Competitors, the Engagers, the New Cold Warriors, and the Competitive Co-existers. While McCourt (2022) admits that sometimes the boundaries between these four labels can be fuzzy, he notices that these four major groups do hold different stances. The China-watching community in the US as a whole shows a tendency towards polarization and politicalization as experts do not see eye to eye on US policies towards China (McCourt 2022, 2024).

2.1 Knowledge about China is conditioned by epistemological relationships with China

While the aspiration for these two goals—academic objectivity and continued exchanges—sounds commonsensical for China watchers, the US's China-watching community's struggles to reach consensus on China policies indicates that this is not always easy. The kernel of this book is to sketch out the struggles, contradictions, and difficulties in implementing them. To start with, objectivity is hard to achieve, as all knowledge about China is conditioned by the scholar or researcher's epistemological relationship with China. It has been this way historically and in our contemporary era. This pattern is pervasive and has unique local features in various countries around the world. In Germany and other European countries, for instance, many senior sinologists who are now retired or have passed away began their study of China because they were attracted to the Chinese Communist Party's ideals (Lodén 2016). The famous German sinologist, Rudolf Wagner (1941–2019), of Heidelberg University was one of them. Looking at the European societies where they came from, they were critical of Western or capitalist developments, and Maoism was an inspiration for them to study China. As Klotzbücher (2023) demonstrates, China was anti-modernity or offered an alternative modernity for these intellectuals in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. But personal experiences of living in Maoist China later in their lives had shattered some of their utopian views of the perfect society of China.

Moving beyond Europe, Modibo Bah Kone, a retired professor who has played a significant role in fostering Chinese educational collaboration at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Education at the University of Bamako in the Republic of Mali (Website of Beijing Foreign Studies University 2024), similarly conveyed that since his high school days, he has had "a lot of admiration for Chairman Mao Zedong. Because we inherited a classical left-wing background, it was the period of socialism and Modibo Keita (the first president of Mali)" (Kone 2024).

Scholars elsewhere have also been prompted by various personal reasons to study China in certain fashions. Caroline Sy Hau (born 1963) is a Chinese-Filipino author and scholar, currently working as a Professor of Southeast Asian literature at Kyoto University, Japan. She is known for her book *The Chinese Question: Ethnicity, Nation and Region in and beyond the Philippines* (Hau 2014). She confessed that,

> My interest in things Chinese was a way to understand myself, my family, what sort of community I grew up in, and also to understand ethnic Chinese relations in Southeast Asia. It was less about China, and more about Chinese in the Philippines and Southeast Asia […] I am using the Chinese in the Philippines and Chinese in Southeast Asia as a kind of ground or framework to understand the Chinese in China, rather than the other way around. (Hau 2016)

Hau expressed that she approached China through literary studies. But she confessed that

> disciplines can also be limiting too, because they tend to narrow your focus. In my case, my frustration has always been that many of the people in my field tend to concentrate on textual analysis, and they never really look outside the text. I think area studies can help bridge disciplines by allowing us to learn from each other [...] I also admit that we need to have a disciplinary base before we can actually cross disciplines. (Hau 2016)

Individual researchers' study of China has always been conditioned by the larger political and social structure in which they exist. The Prague school of sinology in the Czech Republic illustrates this point. Scholars in this Prague School are known for their specializations in modern Chinese literature, field research on popular theater, storytelling, and the philosophy of the Han dynasty, combined with innovative research methods, such as semiotics and Marxist theory (Lin 2022; Cheng 2014).

In the 1950s, the Czech Republic was still part of Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia and China had frequent contact, nurturing the first generation of the Prague school of sinology under the leadership of Professor Jaroslav Průšek (Cheng 2014; Lin 2015, 2022). During the Prague Spring in 1968, the then Czechoslovakia tried to liberalize its politics, and the Soviet Union stopped the political movement by invading. For about twenty years after the Prague Spring, Czech sinology was isolated from the world (Lin 2015). Sinologists were forced to give up their jobs, and some of them stopped conducting research on what they were interested in. Czech sinologist, Zdenka Heřmanová, for instance, was forced to make reports about China to the government at that time (Lin 2015). She had to translate Chinese daily newspapers, which was irrelevant to Chinese literature, her true love (Lin 2015). This period coincided with the Sino-Soviet split. Under the influence of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia's relations with China soured.

Zbygniew Slupski, another Czech sinologist, shared that the situation of the sixties was unique. The political atmosphere was negative towards China and in fact, sinologists at that time also had dismissive feelings towards China. But even so, sinologists at that time did not want to write negative things about China, "although everybody knew there was nothing positive to say about the Chinese revolution" (Slupski 2010–2011).

Clearly, Slupski's account was full of contradictions and uncertainties, and so were his feelings towards China. He struggled with the distance or relationship that he wished to maintain with China, its people, and other relevant subjects. This is also an issue for many China watchers in the contemporary era, which we will illuminate in this book later.

Contact with China finally resumed after 1990. The revival of sinology since the 1990s in the post-communist Czech Republic and Poland does not mean that sinology has returned to its past position. For one thing, China today is different from the China of the past. Contemporary sinologists have been moulded by an atmosphere of liberation and democratization in post-communist societies. New generations of sinologists see a different China—or different Chinas. Today's sinologists ask themselves, of their studies and teaching, whether they want to focus on studying the China that has a rich culture, or the China that has developed itself economically, becoming a world leader in technology, or the China that is authoritarian (Brødsgaard 1996). These diverse choices will lead researchers and teachers to different routes and ways of studying, teaching, and narrating about China.

2.2 Different Chinas and different routes to understanding Chinas

> After belated and uneasy beginnings, French studies of contemporary China have recently matured. Thirty years ago, the field was almost non-existent in France. Most sinologists carried on the once celebrated philological tradition or concentrated on philosophy, religion, classical literature and ancient history. Few were happy to see the sacred field encroached upon by modern historians, whose secular interests they seemed closer to those of reporters than of scholars. (Written by famous French historian and sinologist, Lucien Bianco (1995))

I have overseen most of the Nordic part of Chih-yu Shih's oral history project. Chinese studies as a scholarly discipline in the Nordics began with Bernhard Karlgren's studies of Chinese phonology. Karlgren played an enormous role in the establishment of sinology as an academic discipline in the region. He brought up an entire generation of students who were to set the agenda for the development of Chinese studies in the Nordics, from the late 1950s almost up to the present (Brødsgaard 1996). Completing the global project is not easy as the interviewers are racing against time, and we often lose. It is not uncommon for us to identify a senior sinologist to be interviewed only to learn not long after that this person has just passed away. Writing emails to experts and receiving an automatic reply of "Sorry, this is the email of Prof X, who has just passed away," is sadly normal. It is also not unusual to learn that the China expert we had just interviewed passed away soon after.

In 2016, Göran Malmqvist (1924–2019) was still the most senior sinologist in the Nordic countries. When I contacted him in 2016, he refused to be interviewed. He said: "I am a very old man, educated in a tradition where the definition of sinology

was quite different from that of today. I therefore fear that my recollections would seem irrelevant to most readers." He used huge fonts in his email. At one point, I noticed that some of my very senior scholar friends also used super-sized fonts, and I guessed that this was because it was easier for them to read. Not willing to give up so easily, I enlarged the size of my fonts in my reply email. To make a long story short, Malmqvist later agreed to have the interview. But then his health took a turn for the worse and eventually it was his wife who was replying to my emails. In 2019, he passed away in Sweden. I have never managed to meet him, although I tried for three years.

The initial reluctance of Malmqvist to accept the interview depicts the generational and disciplinary divide that exists in the Chinese studies community at large. The new generation of scholars is interested in contemporary topics, which were considered superficial in Malmqvist's era. Disciplinary divides persist in the contemporary era. Whether you are trained specifically in Chinese studies, or whether you were originally an economist, political scientist, anthropologist, historian, or sociologist who uses these disciplines' theories and methods to analyze China, makes a huge difference as these disciplines have different epistemic cultures. Political scientists, for instance, tend to treat China as a country that can be examined through various social science theories. In this process, they might also compare China with other countries. In other words, political scientists are prone to look at China comparatively, and do not care solely about China. They care about what China, as a case study, can tell us about social science theories. As another example, Jack Gregory, emeritus professor and a general historian at La Trobe University in Australia confessed that, "although I am a generalist, I have been very pleased to be included in the community of China scholars!" (Gregory 2018). This is not just a contemporary phenomenon. The aforementioned Frenchman, Marcel Granet, would see himself as a Durkheimian sociologist whose research focused on China, not a traditional sinologist per se (Blitstein 2017).

Differently, experts trained in traditional area studies, such as Chinese studies, might not bear as much of a theoretical burden as political scientists, economists, or sociologists. Their focus on China tends to lead them to believe that China is a unique country with a unique civilization and culture that cannot be easily compared with other cases. Their emphasis is thus on a thorough examination of China, inside and out. They would not care much about what social science theories, which are mostly products of the West, might say.

In October 2015, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences held a conference called 'Intellectual History of International China Studies: Communication and Conversations' in cooperation with Chih-yu Shih's global project. There are teams in charge of the collection of oral histories in various countries and regions of the world. During that October conference in Beijing, team representatives from

different parts of the world shared their current findings and discussed future work. At the conference, there was a professor of Chinese studies. She was an ethnic Chinese, who was born in Malaysia and grew up there. As an ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, she wanted to preserve her roots. This pushed her to learn classic Chinese literature, and eventually she became a professor of Chinese studies.

Halfway through the conference, she made a confession to the rest of the participants. She said that she realized that she had come to the wrong conference. She did not know that most of the participants were part of a global project, and that we were meeting in Beijing to share the development of 'China studies' in various parts of the world. While traditional sinology programs still exist, there are more and more study programs that focus on the contemporary society, culture, economics, and politics of China. But for many scholars, such study programs are 'China studies,' not 'Chinese studies,' as the two are not considered the same thing.

For this scholar from Malaysia, China studies cannot be confused with Chinese studies. Chinese studies should focus on literature and linguistics and other humanities-related subjects. This was what her focus was on. In her Malaysian university, they mainly recruit students who are ethnic Chinese. They do not need much training in basic Mandarin and focus instead on learning advanced levels of Mandarin and literature. In other words, their students are similar to students of Chinese studies in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. In Chinese studies, a lot of advanced literature study is engaged in.

In the broadly defined West, however, 'Chinese studies' is sometimes used interchangeably with the term 'China studies,' but the two terms have a different foundation from the ones created in China or Malaysia. The education at the university level in the West usually entails teaching Mandarin from scratch, and then introducing various aspects of China to students. Some programs might stress the language element more than others. Those that place more emphasis on the language requirement and element can be more suitably termed 'Chinese studies' while those focusing more on comprehensive knowledge of Chinese culture, society, politics, and economics can be more suitably termed 'China studies,' but one cannot be dogmatic about this distinction because different universities may define and craft their own programs differently.

2.3 The agency of China watchers

With the rich oral history interview data that Chih-yu Shih has managed to collect with collaborators from all over the world, he further developed a theory of post-Chineseness (Shih 2022). This book does not specifically engage with Shih's theory of post-Chineseness. However, Shih's work has inspired me and helped

me to develop concepts that are relevant for my own research in this book. What interests me most is the concept of Chineseness. Who possesses Chineseness? What are the traits of Chineseness?

Perhaps it is logical to think that an ethnically Chinese person would possess some Chineseness, although it is also logical to think that not all ethnically Chinese persons would possess or manifest the same kind of Chineseness. The definition of Chineseness is not fixed and we might never find perfect agreements on the definition. It might indicate the level of possessing Chinese language skills, degree of appreciation of the Chinese culture, or period of living and immersing oneself in Chinese culture (be it in the PRC or outside), just to name some imperfect examples.

The definition of Chineseness also involves partly self-identification of Chineseness versus non-Chineseness by a China watcher as well as others' perceptions of a China watcher's Chineseness. A Caucasian American, for example, can potentially be an owner of Chineseness as long as there is recognition of him or her possessing something that is Chineseness, such as having lived in China for years, speaking fluent Chinese, or practicing Confucian rituals regularly. In this vein, China watchers can comprise ethnic Chinese or non-ethnic Chinese experts, as long as they are recognized as or they believe that they possess some vaguely conceived Chineseness.

Chineseness is something that is not always fixed. It can be fluid, and in practice, it can be improvised (Shih 2022). A person can spontaneously or strategically decide to add to or decrease his or her own Chineseness. Most relevant for my book here is the act of engagement in knowledge acquirement, production, or reproduction of knowledge about China. Shih (2018a, 2019b) opines that when China watchers study and produce knowledge about China, the acts constitute efforts to (re)connect the China watchers with China and thus obtain some level of Chineseness. Knowledge about China is produced through China watchers' (re)connecting efforts or '(re) sinicization.' Sinicization is the process by which non-Chinese societies, groups, or individuals (such as China watchers) are acculturated or assimilated into Chinese culture, particularly the language, societal norms, culture, and ethnic identity of the Han Chinese—the largest ethnic group of China. In this vein, knowledge about China is itself epistemological. Furthermore, as there are dynamic processes of (re) sinicization through different practices, such as education and travel, each China watcher would first (re)sinicize himself or herself through conducting these practices and then further enable themselves to make meaning of their (re)sinicization by producing knowledge.

Each China watcher has his or her agency. He or she might strategically position himself or herself via his or her scholarship on China for various reasons (e.g., to define his or her expertise, career advancement, or personal ideological convictions). This view is in line with German sinologist, Sascha Klotzbücher's

(2023) observation, and many anthropologists in general, that the positionality of a researcher and a studied object, the distance of his or her relationship from that subject, and the intensity of that relationship would determine how a study would develop. If one researcher's achievement has flourished greatly and more researchers and students follow a similar path, the discipline will develop further. The initial positionality of a researcher toward his or her studied object of China would affect how the discipline evolves and how his or her readers and followers form their knowledge about China. One can think of an academic discipline such as Chinese studies as a milieu in which researchers, their readers, and followers interact and engage with one another in order to (re)sinicize.[1] In the following sub-sections, I extract data from Shih's oral history projects to give concrete examples of China watchers who believe or who are believed to possess some Chineseness. I describe their careers and how they have interacted with other actors in their own fields or societies to contribute to China watching and knowledge production about China.

Our readers will meet China experts of various sorts in the following sub-sections, including those who do not speak Chinese or have struggled to learn Chinese, non-ethnic Chinese China experts whose translation of Chinese literature is a way of sinicizing themselves, and ethnic Chinese China experts who struggle to understand their own Chineseness. I use these 'surprises' not only to show the diversity and non-conformity of the China-watching communities in the world, but also to strengthen my arguments that one must check any China watcher's agency deeply to understand how he or she contributes to knowledge production about China. I have no doubt that some readers might also raise a few eyebrows at my choices of China experts. I have done this on purpose, specifically to challenge the Global North mentality and practices in defining what a China specialist should be like. It is in this vein that this study also speaks to the growing scholarly interests in decolonial scholarship that critiques the hegemony of Western or other forms of colonial knowledge systems. The last two sub-sections further deal with two important mechanisms that may sinicize China watchers: education and travel.

2.3.1 China experts who cannot speak Chinese?

It might sound ludicrous that a China expert cannot speak Chinese. But even during the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, when Europe started to have

[1] Standard Western epistemologies treat meanings as something given 'out there.' Following this line of thinking, knowledge about China is just 'out there.' But this study treats knowledge about China as constructed by China watchers through experiences and relations, as a kind of (re)sinicization process. Some of my thoughts are inspired by Tim Ingold's (2000) 'The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill,' although Ingold's work does not deal with China specifically.

different sorts of orientalists conducting research and imparting knowledge about the broadly defined Orient, it was not always easy to clearly discern sinologists, Japanologists, Indologists, and other orientalists from one another. Paternicò (2023) indicated that in Italy, there were many scholars who could read and teach Classical Chinese, but they might not be able to use Chinese language in China for daily communication. However, there were indeed Italian sinologists who were well versed in the Chinese language. In our contemporary era, it is much easier to receive an education or go on exchange or fieldwork and deepen one's language skills than it was centuries ago. If someone is a sinologist, the chances are that this person will have a good command of Chinese language skills. But if a scholar is not a sinologist per se, and his or her disciplinary focus is instead on other fields, such as political science, economics, or law, it is possible that this person does not have advanced Chinese language skills.

Chinese diaspora who have been advancing knowledge production about China in their host countries might also not necessarily have a high command of Mandarin Chinese skills. It is possible that he or she might speak a certain Chinese dialect at home, but there is little support for Chinese language education in the educational system of the host country to help advance their skills. For example, in Chapter five, we will encounter Hendry Jurnawan (赖民裕), a Chinese diaspora in Indonesia. His career has straddled academia, journalism, and politics, and he helped raise awareness of Chinese Indonesians' rights in various ways through his three careers. Jurnawan's family in Indonesia is located in Pontianak, where the Chinese diaspora tends to speak dialects such as Chaozhou (or Teochew, 潮州話) and Kejia (or Hakka 客家話). At home, Jurnawan (2017) also spoke the Fuzhou dialect (福州話). But as Chinese language education in Indonesia ceased to exist due to a policy change, he could not continue formal education to improve his Mandarin. It was only later in life that he was able to improve his language skills. He even studied in China to improve his Chinese (Jurnawan 2017).

2.3.2 China experts who have never been to China?

Can one become a China expert without having lived in China and being immersed in the culture for a period of time? Political, financial, and various other reasons have hindered young and even senior researchers from visiting China more than we can imagine. At the outset of this chapter, I quoted a self-narration by Professor Alexander Andreevich Pisarev (Александр Андреевич Писарев), a Russian sinologist and historian, about his choice to study China in his career. Pisarev was born in 1950 in Vladivostok when his parents were sent to Sakhalin, the most extreme end of the Soviet Empire, as punishment for their unmarried relationship, which was deemed to go against the Communist party members' ethics at the time

(Pisarev 2012). Due to the birth of Pisarev, his parents had to make a short stop in Vladivostok and later continued to the eastern end of the empire. Pisarev (2017) expressed that many would associate his birthplace, the Eastern part of the Soviet Union, with his interest in China. But his motivation was due to a reckless miscalculation: he thought that he had known a lot about Russian and European cultures. To understand 'the East,' which was mysterious to him, he had chosen China because China meant the East for him (Pisarev 2017).

In the early part of Pisarev's career, he confessed that he had not been to China although he was already teaching about China and giving lectures about China in various places (e.g., universities, factories, collective farms) in the Soviet Union (Pisarev 2017). China was a hot topic at that time even though relations between the Soviet Union and China were in a bad shape. Part of this inability to travel to China was related to the Soviet system, which restricted foreign trips to only certain political elites and through governmental channels. Even though China had become a bit more open towards admitting foreigners to visit after Mao Zedong's death, because relations between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and China had been deteriorating, it was nearly impossible for him to visit China. The souring of Soviet–Chinese relations in the 1960s–1970s with the armed clashes along the Far Eastern section of the Russian–Chinese border put all cultural and educational exchanges between the two sides to an end. It was also hard to find any Chinese people in the Soviet Union to make contact with. Students of China in that era had hopelessly understood that they might not ever travel to China even though they had dedicated their lives to studying the country (Pisarev 2017).

Pisarev recalled that when he toured the USSR to talk about China, he sometimes failed to answer very simple questions. For instance, a local farmer once asked him about the shape of a beer bottle in China. He could not answer. That also reflected the odd situation at that time, when China was a contested topic but there was a dearth of knowledge about everyday life in China among everyone from lay persons to intellectuals (Pisarev 2012, 2017).

It was only later, when Pisarev had the chance to finally visit China, that he realized that the shape of a beer bottle in China was similar to the beer bottles that he could find in the Soviet Union. That year was 1984, when Soviet Sinologists were admitted to China for research and educational purposes after a long break in cultural and educational exchanges between the two countries. At that time, Pisarev had already taught about China in the Soviet Union for nearly a decade and been promoted to associate professorship (Pisarev 2012, 2017).

In other words, Pisarev's early years of sinicization came through education and books in the absence of actual contact with any Chinese persons and culture or visiting China. He also recalled that in his early years of contact with the Chinese language in the university, he had difficulty in pronouncing the Chinese tones. His

mother, who was good with music, had to use their home piano to help him figure out the four mā-má-mǎ-mà tones in the Chinese language (Pisarev 2012, 2017).

It goes without saying that during Pisarev's first journey to China, he experienced cultural shocks, in addition to the challenge of having to adjust to listening to Chinese languages with accents and dialects from different regions of the huge country. Pisarev (2012) recalled that he could not understand anything when the first Chinese person he met opened his mouth! It was precisely the initially unsuccessful relationship between him and the real living Chinese language in China that gave him a stomach ulcer within a month (Pisarev 2012, 2017).

But the challenge was greater than that. One interesting example which he gave was when he had a joyful dinner with a Chinese professor in China discussing Chinese and Russian classical literature.

> We were eating sliced chicken and there were a lot of bones that I collected patiently on a tiny plate. My friend spat that stuff freely on the table and, after that, brushed the bones directly onto the floor. When my plate was overloaded, he simply threw what it contained on the floor as well. I was really shocked, as in our culture we never did this kind of things. (Pisarev 2017: 95)

Pisarev (2017) explained that his Chinese host was equally shocked and commented, "You foreigners are strange people, I do not understand, why do you collect all those useless bones on your plate? You have no place left for more food" (Pisarev 2017: 96). One could argue that these encounters would further sinicize him to the Chinese cultures at least at the comprehension level, although he might not totally agree with and adapt to all things Chinese in his life.

In 1994, Pisarev became a professor at the Department of Chinese History at Moscow University. In 1996, he went to Taiwan with the thought that he would not stay too long there. But as it turned out, he worked for more than a decade in Taiwan after he resigned from Moscow University. "Working in Taiwan allowed me to live the way Taiwanese live," Pisarev expressed (2012). Several of the China watchers who will be introduced in the following sub-sections have also been able to compare their encounters with the PRC and the Republic of China (also known as Taiwan) in their intellectual journeys. We will come back to the site of Taiwan, being an alternative hub for China watching, in Chapter nine of this book. For now, let us move on to compare another non-ethnically Chinese expert's different routes towards sinicization.

2.3.3 Translating Chinese as a step towards sinicization

Mohsen Sayed Fergani (محسن سيد فرجانى, born 1959) is a professor in the Chinese Department at the School of Languages at Ain Shams University in Cairo, Egypt. Prof. Fergani is also a member of the Translation Association of the Supreme Council of Culture of Egypt. He is an important scholar, primarily contributing to the translation of Chinese literature into Arabic and promoting knowledge of Chinese literature and civilization in the Arab world (Hindawi Foundation 2024). The Chinese Department at Ain Shams University was founded in 1964. It was the first Chinese Department in the whole of the Arab world. It used to be the only department teaching Chinese in the Arab world, but a number of universities in the region have founded similar institutions since then.

In 1966 and 1976, recruitment by the department was suspended, and Fergani suspected that this might have been related to the frequent wars in Egypt during these years (Fergani 2017). When the Chinese Department reopened in 1997, Fergani became one of its first students and completed his undergraduate studies in 1981, master's studies in 1987, and then doctoral degree in 1995 at the same university. Since his undergraduate studies, he has been teaching at Ain Shams University. In the Egyptian context, he was also able to work as an assistant professor. In addition, he has been a key person in the translation of Chinese classics from Chinese into Arabic in the Arabic world. In the past, the early Chinese classics in the Arab world had to be translated through English and French as intermediary languages. None of them was directly translated from Chinese into Arabic. Fergani's main contributions lie in translating both modern and classical literature. In terms of modern literature, examples are Mo Yan's (莫言) 'Cow' (牛), *Dreams and Bastard* (梦境与杂种), *Selected Short and Medium Novels by Mo Yan* (莫言中短编小说选), Ma Yuan's (马原) *The Enticement of Gandisi* (风底斯的诱惑), as well as Liu Hong's (榴红) *Liuhong Humorous Satirical Novel* (榴红幽默讽刺小说). In terms of Chinese classics, Fergani has translated *Tao Te Ching (or Dao De Jing)* (道德经), *The Warring States Chronicles* (战国策), 'Liezi' (列子), and *The Book of Odes* (诗经). In 2013, Fergani won the China Book Special Contribution Award, which is an annual award established by the State Press and Publication Administration of the PRC to recognize foreign translators, writers, and publishers who have made significant contributions to introducing China and translating and publishing Chinese books. In 2016, the Chinese government further gave him the China-Arab Friendship Outstanding Contribution Award.

Fergani's first contact with China was in high school, through a book written by an American journalist, which recorded his experiences in East Asia, including China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and other countries. The American journalist had entered Vietnam by land. To this day, Fergani still cannot forget the impression

of China described in that book: roads, temples, billboards written in Chinese, and children. It was filled with vignettes of rural Chinese areas, but there were not many descriptions of large, prosperous cities (Fergani 2017).

Many elements of that book were familiar to Fergani and most Egyptians, especially the large-scale population migration caused by the chaos back home. For example, in 1967, his family had to move from his own region of Ismailia to the Fayoum Oasis, a remote rural village in central Egypt, to escape war. Fergani was in the third grade of elementary school that year, and his family stayed in Fayoum for four years. To this day, some uncles from the clan still live in Fayoum. Therefore, when he later read the American reporter's description of rural China, scenes of his childhood living in Fayoum came to mind. He believes that this was key to his passion for China. In 1977, when he graduated from high school, he happened to read in the newspaper that the Chinese Department of Ain Shams University was recruiting students again. Because of the catalyst of that book, he joined the Chinese Department without hesitation (Fergani 2017).

Like many other learners of Mandarin Chinese, pronunciation was not easy for Fergani in the beginning. Arabic does not have tonal distinctions like Chinese, so it took him a lot of effort just to identify the tones. The second challenge was that it took him a lot of effort to remember each Chinese character. The Russian professor, Pisarev, mentioned in the previous sub-section, shared the same challenge in learning the Chinese language. Fergani (2017) admits that even though he is a full professor now, a position which he has held since 1995, he still finds writing Chinese characters difficult. He thinks that his language proficiency is limited and his work focuses more on reading. "So, my eyes understand more Chinese than my tongue," as Fergani (2017) expressed.

Fergani's renowned novelist friend, Gamal El-Ghitani (الغيطاني جمال), was the editor-in-chief of the literary periodical of *Akhbar Al-Adab* (أخبار الأدب) or *Literary News* (alternatively, *Cultural News*) in the English translation until 2011. Gamal El-Ghitani hoped that Fergani could translate some famous Chinese classics for the magazine, so Fergani gave him his translated manuscript of *The Analects*. Thereafter, El-Ghitani started to issue *The Analects* in a series. After the series ended, the next was the translated work of Laozi's Tao Te Ching. Although Fergani also translated contemporary literature, what El-Ghitani wanted for his periodical was the series of Chinese classics (Fergani 2017).

El-Ghitani himself was an award-winning writer, the winner of the 1980 Egyptian National Prize for Literature, as well as the 1987 French Chevalier 'de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres,' literally meaning 'Order of Arts and Letters' in English. His work has been translated into several languages, including French, German, and English. El-Ghitani has a strong affection for Chinese classics because when he was in France, he read the French version of *Book of Changes*, also known

as *I Ching* or *Yijing* (易經). El-Ghitani had always expected Fergani to give the Arab world a truly directly translated version of the *Book of Changes*. But because the ancient Chinese used in the *Book of Changes* is too difficult, to this day Fergani feels that he cannot translate the book well. Fergani has expressed that the barrier between modern Chinese and ancient Chinese is difficult for Arabs to overcome (Fergani 2017).

El-Ghitani himself is deeply influenced by Sufi philosophy and has written many books on Sufism. Therefore, El-Ghitani once asked Fergani if there are any thoughts similar to Sufi philosophy in Chinese classics. Fergani (2017) answered that there are, but they are not equal to Sufism. In Fergani's (2017) view, Taoist mysticism is not completely consistent with Sufism. Taoism is still more of a philosophy and way of thinking, while Sufism is a religious practice.

The translated *Tao Te Ching* for the *Literary News* received great acclaim. Muhammad Hassanein Haikal (هيكل حسنين محمد), a well-known journalist in the Arab world, called El-Ghitani and asked about the translator. Haikal had previously read the English and French versions of Tao Te Ching but he found the translation of Fergani to best embody the essence of Laozi's thoughts. Given Haikal's prominence in the Arab world and the West, Fergani was encouraged, leading him to believe that the translation of Tao Te Ching was an important milestone in his translation career (Fergani 2017).

Maybe translation is a process of sinicization for Fergani. But sinicization as a uni-directional process on a personal level does not make his work complete. In fact, he sees that he is embedded in a wider political institution and context, and he has to work closely with actors (e.g., universities, the Ministry of Culture, the National Translation Center) from both the Chinese and Arab sides to complete his job. Thus, Fergani believes that his work is both cultural and political.

> When I translate Chinese into Arabic, I also establish a relationship between China and Arab countries. Such cultural exchanges will likely make the relationship between the two parties operate more smoothly. Of course, politics also includes aspects of power and conflict. It is a kind of language, but culture can also act as another language. (Fergani 2017)

Therefore, "in addition to the cultural role, I play a political role. I not only carry out cultural exchanges, but also exert political influence. There are traces of translators in universities, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Education" (Fergani 2017).

In a news interview, Fergani called for the creation of institutions in the Arabic world to deepen the learning of the Chinese language and civilization. He lamented that there had been no cultural relations between Egypt and China until 1956. "Due to the lack of awareness of Chinese civilization, culture and heritage, so you find that many agreements are not completed [….] we do not find this on the

Chinese side, which has allocated centres for studying Arab civilization" (Fergani interviewed in Fahmy in 2018).

Fergani added that Chinese literature has benefited from Arabic literature more than Arabic literature has benefited from Chinese literature, as there are those who can translate from Arabic to Chinese perfectly. "China has reached the fifth generation of translators and we have not established the first generation yet" (Fergani interviewed in Fahmy in 2018). In his view, the need for a specialized center on China is imperative.

In addition to Fergani, there are other Egyptian scholars who are contributing to the Arab world's growing capacity to impart knowledge about the Chinese language, culture, and literature. Hassanein Fahmy Hussein, for example, used to work at the same Ain Shams University but has moved to Saudi Arabia to help the country build its architecture for teaching Chinese in schools and universities (Mahmoud 2022). Before Hassanein Fahmy Hussein went to Saudi Arabia, the Riyadh institution was the only Saudi university teaching Chinese and had very few students. He took up a position as an associate professor of Chinese Studies at King Saud University to help expand the China literacy of the university and the overall kingdom because the kingdom aspires to greater cooperation with China. Particularly after Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to China in February 2019, the countries signed bilateral agreements on education, culture, publishing, and translation. Thereafter, Saudi Arabia decided to include Chinese in public schools, which led to an expansion of Chinese language programs and departments at universities. Hassanein Fahmy Hussein has developed a study plan for teaching Chinese in Saudi universities and is a member of the Ministry of Education's committee to include Chinese language study in public schools. The aim is to cultivate young talents in the kingdom to meet the future need for more translated work between Chinese and Arabic languages (Mahmoud 2022). Amidst these changes, there has also been a unique decision to make Chinese studies available to students of both genders rather than for men only, as it had been before in the kingdom.

Hassanein Fahmy Hussein won the Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation and International Understanding in 2021 for his translation of the book *Chinese Food Culture* by Xie Ding Yuan (谢定源). The book explains the culture of Chinese food and drink, and the special place that food has in the history of Chinese civilization. Egypt's National Centre for Translation has published it in two parts. The Sheikh Hamad Award was established in Qatar in 2015 with the aim of honoring translators who encourage links between cultures (Mahmoud 2022). Egyptian academics appear to be at the heart of the Arab world's efforts to learn about China in the contemporary era. In the next sub-section, we will explore the diverse experiences of ethically Chinese China experts.

2.3.4 Ethnic Chinese China experts' diverse sinicization experiences

Knowledge production about China in the Philippines was initially not driven by university researchers. Instead, it was promoted by the Chinese diaspora who were active in the Chinese community and wider society to preserve and promote Chinese heritage in the Philippines. They also had the mission to facilitate the integration of the Chinese into mainstream Filipino society. The Kaisa Heritage Centre (Kaisa para sa Kaunlaran), for instance, is a leading organization where activists, Teresita Ang See, Go Bon Juan, and Joaquin Sy, were active (Website of Kaisa Heritage Centre 2024). The early pioneers played a significant role as a bridge of understanding, acceptance, and cohesion between Filipinos and Tsinoys (colloquial term for Chinese Filipinos). Bringing unity and cohesion in the midst of diversity is an important task to them (Website of the Association for Philippine-China Understanding, Inc 2024).[2]

Teresita Ang See has formerly served as President of the prestigious International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas and the Philippine Association for Chinese Studies. She has also given lectures in local and international fora and written extensively on issues of Philippines–China relations, ethnic identities, culture, race relations, and integration, with the goal of enhancing the understanding of such issues. See firmly believes in the credo of Kaisa (Heritage Centre): "Our blood may be Chinese but our bonds grow deep in the Philippine soil and our bonds are with the Filipino people" (Website of the Association for Philippine-China Understanding, Inc 2024).

Caroline Sy Hau notes that she was lucky enough to have had a chance to meet the aforementioned three very influential people in Kaisa who shaped her life and her thinking about her place and other Tsinoys' places in the Philippines. As noted earlier on, Hau is a Chinese-Filipino author and scholar, currently working as a Professor of Southeast Asian literature at Kyoto University. At first glance, her job title might disqualify her from being included in this book. In Chih-yu Shih's oral

[2] There are many different types of Chinese people in the Philippines. The Spanish called the Chinese *sangleys* (later known as *Chinos*) during their dominion over the Philippines (ca. 1565–1898), and in 1769 they established the official legal category of 'Chinese mestizo' to distinguish between mestizos and locals (*indios*) in reaction to the islands' growing mixed-race population. Like the Peranakan Chinese in Malaysia and Indonesia, these are the children of a Chinese man and a Filipino woman. With time, however, it became hard to discern who was a Chinese mestizo. For instance, mestizos were driven out of the professions that they had historically controlled, such as wholesale and retailing, starting in the middle of the 19th century by a growing number of new Chinese immigrants. Nowadays, they are viewed as Filipinos which is similarly another mixed-race group. Chinese mestizos include the late Manila Archbishop Cardinal Sin Jaime and former President Cory Cojuanco Aquino (Suryadinata 2021; Kung 2022).

history interview, Hau indeed expressed hesitation at being considered a China expert. However, she has been included in the interview because her case exemplifies another way of sinicization that ethnically Chinese diaspora may go through.

Hau grew up in Chinatown on Lavezares Street, in what is now called the Binondo district in Manila. Her parents are professional painters who belong to the Linang School of Chinese Painting, and they teach traditional Chinese painting in the Philippines. Her father even founded the Philippine Chinese Art Centre in 1975.

Hau's high school, St. Stephen's High School, was actually a Christian Chinese school established by the American Episcopal Mission along Magdalena (now Masangkay) Street. She graduated from high school in 1986 and then entered the University of the Philippines at Diliman as an English major, graduating in 1990. Then she went on to Cornell University in the US to do her master's and doctoral studies.

Growing up in a Chinese family in the Philippines with parents deeply involved in Chinese painting, Hau has childhood memories of her parents teaching her to paint bamboo, and of hanging out at the Galerie Bleue, where her parents conducted Sunday afternoon classes in the early seventies, before they decided to do full-time teaching. She remembers joining group exhibitions organized by her parents and their students. One of the first paintings that Hau ever exhibited—two cats with a bowl of food between them—was bought by Philippine National Artist Jose Joya for 500 pesos.

Hau's background naturally sinicized her to a degree. This continued during her time at university, where she studied Asian history, Chinese language, and art. While doing her PhD in the US, she also began to read a lot of books on ethnic Chinese and Southeast Asia.

However, Hokkien was the language spoken at home. Her native mother tongue is Hokkien, code-switched with Tagalog and English. Her sinicization process was not as smooth as outsiders would imagine, because she also faced challenges when it came to learning Mandarin Chinese. Although she went to a Chinese school and had all the support from her parents, she never felt that she had achieved sufficient Chinese proficiency to be able to conduct research that would qualify her as a real Chinese scholar (Hau 2016).

> So in a sense, I don't really consider myself a China scholar…inasmuch as my interests touch on ethnic Chinese issues in Southeast Asia and in the Philippines, in that sense – and in a very narrow sense – I work on China. (Hau 2016)

Hau's interest in things Chinese or in other words, her motive for sinicization, was a way to understand herself, her family, what sort of community she grew up in, and also ethnic Chinese relations in Southeast Asia. It was less about China, and more about Chinese in the Philippines and Southeast Asia.

In later chapters, I will mention more about the concept of interlocking, which essentially means the direct and indirect interactions between different knowledge realms or sub-realms, sometimes within asymmetrical relations of power. In Hau's case, she has interlocked quite a lot of her specialized interest in Philippine literature with her interests in things Chinese. The main angle through which she approaches Chinese studies is ethnic Chinese issues in relation to Philippine nationalism. Moreover, she also enjoys cinema and popular culture. Thus, part of her research focuses on how literary or cinematic works help people understand issues pertaining to ethnic Chinese in the Philippines and Southeast Asia.

Most of Hau's books contain at least one chapter on the Chinese. For example, her first book, a monograph called *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946-1980*, has one chapter on the kind of problematic relationship between Chineseness and the Philippine nationalism. Most of her books touch on issues of Chineseness and the fraught relationship amongst ethnicity, nation, and nationalism. Another book of Hau (2014), *The Chinese Question*: *Ethnicity, Nation and Region in and beyond the Philippines*, represents a summation of all the research that she has done, because it includes one of her earliest published articles on the kidnappings of ethnic Chinese in the Philippines, as well as other articles on the ethnic Chinese that she had published before. As her work is strongly anchored in literary studies, she tends to view the Chinese question through literary lenses.

Hau also writes fictions. She draws inspiration from the stories heard from her parents for her early writings, including stories of her paternal grandfather who was a guerrilla who was active in Laguna and Quezon during the Second World War. Some of her earliest stories were published when she was still an undergraduate student, in *Tulay*, a Chinese-Filipino digest, and a lot of these stories in fact were stories about the Chinese in the Philippines. Fiction was one way through which Hau started to make sense of the issues pertaining to Chineseness. And then later on, she started to do academic work on the Chinese, again in snatches, and it was never a sustained effort, as she confessed (Hau 2016).

2.3.5 Journey to the East: education and travels

> Travel is intrinsically a method of China studies and also a methodology of re- or de-sinicization. (Shih 2014: 86)

Previously, I mentioned that Korean intellectuals have had a long history of engaging in Chinese studies. Pre-modern Korean Buddhist monks had traveled to the west (of Korea), to China and India, to learn about Buddhism and Confucianism. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Korean intellectuals participated in the tribute mission trips to Beijing, the so-called 'Yŏnhaeng' (燕行), which means trips to

Yanjing. Yanjing was the old name of Beijing. These encounters with Chinese literati were documented, demonstrating international friendship through intellectual exchanges (Shim 2023).

While Korean intellectuals have traveled to their west, most Western China watchers have traveled to their east. These trips to China are part of their process of sinicization. Even the aforesaid Russian expert, Pisarev, eventually visited China after many years of losing hope of ever going there due to the souring of Soviet–Chinese relations. These trips involved more than tourism. Scholars tended to study for some time in China, and some even had the chance to teach or work in China before returning home. Education and trips are important milestones for many China watchers' sinicization processes, although the results of sinicization differ from person to person. In this sub-section, I use the examples of two Iranian scholars' journeys to the 'east' to show how the experience has helped them in their intellectual growth and career development. Interestingly, these two scholars also visited Taiwan. Their comparative reflections about Taiwan will be briefly noted, while a more detailed discussion about Taiwan can be found in Chapter nine of this book.

These two persons do not hold academic titles in Chinese studies. At first glance, one might consider them unqualified for analysis here. However, I stress the importance of understanding the context of Global South countries. Using the yardstick of the Global North measurement will not help us understand the diverse nature of China-watching communities on the global scale.

Behzad Azarhoushang teaches at a liberal arts college in Germany, while Zahra Karimi Moughari is a professor of economics at the University of Mazandaran in Iran. Their academic trajectories are quite different, but they have in common their Iranian origin and working on topics involving China in their research.

Azarhoushang holds a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Babol Noshrvani University of Technology in Iran. He went on to a master's program in Germany, which offered a dual master's degree with a Chinese university, and this paved his way to study in China in 2013. He then earned his PhD in Political Economy from Germany's University of Kassel in 2017. His PhD project was on the effects of foreign direct investments in the industrial sectors on regional inequality in China. He also conducted research on Sino-German trade.

Azarhoushang (2021) expressed that for an Iranian like him, his major interest in China was the success story of China and how it might inspire Iran's own development. He struggled to decide between deepening his study of economics or learning the Chinese language while in China. Eventually, he opted for economics. Thus, learning the language was not the main way for him to get to know China. The living experience and his interactions in the university and in society were the key.

Zahra Karimi Moughari, a female Iranian associate professor of Economics in one of Iran's state universities, University of Mazandaran, has worked in the same university for more than twenty years. She received her education in various Iranian universities, all focusing on economic topics. China first appeared in her life around 1995 when she worked as advisor to an Iranian private company. They wanted to import some machinery from a Chinese company. She was in China to translate the business negotiations. She traveled to Beijing and Hangzhou for seven days. China was an interesting country for her because Iran was importing many products from China.

> I worked in a company that produced office furniture, and in this furniture, they used Chinese locks. All locks were imported from China. It was interesting for us to see how they could produce such cheap goods that no Iranian company could compete with. The owners of the company where I worked were interested to know whether they can produce these locks in Iran [….] Ultimately, I asked one of the Chinese lock manufacturers to invite us to visit China to see how they produce these locks. They accepted and invited us to go directly to the factory and see the production procedure. (Karimi 2021)

The first visit was not related to academic research at all but the second was. Her second visit was in 2019, when she was invited as a professor to visit a state university in Chengdu, China, for three months. The Chinese side generously sponsored her trip and even helped her obtain a ten-year cost-free visa that allowed her to visit repeatedly. The second trip allowed her to study the causes of China's economic miracle deeply. "On my first trip the streets were full of bicycles. But on the second trip there were no bicycles on the streets. It was the sign of a big change in China," as Karimi (2021) recalled.

Both Azarhoushang and Karimi had expressed that their intention to learn from China was to help develop Iran, although they understood that Iran could not simply copy Chinese policies in the Iranian context. Karimi's first book about China was published around 2020–2021. Entitled *How Did the Dragon Wake up?*, the book explores how Iran can learn from China's experiences. At the time of her interview in 2021, she was translating a book entitled *How China Escaped Shock Therapy*, written by Isabella M. Weber and published in 2021. Karimi wanted to translate the book from English to Persian in order to share the knowledge with readers in Iran.

Both Iranian scholars have also had the chance to visit Taiwan. The process of visiting Taiwan appeared to be more difficult than for China as there was a lack of formal diplomatic relations, making it hard to obtain a visa. While they recognized the different degree of liberal atmosphere between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland, for both Iranian scholars, the Chinese culture was still strongly shared by Taiwan and the Chinese mainland. When they said this, they had the

comparison in mind that Iran and China lack cultural connections (unlike those between Taiwan and China); Sino-Iranian relations are seen in economic terms, mixed with aspirations for cooperation and fears of competition.

Contemporary China experts from Iran clearly have practical and functional motives for conducting research on China. Their perspectives on China are not from traditional sinological views nor Chinese studies views. Rather, their disciplinary training is in economics and other practical fields. One can find a similar functional approach in some Global South countries.

Because of that desire to learn from China to modernize Iran, some critics might immediately label these Iranian scholars as 'not critical enough.' I discussed this issue already in the methodological section of this book presented in Chapter one. However, an anonymous external observer, whom I have consulted to assist in evaluating the oral history data gathered in Iran, has observed that Karimi's functional perspective on China is highly representative of a significant segment of Iran's academic community that is knowledgeable about China. This viewpoint can be regarded as an independent stance that, crucially, does not conflict with the official position of the government. In a sense, it presents the current Iranian establishment with a possible avenue to navigate its crises. The conservative faction among academic elites in Iran, who operate within the existing system, has consistently favored internal, top-down reforms rather than subversive measures such as regime change. Thus, her perspective should not be misconstrued as that of a government spokesperson. Upon reviewing her other interviews, it becomes evident that she consistently regards the internal reforms of the Chinese Communist Party under Deng Xiaoping as the most effective model for enhancing the conditions in Iran, demonstrating admiration for China's methodology. From a realist standpoint, these Iranian scholars recognize that Western-style democracy has seldom produced favorable results in the Middle East, particularly for Iran, which has a longstanding history of top-down authoritarian governance. As a result, they contend that reforms initiated from above are more pragmatic than pursuing the ideal of Western democracy, which lacks the requisite historical and cultural underpinnings in Iran.

Connected to this functional desire to learn from China and to benefit from the bilateral relations is the promotion of Chinese language learning in Iran. Without surprise, Confucius Institutes have played a significant role. The Iranian government endorsed Chinese language as an optional language in Iranian basic education from 2023 on (Qi and Wang 2023). Like the Saudi Arabia case mentioned above, the purpose is to enable young talents to meet the rising needs amid the warming of bilateral relations.

As a final note, the discussion above does not mean that Iran has only researchers doing studies that are practical, such as economics, and no researchers who

are interested in sinology. There is, for example, assistant Professor Hamed Vafaei (2022) who teaches Chinese language and literature at the University of Tehran. It is interesting to note that his master's thesis was about the various Persian translations of *Tao Te Ching*. There are estimated to be twenty translations of *Tao Te Ching* in Iran, and its popularity has led to its republication. Vafaei (2022) discussed how the existence of common roots and cultural thinking has led Iranians to embrace the Chinese classic.

Vafaei's work is not purely academic, as he also plays leading roles in fostering higher education cooperation with Chinese and Taiwanese universities. The Iranian government's 'Islamic Republic News Agency' (2024) has a Chinese edition. Vafaei (2022) has played a key role in launching the Chinese edition of the news agency. His work, like that of the Egyptian peers whom we mentioned before, is both cultural and political.

The importance of travel and education in China as a means of sinicization will appear again and again throughout this book. In the next chapter (Chapter three), we will move on to Southeast Asia, which has a vibrant group of China watchers, although each country still has its own path of development unlike others. We will also mention a Thai princess whose travels and studies in China have inspired Thai people to embrace China, contributing to (overly) positive knowledge production about China. Before we do that, however, I feel that it is imperative to add one more sub-section on journeys and travels. This time, the journey is not to the emblem of 'the East,' that is China, but to the symbol of 'the West,' the USA.

2.3.6 Journey to America

Chinese immigrants in the USA have contributed significantly to the foundation of Chinese studies there. The USA has one of the largest China-watching communities in the world, and its reputation has attracted talented students from abroad to study there, thus cultivating experts who would then return home to contribute their knowledge about China. For instance, several giants of sinology in Thailand received their education in the USA. We shall meet them in Chapter three of this book. Here I add the case of Irene Eber (1929–2019) because of her difficult and unique journey to achieve her professional goal as a scholar of Chinese studies. When she retired from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel, she was Louis Frieberg Professor of East Asian Studies at the Department of East Asian Studies. But she had a difficult starting point as a Jew in Poland. Her Jewish father had encouraged her to read, which was not normal for a father at the time. Her father was unfortunately killed by the Germans during the Second World War while her mother and sister survived on Schindler's list. She was in hiding during the war and had no chance to go to school. At the time, Jewish children were not permitted

to go to school either. When the war came to an end, she felt that she would like to read and learn, but she simply knew nothing about reading. Her sister was eight years older and could already read various books. So, she tried to read her sister's books. But eventually her strong desire to study pushed her to go to the USA. She was fifteen years old, not even an adult, alone, without her mother and sister; she had to begin by earning a living to survive. Without even a high school diploma, it was not easy to find a university. But she managed to find Pomona College in California, which would allow her to pass its entrance exam and obtain a scholarship to study. She did her undergraduate degree in Asian studies there, went on to study a master's in history at the State University of California, and then a PhD in Asian Studies at Claremont Graduate University (Eber 2015).

At Pomona College, Eber met Professor Chen Shou-Yi (陳受頤, 1899–1978), a Chinese American scholar known for his groundbreaking contribution to the comparative cultural studies of modern China and historical studies of Sino-Western cultural exchange. Irene Eber was guided by Chen during her undergraduate studies and then the PhD. Chen was a close friend of famous Chinese intellectual and politician, Hu Shih (胡適, 1891–1962). He awakened Eber's interest in the intellectual life of the 1920s–1930s and led her to write her dissertation on Hu Shih (Gamsa 2019).

In addition, Chen was the first person to tell her about the Jews in China. She later embarked on the study of Jews in China as well as researching the Chinese translation of the Old Testament of the Bible and its translators. Her interest in the Bible was not for religious but literary reasons. Eber (2015) mentioned that for example, Lu Xun's (魯迅, 1881–1936) brother, Zhou Zouren (周作人, 1885–1967), who was also a Chinese writer, had been keen on studying the Old Testament as literature.

> So, I have become increasingly interested, if they were interested in the Old Testament as literature, then what is this literature like? and I started reading it also as literature. It is often a magnificent study in human behaviour. If you take the story of Joseph, those brothers are a nasty bunch (laughing). (Eber 2015)

According to Eber (2015), there was a Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky (1831–1906) who did good work in translating the Bible into Chinese, but he is unknown in China. What interests Eber is how, through translation, a piece of work can move from one culture into another. For example, olive trees were not known of in China. In the old days, Chinese people used fat from plants of other sorts, but they did not eat olives. Yet olive trees are important in the Old Testament. Schreschewsky lived in China, and he wanted his translation to be reader friendly. So, according to Eber (2015), Schereschewsky had translated olive trees into "the fat from the fruit of the tree" in Chinese so that a Chinese reader would not get stuck on the concept

of olive trees. Eber (2015) had studied other translators' work and believed that Schereschewsky's contribution should have been recognized more than it is now.

In sum, the USA as a country has attracted and cultivated numerous China watchers to the present day. Irene Eber had hoped to move to Israel after her PhD education. She thought that if her father had survived, Israel would have been the place where he wished his daughter would go, particularly since Israel became a state after the Second World War. In the 1960s, there was a man named Harold Zvi Schiffrin (1922–2024) who was an American-born Israeli sociologist and intelligence officer. He had a vision that The Hebrew University of Jerusalem should have a Department for Chinese Studies. He had worked hard to convince people to set up the department as people in Israel did not immediately understand its importance. With the support of the president of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, this department gradually took shape. When Russian immigrants began to arrive in Israel after the birth of the Israeli state, there was a person among them who had studied Chinese in Russia, and he was given the chance to teach Chinese language. When Eber finished her PhD in the late 1960s, she could not find suitable positions for her in Israel. She first went on a fellowship in Taiwan and then in 1969, when Schiffrin established the Department of East Asian Studies, she joined the department. This department is thus the oldest department of its kind in Israel. Later, similar institutions were born in other cities such as Tel Aviv and Haifa. One of Eber's students, Gad Isay, founded the Department of Chinese Studies in Tel-Hai Academic College in northern Israel. The department in Jerusalem began with very few students but it has grown greatly. Even though its size is not comparable to some departments in the USA or Europe, given its humble starting point, this achievement is laudable. Their researchers work on various topics, including history, culture, and politics. They publish widely in English and Hebrew; the latter is crucial as it has become an essential gateway for Hebrew readers to understand China (Eber 1996).

CHAPTER 3

China Studies in Southeast Asia

Abstract

Southeast Asia is historically, geographically, and culturally adjacent to China. China watchers in Southeast Asia are composed of both ethnic- and non-ethnic Chinese. In their endeavors to (re)connect with China or (re)sinicize China as China watchers, each has different strategies, resources, and intellectual trajectories. The China knowledge that they consume for (re)connecting China and the China knowledge that they produce also diverge.

Keywords: Knowledge production about China, China studies, Southeast Asia, scientific Chineseness, sinological Chineseness

Southeast Asia is an important and interesting testing ground because there are many ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. The region is historically, geographically, and culturally adjacent to China. Non-Chinese people may see overseas Chinese as a single homogenous group. However, in reality, there are many differences within this collectively imagined group, and they demonstrate various attitudes toward the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its contemporary rise. Of particular interest to this study, China watchers in Southeast Asia are composed of both ethnic- and non-ethnic Chinese. In working assiduously to (re)connect with China or (re)sinicize themselves as China watchers, each has different strategies, resources, and intellectual trajectories. The China knowledge that they consume in (re)connecting China and the China knowledge that they produce also diverge. This chapter draws on examples from Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines, where there have historically been relatively large Chinese diaspora communities, to show the rich development of China knowledge production. It is used strategically to contrast the case of Central Asia, which will be explored in Chapter four.

3.1 Scientific Chineseness vs sinological Chineseness

There are experts whom Shih Chih-yu described as possessing scientific Chineseness (2018a, 2018b).[1] China watchers of this type tend to see China as 'the other' that must be objectively studied and handled. Think tank analysts and Marxists in Vietnam, for instance, tend to fall into this category. They are not engaged in classical Chinese studies. They are inclined to see China in comparative perspectives. Hence, their intellectual energy tends not to focus on studying Chinese languages and cultures but on comparative analysis of China in relation to other countries.[2]

Shih (2018a, 2018b) points out, however, that scientific Chineseness requires Vietnamese experts' adoption of Russian social science discourses. This is because, in Vietnam, knowledge about China used to come mainly from Russian sources. As the study of China developed and flourished in the West, some Vietnamese also used English-language sources produced in the West. The younger generation sees the importance of engaging with the Western academic communities to exchange views or foster research collaborations (Anderson 2018). These types of experts tend not to use Chinese language sources to explore China.

Unlike scientific Chineseness, there are China watchers who can be termed as exhibiting sinological Chineseness. These experts tend to value having a solid grasp of China, starting from understanding its language, culture, history, and society. That is why Shih uses the term 'sinological' to depict this category of experts (2018a, 2018b). We can see this group of experts as more like conventional sinologists, who would most likely engage with original Chinese-language sources. They would translate various China-related texts, as they believe that the translation itself will help boost comprehension of the Chinese way of understanding certain issues. In Vietnam, there are even China watchers in this category who have never been to China. But they cultivate empathy towards certain traits of the Chinese cultures through translation, thus enhancing their 'sinological Chineseness.' As Anderson (2018) observes, language is the lynchpin for "understanding elements of the shared Sino-Vietnamese tradition, as well as an important tool for distinguishing the strong differences between Vietnamese and Chinese societies" (Anderson 2018).

[1] Shih Chih-yu's work seeks to place different China watchers into categories such as 'scientific Chineseness,' 'experiential Chineseness,' 'ethnic Chineseness,' 'cultural Chineseness,' 'sinological Chineseness,' and 'civilizational Chineseness.' China watchers may move from category to category as their strategic choices of expertise change and their intellectual journeys evolve. These categories give birth to jargon that might confuse readers. For the purpose of this study, I simplify Shih's framework by pointing out jargon-free features that will demarcate China watchers. But one must bear in mind that one China watcher might possess several features at the same time.

[2] For detailed information on the development of China studies in Vietnam, please check Mark Sidel's 2009 article.

Like those in the category of scientific Chineseness, experts in the category of 'sinological Chineseness' care about Vietnam's relationship with China. But they are prone to take a more positive view, believing that a deep understanding of Chinese culture and appreciation of the shared humanity between Chinese and Vietnamese cultures would allow both sides to find better solutions to mitigate differences and conflicts. In the eyes of others, these experts might be viewed as ideologically pro-China when it comes to bilateral relations. But these sinologists argue that this is a misunderstanding. They contend that their closeness to China is due to their understanding of the Chinese language and culture, which makes them look more like China watchers who have pro-China political postures. They do not necessarily agree with such a judgment or their 'pro-China' labeling.

Vietnam's political relationship with China, formally established in 1991, has been normalized and deepened over the years. However, unresolved territorial disputes in the South China Sea (known as the East Sea in Vietnam or the West Philippine Sea in the Philippines) continued to be a major point of contention. Within the Southeast Asia context, Vietnamese people's perception of China is among the most negative. The Vietnamese government is aware of its lack of military and economic power to counterbalance China. Hence it has applied a carefully calculated hedging strategy towards China while also not joining the US-led anti-China counter-alliance (Gerstl 2022). Vietnamese experts in the category of 'scientific Chineseness' have a better match of quality of expertise for policymaking to serve the country's interests regarding China. But even so, the government occasionally does listen to experts in the category of 'sinological Chineseness' for advice, despite their being seen as more pro-China (Shih 2018b).

Shih's (2018a, 2018b) studies of China watchers in the Philippines and Vietnam allude to a remarkable trend. That is, it does not matter if an expert is of Chinese descent or not, sinological Chineseness is a tendency for some scholars to be able to attain sympathetic capacity to see things through the *Weltanschauung* (worldview) of the Chinese people, society, culture, and government. Ethnic Chinese scholars are, comparatively speaking, more capable of attaining such *Weltanschauung* than non-ethnic Chinese experts.[3] But such closeness to China tends to be seen in a rather negative light in the country where the experts reside, work, and serve. It might disempower them in the academic community or larger society where they develop their careers. China watchers are hence pushed to learn to distance themselves from forming indigenous Chinese perspectives on China and to learn to practice watching China from the outside. Hence, overall, there is a trend for

[3] Shih (2018a) does note that an expert who has trained himself to adopt a "sympathetically internal perspective" to understand China is still different from someone who watches China from "an innately internal position" because "an exit is relatively easily available" to the former (Shih 2018a).

China watchers of ethnic Chinese descent to move from an in-group to an out-group position. This thus also shows the strategic choices of experts in their production of knowledge about China. Not only China watchers in Southeast Asia exhibit this tendency. This can be observed in Europe, the United States of America (USA), and other parts of the world too. We will return to this later.

3.2 Uneven development of China studies across Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian societies and countries do not have the same level of development of China studies or Chinese studies. Singapore's universities rank highly in international competitions. It also has a high percentage of ethnic Chinese in terms of population among Southeast Asian countries, allowing them to contribute to the advanced development of Singapore society.[4] Before Singapore became an independent republic in 1965, it used to be a bastion for Chinese language education in Southeast Asia, even without state support. In 1955, Nanyang University was set up as a Chinese-speaking university outside of China, completely with private efforts (1955–1980). This university later became the Nanyang Technological University that we know today (Website of the Nanyang Technological University 2025).

After Singapore's independence, however, Singaporean leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew did not particularly promote Chinese education. Chinese newspapers, such as *Nanyang Siang Pau* (南洋商报) and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (星洲日報), were even considered hotbeds for spreading communism and Chinese nationalist sentiments, which would destabilize the multi-racial society in Singapore and were subsequently suppressed. English was chosen as the medium for education, leaving Chinese, Malay, and Tamil to be taught as mother tongues at home (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b).

Malaysia has a high percentage of ethnic Chinese in the overall population as well. Malaysians of Chinese origin tend to have a higher sense of Chinese cultural identification than, for example, Chinese in Indonesia. The majority of them can still speak some Chinese dialects (Suryadinata 2021). Malaysia enjoys a good

[4] Zhuang (2021) estimates that there are currently around 10.7 million Chinese living abroad, and if we include their descendants, there are roughly 60 million. Depending on various estimation techniques and sources, the numbers and proportion of Chinese people living abroad in Southeast Asia and the rest of the world vary. Even the Chinese government has conflated the terms 'huaren' (foreigners of Chinese descent) and 'huaqiao,' which refer to Chinese residents living abroad. This has resulted in different kinds of statistics (Suryadinata 2021). Even some recent studies have estimated the numbers using statistics that are relatively outdated (e.g., Suryadinata 2021). I am unable to provide current and precise statistics. This chapter's overview of Southeast Asia's ethnic Chinese population only shows a broad trend.

standing in China studies in general. But those who study China in the universities are usually ethnic Chinese themselves. Malaysia has a longstanding preferential policy favoring its Malays, and during the Cold War, it was politically sensitive to display any penchant towards communist China. Thus, Chinese people in Malaysia have tended to focus on studying topics that are narrow and well-delineated, such as the Chinese diaspora or 'traditional China' (in distinction from communist China) (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022).

Like Malaysia, Indonesia is another Muslim-dominated country. In fact, Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-majority country by population and is the largest economy in Southeast Asia. China has placed a strong emphasis on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Indonesia and thus prompted interactions between the two sides on many fronts. But due to the longstanding discrimination against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia (Suryadinata 2021), most Chinese people in Indonesia no longer speak Chinese well. Chinese studies as an academic field is embedded in a structure that is not particularly conducive for its development. Hence, Indonesia's research capacity in producing knowledge about China is moderate (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022).

Previously, we have noted Vietnam and the Philippines. There are experts and institutions in Vietnam that can support the studies of China due to the country's long history with China. By contrast, the Philippines' capacity is lower as there are fewer scholars working on China studies. Historically, it has often been activists and social workers who have disseminated understanding of China through community practice (see Chapter two). China studies is rather marginalized. Only in recent decades, due to China's rising claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea, which has sparked conflict with the Philippines, has China studies received more funding. So, the support for research capacity is aimed to meet the country's political needs (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022). In the least developed countries in Southeast Asia, namely Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, the research capacity is understandably limited.

3.3 Cross-fertilization of China studies and Southeast Asian studies

As Southeast Asia and China are geographically and historically interlinked, one might expect vibrant development of Southeast Asian studies in China, thus promoting exchanges between scholars in China and Southeast Asia. Scholars engaging in China studies and Southeast Asian studies would exchange more, encouraging the studies of China–Southeast Asian relations and blurring the lines of these two knowledge realms. In other words, China–Southeast Asian studies could cut across two knowledge realms, becoming a borderline theme that would help cross-fertilize both China studies and Southeast Asian studies.

Nonetheless, looking back at the Chinese mainland, this potential has not been fully realized. On the one hand, the discipline has grown significantly since China's opening up to the world in the 1980s. There has been a sea change in financial support from the Chinese government. By early 2000, the discipline had matured into a more coherent field in China. In spite of this positive development, several challenges remain. They are not just related to funding and institutional development, which certainly matter. But the heart of the issue is politics.

Southeast Asian studies programs in China have mostly been driven by China's political needs. Geographically, the PRC universities that began Southeast Asian studies were those situated near the Chinese Southeast coast as they are closer to Southeast Asia and have seen frequent exchanges between overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia and China. With China's open-door policy and reforms, the China Southeast Asian Studies Association was founded in 1979 and Chinese scholars started to attend to Southeast Asian Studies. Later, with the proliferation of Chinese connections to Southeast Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the field expanded further (Ku 2006). Initially, these scholars were inclined to locate their base of operations in southern coastal cities close to Southeast Asia, but they gradually spread to inland provinces in China.

A lot of PRC scholars are working on topics related to China's relations with Southeast Asia (e.g., diaspora's influence, China's influence). There are contemporary political and economic needs to monitor and analyze the relations constantly (Ho 2006). The academic interest from the Chinese side meets China's practical needs (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022). Take research on the South China Sea as an example. The studies on the issue are highly connected to China's national interests and perceived rights (Zou 2006). When the PRC government increased its territorial claims over the South China Sea, PRC publications on the issue rose significantly. Both natural scientists and social scientists have studied the South China Sea issues. In the PRC, South China Sea studies are structured either within the Southeast Asian Studies framework or within the oceanic studies framework (Zou 2006). Figure 3.1 shows the trends of Chinese academic publications on the South China Sea issues from the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the largest academic database on China. It strikingly corresponds to the real political needs and conflicts surrounding these contested issues. Publications continued to increase and peaked in 2016.[5] The context was that in 2013, the Philippines instituted arbitral proceedings against China under Annex VII to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. In 2016, the arbitral tribunal adjudicating the Philippines' case against China in the South China Sea ruled overwhelmingly in favor of the Philippines,

[5] The keyword 'South China Sea' (南海) was used in the CKNI for the search of publications on February 16, 2025. As it was in early 2025, there was no data of any publications in 2025 yet.

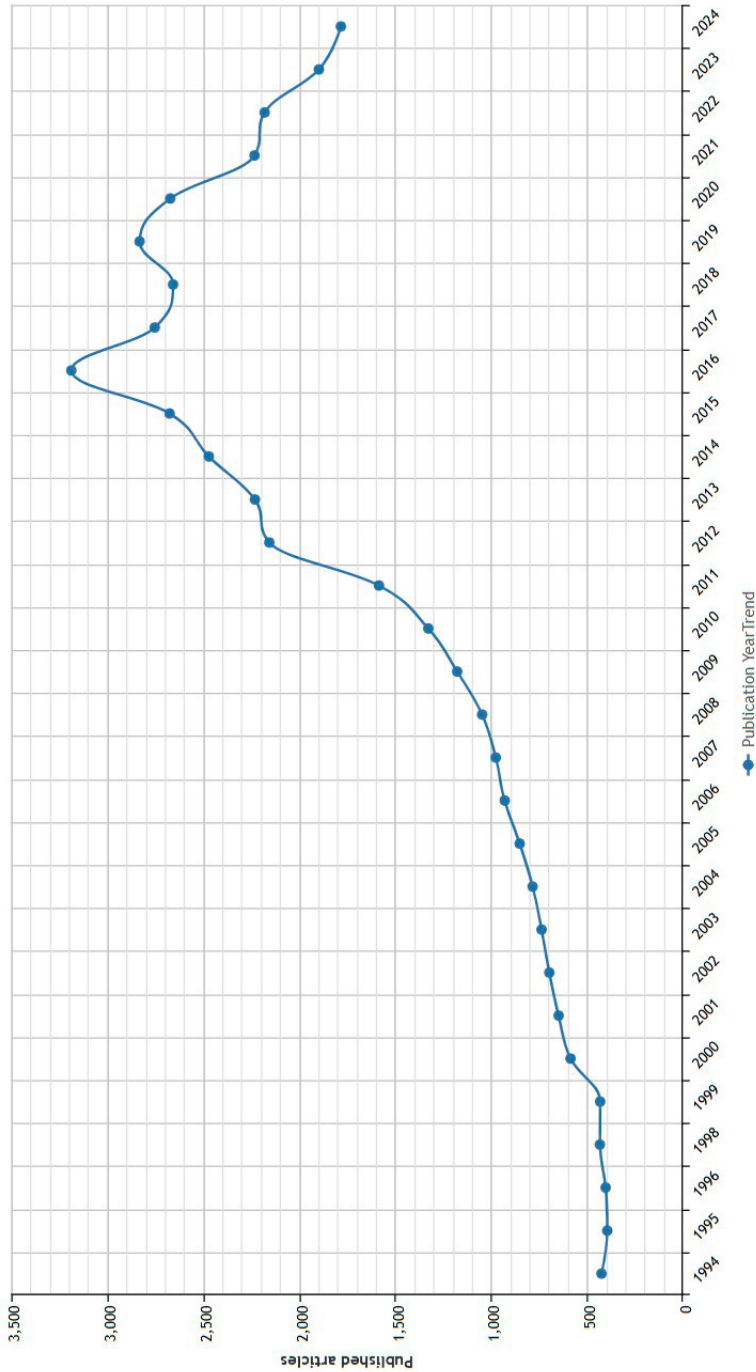

Figure 3.1. Publication numbers on 'South China Sea' in the CNKI.
Source: Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) online database (https://oversea.cnki.net/index/).

determining that major elements of China's claim were unlawful. Predictably, the PRC government reacted negatively to the ruling, maintaining that it was 'null and void.' Chinese publications in the CNKI on the issued peaked in that year. Chinese scholars' increase in work on this topic aims to deepen the analysis of this contested issue, and most importantly support the Chinese government's political claims, blurring the lines between academic work and politics (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022).

With the political needs of China came the China-centric impulse in Chinese scholarship, comparable to the problem of Eurocentric Western social science's approach to studying the broadly defined Asia in the past (Ho 2006). Western scholarship has started to reflect critically on how their centrism affects intellectual paradigms. More scholars trained in the West are willing to try to write consciously about the studied regions' local perspectives and recognize the local agency. Chinese scholars are in the process of awakening to the need to curb Sino-centrism in their approach to studying Southeast Asia (Ho 2006).

In conjunction with this, there is of course a question of which language is used to study Southeast Asia. Not all PRC scholars working on Southeast Asia can master Southeast Asian languages (Ku 2006). Hence, Southeast Asian studies in the PRC relies heavily on secondary sources for research. This would also become a barrier to understanding and representing indigenous perspectives in academic research.

Also, even though the exchanges between China and Southeast Asia are frequent and important, these do not necessarily result in the rise of concrete research collaboration. To contextualize, academic exchanges between China and Southeast Asia had already begun in the early Cold War era. In 1956, for example, the Association of Southeast Asian Institute for Higher Learning (ASAIHL) was founded with the blessing of the then Thai prime minister, Plaek Pibulsongkhram. Among the founding members of ASAIHL, other than Southeast Asian universities leaders, there was also the then vice chancellor of the University of Hong Kong, Dr. Lindsay Ride, an Australian physiologist (Website of ASAIHL 2024; Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022). The network later expanded to other regions of the world. In the more contemporary era, there are also various other kinds of networks. For example, in 2015, the Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies in Asia was formed, including institutions from Southeast Asia, Japan, Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan with the aim of increasing regional coordination. China also led the formation of the Network of ASEAN-China Academic Institute in 2017 with a permanent secretariat based at Fudan University in Shanghai (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022).

Individual Southeast Asian countries also have their own networking initiatives. For instance, in Thailand, there is a Thai University Network for Chinese Studies, involving several Thai universities such as Mahidol University and Mae Fah Luang University. At Thailand's oldest university, Chulalongkorn University, there is a well-respected Institute of Asian Studies, founded in 1967. It opened its

own Confucius Institute (CI) with Peking University as the Chinese partner in 2007. The New York-based Social Science Research Council (SSRC) has reported that Thailand's strength in China studies is built on such university research centers and their intra-and-inter university networking (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022). As noted, networking and exchanges might still not be able to reach the point where concrete research collaboration within and beyond national borders can be carried out. However, with these exchanges, knowledge about China and its relations with Southeast Asia can at least be updated and discussed.

3.4 Chinese diaspora and Thai knowledge production about China

In 2021, the Asian Research Centre at Chulalongkorn University in Thailand cooperated with Shih's oral history's project to publish their oral history interviews in a book called *A History of Chinese Studies in Thailand Told from the Perspective of Senior Thai Scholars* (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021). Thais of Chinese origin are the largest minority group in Thailand and one of the largest overseas Chinese community in the world, with a population of around seven to ten million people. This group is also the oldest and most prominently integrated overseas Chinese community, with a history dating back centuries. They are highly assimilated into Thai society and are different from the new waves of Chinese immigrants (since the 1990s) who may be less assimilated (Siriphon 2015). The senior China experts in Thailand who were interviewed in the aforesaid book all have ethnic ties with China. But they have all adopted Thai names, and hence it might be hard to understand their ethnic ties at first glance. Among them are Professor emeritus Khien Theeravit (เขียน ธีระวิทย์, born 1935) of Chulalongkorn University, who is seen as the symbol of Thailand's Chinese studies,[6] Professor Sarasin Viraphol (สารสิน วีระผล, born 1946),[7] Professor Prapin Manomaivibool (ประพิณ มโนมัยวิบูลย์, born 1942), and others. Their family background and ethnic ties had motivated their study of China (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021).

Schools where Chinese diaspora can learn Chinese and other relevant topics started to emerge at the beginning of the 20th century, when the late Qing dynasty

[6] In 1976, Khien Theeravit published a book entitled *Government and Politics of the People's Republic of China* which was the first book ever published in Thailand that offered detailed information about the PRC up till the Cultural Revolution. The book received high praise in Thailand.

[7] Sarasin Viraphol received his PhD from Harvard University. His doctoral research was about historical Sino-Siamese trade (Viraphol 1974, 1977). After spending eight years in academia, he worked for twenty years in the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, attaining the rank of ambassador. He is currently Executive Vice President for business development at Charoen Pokphand Group, Thailand's largest private company, which was founded by Thai-Chinese Chia Ek Chor in 1921 (Manomaivibool 2015).

fell into political turmoil (Wongsurawat 2019). Chinese political leaders with different political ideologies to reform or revolutionize the declining dynasty toured around Southeast Asia, garnering support and promoting unified stances on political issues back home. For instance, the famous reformer, Kang Youwei (康有為, 1858–1927) visited Chinese overseas communities and realized that the communities were divided and lacked strong identification with the Chinese motherlands. He hence advocated that Chinese education in Southeast Asia was imperative to forge a stronger national identity and patriotic sentiments towards the motherland. Siam, the predecessor of the current Thai state, used to work closely with Chinese schools within its borders to train and modernize bureaucrats (Wongsurawat 2019). But as Chinese schools became places to nurture Chinese nationalist identities and ideologies of various strands (e.g., communism), the Siamese state became increasingly uneasy with Chinese schools as such trends ran against the Siamese nation-building process (Wongsurawat 2019; Lertpusit 2023). This similar fear of Chinese education can be seen in other Southeast Asian countries too. Over different periods of the early 20th century, the Siamese state exercised various degrees of control over the operation of Chinese schools (Manomaiviboon 2004; Wongsurawat 2024). This prompted many parents to send their children to study outside Thailand, such as in Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan. The numbers of Chinese schools thus dwindled (Wongsurawat 2019; Taiwan Today 1957). After the Second World War, in the 1950s and 1960s, the Thai state was anti-communist. Accordingly, Chinese schooling was also limited. The senior China experts interviewed in Thailand were mostly born in that particular historical context where some of them received limited Chinese schooling in Thailand or were sent by their families to study Chinese overseas. Chinese schools in Thailand were required to fall in line with the official discourse of curtailing pro-communist ideologies.

However, some segments of the Chinese community in Thailand were still sympathetic to the communist cause and operated in secretive manners inside certain Chinese schools and circles of journalists or intellectuals (Lertpusit 2023). Prior to 1975, one could say that this left-leaning force led the production of knowledge about China through Chinese schools in Thailand (Wongsurawat 2024).

Senior China experts in Thai academia recorded in Shih's project can all be seen as possessing traits of sinological Chineseness in terms of their ethnicity and intellectual journey to reconnect with China. However, one can observe traits of scientific Chineseness in them too, because they all seem to be able to discuss and present China from indigenous Thai perspectives. During the Cold War, the US treated Thailand as a bastion of anti-communism in the region. The strong anti-communist political posture of the Thai government in the early days prompted this distance between the senior China experts and their studied subjects. These experts all had to show that their research on China did not mean support for the Chinese political regime and ideology. In the days when it was hard to visit China, some of

them visited Taiwan and Hong Kong to collect research materials (Manomaivibool 2015; Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021).

Sawai Wisavanan (ไสว วิศวานันท์, born 1932) was senior researcher at the Chinese studies center, Chulalongkorn University. He was born during a similar period as Khien Theeravit. He is also an ethnic Chinese Thai and he recalled that when Chinese language education was restricted as noted above, his Chinese parents sent him to Singapore. So, he left Thailand aged six or seven and returned at the age of fifteen. At the time, Chinese schooling was forbidden by Thai law. But Wisavanan observed that this was not implemented evenly. Some Chinese schools were considered leftist or communist and were closed, while other schools were controlled under the law under the ten-hour or five-hour teaching per week rule.

Traveling to China was politically incorrect at that time too. Sawai Wisavanan noted that someone only had to return from a trip in China to be considered communist by the Thai government. Thus, people with good funding would tactfully stay in Hong Kong for a while to circumvent the problem before returning to Thailand (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021).

In the university, as Khien Theeravit alludes to (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021), when he began his teaching career, Thailand had banned China politically and barred all information about China. “One had to be brave to speak about Chinese issues because, at that time, anyone who studied communist China was suspected of being a communist,” explained Theeravit (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021).

Professor Sarasin Viraphol also noted that during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, scholars like him found themselves in another sort of cultural revolution—the anti-communist movement in Thailand. The Chinese studies center at the university was considered negatively due to the poor political relations between the PRC and Thailand. The center’s publication, *Chinese Studies Journal*, was banned. Copies of it were confiscated and burnt.

In addition to the pervasive anti-communist atmosphere, another interesting fact that might further contribute to these senior experts’ further distance from China is that some of them were educated in the USA. Khien Theeravit and Sarasin Viraphol were the first and second Thai recipients of Harvard–Yenching scholarships to embark on their studies of China at Harvard University, under the instruction of the famous scholar, John King Fairbank (Manomaivibool 2015). Prapin Manomaivibool was educated at the University of Washington, under the instruction of Chinese American linguist, Li Fang-Kuei (李方桂, 1902–1987). In other words, American educational institutions and constructions of China knowledge played a prominent role in their learning of China. Manomaivibool shared in her oral history that when she had questions about teaching Chinese, she would contact her former professor in the US for help. For instance, in Thailand, students

and teachers sometimes would mistakenly think that her Chinese was not correct because she used the Mandarin spoken in northern China. In Thailand, what is most known is the Mandarin used in Southern China. When in doubt, she consulted her former Chinese American professor in the USA and her professor would assure her that her accent was all right. But later in life, when she established contacts in China, she also would seek help from Chinese colleagues in Beijing. It is quite notable to see how a Thai China expert sought legitimacy from colleagues in the USA and later China to assure her continued development in Thailand.

Khien Theeravit similarly expressed that due to the Thai government's anti-communism policy in his time, he could not find many communist-China-related data in Thailand. Hence, the sources which he collected during his study at Havard University became vital for his teaching back in Thailand (Manomaivibool 2015).

Besides the aforesaid anti-communist environment and the American influence in these senior China experts' intellectual journeys, they faced another task in their time, which was to use the study of China to explore and discover the origin of the Thai people. The purpose of this research was to construct an understanding of the Thai nation. Khien Theeravit noted that "Chinese studies in Thailand is virtually inseparable from Asian studies and Thai studies. Context-wise, they are all intertwined" (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021). There are many theories regarding where the Thai people came from. Some have postulated that the Thai were people driven out of Tibet. But the most accepted theory was that the ancient kingdom of Nanzhao (南詔) used to be the Thai state. Theeravit contacted Yunnan University in China to conduct cooperative research on the true origin of the Thai people. Sawai Wisavanan also went on the trip even though, as mentioned, it was not easy to make trips to China in those days (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021).

Naturally, the early years of disruption had a negative impact on the overall development of Chinese studies in Thailand. American Cold War knowledge construction of the world also affected a great deal of the Thai's knowledge construction of the PRC (Eaksittipong 2017). In fact, the US and the Asia Foundation, which is an American non-profit international development organization played important roles in buttressing Asian studies and China studies in Thai universities in those days. Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Political Science, for example, received some support from them to establish the Institute of Asian Studies under its Department of International Relations in 1967. Khien Theeravit was one of the founding members of this institute (Manomaivibool 2015).[8]

[8] The Institute of Asian Studies at Chulalongkorn University has played a vital role in disseminating knowledge about China. In the early 1990s, the institute further set up a center of Chinese studies. Khien Theeravit and other scholars had played instrumental roles in setting up the center. Sarasin Viraphol was one of the members of the founding committee. The Chinese studies center was eventually created under the umbrella of the Institute of Asian Studies on the occasion of celebrating the 20th anniversary of the establishment of Sino-Thai diplomatic relations in 1995 (Manomaivibool 2015).

The critical overture came after 1975, when the US attempted rapprochement with communist China. In that context, the US had hoped that Thailand would similarly come to recognize the PRC. In 1972, US president Richard Nixon visited the PRC. In 1975, Thailand and China established formal diplomatic relations before the US did the same in 1979. The implications of such change were felt not only in international politics but also in Chinese schooling in Thailand. After 1974, the right wing of Thai society, also known as the royalists, composed of members of the Thai royal family and prominent businessmen of Chinese Thai descent, 'hijacked' the agenda to foster Thai understanding of China. This was in drastic contrast to past developments in the country (Wongsurawat 2024).

Princess Sirindhorn of Thailand has become a patron of Thai–Chinese cultural and educational exchanges, although other royal family members and societal elites in Thailand have also been promoting similar exchanges (Skaggs, Chukaew, and Stephens 2024). The princess might not be typical of the China watchers whom we are examining in this book. But her role in producing a positive image of China and knowledge about it for Thai people is highly significant. Bearing in mind the context of the early Thai resistance against communism in history, the princess's visits to China, including studying and travels, and the way that her trips have been portrayed and broadcast by various Chinese and Thai media, helped turn around the Thai public's earlier antagonism and skepticism towards China. Hence, the next few paragraphs will cover her contribution.

Born in 1955, Princess Sirindhorn is the second daughter of King Bhumibol Adulayadej and the younger sister of King Vajiralongkorn. Thais often call her 'Phra Thep,' meaning 'princess angel.' The title 'Maha Chakri' was conferred upon her by King Bhumibol, signifying her elevation to the position of the first female Crown Princess. Following her brother's accession to the throne, she received a new royal designation, 'Krom Somdej Phra,' from King Vajiralongkorn in 2019. This title represents the highest royal rank attainable by appointment. In English, she continues to be widely known as the Princess.

The princess's image in the kingdom has been positive due to her dedication to philanthropic work. She is widely acknowledged as a princess who possesses a profound passion for knowledge and is extensively recognized for her proficiency in history, culture, and the arts. Many consider her a patron of the arts and music from the royal family. Her various educational initiatives constituted a significant aspect of her royal responsibilities throughout her father's reign.

According to a report from a Chinese state-sanctioned media outlet, the *Global Times* (2021), the princess knew China at a very young age, even before Thailand had a formal diplomatic relationship with the newly established PRC. When formal diplomatic relations were formed in 1975, the princess started to learn the Chinese language, as advised by her mother. The *Global Times* (2021) report quoted the

princess as saying, "My mother said that the Chinese people enjoy reading and learning, and that I could learn more knowledge if I could understand Chinese. She was right." A more balanced account would need to mention that the princess is known to be fond of foreign languages and literature from both Thailand and abroad. She is said to be versed in several languages, including English, French, Khmer, Sanskrit, Latin, Pali, and Chinese.

The princess studied at Peking University and paid many official and private visits to China. As part of her interest in writing and translation, she has published several of her travel diaries based on her traveling experiences in China, such as *Treading the Dragon Land (1981)*, *Forward A-Far the Sand Streams* (1990), *Snowflakes in Mist Streams* (2000), *A Student Abroad (2001)*, and a book called *A Return to the Motherland of China* (1998a) to share with the Thai people the historic moment of Hong Kong's return to China in 1997.

Moreover, the princess has published her translation of poems of the Tang and Song dynasties in the book *Verses of Clear Jade* (1998b). She has also written articles on topics such as the eternal fraternity of Chinese and Thai (Thai Chinese Culture and Economic Association 2012). As the Chinese diaspora has been a sizable and important group in Thai society, the princess's annual offering of new year greetings to the local Chinese community similarly shows her dedication to being a bridge between the Thai and Chinese cultures. In 2019, when the PRC celebrated its 70th anniversary, the princess was awarded China's Friendship Medal, an award bestowed upon foreigners who have made significant contributions to China.

Chinese state media deliberately portrays the princess's crucial role as a patron (Xinhua Thai News Service 2019). Her 2021 Chinese language study at Peking University was widely broadcast in Thailand, which inspired more Thais to learn Chinese (Manomaiviboon 2004). Princess Sirindhorn also helped bring PRC funding into Thailand to boost Chinese studies there. For example, Chulalongkorn University, the princess's alma mater, has received significant funding to run its Chinese studies. She was instrumental in helping to set up the CI at Chulalongkorn University, in cooperation with her Chinese alma mater, Peking University. Thailand currently hosts the highest numbers of CIs in Southeast Asia. In total, there are 16 CIs and 21 Confucius Classrooms as of 2024. Chulalongkorn University's CI even offers Chinese studies degrees. The princess serves as a patron for these institutions in Thailand.

Western articles and analysis tend to depict CIs and Chinese cultural power in Thailand as a kind of soft power influence (e.g., Skaggs, Chukaew, and Stephens 2024). In that logic, the princess's role becomes rather contested. However, it is fair to say that the princess has played an important role by bringing Thai people to know more about China and change Thai attitudes from the historical anti-communist sentiment to an appreciation of Chinese culture and people. The princess's participation in cultural events organized in collaboration with the Sino-Thai community,

especially in Chinatown, holds significant importance. Notable Sino-Thai business tycoons have also played a crucial role as financial backers of royal projects. Her involvement not only contributed to the enhancement of Thai–China relations but also conveyed a wider message of inclusive acceptance from the monarchy towards the Chinese diaspora in Thailand—an essential element intricately linked to her diplomatic and cultural responsibilities in promoting Thai–China connections.

Chinese language ability has been deemed vital for maintaining the vibrant economic ties between Thailand and China, and thus, Thai people value the princess's efforts in pushing more opportunities to learn the Chinese language (Manomaiviboon 2004; Lertpusit 2023; Skaggs, Chukaew, and Stephens 2024). It is worth mentioning that when the Chinese language was allowed again and became popular at the beginning of the 21st century in Thailand, there was generally a lack of qualified teachers, let alone a proper syllabus to facilitate the education. Senior China experts raised problems such as deficiencies in funding, human resources, knowledge, skill, and coordination and integration in the country to advance Chinese studies (Manomaiviboon 2004). Everyone acted on their own without any central institution (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021). Prapin Manomaivibool notes that each of the levels of education, namely primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary, begins teaching the language from zero. The Ministry of Education has no unit that oversees Chinese language education directly. Prapin Manomaivibool has opined that there should be a Chinese language teaching institute under the Ministry in the same way that there is a Thai language institute, to supervise and provide support to the language teaching in schools (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021).

In Prapin Manomaivibool's oral history interview, she implicitly referred to the issues related to Chinese-government-sponsored education and CIs that had raised similar concerns in many parts of the world. She was vocal in her caution about hidden agendas from China. Using parallels of the US sponsorship of Thai students in the early years to study in the US, she expressed that Thailand cannot embrace China indiscriminately. "We should move forward on our own, independent of others, but most importantly, we must find our own people who have the potential and then groom them to be the core of the next generation," according to Prapin Manomaivibool (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021). This is reminiscent of the question of 'independent knowledge of China' sought by the European Union's (EU) Horizon Europe program (European Commission 2021). We will return to this topic in the seventh chapter of this book titled 'Securitization of China Knowledge.'

If we consider Southeast Asia as China's neighbor with rich historical linkages, the presence of large Chinese communities, and longstanding development of Chinese studies, Central Asia is similar in terms of geographic proximity and historical linkages. But Central Asia has developed its unique path of Chinese studies. In Chapter four, we will discuss the development of Chinese studies in Central Asia.

CHAPTER 4

Void of China Studies in Central Asia?

Abstract

Central Asia is very unknown to the outside world. Studies about Central Asia and China are growing but are still comparatively understudied and under-published in the international market. There is a strong legacy of Russian sinology in the development of Central Asia's knowledge production of China. But what is under-appreciated is the uniqueness of Central Asia, where ethnic minority scholars of Uyghur, Dungan, and Kazakh backgrounds have played roles in building the foundations of Central Asian sinology.

Keywords: Central Asia, Russian sinology, Uyghur, Dungan, Kazakh

Back in 2003, internationally renowned Chinese expert on international relations, Yan Xuetong (阎学通 2003), pointed out the secondary if not tertiary importance of the region of Central Asia in both China and Russia's foreign relations. "Russia considers itself a European country, while China's focus is East Asia. Neither is interested in the other's regional issues" (Yan 2003). Much has changed with China's unleashing of various Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in the region since 2013. While it is true that the Asia-Pacific region (including Southeast Asia) is the main arena in which China competes and cooperates with other regional powers, Central Asia can be considered China's 'second region,' in which Japan and South Korea also have their own development initiatives therein, as observes Professor Emeritus Brantly Womack (2023) of Foreign Affairs of the University of Virginia. The Russo-Ukrainian war since 2022 has made Central Asia a crucial region for Russia as it searches for international support. As China and Russia both face an increasingly unwelcoming international environment, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladmir Putin have usually chosen to meet in Central Asia to manifest their cooperative relationship and support for each other since 2022 (Chen 2023).

Central Asia's geopolitical importance is on the rise. Nonetheless, the New York-based Social Science Research Council (SSRC) reported that this region is lagging behind in its research capacity on China (see also Chapter one). Is there a void of indigenous research on China and education on China in Central Asia? Actually, before the first ever China-sponsored Confucius Institute (CI) was established in Seoul in South Korea in November 2004, there was a pilot institute in Tashkent

in Uzbekistan in June 2004. In 2005, the first CI in Central Asia was established in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, which was one of the first CIs in the world.

As of 2023, China has set up 13 CIs and 24 Confucius Classrooms in Central Asia since 2004, with over 18,000 students now studying at these places (Confucius Institutes Website 2023; Liang and Jiao 2011). As Western media and scholarly narratives about CIs in general are often formed under the Chinese soft power framework, CIs' existence is often seen from alarmist perspectives (Rashidov, Mullojonov, Rashidova, and Lemon 2024). Reasoning from the fact that China research in Central Asia is wanting and that CIs are providing knowledge about China in Central Asia, the conclusion is that overly one-sided funding from China is hampering Central Asia's ability to produce 'independent' knowledge about China. Politically and policy-wise, observers in the West and even in Central Asia have concluded that there is a need to support Central Asian institutions to enhance their own capacity for conducting research and imparting knowledge on China without CIs (CABAR 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

This conclusion seems justifiable. Even indigenous voices from Central Asia have also expressed similar concerns. The Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (CABAR), a not-for-profit regional platform, has organized meetings inviting Central Asian experts to address their indigenous needs for improved capacity to study China. As Muratbek Imanaliev, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan and former Secretary General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) noted in the CABAR meeting, "the paradox lies in the fact that we have a thousand-kilometre border with China, but unfortunately, have no idea about China" (CABAR 2019a, 2019c). The CABAR report (2019a) further mentioned that Imanaliev has expressed that Kyrgyzstan needs to develop its own knowledge of modern and historical China and the East. Domestic publications and textbooks on such knowledge are needed. "This allows formulating a more accurate, professionally verified concept of Kyrgyz relations with China and the rest of Asian East countries" (CABAR 2019a).

While I do not disagree with the current observation that Central Asian countries need to beef up their capacity to study China and use the knowledge for better policy formulation, I wish to question the assumption that sinology or research on China does not exist in Central Asia. A longue durée perspective is needed to generate a holistic picture of Central Asia's capacity to produce knowledge about China. The oral history interviews of senior sinologists and China experts in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan conducted by Shih's oral history project, partly through cooperation with the author of this book, enable us to understand this matter better.

My attempt is in line with recent intellectual and civic awakening in Central Asia concerning the need to decolonize knowledge production about Central Asia

(Dadabaev 2022; Marat and Kassymbekova 2023). While it is true that the Russian influence is deep-rooted in the region culturally, politically, and economically, the region cannot just be seen as a sub-set of any Russian sphere of influence, as international relations observers tend to perceive Central Asia. Historically, the current states of Central Asia acquired their present shape and form when they were first created as republics of the Soviet Union from 1917 to around 1936. The founding of the Soviet Union had some decolonizing effect because these regions were made into semi-self-governed republics. But the Soviet Union 'neo-colonized' them under the Marxist ideological influence (Dadabaev 2022). In more recent years with China's rising presence in Central Asia, China watchers' attention is on China's various initiatives and engagement with the region, often looking at the region as slowly being under Chinese influence, and then inevitably there is a discussion about whether Russia opposes or cooperates with China in the region. In addition to this, there are a lot of geopolitical discussions about how Russia treats Central Asia as part of its Eurasian imagination and identity, thus affecting Russia's policies in regard to its neighboring countries. If we place this historical perspective in our analysis, I think that the challenge here is not just that Central Asian countries need to beef up their capacity to study China. The real question here is whether and how Central Asia can exercise agency to decolonize knowledge production about the region and its relations with other outside powers. We will examine the Central Asian case carefully first and then come back to this question at the end of this chapter.

We are limited to studying oral history interviews collected in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan because it is practically impossible and dangerous for interviewers to conduct interviews in Turkmenistan. Where there is a lack of senior sinologists alive for interviews, mid-career experts were interviewed. Their memories and connections with those experts who have passed away can still help us construct a picture (albeit incomplete) of the development of China or Chinese studies in Central Asia. As a result, two senior sinologists, Klara Shaysultanovna Khafizova (Клара Шайсултановна Хафизова, born 1939) and Konstantin Syroyezhkin (Константин Сыроежкин, born 1956) were interviewed by Russian legal scholar, Olga Adams (Ольга Адамс), back in 2015. In 2023, the author of this book interviewed senior sinologist, Abdul-Ahad Ablat Khodjaev (Абдул–ахад Аблат ходжаев, born 1942) and two mid-career experts, Shoazim Ibragimovich Shazamanov (Шоазим Ибрагимович Шазаманов, born 1964) and Anri Abdullaevich Sharapov (Анри Абдуллаевич Шарапов, born 1967) in Uzbekistan. In Kyrgyzstan, two mid-career experts, Fatima Khavaza (Фатима Хаваза, born 1958) and Ali Dzhon (Али Джон, born 1951), were interviewed in 2023. Tajik scholar, Muzaffar Olimov (Музаффар олимов, born 1954), was interviewed in Finland in 2024.

I do not claim that our list of interviewees is complete, but it is what we could achieve, taking into consideration our budget, the availability of experts, and the

safety of the interviewers and interviewees. Galina Pavlovna Suprunenko (Галина Павловна Супруненко, 1940–1997) was a renowned sinologist in Kyrgyzstan but passed away in 1997 (Tchoroev 2022; Central Asian Archaeological Landscapes 2023). Another important figure, Murat Auezov (Мурат Ауэзов, 1943–2024) was based in Kazakhstan. Auezov had not been able to accept my interview due to health reasons and eventually passed away in 2024. These are examples of people who should have been interviewed, but we did not manage to do so. Most transcripts of the oral history interviews can be found on the website of Shih Chih-yu's project, situated at the Research and Educational Center for China Studies and Cross Taiwan-Strait Relations at National Taiwan University (2025). Due to the limited resources and language skills of the interviewers and availability of interpreters, transcripts are in different languages, ranging from Russian and Chinese to English. There were also interviewees who did not give consent to be recorded and published on the website. Whenever personal safety and privacy is involved in writing up this book, I use the term 'anonymous interviewee' in the text.

Finally, before I continue, I would like to present a position statement regarding myself in this chapter, as is customary in various chapters of this book. My previous research has included the examination of Xinjiang, which has kept Central Asia at the forefront of my thoughts until I had the chance to serve as an associate professor at Nazarbayev University (NU) in Kazakhstan for a year back in 2014. This opportunity arose shortly after Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled his ambitious initiative, the BRI, directly at NU in September 2013. During this period, I observed a notable surge in Chinese educational delegations visiting NU to explore potential collaboration. Shih's oral history project utilized various funding sources to support both myself and a Russian legal scholar in conducting oral history interviews. The Kazakh segment was managed by the Russian legal scholar, while I concentrated on other Central Asian countries. My interviews were all conducted after I left NU. My approach to writing this chapter is predominantly from an outsider's viewpoint. Despite having spent time in Central Asia and continuing to visit, I do not consider myself an insider. Additionally, my limited proficiency in Russian and Central Asian languages necessitated my reliance on translators and interpreters, unless the interviewees were able to communicate with me in Chinese or a related dialect.

4.1 Political needs drive Central Asian knowledge production about China

The analysis of these oral history interviews shows that, first of all, although their personal passion for learning about China did affect these Central Asian China watchers' dedication to their research, most of them were also highly motivated by the needs of their countries at the time (CABAR 2019c). Their countries had the

political need to understand China, and thus offered chances for these researchers to start to learn about China. Once they had advanced their careers, their research was steered in the direction of serving the practical needs of their countries. This is a feature common during the Soviet era (Kemper and Conermannn 2011; Kemper and Kalinovsky 2015), and persists to this day, when their countries have been independent from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) for decades.

Take Kazakhstan, the largest Central Asian country, for instance. Sinology arose in the second half of the 1980s in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (Kazakh SSR, 1936–1991), one of the republics of the Soviet Union. It began with the establishment of the first Oriental center in the country (CABAR 2019b). Up until then, sinologists had all been trained in various cities of Russia or in neighboring Tashkent, which is the capital of today's Uzbekistan.

Konstantin Syroyezhkin, a leading Kazakh sinologist, was born in the south-eastern Kazakh city of Almaty during the time of the Kazakh SSR. He received his education in the Higher School of the Soviet Committee for State Security, Foreign Intelligence, and Domestic Security Agency of the Soviet Union, commonly known as the KGB (Комите́т госуда́рственной безопа́сности, КГБ). Syroyezhkin observed that the lengthy Soviet border with China necessitated that the majority of cadets from the Oriental Faculty focus on Chinese studies. Although they did not have Chinese teachers from China at the time, he had the chance to study from the best-known experts in the discipline, i.e., legends of sinology. For example, the ancient history of China was taught by the famous sinologist, Lev Petrovich Delyusin (Льва Петрович Делюсин, 1923–2013).

During the era of the Kazakh SSR, research on China had a strong focus on Xinjiang as this was the borderland area with China. The need to study China prompted the birth of the Institute of Uyghur Studies, which was created from the Department of Uyghur Studies of the Institute of Linguistics of the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh SSR. It was headed by the former head of the Department of Uyghur studies and member of the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh SSR, Gozhakhmet Sadvakasovich Sadvakasov (гожахмет садвакасович садвакасовб, 1929–1991). Although the main direction of the institute's work was related to Uyghur philology, there were efforts to study historical, social-economic, and socio-political issues related to Xinjiang. Syroyezhkin, whose scientific career began with this institute, had approached his research by examining historical, social–economic, and social–political issues of China as a whole, but with an emphasis on their ramifications and connections with Xinjiang.

Political needs also prompted Uzbekistan-based Abdul-Ahad Ablat Khodjaev's (2023) research career. Khodjaev notes that part of his work looked into the history of the Silk Road. This is highly relevant to contemporary politics, as both China and Central Asian countries have used the concept of the ancient Silk Road to evoke an

imagined discourse of the ancient past in which territories, peoples, cultures, and civilizations collided and connected. This kind of discourse tends to romanticize a past that humankind might have shared, conjuring up an imagined coexistence and peaceful interactions between cultures, peoples, and powers along the vaguely conceived Silk Road (Winter 2021). The negative parts of the past, such as plague, war, and famine, tend to be dismissed in this discourse (Winter 2021). This Silk Road concept works well for both China and Central Asian countries in general. At the symbolic level, it is a strategic narrative that connects China with Central Asia from the past through the present to the future (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014; Chen and Günther 2016; Chen 2024). Khodjaev (2023) noted that his research was to find out how, in this context, Uzbekistan can use the banner of the Silk Road to maximize its interests: in particular, if a Silk Road kind of connection is about to be revived in the contemporary era, how should Uzbekistan develop, bearing in mind that it is a doubly landlocked country?[1] How should Tashkent respond to China's BRI in this context?

4.1.1 The search for Central Asian roots drove research on China

Central Asian China experts connected their research to the needs of the countries, which are not just about understanding how to help their countries manage relations with China. Several of them have also worked on understanding the historical connections and relations between China and Central Asia, in an attempt to help their newly independent states' search for their ethnic group or nation-states' roots and identities. The late Kyrgyz sinologist, Galina Pavlovna Suprunenko, for example, used Chinese sources to examine the diplomatic and economic relations between the Tang Empire and the Kyrgyz Khaganate. In the 1970s, Suprunenko translated several Chinese sources of the Qing Dynasty, which are still a valuable source for the history of the Kyrgyz Khaganate of the 18th century. In the 1980s, Suprunenko further deciphered inscriptions in Chinese on stone steles found in the settlements of AK-Beshim and Krasnaya Rechka, which made it possible to clarify the dating of some events that occurred in the current-day Kyrgyzstan in the early Middle Ages (Tchoroev 2022; Central Asian Archaeological Landscapes 2023). The Uzbekistan-based Abdul-Ahad Ablat Khodjaev (2023) and the Kazakhstan-based Klara Shaysultanovna Khafizova (2015, 2022) contributed similar efforts to search for their respective new countries' roots. Khafizova mentioned that this is related to Soviet-style classical sinology, where scientists studied the history of Central

[1] Uzbekistan is not just landlocked. It is also surrounded by other landlocked countries such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan.

Asian peoples using Chinese, Manchu, Mongolian, and Russian sources. 'China' was actually not the real focus of Soviet sinologists at that time (CABAR 2019b).

Khodjaev (2023) mentioned that during the Soviet era, while border issues with China were a problem, he was able to study such topics, which meant a lot for policymaking at that time. After Uzbekistan's independence, the new state desperately needed to find the origin of the Uzbek people to justify its nation-statehood. He hence redirected his attention to use Chinese materials to help trace the Uzbek people's origins (Khodjaev 1991; Dzhumaeva 2022). Recalling our discussion of Thailand in Chapter three of this book, part of the Thai sinologists' work was also to search for the origins of Thai people through their exploration of current-day Thailand's historical relations with China.

4.1.2 Central Asian China watchers could tackle sensitive topics

Several senior Central Asian sinologists have dealt with the ethnic issues of China in their research. This kind of research topic is considered politically sensitive, which has affected the ability of scholars in and outside of China to conduct research on it (Chen 2012). But when senior Central Asian sinologists started their careers, such topics were allowed. This is because there was a need to understand their own countries and peoples' histories with China and scrutinize the border issues with China. This inevitably led to the need to bring the ethnic dimension of the issues to the fore, as ethnic groups in Central Asia and China have intermingled for centuries. For example, Klara Khafizova explored the Qing strategies towards Xinjiang and the Kazakh world. Her findings were not uncritical of Chinese policies towards ethnic groups in its Western periphery and neighborhood (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012: 181).

Konstantin Syroezhkin (1997, 2003, 2006, 2015) is one of the few scholars in Central Asia who has dealt at length with interethnic conflicts between the Uyghurs and Kazakhs. He argued that Uyghurs should not regard Xinjiang as their own national territory by ignoring the existence of other Central Asian minorities therein (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012: 179). Just as the Uyghurs faced the pressure of being assimilated into the Han-dominated Chinese state, the Kazakhs in China faced the pressure of being Uyghurized (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012). Syroezhkin's (2015) work also offered different views from Chinese sources, such as that the Uyghur territory remained independent from China until the 18th century and then was transformed into part of China under the Qing. While the topic of Uyghur separatism has been politically sensitive both in the past and in the contemporary era, Central Asian scholars such as Syroezhkin were allowed to study such a topic because of its political importance (Kamalov 2006: 7).

In Laruelle and Peyrouse's (2012) research, they indicate that Central Asian experts were dismayed at the discovery of Chinese school textbooks that showed the

Chinese empire's territory stretching to Central Asia, including current Tajik Pamirs, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Such maps are not uncommon, particularly in China's early 20th-century cartography, in claiming that the proper shape of the real China was a combination of late imperial and modern understanding of territory, some of which was considered lost during China's century of humiliation, when foreign powers encroached on China (Callahan 2009). The Central Asian experts interpreted this discovery in negative ways for fear that China will one day reject its border treaty agreements with Central Asian states and expand its territory into Central Asia.

Murat Auezov, for example, voiced his concerns loudly. Auezov is a senior China watcher who should have been included in the oral history interviews, but we did not manage to do so before his passing away in 2024. Auezov was a public figure in Kazakhstan, a writer and former politician, and was among the first ambassadors of the independent Kazakhstan to be sent to China in 1992 (Ahkmetkali 2023). From 1959 to 1965, he studied Chinese philology at the Institute of Oriental Languages at Lomonosov Moscow State University, where he received his PhD. Auezov often publicly expressed alarmist views on China and was considered a Sinophobe. But looking more deeply into his career, he also opened a Chinese cultural center in the National Library of Almaty and launched a Kazakh-language journal called *Көрші* (*Korshi*, meaning The Neighbor). The journal was financed by Chinese companies in Central Asia, and by the Xinjiang Association for Cultural Exchanges with Foreign Countries (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012).

4.2 The deep influence of Russian sinology

Despite Central Asia's geographic proximity to China and historical interactions with China, as Sciorati and Silvan (2023: 49) comment, Central Asians are normally not familiar with Chinese culture, history, as well as political and business traditions. As various surveys and studies reveal (Chen 2023; Chen and Günther 2016, 2020; Chen and Jiménez-Tovar 2017), Sinophobia and Sinophila, fed by myth, imagination, and partial facts drive normal Central Asian peoples' perceptions of China. From the societal to political level, there is still a widespread perception of China's 'threat' to Central Asia. The main reason for this kind of development is that the Soviet and Russian understanding of China has directed how Central Asia should look at China. This understanding is mediated through Soviet and Russian perceptions (Sciorati and Silvan 2023: 49).[2] But it is important to highlight that recent

[2] For a more detailed and separate discussion on Soviet oriental studies, see Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann's 2011 'The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies' published by Routledge. That volume shows how Soviet orientology developed from the imperial tradition of Russian oriental studies and the Soviet Marxist framework.

research indicates corrective measures, including the efforts by the Kazakhstani authorities to reinterpret Soviet history and portray China as a supportive nation that has assisted Kazakhstan in fending off foreign invasions (Shakhanova 2025).

In the realm of China watching, and particularly academic studies of China in Central Asia, Russian sinology similarly plays an instrumental role in cultivating sinologists from Central Asia (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012; Meng 2011, 2013; CABAR 2019b). Central Asian sinologists in the early days were all trained in Russian cities or Tashkent, today's Uzbekistan. Almaty-based Syroyezhkin was educated in Moscow. Kyrgyz sinologist, Galine Pavlovna Suprunenko, who passed away in 1997, also graduated from the Faculty of Oriental Studies in Moscow. As Syroyezhkin explained (2015):

> Pre-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union had the world's strongest schools of sinology. […] As for the Soviet school of Sinology, it is also rich in world names. Although it is now customary to indiscriminately blame everything that was in the USSR, one cannot but admit that in those days, Oriental studies in general and sinology, in particular, were at a very high level, despite the notorious ideology, and in certain years, political demands. In any case, those who intend to seriously study China cannot bypass the huge layer of Soviet sinology literature. (Syroyezhkin 2015)

Klara Shaysultanovna Khafizova, another leading sinologist of Kazakhstan (CABAR 2019b), was educated in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the Central Asian State University (later renamed the Tashkent State University) in current-day Uzbekistan. Khafizova held high status as the Academician of the Kazakh National Academy of Natural Sciences. The Oriental Institute where she studied was founded in 1918 and in fact was the only such institute in Central Asia and Asia's oldest Oriental Institute of higher education. It is one of the largest schools of its kind in Asia and the former Soviet Union. Even though Khafizova was educated in Tashkent, not Moscow, she also noted the instrumental role of Russian sinology in their training of China experts (CABAR 2019b).

Hence, a comprehensive picture of the situation in Central Asia is that Russian sinology has been nurturing Central Asian China experts in history. As Russian sinology used to be internationally recognized and respected, older generations of China experts in Central Asia had been trained and equipped with advanced levels of Chinese skills to study Chinese materials directly. Interestingly, even though Soviet sinology was strong and could stand alone as a respectable force, its development was generally "inspired by the Western model of sinology," as Laruelle and Peyrouse (2012: 144) point out. During Soviet times, sinology was politicalized to serve the needs of politics. The discipline was also subject to the ups and downs of Sino-Soviet relations. If we want to understand the Central Asian development of sinology, we have to trace its current form back to the Russian influence.

One salient legacy of the Russian influence is geography. Why were Central Asian sinologists trained in either certain cities of Russia or Tashkent? This is because during the Soviet era, only Moscow and Leningrad were allowed to formulate discourse about the outside world. With regard to sinology, the only city that was able to form a school of sinology with a certain level of autonomy from Moscow and Leningrad was Vladivostok, and to a more limited degree, Irkutsk and Barnaul (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012: 144). The Faculty of Oriental Studies at the Leningrad State University (now Saint-Petersburg University) was where the Chinese Studies in Russia was founded and has a long history of Chinese studies in Russia (Altantsetseg 2022). The Central Asian departments of Oriental Studies were modeled on the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow. The training centered on historical, linguistic, and cultural questions. Most importantly, the oriental studies were not about studying Asia outside of the USSR. It was about the Russian-centered motive to understand Central Asia, the oriental part of the Soviet Union (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012: 145).

Another geographical dimension that reveals the Soviet influence was the regionalization of Soviet sciences. During the Soviet era, the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (Kyrgyz SSR, 1936–1991) was allocated to study the Dungan minority, an ethnic group known by a different name, Hui (回) or Huizu (回族) in China (Meng 2011, 2013; Jiménez-Tovar and Lavička 2020). The Hui are Sinophone Muslims in China. A small number of them who reside in today's Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are known as the Dungan. A Department of Dungan Studies was set up in the Kyrgyz SSR at the end of the 1930s. From the 1940s on, the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh SSR also set up a department of Uyghur Studies within its Linguistic Institute. A tiny group of senior Central Asian sinologists was thus formed in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, some experts who were included in the oral history project were sinologists with expertise in these two ethnic minorities (i.e., Uyghur and Dungan) and the historical relations between ancient China and Central Asia. Their starting point for studying China is thus different from sinologists of other parts of the world. It is in this way that they are unique.

It is not easy for researchers to get access to study the situations in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, another two Central Asian countries, because they are closed in nature and strictly monitored by their governments. According to Laruelle and Peyrouse (2012), neither country has real sinology studies. Take Tajikistan as an example. Their focus is on regions of cultural and geographic proximity, which would mean countries such as Iran and Afghanistan (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012: 146; Aini and Maltsev 1988). China studies were not prominent, neither in the Soviet era nor today. In Soviet times,

> the Sino-Tajik border being inaccessible, the Tajik Soviet Republic was never considered by Moscow as being close to China, in contrast to the Kazakh and Kyrgyz Soviet Republic,

> and therefore never had any sinologists or any departments of Uyghur or Dungan studies. (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012: 146)

Professor Muzaffar Olimov (2024), the Professor and Head of the Centre of Regional and Comparative Studies at Tajik National University and a research consultant for the Research Centre Sharq/Oriens concurred that as of 2024, Chinese studies had not yet been developed in Tajikistan. "In Soviet Tajikistan, although the PRC was considered an eastern neighbour with a border of almost 500 kilometre, the great neighbour remained quite a distant country until the end of the 20th century," according to Olimov (2024).

Independent Tajikistan has discovered the PRC only recently. It was only after the signing of a treaty on disputed territories under the SCO with the four neighboring republics, including Tajikistan, that China established more active ties with all of its new western neighbors. But there is no sinologist in Tajikistan, as one might find in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Currently, there is an Institute of Oriental Studies in Dushanbe, capital of Tajikistan, but again, its focus is more on Iranian and Afghan studies. The CI in Tajikistan does offer teaching in the Chinese language, but its main purpose is not academic research. CI's task is to prepare interpreters to help Chinese businesses in Tajikistan (Olimov 2024).

4.3 Central Asian Studies of China struggle to take off

Laruelle and Peyrouse (2012: 145) consider the aforementioned Khodjaev as the founding father of sinology in Central Asia. Of Uyghur origin and born in Kashgar, he spent some of his childhood years (1955–1959) in China. Khodjayev (2023) learned some basic standard Mandarin and even Shanghainese in his early days in China. His family moved to Uzbekistan during the wave of Chinese migration from Xinjiang to the USSR in the 1950s and 1960s (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012). In the 1960s and 1970s, Khodjaev (2023) was given the task of directing sinology in Tashkent, and he was one of the very few academics at that time who was trained in Russian sinology and then continued his work in the post-Soviet time. He held a chair in this field in Uzbekistan. Compared with Murat Auezov, Klara Khafizova, and Konstantin Syroyezhkin in Kazakhstan, Khodjaev's position was relatively more institutionalized (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012: 146), thus making him the founding father of sinology in modern Central Asia.[3] In August 2025, Khodjaev received an

[3] Khodjaev served as an interpreter for former Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, and later as Uzbek ambassador to the PRC in the 1990s, which gave him access to many official archives. He published his dissertation based on old Chinese archives in Moscow in 1979. He subsequently wrote more

honorary title for his accomplishments in a presidential decree on the occasion of Uzbekistan's Independence Day. His extensive service in teaching and mentoring young experts was recognized with the title 'Ўзбекистон Ћпубликасида хизмат кўрсатган ёшлар мураббийси,' which translates to 'Honored Youth Mentor of the Republic of Uzbekistan.' Uzbekistan bestows this prestigious state honor upon a select group of leaders in education, culture, and science (Website of the Joint-Stock Company 'National Electric Grid of Uzbekistan' 2025).

Nonetheless, a lack of consistent funding has been a persistent problem in the Central Asian development of Chinese studies. In Kyrgyzstan, some early specialists in the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences left because of this problem. Currently, the Dungan studies section, which remains in existence, includes only a few researchers. Their main tasks are to write textbooks of Dungan languages and literature for Dungan-speaking schools at the demand of the Kyrgyz government. But they do not really engage in wider Chinese studies. The situation was reported by Laruelle and Peyrouse in their 2012 book. In 2023, the author interviewed some researchers in Kyrgyzstan and confirmed that the situation had remained the same (Khavaza and Djon 2023).

Due to the Soviet legacy and shortage of funding, traditional sinology in Central Asia remains focused on scholars working on Uyghur and Dungan studies. Only in recent years have we seen some researchers working in political science or international relations begin to include China in their observations. Akin to what has happened to other parts of the world (see Chapter two), scholars in other non-sinology disciplines might watch China but they do not necessarily speak Chinese languages fluently nor have had cultural immersion experience in China.

The question of whether Uyghur and Dungan studies are part of sinology can be controversial. It is not uncommon for prospective interviewees to hesitate when approached for an oral history interview, on the grounds that they do not see themselves as sinologists or China experts. But this issue does not exist solely in Central Asia. As noted in previous sections, scholars from various disciplines could all have been involved in the study of China, but they are not sinologists. The oral history project opts for a flexible yardstick to include diverse kinds of senior China experts.

For scholars in sinology, my impression is that most of them will not doubt the inclusivity of Dungan and Uyghur studies in sinology. But for contemporary Central Asian scholars who are not in the field of sinology, they could have different views

about Chinese rulers in Xinjiang in the 18th century. The Presidential Research Institute of Uzbekistan had funded his studies, printed out only limited copies of each of his publications, and distributed them to various governmental agencies and university research institutes. These publications were originally not intended for general distribution, but he has shared some of his publications with the author for the sole purpose of research.

on this matter. Some would think that Dungan and Uyghur studies are Central Asian studies and have nothing to do with China. Apparently, political identities and views have affected the division of perspectives on this topic.

The Central Asia case is unique in the sense that because the traditional Soviet view has been that a native person is better equipped with the know-how to study his or her own culture than a non-native, the earlier scholars in Dungan or Uyghur studies have been people with those exact ethnic origins. And these scholars can mostly trace their ancestral lineage or family connections to varying degrees back to China. They can in a way be considered bridges between China and their Central Asia countries. Their unique ethnic background makes them potential candidates for possessing sinological Chineseness as defined by Shih (2018a, 2018b). But do they really exhibit sinological Chineseness? We will come back to this in the next section.

4.3.1 The study of China is largely confined to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

Due to the various forces of development mentioned above, the study of China in Central Asia has largely been confined to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. This was noted in Laruelle and Peyrouse's (2012: 148–249) earlier finding and confirmed by the author in her recent interviews in 2023. Not much has changed. Uzbekistan, with Khodjaev, had its moment of glory as the chair of sinology in Central Asia. But Khodjaev has retired. He is sometimes called back to contribute to Chinese studies but there has not been a clear and well-established younger generation to continue his work. Chinese language training does exist in Uzbek universities, some of which receive Chinese government funding and others which do not. Informal discussions with language teachers in Uzbek show that the curricula and teaching methods are not well established. Relatively speaking, Kazakhstan has slightly more capacity to conduct research on China, but even so, scholars have different views on whether there is well-established sinology on contemporary China.

Today, major universities of Kazakhstan possess oriental studies faculties with Chinese philology departments. The Chinese language, along with English, is among the most popular languages for Kazakhstani students (CABAR 2019b). Syroyezhkin and Khafizova, however, have both expressed worries about the future development of Chinese studies in Kazakhstan. A worrying trend, in Khafizova's view is how "a lot of specialists appeared without knowing the language or without special scientific training, or even without both" (Khafizova 2015). This echoes Syroyzehkin's view that younger generations do not have enough language training and scientific background to qualify as proper scientists, even though they might have learnt the language in school.

The concerns over the lack of proficient Chinese language skill reflects similar situations in Europe. Gregory Lee, a Professor of Chinese Studies at the University

of St. Andrews in the United Kingdom, for instance, noted that the utility-oriented modern study program has misled students to believe that by taking some cursory language courses and other courses on economics, cultures, society, and others, they would be well equipped to 'do business' with China (Lee 2023). Although not all educational programs were designed for such practical aims, academic programs very often must at least sell some aspects of these practical implications so that they can attract students.

Returning to the case of Central Asia, while the Chinese language is certainly taught in Kazakhstan and Kazakhstani students have the chance to do internships in China, Syroyezhkin (2015) noted that

> knowledge of the language does not yet make a specialist in the country out of yesterday's student. If the entire five-thousand-year history of China is studied at the Faculty of Oriental Studies for only two semesters, then we have what we have. I am not even talking about the basics of China's economy, culture, literature, psychology, etc. (Syroyezhkin 2015)

When Syroyezhkin was interviewed for the oral history project in 2015, he confessed that the school of Kazakh sinology had not been formed yet, despite the existence of experts in Kazakhstan. He mentioned that there were few experts who could really be counted as sinologists, who had both mastered the Chinese language and knew the country well. Deficient financial support for such a school was the main reason. Yet he mentioned that this challenge also applied to other area studies, such as Arabic studies, Iranian studies, and other areas of oriental studies. Turkology might have been in a better condition but even so, there was no scientific school for Turkology either. He was worried about the situation of an older generation of experts passing away and universities not giving sufficient attention to and investment in the study of China in the future.

Syroyezhkin (2015) observed that most young people in Kazakhstan have no craving for science.

> I have had the opportunity to communicate with only five young people who wanted to do serious scientific research in the field of sinology. Here the reason is obvious – the prestige of the title of a scientist, and of science in general, has been lost. (Syroyezhkin 2015)

He expressed that the same situation can be observed in Russia and other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. An anonymous sinologist shared similar views of the younger generation's lack of Chinese training but differed in the view of the demands to learn the Chinese language and culture. This anonymous interviewee contended that what is most vital is for students to learn practical skills such as informational technology from China so that our

country can modernize. She lamented that PRC-sponsored educational programs do not actually aim to modernize Central Asian citizens but rather keep them as an agricultural country so that Central Asian countries can continue to provide cheap agricultural products to meet the needs of the Chinese market.

Kazakhstani scholar, Khafizova, added that traditionally, the 'Orient' was educated in the Russian language. While the newly independent state of Kazakhstan wishes to enhance the use of the indigenous Kazakh language in various walks of life, Kazakh-speaking experts conducting oriental studies are not yet mature enough to present anything sufficiently groundbreaking to deserve national and international recognition (Khafizova 2015). There is a need for better integration between Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking China experts in the country in order to improve the quality of China research and education in Kazakhstan (CABAR 2019b). As Khafizova (2015) observes, most research outputs have been related to the history of Kazakh–Chinese relations, which again echoes the aforementioned point that there is a tradition in Central Asia that practical needs to manage political relations with their Chinese neighbors have led to this (narrow) direction in the development of sinology.

Overall, there have been few sinologists in Kazakhstan from a longue durée perspective, if we are strict with the level of language skills that the experts need to possess (CABAR 2019b). More and more people trained from other disciplines might encroach on the field of Chinese studies. They could study China due to their interests in political sciences, economics, sociology, or other fields, but their own disciplinary training would override training in the Chinese language. This is seen by the older generation of sinologists as 'superficial' and 'not qualified' to be a sinologist.

The Kazakh case challenges Chih-yu Shih's theoretical attempt to discern various kinds of China watchers. Do Khafizova and Syroyezhkin possess sinological Chineseness or scientific Chineseness as defined by Shih Chih-yu (2018a, 2018b)? At first glance, they can be categorized as sinological Chinese as they do command the Chinese language, value the skills, and use original Chinese materials for their research. But as both of them were pushed by the environment to conduct research to serve the political establishment's needs in their times, they often still appear to possess more scientific Chineseness in the sense that they seek to distance themselves from their studied subject, China, in exchange for being trusted as the right authority to objectively study China and offer useful policy suggestions for the country's needs. Moreover, the line between higher education and think tanks is blurred in Central Asia (CABAR 2019b, 2019c) in the sense that people can work between these two types of institutions. Most workplaces where Syroyezhkin has served are of a think tank nature, some of which are highly tied to the political establishment with clear state mandates. As such, he has demonstrated more

scientific Chineseness than Khafizova. The younger generation of China experts, whom Syroyezhkin and Khafizova both disapprove of, show even more scientific Chineseness than the older generation of China hands in Kazakhstan.

In Uzbekistan, Anri Abdullaevich Sharapov, an Uzbek scholar at the Department of International Relations, University of World Economy and Diplomacy is a political scientist, not a sinologist. Sharapov is in his mid-career development. In his oral history interview, he stated explicitly that his interest is in comparing Japan, South Korea, and China's influence in Uzbekistan. Geographically, these countries are close to Uzbekistan and share some cultural similarities. Among the three, China is the most influential, particularly in the realm of economics and trade. Sharapov received his education in Moscow State University from 1987 to 1992, spanning the last years of the Soviet period and the beginning of the period when Uzbekistan became independent. He has never visited China due to a lack of funding. Even though there is now funding for the younger generation to visit China, he expressed that he is not qualified to apply anymore. Sharapov demonstrates a more clear-cut case of scientific Chineseness as defined by Shih (2018a, 2018b).

Overall, coming back to the question of decolonization of knowledge production in Central Asia, when it comes to the study of China and China watching in general, the colonial legacy has deep imprints in directing how knowledge is structured and produced by certain intellectuals for certain political purposes. There is so far no systematic support from the top to form any formal school of sinology. But one cannot claim that there was no important research output coming out from Central Asia even given its limited condition. Khodjaev, Khafizova, and other names mentioned here are sinologists dedicated to their passion. Their work should be translated into other world languages to show how actually they have understood China from their Uzbek or Kazakh perspectives. This is to show that it is not true that there is an absence of indigenous scholarship and voices on China from Central Asia.

The real challenge is that academic freedom in Central Asia faces considerable obstacles due to censorship, political oversight, and bureaucratic limitations, particularly within the social sciences. Such pressures have the potential to hinder research endeavors and the expression of research outcomes. Also, indigenous scholarship lacks funding to sustain and further reach critical mass of disciplines willing to take up the same line of work. Funding shortage also leads to fewer opportunities for China watchers from different Central Asian countries to meet and have dialogues among themselves. Each country grapples with its own challenges to advance the field of China studies. Lack of funding is a real killer for any cross-country dialogue. It is not just a problem facing Central Asia; it is nearly everywhere, but in Central Asia, the scale is huge and warrants attention and efforts to redress the problem.

4.4 Comparing Central Asia with Southeast Asia

While Southeast Asia and Central Asia might be incomparable for many reasons, here we try to compare the incomparable. Southeast Asia's development of sinology and Chinese studies is normally deemed more advanced than that in Central Asia. The large population of ethnic communities in Southeast Asia has facilitated such a development as Southeast Asian scholars of Chinese descent were motivated to advance their knowledge and sustain links with China. Sinologists in Central Asia did not have ethnic Han Chinese roots, although some of them have ethnic ties, such as with the Uyghurs and Hui/Dungan in China. Unlike Southeast Asian China watchers, who may be motivated by their own ethnic roots to study China, Central Asia China watchers were motivated largely by their countries' political needs to understand and manage relations with their gigantic neighbor.

China watchers in both Southeast Asia and Central Asia are conditioned by the political environments of their societies and the academic space in which their countries allow them to work. Although each country and society have their own conditions, it is common that researchers' work should have practical applications, either in using the study of Chinese texts to help their own nation-state search for historical roots, or in managing contemporary relations with China. While one could argue that most China experts are not real politicians and have no power in policymaking, at least in Central Asia, one could contend that some senior China watchers there have been key components in shaping Sino-Central Asian relations insofar as they are assigned the task of making sense of their respective countries' political and economic relations with China, as shown in Syroyezhkin and Khodjaev's careers.

Although some experts might have traits related to sinological Chineseness as defined by Shih (2018a, 2018b), China experts in Southeast Asia and Central Asia tend to simultaneously show scientific Chineseness. Ethnic Chinese experts in Southeast Asia, specifically, could have claimed the authenticity of their ethnic Chineseness to support their status as experts of China in their current countries. Nevertheless, the majority had to navigate a delicate balance to ensure that they were not perceived as disloyal to their present countries. There is a trend pulling them towards even greater scientific Chineseness, detaching them from an in-group position. Too much in-group position would disempower them in their careers.

In Central Asia, Bulat Sultanov, Director of the Institute for International and Regional Cooperation of the Kazakh-German University and Chairman of the Board of the Belt and Road Expert Club, has expressed that it is safer to write works on Chinese history and culture, but not contemporary problems of China. And if one's public writing on contemporary China is found, the author "can immediately be labelled as Sinophobe or Sinophile" (CABAR 2019b). Both are subject to potential

public scrutiny and criticism. Sinophiles can be subject to more skepticism than Sinophobes. The same phenomenon can be seen in contemporary Europe and America too, particularly when the production of China knowledge becomes politicalized and securitized by governmental agencies and educational institutions, a topic which we will deal with in the seventh chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Revolving Doors Between Research, Journalism, and Politics

Abstract

Hendry Jurnawan has a career that straddles academia, politics, and journalism in Indonesia, which has enabled him to raise awareness of Chinese Indonesians' rights in various ways in society. Mette Holm is a Danish journalist but she is also affiliated with academic institutions and non-government organizations. Her role as the wife of a high-level Danish and international politician has complicated her engagement with China. As agents cannot operate in a vacuum, we also examine two institutions that enable the connection between scholars, journalists, and politicians to create, disseminate, and support knowledge production about China: the Islamabad-based Pakistan-China Institute and the East Asian Institute in Singapore.

Keywords: Hendry Jurnawan, Mette Holm, knowledge production about China, Pakistan-China Institute, East Asia Institute, Singapore

China watchers involve more than scholars. This book covers proportionally more cases of the development of the academic field of broadly defined Chinese studies to look at how knowledge production about China is created in the higher education environment. This does not mean that I ignore the importance of journalists, politicians, and other types of agents who might have similarly become vital sources of information about China in various countries. It is also not uncommon to find cases where scholars move through the revolving doors between the academia, government jobs, business, journalism, non-governmental jobs, and others to extend their networks and influence. The assumption that someone does not have an education in classical sinology or advanced Chinese language skills and thus cannot be qualified as a China expert merits reconsideration.

This chapter looks at individuals whose lives have unintentionally or intentionally revolved in different realms and affected knowledge production about China in their countries. Hendry Jurnawan has a career that straddles academia, politics, and journalism in Indonesia. Mette Holm would probably define herself as a journalist but she is also affiliated with academic institutions and non-government organizations. Her role as the wife of a high-level Danish and international politician, a very important person (VIP), has also complicated her engagement

with China. I have selected only two examples but I am aware that there are a lot of fascinating examples that one can write about, such as Santa Romana of the Philippines, who was a journalist and public intellectual and later became even the Philippine ambassador to China, or Ramesh Nath Pandey, an Indian journalist active in Nepal and India, who later became active in Nepal's politics and its relations with China (Shih 2018a; Clemente and Combinido 2018). Or tracing back to the late 19th century and early 20th century, one could write about the journalist turned university professor, Naitō Konan (内藤湖南, 1866–1934), who is renowned for his periodization of Chinese history (Fogel 1984).

As individuals cannot operate in a vacuum, this chapter has selected two non-Western think tanks to look at their roles in facilitating the work between politicians, researchers, and other producers of knowledge about China. One is the Islamabad-based Pakistan-China Institute and the other is the Singapore-based East Asian Institute. Again, a lot of fascinating examples could also have been included (e.g., the Taiwan-based Institute of International Relations, the China-sponsored Budapest-based China-CEE Institute), but I have to limit myself to two examples in this book.

5.1 Hendry Jurnawan: An Indonesian politician, journalist, and scholar

> Unintentionally, I started professions in three areas all at once. Since graduating in 1983, I immediately became an economic lecturer of Panca Bhakti University, Pontianak. It was from 1984 until now, and at the same time I involved myself actively in politics. From 1984, I became one of Golkar's officers until 2009. In the same year, I moved to 'Nasdem' (NasDem Party/National Democratic Party), which is Surya Paloh's own political party until now. From 1986 until now I have worked as a journalist. I love these three professions – education, politics, and journalism. (Jurnawan 2017)

> All of my three careers were useful for West Kalimantan Chinese people. (Jurnawan 2017)

Hendry Jurnawan (赖民裕) was born in Pontianak in 1952, the capital of the Indonesian province of West Kalimantan, on November 24, 1952. The exact numbers of Indonesians with Chinese descent remain unverified, as many Chinese Indonesians choose not to identify as Chinese for various reasons that will not be explored in this book.[1] The Chinese community in West Kalimantan exhibits distinct characteristics compared to their counterparts in other regions of Indonesia. While

[1] Please check Ayrodiguno and Shih's work (2023) for further information.

the Chinese population is generally a minority in other islands, in the cities of West Kalimantan, they represent a significant portion, surpassing the Dayak, Malay, and other ethnic groups in the region. That said, West Kalimantan is the province with the largest number of Chinese people in Indonesia. In contrast to the predominantly Hokkien-speaking Chinese in Java, the Chinese in West Kalimantan are more diverse, primarily consisting of Chinese who speak Chaozhou (or Teochew, 潮州話) and Kejia (or Hakka 客家話) dialects, with smaller groups speaking Cantonese and Hainanese.

In Indonesia, the Chinese are often stereotyped as economically driven individuals, associated with significant wealth that contributes to social inequality. The wealthiest in Indonesia are frequently Chinese businessmen. Nevertheless, in West Kalimantan, the Chinese community is not limited to trade and business; they are also engaged in various occupations, including farming, mining, and fishing.

Jurnawan is an Indonesian of Chinese descent whose career has straddled academia, journalism, and politics, which has enabled him to raise awareness of Chinese Indonesians' rights in various ways in society (Aryodiguno and Shih 2023). His family has spent many generations rooted in Indonesia. While most Chinese in Pontianak can speak Chaozhou and Kejia dialects, Jurnawan actually spoke Fuzhou dialect (福州話) at home. Jurnawan's father worked for the Kuomintang as a civilian pilot, but he resigned in 1939 due to a vision problem as a result of his eye being struck by metal when he was repairing an airplane. In 1940, all civilian pilots were recruited to become military pilots. Because of his vision problem, Jurnswan's father could not fulfill the requirement to become an air force pilot. When the Kuomintang began to lose the civil war against the communists in China, his father left mainland China by ship for fear of being captured by the communists. Even with this retreat, Jurnawan expressed that his family's position was pro-Republic of China (ROC, also known as Taiwan today) as his mother's side also had connections with the Kuomintang.

Jurnawan's first education was in a Chinese-language school, ZhenQiang (振強小學) Elementary School, until it was closed down due to the Indonesian authorities' policy of restricting the rights of people of Chinese descent. Many Chinese in Indonesia, known as the *Tionghoa* people, did not like to go to an Indonesian-language school because they did not understand that lacking Indonesian language skills would affect their future. Most parents just let their children go into business instead of letting them continue their education in Indonesian schools. Jurnawan's father, a civilian airline pilot for the Kuomintang with rich travel experiences and several linguistic skills, had a different vision. His father believed in the importance of the Indonesian language for his son's future. So Jurnawan continued his education in an Indonesian-language school, despite the initial difficulty due to his lack of Indonesian language skills. Jurnawan eventually took a doctoral degree.

After completing his undergraduate degree, he started his career in the three areas of academia, journalism, and politics. Regarding academia, he was asked to

become a lecturer at the relatively new Panca Bhakti University in 1984. Panca Bhakti university was created in 1983. It was a private university where ninety percent of students were of Chinese descent. Within six years of the university's opening, it had accepted about one thousand students in four faculties: Law, Economics, Engineering, and Agriculture. In the beginning, Panca Bhakti University lacked Chinese lecturers, so when Jurnawan completed his undergraduate studies, he was asked to teach there, and then he established the Faculty of Economy in the same university. During his teaching career, Jurnawan mostly taught marketing and management. Occasionally, he gave a couple of public lectures on Chinese culture and history to the public and government officials. But in his capacity as a lecturer, his production of knowledge about China was not significant. He also intentionally refrained from conducting research on China's development because he was afraid that he would be perceived as being disloyal to Indonesia, and that would undermine his political career.

Interestingly, it is his role as a politician that has more direct connections with Chinese people, as he strove to raise awareness of Chinese people's various rights in the country. Jurnawan was appointed by the Mayor of Pontianak, Colonel Majid Hasan, to join politics after his undergraduate studies. He was given the understanding by the mayor that participating in politics required him to follow the mainstream. In practice, he would have to join the Golkar party, the oldest extant political party in Indonesia. In his view, the benefits of joining politics were that he would then have the opportunity to fight for the rights of the minority and hence help people of Chinese descent in the country.

The mayor of Pontianak at the time was Majid Hasan, of mixed Acehnese and Sundanese ancestry. He was not anti-Chinese. He agreed with Jurnawan that he should do more to help Chinese people who were facing difficulties in the region. At the time, Chinese people there who did not have a comprehensive understanding of politics often fell victim to the authorities' extortion. For example, many Chinese traditional healers practiced their healing work without certification and would often be blackmailed by the Health and Security authorities. Jurnawan tried to help some of the traditional healers to spare them from such extortion.

From 1984 to 1988, Jurnawan was elected to the executive board for the Golkar party at the municipal level of Pontianak. From 1992 to 1999, Jurnawan became a member of the Regional Representative Council in West Kalimantan. The period during which he served in politics overlapped with the so-called New Order era in Indonesia, during which Indonesian President Suharto reigned from 1966 to 1998.[2]

[2] Suharto (1921–2008) was the second and longest-serving president of Indonesia. In the New Order era under Suharto's regime, there were three Chinese board members of the Regional Representative Council in Pontianak and West Kalimantan. The first was Eddy Fajarai (Chinese name: 黎顏輝). He was twenty-one years old when he became the first person of Chinese descent to be elected as a board

Another contribution that Jurnawan made to the people of Chinese descent was helping them obtain Indonesian citizenship. The background was that even when people of Chinese descent had lived in Indonesia for a long time, they were still identified as foreign citizens in Indonesia, which made their lives more difficult. It was hard for them to get a job and have a proper education. "The people disliked us as if we suffered from leprosy," Jurnawan recalled (2017). Jurnawan was able to obtain Indonesian citizenship in 1978, after which he started to pursue his undergraduate studies. In 1980, Suharto's government circulated the Official Letter of Indonesian Citizenship (SBKRI) for foreign citizens to become official Indonesian citizens. The purpose of this policy was to allow the people to be able to vote in the General Election in 1983. At that time, news was not easily accessible. State announcements about the selection of citizenship were communicated only through the radio. In rural areas, radios were rare, let alone televisions. Chinese people were dispersed throughout remote areas of West Kalimantan, especially in Pontianak and Singkawang. The information was announced in the Indonesian language, and there were many Chinese people who could not understand Indonesian, so they knew nothing about this opportunity to obtain citizenship. The content of the announcement on the radio was that Chinese people who did not apply for Indonesian citizenship would remain foreign citizens. As a result, they remained Chinese citizens without realizing that they had had the chance to change such status.

When he was a student, Jurnawan joined volunteer groups to help local Chinese obtain Indonesian citizenship. When he became a member in the Regional Representative Council, he proposed more distributions of SKBRI. SKBRI continued to be distributed, but the quantity was not the same as the first time.

Jurnawan clarified that his work as a politician was not only for Chinese rights, but for all the West Kalimantan people.

> Therefore, in my heart, I cannot be a pro-Chinese person and against non-Chinese. On the other hand, the Chinese are fully aware that I have become an Indonesian citizen and I am not a citizen of China. Of course, there exist boundaries for everything, things I am allowed and not allowed to do. The Chinese did not want to put me in a difficult situation either. (Jurnawan 2017).

member and he served as such in Pontianak for three periods from 1988 to 1997. Eddy Fajarai has already passed away. The second board member was Wijaya Tanda SH (Chinese name: Chen Yong Cheng 陳永城). He became a board member of West Kalimantan province for one and a half periods from 1979 to 1987. Jurnawan was the third and last person in the New Order era to become a board member, from 1992 to 1997. In the second period, 1997 to 1998, the Reformation Era took place after the anti-Chinese riots in 1998—the National Election was re-conducted. Jurnawan did not participate in elections anymore since people hated Suharto and his followers. Jurnawan knew that his chance to win election would be low.

Jurnawan treaded a fine line to make sure that he would not give the wrong impression to Indonesians that he was not loyal to the Indonesian state and people. He worked hard to gain the trust of the Indonesian regime. At the same time, he was a very important person for Chinese people in West Kalimantan. For example, when they were having a hard time in obtaining Mandarin books or magazines, he would use his capacity as a politician to help. The customs and immigration authorities of West Kalimantan permitted Mandarin books to enter because he argued that the books were important for all schools where Indonesians wanted to learn Mandarin. This would not just help the Chinese people in the region.

When Jurnawan was still a member of the Regional Representative Council, he recalled that he was asked by the government to explain why, in the 1980s, many Chinese females of Singkawang and Pontianak went to Taiwan to get married. He clarified that they only wanted to improve their families' financial conditions—rather than being brought to Jakarta to be deceived by criminals to work in the flesh trade. The lives of Chinese people living in West Kalimantan changed because many of them went to Taiwan to get married so that they could send money to their parents in Indonesia to improve their lives.[3]

Even though his parents had connections with the Kuomintang and thus his natal family was pro-ROC/Taiwan in that regard, Jurnawan expressed that in his heart, there was no difference between the old China (ROC/Taiwan) and the new People's Republic of China (PRC), or between Beijing and Taiwan, because he thought that every Chinese was a descendant of the dragon (龍的傳人). He tried to improve his Mandarin skills and even taught the Indonesian language at Guangdong University of Foreign Affairs, using the opportunity to improve his Mandarin. His choice to go to Guangdong was because many Indonesians of Chinese descent in West Kalimantan had come from Guangdong.

Jurnawan's neutral perspective on the new and old Chinas also affected his work as the first editor-in-chief and journalist for the *Kun Dian Ri Bao* (坤甸日報). This newspaper was founded in 2001 by Dhalan Iskan (余士干) of the *Jawa Post*. This newspaper was meant to be the first newspaper in Mandarin language during the post-reformation era, after President Suharto left office in May 1998.[4] After being ruled by Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime for over three decades, Indonesia embarked on a new phase of governance called Reformation (*Reformasi* in

[3] Eventually, the representative of Taiwan in Indonesia required those Taiwanese who wanted to get married to Indonesians to go to Indonesia and apply for visas for their future spouses and get married legally, preventing cases of human trafficking.

[4] Under Suharto's regime, the Mandarin language was forbidden. In Indonesia, there was only one legal Mandarin newspaper under government supervision. It was called *Yin Du Ni Xi Ya Ri Bao* (印度尼西亞日報), and was published by the Indonesian intelligence agency (Jurnawan 2017).

Indonesian). *Kun Dian Ri Bao* aimed to be neutral and had no preference nor affiliation with the ROC or PRC. Jurnawan (2017) maintained that the newspaper did not spread propaganda against either the Taiwanese or Chinese government.

5.2 Mette Holm: A Danish journalist and wife of a VIP

> Before, I was married to a photographer, and we were detained in China in 1991, and they separated us. And, you know how Chinese walls are very thin, so he was on the other side of the wall, and they were shouting at him in Chinese, and he spoke absolutely no Chinese, and he was coughing all the time. And that's probably the worst thing I've ever experienced, because I could hear him clearly, and it was not going well. And he didn't know what they were saying. That, of course, meant that I was basically willing to say almost anything in order to protect him. It was very unpleasant. We got out, both of us, in one piece, and much wiser. (Holm 2020)

Mette Holm (born 1953) was a Danish journalist, activist, and senior fellow at the now-defunct Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in Copenhagen, Denmark. Holm studied anthropology at the University of Copenhagen between 1978 and 1983, where she took most courses related to China. Famous Danish human rights expert, Hatla Thelle, was her thesis supervisor. We will meet Hatla Thelle in Chapter eight of this book, where we will learn about Thelle's work for the Danish Institute for Human Rights, which was then one of the leading human rights institutions in the world. Hatla Thelle has been one of the most important individuals in the effort to do away with capital punishment and torture in China. Holm and her supervisor have kept in touch on and off over the years.

During Holm's studies at the University of Copenhagen, she went to China as an exchange student. There were ten Danes studying with her in China at the time. The context was that Deng Xiaoping had introduced an exchange student system that sent eight hundred Chinese students overseas. Holm (2020) explained,

> the best and brightest Chinese students at the time, the ten most clever went to the US, ten most stupid, which were none the less brilliant, went to Norway, and the next bottom ten, went to Denmark. They all got high degrees and most of them remained and became naturalized (citizens). One returned to China because she was very uncomfortable with living alone in Denmark. The others have remained to become Danish citizens. (Holm 2020)

In exchange, the Danish side sent ten Danish students to China. That is why there were ten Danes studying in China when Holm went on the exchange study (Holm 2020).

Initially Holm was impressed by Chinese culture and feats like the Great Wall and The Long March. However, she soon realized how lucky she had been to grow up in Denmark with all the protection of her rights and so many possibilities to choose from. The realization that in China people lacked these opportunities prompted her to pay attention to human rights issues. Being disillusioned by the lack of opportunities in the field of anthropology at the time, she switched to journalism in 1983 and graduated in 1987. After her studies, she immediately started work at the foreign desk at the Danish National News Agency. In Denmark, journalists are entitled to one week's educational leave a year, and journalists can accumulate those weeks. So, in 1988, she returned to China, traveling around to visit her old haunts. When she returned to Denmark, she was offered a job at the foreign desk of the National Television News. In the following spring of 1989, she went on another two-week course in Japan as part of her educational leave.

In May 1989, there was to be a summit between Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping in Beijing. A colleague and friend of Holm had covered all the summits. He had been a correspondent in the Soviet Union. He decided to pass the torch on to Holm, who was heading to China to assist in reporting on the upcoming summit.

This was one of the biggest events in international journalism in a long time. There were eight hundred journalists flying to China to cover the summit between Deng and Gorbachev, and it was also the first time that a Taiwanese government minister had gone to Beijing to attend the Asian Development Bank's first meeting ever in China. With these two major events, there were hundreds of journalists who would normally not be there.

Holm covered the news until late May, when the director of TV News in Denmark said that while he was pleased with her coverage, she alone had spent half of the annual budget of the foreign desk of the Danish National TV News. Hence, she had to return to Denmark. At that time, nobody knew that China was only at the beginning of a major transformation and that the Eastern European communist regimes would collapse one after the other in the autumn of 1989.

When the June 4 Tiananmen Square incident occurred less than a week later, Holm had to cover the news from Denmark. Some of her Nordic colleagues, such as Yrjö Lansipuro from Finland, remained in China. She kept in touch with her Nordic colleagues in China to get the news covered.

The 1989 reporting was the defining moment of her career. She was on TV news every day for two months (Holm 2020). She became famous in Denmark. As a result, she was able to basically do what she wanted professionally, so she suggested to a major Danish newspaper that she become their correspondent in China. This was the Danish newspaper with the biggest foreign desk at the time, with twenty full-time correspondents based abroad. Out of the twenty correspondents, there

were nineteen men and one woman. She mostly covered news about China, but also other Asian countries.

Clearly, as a journalist and a human rights-minded individual, Holm was not the Chinese government's favorite person. She also noted that the Chinese government did not trust foreign correspondents like her.

> The Chinese think foreign correspondents are spies because their own correspondents might very well be. Many years ago, I visited the People's Daily, and I had this interesting conversation with the editor-in-chief and the head of the foreign desk. They said, ah, but we have correspondents all over the world, and only about twenty-five percent of what they report reaches the media. The main part goes to the foreign department. […] That's just the way they work. So, they could never, and they still can't, get over the suspicion that someone like me is a spy. (Holm 2020)

However, Holm's role as the wife of a Danish VIP made it hard for the Chinese government to openly inhibit her work. Holm's second husband, Mogens Lykketoft, was a Danish minister, speaker, and president of the Danish Parliament as well as president of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).[5] Lykketoft has been in government and politics for most of his life—and thus is considered a VIP by the Chinese government. Holm and Lykketoft met in China in 1993. He was then the minister for finance. He was on an official visit to China, and she was covering the news. They had a lot of interests in common, China being one of them, but also foreign affairs and the world at large. They eventually got married. When it comes to China, Holm said that she has always been on the ground, while her husband, being a high-ranking political figure, would always meet and negotiate with his counterparts in high office. They have written several books together, the first being on China.

When they got married, the Chinese government realized that they could no longer deny her access to China or detain her. It was difficult for the Chinese government to deny her entry to China, or at least Beijing would have to refuse both her husband and her, which they have done on occasion, such as for a trip to Tibet, although they have been allowed into Tibet twice. The only way for the Chinese side to hinder them is to treat them as VIPs in China. In practice that means,

> we get picked up at the airport by a chauffeur driven Mercedes with the tinted windows, and get taken to big hotels, often placed somewhere far from the city. No public transport

[5] Lykketoft was elected UNGA president on June 15, 2015. He presided over the UNGA from September 14, 2015 to September 13, 2016. At the time of his election, he was also speaker of the Danish Parliament, a position that he had held since 2011.

> or taxis, so that we can't really move about on our own. And that's part of the very hospitable side of China, they are generous hosts. And it's also part, of course, of their control. If they place us some 20 kilometres outside Shanghai, in a fantastic resort so that we can't go anywhere. And that's just the way it is. (Holm 2020)

Besides being a well-known journalist and wife of a VIP, Holm worked with the China team at the Danish Institute of Human Rights, where her former supervisor, Hatla Thelle, dedicated her life to human rights causes in China. Holm later became an associate senior fellow at the Copenhagen-based NIAS, which worked very well for both sides. She met many NIAS experts and did a lot of interesting interviews. But she did not really produce academic papers. Her work was mostly freelance work with the Danish Institute of Human Rights and she kept up her connections with NIAS. But she mentions that between 2003 and 2006 she quit journalism to work for the Danish Institute of Human Rights as an information officer to support their work because there was a right-wing government in Denmark that wanted to close down the Institute. Eventually, the Institute survived the crisis.

Holm frequented China and gave lectures. She mentions that she has academic friends in China but sometimes she and her husband have to keep their distance when contacting them might put them in danger.

> My husband and I talked about a good friend, whom we don't get in touch with right now, because maybe it's not the right time for him to be in touch with people like us. That's how it is, and that's terrible. Even if our relationship is totally legitimate, we can't be in touch. Things are not necessarily logical. It depends on the prevailing wind, doesn't it? (Holm 2020)

Despite all the challenges, Mette Holm has been an important figure in narrating and debating about China in the Danish media. She has written numerous books, and one of them has gone to second and third editions. This is an educational book for high school students, originally published in 2001. The book is entitled 'Kina – fra kejserdømme til kapitalisme,' which literally translates to 'China – From Empire to Capitalism' in English. She summarizes her contribution in Denmark as:

> I have been told that it is the most commonly used book in high school in Denmark. Maybe 'the' book on China. […] I have made several hundred public talks, lectures, media reports and the like over twenty years and more. So, I guess, I have contributed to the general knowledge of China. (Holm 2020)

Figure 5.1. Mette Holm and Mogens Lykketoft in Shanghai in 2017. Source: Private photo provided by Mette Holm and Mogens Lykketoft. The photographer is unknown.

5.3 Institutions

Individuals cannot operate in a vacuum. Rather, individual agency is affected by the structure it operates in and agency may further induce changes to the structure. There are always institutions and systems as an arena in which for individuals to operate. After giving examples of individual agents above, I aim to look at two institutions that enable the connection between scholars, journalists, and politicians to create, disseminate, and support knowledge production about China. There are numerous examples, including scholarly associations (e.g., European Association for Chinese Studies), journals and their publishers (e.g., *Orizzonte Cina*, a quarterly journal linked to the Italian University of Turin), and think tanks (e.g., Mercator Institute for China Studies). Due to limitations of space, I offer only two non-Western examples: the Pakistan-China Institute based in Islamabad and the East Asian Institute based in Singapore.

5.3.1 Pakistan-China Institute in Islamabad

> Swaran Singh: China and Pakistan are seen as strange bedfellows. They have nothing in common. You are Islamic, they are atheists, they are regimented, and you are a chaotic democracy. Small country vs big country, weak economy vs strong economy. Even trade is so little, money-making is not the object. So, what is it that you see that makes China such an attractive country?
> Mustafa Hyder Sayed: I think the same question can be asked between the biggest capitalist of the world, America, and communist China. They are the biggest trading partners in the world. [….] My point is foreign relations have been known to defy many norms. This agreement between China and Pakistan is driven by opportunity. Both states stand to gain from this agreement: China will obtain access and Pakistan will gain economic development. If the relationship between the biggest communist and the biggest capitalist is justified, the relation between Pakistan and China is also very understandable. (From oral history interview of Mustafa Hyder Sayed (2017) conducted by Swaran Singh)

Pakistan and China are known to have a warm relationship. Islamabad recognized the PRC almost immediately after its establishment. In 1989, when the UN sanctioned China after the Tiananmen Square incident, Islamabad singlehandedly spoke out against the UN's decision. Even though Islam is the main religion of Pakistan, Pakistan has not fretted about China's handling of the Uyghur issues in Xinjiang. Conversely, Xinjiang has become a vital component of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that will link Xinjiang with Pakistan's Gwadar Port (Shih 2022). Chinese media and publications describe Pakistan as 'iron brothers' (Li 2021) while Pakistanis describe their relations as "higher than the mountains, deeper than the sea, sweeter than honey, and harder than steel" (Chen and Xu 2022).

In this context, the Pakistan-China Institute was launched in 2019 as an Islamabad-based think tank with a lean team of ten to fifteen people in the Islamabad office and six to seven staff in their Chinese office based in Shenzhen, the Silicon Valley of China. The Pakistan-China Institute's operation is substantially sponsored by the Chinese government, although there is no transparent information on the exact numbers. Its executive director, Mustafa Hyder Sayed, comes from a well-connected Pakistani family and has received education in both the US and China. Sayed's first visit to China was in 2011, and he explained that since then, he has visited China many times, once every forty-five days on average (Sayed 2017). The Pakistan-China Institute is unique in being the only think tank created on the basis of Sino-Pakistani relations and working on missions that foster the bilateral relationship. In his capacity as the executive director of this institute, Sayed has become one of the main knowledge producers about China in Pakistan. The knowledge that the institute and himself produce is generally very positive

about China. China is not considered a risk or threat by such knowledge producers. This corresponds in general to criticism from outside of Pakistan and China that Pakistan's elites are zealously stamping out criticism of Pakistan's cooperative projects with China, despite evidence of challenges posed by these projects (e.g., Afzal 2020; Vinayak 2020).[6]

As part of Chih-yu Shih's oral history project, Prof. Swaran Singh from India conducted the interview with Mustafa Hyder Sayed. He is relatively young to be included in the oral history interview but his significance as a knowledge producer about China in Pakistan justifies this choice. Sayed's operation is embedded in Sino-Pakistani relations that have historically been generally positive. The two countries have strong connections even in sensitive areas such as defense. The motive for creating the Pakistan-China Institute was that there was a lack of consolidated relations between the respective civil societies, private sectors, and professional organizations. A platform was needed to bridge that gap. Mustafa Hyder Sayed's father is a prominent Pakistani politician named Mushahid Hussain Sayed, who sought to create the institute as a non-governmental think tank to bring professionals from both China and Pakistan together. Even though the institute is non-governmental in nature, it is clearly well connected through Mushahid Hussain Sayed, who is currently a senator in Pakistan while at the same time being the chairman of the Pakistan-China Institute.

The institute itself operates similarly to Western think tanks in some ways and differently in others. What distinguishes it from normal Western think tanks is that the institute has taken up tasks of cultural diplomacy between Pakistan and China. When Chairman Hussain visited China, he realized the importance of Pakistani universities including Mandarin in their curricula. Mustafa Hussain Sayed (2017) explained:

> He (Mushahid Hussain Sayed) spoke to two or three aspiring teachers in China who agreed to come to Pakistan for this purpose. He then introduced these teachers to private schools that hired them, and that's how he started this initiative in Pakistan. Now many universities have adopted these language classes and we have also started livestreaming these Mandarin language classes.

The institute publishes a bilingual magazine called *Youlin* Magazine, which literally means 'friendly neighbors' in Chinese and basically promotes culture and society from both countries. It is the only magazine in Pakistan that is published in both English and Chinese (Website of Youlin Magazine 2024).

[6] Chinese stakeholders view the strong consensus among Pakistani elites as positive signs, which potentially may protect them from changes in cooperations (Safdar 2024, 2025).

The CPEC project is well documented and actively debated in international media. The role of the Pakistan-China Institute is to facilitate the dissemination of information about this project. As Sayed (2017) articulates, they hope that the media can generate 'a useful discourse' on CPEC and raise awareness of the project in Pakistan.

> With work starting on CPEC, the task at hand is how Pakistan can best capitalize on this historic opportunity. We need to make this development sustainable for Pakistan and Pakistanis. A lot of work needs to be done as this is a recent project and, as you know, the relationship is being defined by CPEC now. (Mustafa Hussain Sayed 2017)

The Pakistan-China Institute's functions as a think tank, a cultural hub, and a link between various political and professional actors in both countries gives Sayed an opportunity to straddle various realms to produce positive images of Pakistan's relations with China. Such knowledge producers are usually questioned in the Western media and academic publications. They are seen as being too close to the Chinese government, and thus lacking independent voices. But there are other non-Western institutions that have the ambition to garner influence in politics but still are highly respected as authoritative knowledge producers about China. The East Asian Institute (EAI) in Singapore is a superb example.

5.3.2 East Asian Institute in Singapore

The last institution to bring up is the EAI. Like the Pakistan-China Institute, the EAI defines itself as a non-governmental think tank. Based in Singapore, the EAI is considered one of the top think tanks in the world. The China watching offered by the EAI did not grow out of the Cold War context, as most think tanks in the US did. Its birth and operation have been affected by political considerations embedded in local Singaporean politics (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b).

The EAI was founded by Goh Keng Swee (吴庆瑞, 1918–2010), former deputy prime minister and former minister of defense of Singapore. After Goh's retirement from politics in 1985, he became a special economic advisor for the PRC's State Council to open up China's coastal cities and tourism (1985–1990). Goh was a politician, scholar, and public intellectual, and he used to have regular Wednesday lunchtime dialogues with the then senior minister, Lee Kuan Yew. He never claimed himself to be a China scholar nor did he ever publish formal academic writings on China. But his rich knowledge about China and insights drawn from his work and networks would qualify him to be an exceptional China expert or China watcher (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b).

In 1983, Goh founded the Institute of East Asian Philosophies (IEAP) to conduct research and promote the values of Confucian ethics, which he contended were

the pillar of several Asian countries' economic success and should be promoted to strengthen Singapore. Goh had in mind that the young generation had equated modernization with Westernization and embraced Western values and lifestyles. In Goh's mind, this was a challenge that had to be addressed for Singapore to maintain its Asian origin and values (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b).

In 1990, Goh appointed John Wong as director of the IEAP, steering the direction of the institute from researching Confucianism to the political, economic, and social development of contemporary China. As a result, IEAP was renamed the Institute of East Asian Political Economy (IEAPE). In 1997, IEAPE was renamed the EAI. While the IEAP and IEAPE were closed-door think tanks for the Singaporean government and kept their research results out of the public eye, the EAI was re-defined as an open academic organization with autonomy within the National University of Singapore. It produces academic research results that are relevant to policymaking (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b).

Prof. Wang Gungwu (王賡武, born 1930) was appointed the first director of the EAI. EAI briefings are circulated to Singaporean government circles regularly. The government also seeks advice from the institute. Even if it has non-government status and autonomy, it clearly has had a strong link to the Singaporean government since its inception. The quality of its work is highly recognized in Singapore, Asia, and beyond (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b). In Chih-yu Shih's oral history project, Wang (2010) clarified that the EAI's aim is to offer reliable and up-to-date information about China, but it is not the EAI's job to help the government deal with China or help China.

> If the West wants to read the information we put out, it's fine if it can help them understand China. We are not just for the Singapore government. Indians are also very happy to read our information and use it to understand China. So, this is not a matter of stance, nor is it about helping the Singapore government or China. We just want everyone to understand China, and anyone can use this information. (Wang 2010)

It is interesting to note that the EAI published a book about the institute's history in 2016. In the book, it was mentioned that Goh had understood that the US had the largest resources dedicated to China watching, due to the US's Cold War work and legacy (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b). Taiwan was also known to have the best China-watching facilities in Asia as it had a real, urgent need to understand its difficult neighbor on the Chinese mainland (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b). Goh even sent a scholar to Taiwan to check Taiwan's major research outputs on China, including those produced by Taiwan's military intelligence unit, known as the studies of *Feiqing* (匪情) or 'bandits,' referring to the communists on the Chinese mainland. Goh reached the conclusion that despite the US and Taiwan's

capabilities, both failed to predict major changes in China, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. This is because the Chinese inner political circles are opaque, and there are simply many known unknowns even for China watchers. What China watchers predict can only be considered speculative, based on whatever information that they could gather. Under the leadership of EAI directors, nevertheless, the EAI tries to recruit the best China experts from China, the US, and the world with the aim of offering empirically based evidence on China (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b).

Unlike its predecessors and unlike the Pakistan-China Institute, the EAI does not promote Chinese culture, or anything related to it, although the IEAP initially did aim to promote Confucianism. In fact, promoting the Chinese language, culture, and Chinese-language education used to be a sensitive topic in Singapore. This is because the city-state wishes to promote a multiracial identity rather than any strong Chinese identity. Singapore, on the one hand, wishes to present the image that it understands China well due to many of its connections with China and its capacity to absorb Chinese talents to work for Singapore, while on the other hand, it keeps a careful distance from its Chineseness to prove its objectivity. EAI experts have both the scientific Chineseness and the sinological Chineseness that we talked about earlier on. But they have strategically used their in-between position and identity as neither Chinese nor the West, but with good relations with both, to carve out a niche in the global China-watching community (Woon 2023).

Chih-yu Shih (2019) has critically questioned this approach by arguing that Singapore will alienate itself from China if it continues to downplay its Chineseness. In the long term, this would affect Singapore's intellectual appreciation of China. In his work, Shih (2019) has compared Singapore with smaller states such as Nepal and Bangladesh. In Shih's (2019) opinion, these smaller states might turn out to understand China better because they "do not have to turn away from China culturally" (Shih 2019: 247). The Pakistan case can be a parallel here.

As we reach the conclusion of Chapter five, we can link this discussion to the overarching objective of the first major part of this book. As noted in the introduction of this book, the first major part of this book, 'CHINA WATCHERS: THE AGENCY & DIVERSITY,' is composed of Chapters two to five. We have observed the variety of China watchers that exists both within and outside of conventional perceptions. In examining the cases of Central Asia and Southeast Asia, we find both types of experts: those who embody sinological Chineseness and those who exhibit scientific Chineseness in their work. It is also evident that the distinction between these two categories is not always clear-cut, as even those experts who may lean towards possessing sinological Chineseness can strategically choose to display more scientific Chineseness in their work. Scientific Chineseness entails a conscious alienation from one's Chineseness to create that image of objectivity. The identity of being

recognized as a China expert seems to play a crucial role in the strategic decisions of many China watchers to exhibit scientific Chineseness. Ultimately, learning the language and immersing oneself in Chinese culture and society may simply serve as methods of signaling one's expertise. Demonstrating sinological Chineseness is one approach to conveying that expertise. In their professional endeavors, China watchers, especially those involved in research, often strive to distance themselves publicly from anything associated with politics, in contrast to politicians and activists. This serves as an additional means of establishing credibility as an expert. The performative aspects of the choices and actions of China watchers may stem from personal decisions, but they can also arise from the pressures and expectations of their work environments and society. They adapt their behavior to align with external expectations regarding the characteristics of China experts.

We confirm the hypothesis that it is not uncommon to see an individual or an institution display more scientific Chineseness to demonstrate objectivity and gain reputation. Singapore's EAI is deemed much more capable of showing this kind of scientific Chineseness than the Islamabad-based Pakistan-China Institute. Similar impulses can be observed in the European Union's (EU) Horizon Europe program's exercise of creating projects that can produce 'independent knowledge about China' (European Commission 2021).

But would 'independent knowledge' or scientific Chineseness hinder or foster a better understanding of China? Chih-yu Shih (2019) seems to believe that sinological Chineseness would work better than scientific Chineseness in helping a China watcher truly understand China. I do not take a stance on this situation but rather wish to invite readers to ponder this question. What is clear is that in the EU and other like-minded Western countries, there is a trend towards scientific Chineseness, and China watching is being securitized to meet that aim. I will talk about the securitization issue in Chapter seven. In the next chapter, Chapter six, I will explore the issue of politicalization of China watching and Chinese studies first. With the discussion in Chapter six, I think that this will better prepare readers to comprehend the question of securitization in Chapter seven.

The Structure where China Watchers Operate

CHAPTER 6

Continuities and Ruptures in Knowledge Production about China

Abstract

The historical legacy of European colonialism affected Brazil's approach to China. European orientalism became Brazilian orientalism. It is not easy to decolonize the orientalist legacy in Brazil. The example of Costa Rica adds nuance to the complication of inherited orientalism in various Latin American countries. However, knowledge production about China can either be continued or ruptured. We see the contrast between the politicalization of China watching during the Cold War with de-politicalization in the post-Cold War era where knowledge production about China in the USA, Russia, South Korea, and Hong Kong experienced ruptures.

Keywords: Decolonization of knowledge, politicalization, de-politicalization, China watching, Brazil, Costa Rica

Individual and institutional agency affects the epistemology of China, but the other direction can also be true: the collective epistemology of China could affect the development of individuals and institutions. Epistemology can be sustained or ruptured in different contexts. Chapter six begins with examples of continuity via three related forces: the legacy of colonialism, traditional culture, and institutionalized bureaucracy.

First, concerning the legacy of colonialism, in this chapter, we will summarize several examples that have been examined in earlier chapters. We will also particularly examine the case of Brazil because we can see the influence of the three forces at play therein. We will see how the historical legacy of European colonialism affected Brazil's approach to China. European orientalism became Brazilian orientalism. Even contemporary Brazilian scholars are conscious of the problem of orientalism; they sometimes still voluntarily or involuntarily reinforce orientalism in their work.

Second, concerning traditional culture, Brazil's strong Christian culture has affected its intellectuals' tendency to understand Confucianism through the lenses of Christianity, which ultimately leads to inaccurate interpretations of Confucianism.

Third, concerning institutionalized bureaucracy, we will see how the educational system's appropriation of Asia and China in its curriculum could become institutionalized and thus complex to change. In addition to Brazil, I show the

example of Costa Rica, a Central American country, to add nuance to the complication of inherited orientalism in various Latin American countries.

After the continuity of epistemologies, I move on to examine the ruptures of epistemologies. During the Cold War era, China watching and Chinese studies were politicalized. This stands in contrast with the post-Cold War era when Chinese studies had more open and fertile ground to prosper. One may argue that the de-politicalization or normalization of Chinese studies and China watching in the years following the Cold War altered the epistemological approaches and methods of understanding China. This tendency will be demonstrated using the United States of America (USA), South Korea, Hong Kong, and Russia as examples. In terms of method and data, I mostly use Shih's oral history data as sources to discuss the situations of continuities and ruptures of knowledge productions. Shih's data further inspired me to check the publications of André Bueno to know more about the development of Brazil's sinology. I also use my own new interviews with young and mid-career scholars in Costa Rica and Chile to enrich the discussion. All things considered, the conversation in this chapter will prepare us for the seventh chapter, which will address the resurgence of politicalization in our current times.

6.1 Hard to eradicate orientalism

At the outset of this book, we mentioned the European expeditions to the Orient that resulted in the birth of European Chinese studies, thus giving Europe certain advantages in developing the knowledge realm. The 'China watchers' of the era were not strictly academically trained sinologists but consisted of travelers, geographers, and missionaries. In addition to documenting their discoveries in Asia, the missionaries' main task was to evangelize. Their scholarly or non-scholarly work regarding China mainly was for the purpose of explaining the cultural differences between Eastern and Western beliefs with the ultimate objective of evangelizing the Chinese. The origin and foundation of sinology or the more broadly defined oriental studies are rooted in colonialism. Even though there have been efforts to denounce orientalist discourses on Asia and China, it is not easy to altogether jettison the epistemological traditions upon which China or Chinese studies were founded (Bueno 2021). I do not try to argue that all imperialist or colonial influences necessarily lead to negative impacts. But the issue of concern here is whether we can develop China studies using local theories, concepts, methods, and talents to speak to local needs on their own terms. In academia, this is now known as decolonization of knowledge production.

Decolonialization of knowledge production should have come with the collapse of many colonial powers in the 20th century, although reality speaks to the opposite.

We see contrasting examples around the world. Take Central Asia for instance: as we have seen in Chapter four, the Russian or Soviet legacies still influence the development of oriental studies in the region deeply. To this day, whether any Central Asian sinology exists at all is still a subject of heated debate. Senior experts tend to think that there is none. There have been a lot of voices about decolonizing Central Asia from Russia, particularly after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. This desire is not limited to the domain of politics but is also presented in various aspects of life. Academically, there have been voices calling for studying Central Asia's foreign policies and international relations in a decolonized way (Dadabaev 2022), meaning that each Central Asian state can exercise its agency and power to navigate international politics without always being subject to Russian influence or the baggage of historical relations with Russia. Academic writings should talk about Central Asian countries' agency in global politics. Similarly, the aspiration of some China watchers to form Central Asia's own school of sinology, despite the multitude of challenges and debates, can be seen as part of the overall Central Asian desire for greater autonomy and capacity to understand China on their own terms and for their own needs.

Kemper and Kalinovsky (2015) observe that Kazakh archaeologists, who had received training at academic centers in the old Leningrad, gradually developed their own research projects in Kazakhstan. This led not only to the birth of a Kazakh school of Orientalists/archaeologists in Alma-Ata (today's Almaty) but also to a reinterpretation of certain aspects of Kazakhstan's history (Kemper and Kalinovsky 2015). Sinology, archaeology, and other fields are lumped together in oriental studies, but sinologists in Kazakhstan have not achieved what their archaeologists have.

In contrast to Central Asia, we may find the field or sub-field of Chinese-African studies more capable of decolonizing knowledge production about China. Scholars in and beyond Africa have started to use the lens of African players to look at contemporary relations between China and African countries. So, we see researchers writing about Africa's cooperative projects, such as those under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) banner from the African perspective, and talking about African actors playing a vital role in initiating and framing cooperation with China to garner Chinese financing and investment (e.g., Chen 2020; Chiyemura, Gambino, and Zajontz 2023). Moreover, African players are depicted as active players in resisting Chinese influence (Pepa 2020; Alden and Large 2018; Mohan and Lampert 2013). Chiyemura, Gambino, and Zajontz's 2023 paper further cautions against a reductionist conceptualization of African agency to the vague notion of state or political elites. There is, in fact, a polymorphy of practices through which various African actors, both state and non-state, influence the terms and conditions as well as the design and construction of infrastructure projects.

In addition to Confucius Institutes (CIs), which tend to impart only positive knowledge about China (Benabdallah 2020; Aukia 2025; Gukurume 2025),[1] there are some African institutions that have taken up the role of imparting knowledge about China with a much more analytical and reflective approach to understand China's presence in Africa (Hoeymissen 2021). For example, at the University of Botswana, there is an undergraduate program in Chinese studies different from the university's CI. This program is the only Chinese studies program in Botswana, and it uses local resources to hire staff to teach and work for the program. There are even more local than international teaching staff in this program (Bolaane 2025).

In order to show respect for the African lens, many analysts and researchers have also started to use the term 'Africa–China' instead of 'China–Africa' in their writings (Zheng and Carayannis 2023). For instance, at the Wit Centre for Journalism of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, there was a Wits China Africa Reporting Project that aimed to improve the quality of reporting on African and Africa–China issues by training journalists. The project's name was changed to the Africa-China Reporting Project in 2016 to emphasize that its home is in Africa and its focus is on Africa (Website of Africa China Reporting Project 2024; Zheng and Carayannis 2023). This is in contrast to the locally known 'brown envelope' journalism financed and trained by China to steer African journalists to write about China in predominantly positive ways (Aukia 2025).

Compared with Africa, Latin America appears to struggle more with decolonization of knowledge production about China. Maria Montt Strabucchi (2023), a Chilean historian specializing in Latin American studies, has examined how contemporary Latin American novels depict China. Her research reveals that authors such as Colombian Santiago Gamboa (2002, 2008) and Uruguayan Gabriel Pervoni (2013a, 2013b, 2014) have incorporated themes related to China into their works. These literary pieces often aim to connect with the Latin American commercial market by emphasizing both the differences and similarities between China and their own cultures. Moreover, these narratives frequently reinforce a Latin American viewpoint shaped by orientalist views, presenting China as an exotic figure while recognizing its rise as a significant global economic force (Strabucchi 2023). In the following, I use the example of Brazil to highlight the problems in Latin America.

[1] There are around sixty-two CIs in forty-seven African countries, with Kenya and South Africa having the most (Aukia 2025).

6.1.1 Brazil: From the Iberian to the American worldview

Brazil, the largest country in Latin America, has inherited its orientalism from Europeans or, as Longobardi (2022) coins it, "an Iberian worldview." Chinese studies in Brazil grew out of the context of European exploration of the world. Brazil was ruled by Emperor Pedro II during the period entitled '*Segundo Reinado*' ('Second Reign' 1840–1889). During the time of the Portuguese empire, Brazil was part of a vast network of intercolonial trade and cultural contacts that connected Europe, America, Africa, and Asia (Bueno 2023). Pedro II himself was a proto-scholar and orientalist. He inspired the interest of Brazilian intellectuals in 'Eastern' civilizations but with orientalist views inherited from Portugal. In the 19th century, the discussion about China in Brazil was centered on the issue of Chinese immigration. Intellectuals had different views and vigorously debated the merits and problems that would arise from Chinese immigration to Brazil. These intellectuals were not strictly sinologists per se, but they used what they could gather at that time, from travelers' testimonies about China and the Chinese to reports about Chinese laborers in various countries to substantiate their positions in the debate (Bueno 2021). It was not uncommon to see orientalist perspectives about China in these discussions.

Fast-forward to the 20th century: in 1908, Japan brought migrants to Brazil and installed the largest Japanese colony in the world (Lee 2018). As Japan and China were in conflict, this stimulated the production of publications on the international relations of China. Again, these were not strictly professional sinological works (Bueno 2021).

During the Second World War, Japan aligned itself with Germany. In 1944, Song Mei Ling (宋美齡), wife of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) even went to Brazil to ask for help in their fight against both the Japanese and the Chinese communists (Bueno 2023). In that context, the Brazilian public became aware of China again and was politically sympathetic to the anti-communist ideology. Chinese culture began to be known to the Brazilian public. For instance, the translations of Lin Yutang's (林語堂, 1895–1976) works were popular among the public (Lin 1945, 1958; Bueno 2021). Lin was then a world-famous author and played a unique role in explaining Chinese culture to the West. Nearly all of Lin Yutang's works were translated into Portuguese by the publisher, Pongetti, which was quite successful and sold out of copies very fast. Lin supported a Christianized and anti-communist vision while attempting to explain traditional China to the West (Bueno 2023). This has led to his success in Brazil. We will return to this issue in Section 6.2.

In the wake of the end of the Second World War, Brazil followed the Americans in rejecting communism and recognized the Republic of China (ROC) on the island of Taiwan as the official representative of China (Longobardi 2022). However, Brazilian governments did not support Chinese studies, believing that this was

a domain reserved only for diplomats. Nevertheless, this did not stop individual Brazilian intellectuals from venturing to the Chinese mainland to investigate what went on there themselves (Bueno 2021).

Academic fields and educational programs in Brazil have been late in including China in the subject of studies. It is only with the contemporary importance of Brazil's international relations with China that China studies start to emerge in different disciplinary studies (Longobardi 2022). Adventurous intellectuals who went to China without Brazilian governmental support in the early days eventually came up with a so-called China-as-Model approach that impacted Brazil's development of sinology. This approach is a practical one, contending that if China was able to lift its country to achieve better development, Brazil, which had similar socioeconomic conditions, could adjust the Chinese model to help Brazil develop (Bueno 2021). These intellectuals are not professional sinologists because Brazilian universities did not have regular courses on China at the time, and most translated work was from Europe. These individuals, nonetheless, did their best to share their observations in China and proposed ideas for Brazil's own development. This practical approach has affected the development of Brazil's own sinology (Bueno 2021).

André Bueno is an important Brazilian sinologist who introduced Confucianism to Brazil (Ciglič 2016). My description of Brazil's situation relies largely on André Bueno's publications because he appears to be the dominant figure in detailing the development of Chinese studies in Brazil. In Bueno's view, while the China-as-Model approach is well intended, it suffers from an epistemological problem. As Bueno (2021: 558) observes,

> Many scholars involved in this idea of "China-as-Model" continue, in a way, to reproduce orientalist stereotypes, believing that they can understand China through literature and theories of Western experts, without needing to learn the Chinese language or analyze the studies done by the Chinese themselves.

Orientalist perspectives are pervasive because Brazilian intellectuals draw their inspiration from translated works from North America and elsewhere without necessarily having a profound grasp of Chinese culture, society, and practices (Bueno 2021; Longobardi 2022). This often leads to the reproduction of orientalist views from the source countries of the translations. Henry Kissinger's (2013) work, for example, is widely read by Brazilian intellectuals, even though he was not a sinologist.

As Bueno notes,

> The dominant assumption of this theoretical line is that China, as an epistemological object, must respond to Brazilian demands in a specific way, without manifesting an active attitude. These stances provoke countless disappointments for the followers of the

> China-as-Model since occasionally China "does not behave" according to its forecasts and analyses. (Bueno 2021: 558)

There have been reformed efforts by Brazilian scholars to suggest that they should prioritize the study of original Chinese sources in their analysis. This does not mean that researchers in this approach would abandon knowledge from the West. Instead, the aim is to develop a new ecology of knowledge that combines Western (in this case, Brazilian) and truly Chinese experiences and views. As the focus is on reading Chinese thoughts directly, it mitigates the problem of being mediated by second-hand orientalist productions. In this vein, it is believed that researchers can find real 'Chineseness' in knowledge. Bueno (2021) laments, however, that even though individual scholars have sought to provide ideas to help Brazilian sinology escape the Western orientalist influence, they have not been entirely successful. In universities, the structures and design of the curriculum are still run by professionals influenced by embedded colonialist thinking. Teachers and students are hindered by the system and cannot find creative space for healthy Chinese studies to thrive (Bueno 2021). We will return to this problem later in this chapter. This sub-section has shown readers the pervasiveness of orientalist views in Brazil's attempt to understand China. The sources of orientalist views are not single. It started with an Iberian influence and added a layer of American influence in modern times. In the following, I intend to show another layer, the traditional culture of Brazil, and how that influences Brazilian intellectuals' (wrong) approach to understanding China.

6.2 Brazilian imaginary of Confucianism

Another obstacle for Brazil's Chinese studies or China watching to decolonize truly is that Brazil's intellectuals and public have projected too much of their history, culture, and contexts into their views of China. A notable example is how Brazil's traditional Catholic Christian culture has affected Brazilian intellectuals' ways of perceiving Confucianism. Brazilian intellectuals are prone to use a kind of religious imaginary to see Confucius and Confucianism. In reality, this means that Confucius has been treated as a kind of biblical Old Testament prophet who knows God but does not know Jesus. Primary ideas of Confucianism are often compared with Christianity in a positive way, as if they share commonalities (Bueno 2015).

As noted earlier, Lin Yutang's work was translated into Portuguese and was well received in Brazil. To name two examples, in 1945, Lin Yutang's Chinese work *Wisdom from China and India* was translated into *Sabedoria de China e Índia*. In 1958, his work *The Wisdom of Confucius* was translated into *A sabedoria de Confúcio*. Both books introduce the Chinese culture and thoughts to Brazilians. One of

the reasons why Lin's translated work was popular was that Lin himself was a Christian. This fact was crucial because it tapped into the Brazilian mentality to see Chinese Confucius and Confucianism as something comparable to the Brazilian religious imaginary. The Chinese were believed to be 'proto-Christians' who would become true Christians one day (Bueno 2015).

In addition, as noted previously, Chiang Kai-shek had sought to elicit support from Brazil in his fight against the Communist Chinese. Around the time when Lin Yutang's work began to be published in Portuguese, a Chinese Catholic priest, Kao Se-Tsien (or Gao Shiqian, 高師謙), also known as Father João Batista (Jean Baptiste), visited Brazil. His Catholic priesthood gave him even more authority than other Chinese figures in the Brazilian context to sustain the claimed linkage between Confucianism, Christianity, and the cause of Sun Yat-sen, the founding father of the Republic of China (ROC) in order to fight against atheist communism. However, the eventual victory of the communist Chinese on the Chinese mainland rendered Kao's efforts a failure. The Brazilian conception of 'China' thus became a failure both in a political and religious sense (Bueno 2015).

In the 1960s, Bueno (2015) explained that there was a time when Confucius and other Chinese philosophers were picked up by some Brazilians again, and with a different kind of religious imaginary. In the hippie movement in the West, some Brazilians, along with other Westerners, looked into Eastern religions for inspiration. Chinese Daoist philosopher Laozi (老子) and Indian mysticism were lumped together to become a kind of 'New Age guru' (Bueno 2015). Some Brazilians saw these Asian figures as a counterforce to the Catholic institution or an alternative belief. Although a different kind of reasoning was used to understand philosophy from the vaguely conceived East, the result is similarly erroneous, barring Brazilians from truly understanding Chinese philosophies, cultures, and religions. This is overall not conducive to the development of the academic discipline of sinology in Brazil.

6.3 Further obstacles: institutionalized educational systems

Although individual scholars have attempted to offer suggestions to help Brazilian sinology break free from the Western orientalist influences and wrong epistemological lens, Bueno (2021) regrettably notes that their efforts have not been entirely successful. Professional administrators and managers with imperialist ideologies still oversee the structures and curriculum design of universities. The system prevents educators and learners from finding innovative spaces that foster the growth of healthy Chinese studies (Bueno 2021).

Other Latin American universities face the same challenge. David Ibarra, a professor trained in China and teaching in Costa Rica, expressed that China is not an

important subject for his country. Due to the university's structure and curriculum, he can only teach general history, nothing specific about China. This curriculum has been handed down from earlier generations and it is difficult to change it.

The immigrant-receiving country of Costa Rica started to receive Chinese immigrants around the 19th century (Mok, Villaneuva, and Esquivel 2013). In the city of Puntarenas, which was the entry port for travelers arriving by ship before there was an international airport in Costa Rica, Hilda Chen Apuy Espinoza (1923–2017) was born the daughter of a Chinese immigrant and a local Costa Rican woman. At a time when it was difficult for a young female to study abroad, she managed to do precisely that and was at one point cultivated at *El Colegio de México* (The College of Mexico), where she learned about general oriental studies. At that time, the Orient for Latin Americans covered not just Asia but also Africa and the Middle East—in other words, anything that was 'oriental' from the Latin American geographical perspective. One of Chen's students, Rina Cáceres, later became known for his scholarship in the study of Latin America and the Middle East. David Ibarra was a student of Rina Cáceres, who asked him to focus on China. So, in a way, one could say that David Ibarra was one of the first generation of Costa Ricans who really started to attend to China. After Ibarra's master's study in the same *El Colegio de México* (2009–2011), he went back to Costa Rica to teach. Later, Ibara continued his PhD at Beijing Normal University in China, specializing in contemporary Chinese history (2014–2017). Upon his return to Costa Rica in 2018, he began teaching at the University of Costa Rica (*Universidad de Costa Rica*), where Hilda Chen Apuy Espinoza had taught before. The syllabus for teaching general history and Asian history has remained similar from Espinoza's era to Ibarra's (Ibarra 2024). In the teaching-focused university, he has to follow the structure and design of existing studies. There is not much chance for him to teach about China.

In terms of research, David Ibarra has worked with colleagues such as Lai Sai Acon-Chan, a professor with a Chinese immigrant background, to study Chinese immigration to Costa Rica (e.g., Soto-Quirós, Chan, and Ibarra 2023). He has also attended events organized by the language-focused CI in his university as well as the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (*Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales*, FLACSO), a regional international governmental academic organization headquartered in Costa Rica. This region-wide organization has cooperated with Chinese institutions, such as the Institute of Latin American Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, to facilitate exchanges for scholars in China and Latin American countries. In 2024, for example, the two institutions co-published an edited volume titled *China y América Latina y el Caribe: Relaciones Multidimensionales y Multinivel* (China and Latin America and the Caribbean: Multidimensional and Multilevel Relations) to explore contemporary relations. But beyond scholarly exchanges and research publications on Chinese immigrants and

contemporary relations, Costa Rica has not developed research outputs centered truly on Chinese studies per se (Ibarra 2024). We will return to this issue in the concluding section of this book.

While the cases of Brazil and Costa Rica are used to show how epistemology can be sustained via inherited orientalism, traditions, and institutionalized educational systems, the following section turns to examples of how epistemology can be ruptured, as in the cases of the US and Russia.

6.4 Ruptures: from Cold War politicalization to post-Cold War de-politicalization of China watching

Politicalization of China watching and Chinese studies has occurred in many countries, although the exact period has varied in different countries. At the outset of this book, I mentioned that the term 'China watching' may have a negative connotation due to its Cold War legacy. During the Cold War, the US dedicated a great deal of resources to watch the communist world, including China and the Soviet Union. The methods and purposes of such China watching can hardly be termed serious sinology. But contemporary Chinese studies and sinology cannot be completely separated from that era of China watching either, as people did move between the political world, academia, and journalism. Knowledge about China was generated and exchanged between these professions. In John Gittings' (1972) recollection of what happened in Hong Kong during that era, he noted that the former British colony was the center of information gathering about the Chinese mainland.

> The gathering of intelligence has been almost a monopoly of the British and the American, at whose tables the diplomatic China-watchers of other nationalities gather for crumbs. In a way all too familiar elsewhere in the Third World, there has been a considerable over-lapping between the journalists, academics and intelligence experts in Hong Kong, in a supple and informal relationship well lubricated by the funds for the subsidy of institutions, publications and free excursions. "Who else is he working for?" is the natural question to ask about the China-watcher. (Gittings 1972: 416)

In that era, both China watching and Chinese studies were simply politicalized. This was not only in the US but also in countries that had close relations with Washington. For example, during the Cold War, South Korea's security strategy, political development, and international relations were strongly influenced by Washington. Most prominent South Korean publications on China at the time focused on understanding communist China and aspects of its international relations that could affect Korea (Moon 2007).

In Russia, which has a longer history than the USA, politicalization was also the main feature of Chinese studies. The conquest and assimilation of Siberia and Central Asia into the Russian Empire meant that the empire needed knowledge to understand these areas. So, funding was provided to finance geographical expeditions, usually headed by well-educated military men such as Vladimir Obruchev (1863–1956) and Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim (1867–1951)[2] to explore Russia's relationship with the East. These talented military men were known for their geographic, ethnographic, political, and economic analyses of these faraway lands through their military expeditions. Thus, the concept of being interdisciplinary was already present at that time but it was understood as combined geographical, economic, military, political, and ethnological knowledge about the East (Voskressenski 2014). These military men may be considered as proto-orientalists.

Previously, when we discussed Central Asia, we noted that Chinese studies, as part of oriental studies, has been treated by the Russians as a kind of practical knowledge needed for diplomatic purposes to help the country's foreign policy actors understand how to deal with non-Western societies diplomatically and commercially. When the Soviet Union was created, its political ambitions to expand the Russian sphere of influence to Eastern Europe, Mongolia, China, and later Vietnam, Korea, and Cuba further resulted in the development of non-Western studies. In Chapter four, I mentioned that the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the Leningrad State University, which is the current-day Saint Petersburg University, is where Chinese Studies in Russia was founded. Sinology was also developed at major geographical centers in Moscow, Novosibirsk, Chita, and Vladivostok (Voskressenski 2014). Kuznetsov (2014) also notes that during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) decided to increase the number of students who could study Chinese in Soviet universities because the USSR hoped to send them to China to help in China's modernization.

Soviet sinology has been highly affected by the political ideology of its time (Kirby 1975; Pisarev 2014). Pisarev (2014) notes that Lenin reformulated Marx's views on socio-economic formations and laid the theoretical foundations for sinology.

[2] Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim was working for the Russian Empire but he later became Finland's most famous military leader and statesman. His expedition in Xinjiang inspired the development of an early generation of sinologists in Finland. His work has also been translated and published in China and commented on by Chinese scholars. For example, the Heilongjiang Education Publisher published an edited book called *Finnish Explorer Mannerheim's Xinjiang Expedition and Research* (芬兰探险家马达汉新疆考察研究) in 2007 and Xinjiang People's Publisher released a translated book called *Collection of Mannerheim's Expedition and Research in Western* China (马达汉中国西部考察调研报告合集) and *Personal Statements of Finnish Explorer Who Went to Western China Hundred Years Ago: Documentary of Mannerheim's Xinjiang Expedition* (百年前走进中国西部的芬兰探险家自述:马达汉新疆考察纪行) in 2009.

According to Lenin, early-20th-century China's mode of production was feudalism (Pisarev 2014). In order to modernize China, Lenin believed that Chinese society needed a bourgeois revolution against their feudal landlords. All Soviet scholars were forced to use Lenin's thinking and anti-feudal approach to understand the historical realities of China, which eventually proved to be a failure (Pisarev 2014).

Like the US and South Korea, with the Soviet Union, we may check the development of Mongolia, which was not formally part of the Soviet Union but had a close relationship with it during the 20th century. Mongolia was a satellite state of the former USSR. After it gained independence from China in 1921, Mongolia established a communist government with strong support from the USSR. As oriental studies started to grow in the Soviet Union, Mongolians who wanted to learn about China also went to the USSR for training. Noosgoi Altantsetseg, a professor at the National University of Mongolia, was trained in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the Leningrad State University. Choijamts Battsetseg, another scholar at the National University of Mongolia, was trained at the National University of Uzbekistan, when Uzbekistan was part of the USSR. Battsetseg's studies at the National University of Uzbekistan were formed in cooperation with the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Academy of Sciences in Mongolia. When the relationship between the PRC and the Soviet Union gradually worsened, Mongolia had tense relations with China too. Hence, at the beginning of the 1970s, it was not possible for Mongolian academics to be trained in the PRC at all (Altantsetseg 2022).

De-politicalization of Chinese studies came around the end of the Cold War in the US, which opened up space for researchers to work on topics that were not solely for political purposes. Studies about China were highly influenced by the general advancement of social sciences in the US too (Mertha 2024). This is not to say that the old China hands went obsolete. But new generations of China experts have more freedom to choose topics of their own interests. The development of modern social sciences, with the birth of many new innovative methodological tools and software that could be used to study both contemporary and ancient China, has also helped these new generations of researchers to create interesting and new perspectives on China. The opening of the Chinese market and society to the outside world further expanded the opportunities for field trips in China. On the one hand, the field is developing well in the US. On the other hand, some American scholars feel that the field has become so specialized that it paradoxically leads scholars to see the 'trees' well but not the 'forest' (O'Brien 2006, 2011, 2018; Mertha 2024).

Meanwhile, in South Korea, Seoul's desire to improve relations with communist countries after the end of the Cold War spurred new interest in China and prompted further development of the field too. The US rapprochement with China in the 1970s encouraged Koreans to further develop the discipline, resulting in

more China-related research publications and the establishment of Chinese studies in Korean universities. But in the 1970s, most Korean researchers still did not have good first-hand data, so they relied primarily on foreign publications from places such as the US or Japan, sorting, revising, and translating them into Korean knowledge production about China. At that time, due to the limited access to the Chinese mainland, Taiwan was the alternative place for watching China (Shim 2023). From 1979 onward, South Korea witnessed the opening up of China to the world and the formal establishment of diplomatic relations of the two countries in 1992 (Shim 2023). It prompted a steady stream of rigorous research on China. The problem of lacking first-hand information was solved with the opening up of China. There was no shortage of Korean students who went to China to receive their education in the new generation (Moon 2007). In fact, South Korea and the US share similar challenges in the contemporary era in the sense that scholars might work on excessively narrow topics as a result of over-specialization. While multifaceted apprehension of China and diversification of interests are positive signs of advancement, if there are too many narrow topics, the field becomes too fragmented (Shim 2023).

If we compare the situations in the US and South Korea with those in the Soviet Union and Mongolia, de-politicalization of Chinese studies came later in the USSR. It was only after the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s that less ideology-driven research could be performed. Contemporary Russian sinologists are more interested in understanding the realities of the pre-modern society of China without having to think about the applicability of any theoretical foundation such as the one imposed on Soviet sinologists beforehand (Pisarev 2014). The new political elites and researchers in Russia have relatively aligned views on China's importance, as after the collapse of the Soviet version of socialism, China appears to be the only country that is still largely socialist and able to modernize well (Voskressenski 2014). Sino-Russian relations were normalized. Later, this further evolved into a Russo-Chinese partnership and nowadays there are even discussions about their over-reliance on each other (Voskressenski 2014; Shakhanova 2024).

With this geopolitical transformation, there have been voices calling for a break from traditional methods of research on China and the start of a new kind of integrated field or interdisciplinary research for Russo-Chinese studies, linking international relations, international political economy, and strategic studies (Voskressenski 2014). It is unclear how Chinese studies, which is still quite a traditional discipline in post-Soviet Russia, can meet the modern challenge of becoming more integrated with other disciplines (Voskressenski 2014). Although new generations of Russian scholars have benefited from the advancement of social sciences in general and the relatively more open environment in which to conduct research, they still face an outdated administrative structure that cannot

facilitate an innovative revolution in Chinese studies. Previously, I mentioned Brazil and Costa Rica's challenges in the same domain. Clearly, like in many other places in the world, research funding has constantly been slashed, partly resulting in a brain drain. There are always talented people who would then prefer to move to more profitable or stable professions. Pisarev (2012) lamented that "Russia has lost its status as one of the most active and serious centres of sinology in the world." We will return to these common challenges for Chinese studies in the concluding chapter, Chapter ten of this book. For now, let us summarize this chapter by concluding that politics has partly, although not entirely, driven continuities and ruptures in knowledge production about China in various parts of the world. Of particular concern in this chapter is the politicalization of China watching and Chinese studies. Geopolitical transformation in the second half of the 20th century caused a break in politicalization, allowing the normalization of China watching and Chinese studies. But de-politicalization is not the same as decolonization. In fact, orientalist thinking is still pervasive and is harder to break free from.

In the next chapter, we will witness the return of a new kind of politicalization in the contemporary era. Although it is unlike the Cold War type of politicalization, its emergence and the ensuing securitization of various China-related research and initiatives pose a new challenge to the China-watching business.

CHAPTER 7

Securitization of China Knowledge

Abstract

Securitization is a concept developed by Ole Wæver to examine international politics, known as the Copenhagen School of Security Studies. To apply the concept of securitization in the field of higher education and knowledge production, we see historical examples in Thailand where imparting knowledge about China was disrupted by the state amid a highly anti-communist atmosphere and great suspicion of Chinese education's threat to the Thai nation-building process. In our contemporary era, securitization of knowledge production about China has intensified, particularly in Europe and North America. This is partly related to China's rising uneasy and sometimes conflictual relations with the West and partly related to the increasing authoritarianism and censorship of academic freedom and exchanges in China.

Keywords: Securitization, higher education, China, research security, knowledge security

Chapter seven is another attempt to provide information about the context where the broadly defined China watchers operate and how it has changed in the current era. The primary driver of the new change is securitization. Since many China watchers would feel uneasy talking about this current and widespread issue in public, I have chosen not to use a lot of oral history interviews in this chapter. Fortunately, there are enough media reports and policy papers to support the background information that I plan to present.

My position statement would be relevant in this chapter too, as I have been a scholar working on China in Finland. I have experiences in discussing securitization issues and being asked for opinions in Finland and at the wider EU level. I hear views from university administrators, university leaders, government officials, diplomats, and journalists, as well as broadly defined colleagues, who are researchers in many countries around the world. So, I could have written this chapter from an insider perspective, but that would put many people in potential danger. So, my approach is to write it mostly from a third-person perspective.

To start with the discussion of securitization, I return to something that was left undiscussed in Chapter four when looking at China experts in Central Asia. The career development of Central Asian China watchers is driven by the needs of the countries that offered them chances to advance. Some of them had the opportunity to contribute their views to the country's policymaking. For example,

in Kyrgyzstan, three former foreign ministers (Muratbek Imanaliyev, Kadyrbek Sarbayev, and Erlan Adbyldayev) were sinologists. The current Kazakhstani president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, is also believed to be a sinologist with the ability to speak Mandarin (CABAR 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). The highly respected Kazahstani sinologist, Konstantin Syroyezhkin, was the main scientific consultant for President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazahstan. In the past, when Tokayev was prime minister, Syroyezhkin gave advice to Tokayev when China negotiated the demarcation of borders with Kazakhstan (Radio Free Europe 2024).

What is striking is the news of Syroyezhkin being arrested by the Kazakh authorities in 2019 and sentenced to ten years in prison on the charge of violating Part I of Article 175 of the Kazakh Criminal Code, which is 'high treason' (Radio Free Europe 2019; Grove 2019). This book will not speculate on the intriguing case of Syroyezkhin as this is beyond its scope, but the issue that I try to cope with here is whether this is related to the mounting securitization of China research and knowledge production about China in Kazakhstan as elsewhere in the world.

Syroyezhkin was the author of more than one thousand publications on China and Sino-Kazakhstani relations, written in Russian, Chinese, and English. Oral history interview data revealed his in-depth expertise and experience with China. His views of China are generally believed to be critically grounded in in-depth observations. When Syroyezhkin was arrested in 2019, he was sixty-three years old. The charges were not made public. Local and Western media have speculated that he was accused of passing classified information on to Chinese nationals. A Kazakhstani law adopted in 2017 enables the authorities to strip a person of citizenship for 'damaging vitally important interests of Kazakhstan' (Radio Free Europe 2019; Grove 2019). Hence, in addition to his sentence, which would be served in a maximum security prison in Kazakhstan, he was stripped of citizenship. Reports indicated that he would be barred from being in Kazakhstan for five years after he served the sentence. There was a possibility that he would be involuntarily deported to Russia after his release (Radio Free Europe 2019).

In 2024, he was released on parole (Radio Free Europe 2024). He reportedly went back to Almaty after that. Since his release, he has been living with his sister because his own flat was sold while he was behind bars. Since his release and subsequent presidential pardon,[1] he has stayed in Kazakhstan, and there is no indication that he has gone overseas (Orda.kz 2024).

Syroyezhkin is not now employed by the government in any official capacity. As an independent expert, he has been interacting with the public and media

[1] In September 2024, Syroyezhkin received a full pardon from President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. This effectively lifted all remaining penalties from his conviction, erased his criminal record, and restored his civil rights.

instead. For instance, he spoke in-depth about Kazakhstan–China ties, his experiences, and the facts of his case in an interview with a Kazakh news organization in January 2025 (Orda.kz 2025). In these public remarks, Syroyezhkin continues to claim his innocence in relation to the treason accusations and insists that he has never betrayed Kazakhstan. Instead of holding an official position, he now mostly shares his knowledge of China and Central Asia through comments and interviews.

Various rumors and speculations about Syroyezhkin's case also point to the possibility that Syroyezhkin was actually spying for Russia, not China. As there is not enough public information for journalists to report about this case, this news appears mostly in local and regional news (e.g., KazTAG 2024). It is not highly visible internationally except for reports from the *Wall Street Journal* and *Free Radio Europe*. Thomas Grove's (2019) article in the *Wall Street Journal* suggests that this detention was a signal to Beijing from the Kazakhstani political establishment, showing the red flags of what is allowed and not in the country when it comes to China cooperation (CABAR 2019c). It is very difficult to write about this case due to the lack of public information. However, whatever the truth might be, Syroyezhkin's case definitely shows that there is some kind of 'appropriation' of China as risky, and hence any research that has to do with it has the notion of 'risk.' The risk could be so high that it is seen as violating some kind of national security, hence the need to securitize the study and the researcher.

7.1 Appropriation of China as risky

Appropriation of China has been a constant phenomenon throughout history. Even China watchers who are supposed to be neutral have been doing this, consciously or unconsciously (Klotzbücher 2023). In different historical periods, however, China has been appropriated differently. In the 20th century, many European sinologists have approached China because of their interests in Maoism. These sinologists have imagined China as a kind of anti-modernity or alternative modernity, offering answers to the ills of the Western or capitalist societies that these China watchers did not appreciate (Klotzbücher 2023; Holm 2020). Later on, in the late 20th century, when China underwent reforms to open up, China watchers and people working for educational institutions in Europe looked at China as a potential market (Klotzbücher 2023; Lee 2023). A growing materialistically affluent society was imagined and appropriated as 'China' (Klotzbücher 2023). Contemporary courses on China and expertise had been growing in Europe.

In the United States of America (USA), China has been appropriated differently in different historical periods too. There was a plethora of resources for China watching during the Cold War, as noted previously. Many old China hands there

would remember how China was appropriated as a risky option in the McCarthy era. Anti-communist fervor pushed them to show loyalty to the US government by opening displaying hostility towards any communist regime (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b). They had to be politically correct in their work for fear of being deemed as communist sympathizers. The post-Cold War era eventually de-politicalized the study of China, giving the younger generation of China watchers more freedom to decide what to study about China and how to talk about China.

Sometimes risks are associated with communism. But at other times, there have also been cases where some sort of racism or fear of the other have pushed China to be seen as risky. The fear about China in a broader context has always been present throughout history in various parts of the world. The fear of the 'yellow peril' is nothing new.

In the more contemporary era and in Central Asia at least, I have noticed that outsiders may find it hard to ask Central Asian scholars to share their views about China. There is some kind of mystical secrecy surrounding 'the discussion about China,' as if 'China' is not public knowledge to be shared easily. Perhaps because most Central Asian states have had no real experience with democracy and freedom of expression, and perhaps because the discussion about China would involve commenting on their respective governments' often opaque handling of China relations, there is a sense of fear and thus a taboo against talking openly about China.

As this book is being written, education on China, and anything that has to do with Chinese studies and China studies, is being seen through the lens of risk again. There is a growing fear that cooperation with Chinese educational partners, involving either individual experts or institutions or both, involves risks of various sorts. The types of risks vary depending on the disciplines involved. They could cover intrusion on academic freedom, increase of (self-)censorship, intellectual property theft, espionage, and other forms of hostility (Baum and Ma 2023). This section does not aim to cover all of these potential risks in detail as there are numerous policy papers, academic articles, and media debates on them. What this book seeks to highlight is the general trend of securitization of knowledge production about China in some parts of the world in our current era.

This trend arises in a much more unique context than in other past periods. With globalization and the unprecedented economic rise of China, China is becoming part of 'us' in many societies. What does this mean? Back in the 1950s to 1990s, China was studied as an object 'out there.' Nowadays, with China's growing international outreach and interactions, China is no longer as isolated as it was before. It is no longer sufficient to study China as an object of investigation, without any relationship to 'us.' China has become part of 'us' or wants to be part of 'us' (Klotzbücher 2023), such as the pervasive presence of Huawei and its 5G development in various countries of the world. Huawei's presence has increasingly been seen as a risk, and

it is thus subject to various degrees of securitization in different countries (Kroet 2024; Berman, Maizland, and Chatzky 2023; US Government Information 2018). We can look at securitization of knowledge production about China in similar ways too.

7.2 Securitizing knowledge production about China

Securitization is a concept developed by Ole Wæver (1995) to examine international politics, known as the Copenhagen School of Security Studies. Security issues are not simply 'out there' but require certain actors and stakeholders to raise awareness of the issues, articulate them as problems and threats, and then further promote measures, regulations, and actions to securitize the issues which are the subject of debate. For instance, immigration as an issue can be securitized to become a topic of high political concern (e.g., Ceyhan and Tsoukala 2002; Bello 2022). When some securitizing actors address certain issues to a particular audience group, push them to agree on the nature of the threat, and support taking measures to tackle the threat, they do not always succeed immediately. There will be an audience that refuses to securitize the matter. Hence, a process of articulation, communication, and negotiation among supporters and opponents is expected. Underlying securitization theory is the belief that not all issues are threatening in themselves. However, if there are efforts to refer to them and frame them as security issues, these issues might become security problems (Pinna 2024).

To apply the concept of securitization in the field of higher education and knowledge production, we see historical examples in Thailand (see Chapter three), where conducting research on and imparting knowledge about China were disrupted by the state amid a highly anti-communist atmosphere and strong suspicion of Chinese education's threat to the Thai nation-building process. In our contemporary era, securitization of knowledge production about China has intensified, particularly in Europe and North America, or the so-called vaguely conceived 'West.' This is partly related to China's rising uneasy and sometimes conflictual relations with the West and partly related to the increasing authoritarianism and censorship of academic freedom and exchanges in China (D'Hooghe and Lammertink 2020). Greitens and Truex (2020) conducted an original survey of over five hundred China experts and reported that repressive research experiences are rare but real (Greitens and Truex 2020). Visiting China has become a problem for many China watchers. Some of them have experienced being denied visas, invited to tea (i.e., being invited to be interrogated by Chinese security officers), denied access to archives, and other unpleasant experiences (Greitens and Truex 2020).

In the US, geopolitical tensions have not just affected US-based China experts but also had a chilling effect on collaboration with China in various ways. The US

is one of the earlier countries to have tried to scrutinize Confucius Institutes (CIs). From the Obama to Trump and the Biden administrations, there have been intensifying efforts to restrain the operation of CIs, as evidenced in the enforcement of the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (US Government Information 2018), the 2021 Innovation and Competition Act (US Congress 2021a), and the 2021 Confucius Act (US Congress 2021b). Essentially, US universities were forced to make a choice between substantial US governmental funding or China's smaller CI funding. American universities that have received federal funding need to prove that they do not use federal funding to fund Chinese language education. This is practically difficult as usually federal funding covers the overheads of the entire university, which normally would also cover support for Chinese language instruction (Li 2024; Li and King 2024). The US pressures on CIs was followed by similar measures in India, Japan, Australia, and the United Kingdom (UK). Besides Chinese language instruction, scholars have noted that general US collaboration with China and Chinese experts have been put in peril due to various securitization measures from the US government (Baum and Ma 2023; Tsai 2023).

In Europe, similarly, D'Hooghe and Lammertink (2020) illustrate that in comparison with 2018, today's higher education and research cooperation takes place in a political climate where there is far more criticism and skepticism of Chinese policies and behaviors. Some of these criticisms are based on evidence, but others could be based on imagination or distorted facts.

The COVID-19 pandemic and political spats between China and the West regarding the origin of the pandemic and its management did not help improve relations either. From technology transfer and investment to higher education, China is not just deemed as a competitor in North America and Europe. Western governments, societies, and media have also noted dubious, if not entirely illegal, actions from China in influencing different spheres of their societies, one of them being education and the production of knowledge about China.

But China is not entirely to be blamed for this development (Cai 2024). Without the consent and cooperation of certain European stakeholders, China cannot just exert its influence on European soil. Even in the economically more developed parts of the West, a lot of higher education institutions have struggled to meet their mandates with limited resources. Various higher education institutions are involved in research and dissemination of knowledge on contemporary China in Europe and North America. However, there is a gigantic inequality of resources among these institutions in different countries, resulting in unequal competence, expertise, and distribution of knowledge at the country level. Moreover, many junior and junior-to-mid-career researchers live in uncertainty as contracts are not secured for the long term. Constantly having to worry about job changes and career alternation does not help them focus on improving their research quality.

This challenge was reflected in the European Commission (EC) document 'Upgrading China Knowledge in Europe' (2020). This document uses data to show that European knowledge about contemporary China is mostly produced and upgraded in the UK, but has become less accessible (due to Brexit) in Germany, the Netherlands, and France, with Eastern and Southeastern European universities having the least capacity to contribute to the cause. Nordic countries such as Finland and Denmark have an impressive corpus of publications on China in natural scientific fields, but not in humanities and social scientific research on China. Humanities and social sciences in Nordic countries face similar resource constraints as in Eastern and Southeastern European countries.

Excluding the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, and France, few higher education institutions in the European Union (EU) member states are truly well endowed with rich resources for sustainable research and education. Well-endowed actors can more easily obtain even more resources, which results in persistent inequality of resource distribution. Actors with fewer resources struggle to meet their mandates for education, research, and social impact. Very often, the quality of delivering these results is compromised, hampering advanced development of European knowledge about China.

This uneven competence in China expertise in the educational sector affects international politics too, because it weakens the position of the entire EU when certain member states lack the capacity and know-how to properly evaluate, analyze, and manage China relations.

This leads to the second challenge, which is that some institutions have relied on Chinese state funding, mostly through CIs, China-sponsored cultural centers, or less institutionalized Chinese funding to support their study programs. It has been pointed out by the aforementioned EC document 'Upgrading China Knowledge in Europe' (2020) that the commonly known problems related to CIs are actually experienced differently in different institutions. One cannot overgeneralize and over-politicize the problem. However, independent European resources are believed by European policymakers to help minimize the potential problems associated with Chinese state funding and help European institutions become more mature in their development of education and research on China.

Similar voices can be heard beyond the West as well. In Chapter three, we mentioned the prominent Thai sinologist, Prapin Manomaivibool. She similarly expressed,

> I doubt if our country is developing in the right direction in terms of Chinese language education. We willingly embrace all volunteer teachers and accept every offer from China indiscriminately. This is why when the Office of Basic Education wanted to improve the quality of three hundred Thai teachers to teach Chinese in public schools, I willingly went

> in to help, right from the process of selecting three hundred Chinese major graduates to spending one year studying in China and returning to teach in schools. (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021)

Returning to Europe, one has to understand that CI funding is not mainly for research or education on contemporary China. In most cases in Europe, it is for supporting Chinese-language education with free tuition by language teachers and resources from China. CI funding can only partially support academic activities such as seminars on China, at least in quite a lot of (albeit not all) European countries. But of course, the nature of such funding means that academic topics and discussions can be censored if Chinese state interests become involved (e.g., see Pedisic's 2025 report on Croatia), and educational institutions may lack full autonomy in organizing academic events in the CI context. In the whole of Europe (not just the EU), there are also CIs that directly fund and operate as an academic unit to offer degree programs (e.g., in Iceland, which is not an EU member state). The teachers sent from China are normally not academically trained at the doctoral level, but they offer courses in degree programs. Universities in these countries do not seem to have strong incentives to move away from Chinese state funding or to even think about at least building up a parallel independent knowledge capacity on China.

To summarize, the causes of the lack of (advanced) independent knowledge on China and capacity to conduct research on China are complicated. Not all of them can be blamed on China. However, as international relations between China and the West have become more contentious, more discussions in the West have arisen regarding how to fix these problems. International politics generates the need to 'independently' study China. In conjunction, there is a surge of securitization of knowledge production about China.

Specifically, not only has the soft power problem in relation to CIs become more visible in public debates, but there are also more serious problems being identified as related to China and other authoritarian states. They are framed as 'foreign interference' in a country's education, including illicit technology and knowledge transfer, disinformation spread in education, espionage in relation to students, researchers, and staff, and other types of influencing and lobbying by foreign actors in the educational sector.

7.2.1 The EU and member states

In the EU member states, the aforesaid risks and challenges are not unknown to people working closely in areas of higher education and research collaboration. However, several notable catalysts have exacerbated the issues and pushed for wider debate and even securitization in recent years. For instance, regarding CIs in

particular, the Free University of Brussels (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, VUB) decided not to extend its CI agreement after a former Chinese director, a renowned former professor at Renmin University of China, was accused by Belgian security services of being a recruiter for Chinese intelligence in Belgium (Galindo 2019). Although the accused later appealed and was able to change the verdict (Januzi 2020), the reputational damage to CIs had been done in Europe, and CIs are now seen to pose a high potential risk to European security. In another incident in 2019, the Czech-Chinese Centre at Prague's Charles University had to close because of the accusation that the university had received secret payments from the Chinese embassy to the Czech Republic (Prague Post 2019). Examples like these were watched closely by higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe and in the wider West.

Gradually, several actors have been pulled in to engage in defining these risks associated with China collaboration and knowledge production about China, prompting them to brainstorm on how to tackle these problems. The major players are the EU, member states' governments, member states' funding agencies, research institutes like the Leiden Asia Centre, HEIs, and research-performing organizations, and scholars. To a lesser extent, civil society, think tanks, investigative journalists, and the media have also played their due roles (D'Hooghe and Lammertink 2020). Several developments were notable in this process.

In 2018, the EU published *EU-China: A Strategic Outlook* (European Commission 2019). This document redefined its relationship with China. It is a shift in the sense that the EU clearly defined China as a systemic rival in that document. And such development has gradually spilled over to EU–China higher education and research cooperation, resulting in greater awareness of the challenges and risks in cooperation (D'Hooghe and Lammertink 2020; Pinna 2024). Subsequently, the Joint Communique following the fourth EU-China High Level Innovation Cooperation Dialogue, which was held in April 2019, tried to cover issues such as research integrity, intellectual property protection, research ethics, and reciprocity (European Commission 2019). In response to the EU's 2019 Strategic Outlook, the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation organized an event on knowledge cooperation with China. This event prompted ideas for a comprehensive approach to tackling foreign interference in European higher education and research institutions. This meeting also stimulated the preparation of EU guidelines to deal with foreign interference in higher education and research environments (European Commission 2020). EU member states and many higher education and research institutions, such as the League of European Research Associations, an association of twenty-three European research universities, have supported such development (D'Hooghe and Lammertink 2020). In 2022, the European Commission published *Tackling R & I Foreign Interference: Staff Working Document*. The document offers a non-exhaustive list of mitigation measures to help stakeholders to develop a

comprehensive strategy regarding so-called 'foreign interference' in the research and education environment.

While the above depiction seems to reveal a smooth process of securitizing China-related higher education and research cooperation, stakeholders held different views and underwent processes of negotiation and compromise. Not every stakeholder agreed to emphasize the risk aspect. In fact, if any reform entailed great change to the current cooperation and arrangements to conduct research on China and cooperate with Chinese partners, most HEIs were initially reluctant to reform. Some held the view that too much emphasis on risk would create a harmful environment for doing anything further with Chinese collaborators (D'Hooghe and Lammertink 2020). Views were mixed and even though there were proposals to harmonize the efforts, stakeholders commonly believed that there is no one-size-fits-all approach (D'Hooghe and Lammertink 2020). This resulted in different and uneven actions being taken in EU member states (Pinna 2024). Even though the EU has issued different recommendations, not all member states' policies are aligned with those of the EU's. For example, the issue was less debated in France. Even though there was an understanding of the problems, no guidelines were issued in France (D'Hooghe and Lammertink 2020). Italy's approach is nuanced, seeking to balance between the EU's securitization measures, national interests, and historical ties with China (Pinna 2024). Hungary sees China cooperation as opportunities in general and does not see any risk and thus no need for securitization (Pinna 2024).

The Netherlands is one of the pioneering countries in regard to aligning itself closely with EU recommendations (Pinna 2024). The Dutch government released its China policy paper in 2019. In addition to noting the government's political and economic approach to China (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019; D'Hooghe and Lammertink 2020), the Dutch China policy paper noted risks in higher education cooperation, such as political interference, lack of academic integrity, and unwanted technology transfer. The Leiden Asia Centre, an independent research center affiliated with Leiden University in the Netherlands, also published several detailed reports on this topic (D'Hooghe, Montulet, de Wolff, and Pieke 2018; D'Hooghe and Lammertink 2020). In 2019, the Hague Center for Security Studies published a *Checklist for Collaboration with Chinese Universities and Other Research Institutions* based on the findings of the 2018 Leiden Asia Centre Report. Following this, Dutch universities and later other universities in the EU started to follow suit. Prior to this, European research universities generally did not have specific policies in place for China (D'Hooghe, Montulet, de Wolff, and Pieke 2018). In 2020, a report by a Dutch think tank 'Clingendael,' also known as the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, further showed the increase in Chinese censorship in academic publishing and self-censorship with regard to China among Dutch scholars (D'Hooghe and Dekker 2020). In 2021, the Dutch General Intelligence and

Security Service issued a report warning of cooperation with China. In 2022, the Dutch National Contact Point for Knowledge Security (2022) issued the National Knowledge Security Guidelines, and in 2025, the Knowledge Security Screening Law to protect against foreign interference in research came into effect.

Elsewhere in the EU, in 2020, the German Rectors' Conference, a group that includes more than thirty German HEIs, adopted a document called *Guiding Questions on University Cooperation with the People's Republic of China.* In 2020, the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education published *Responsible Internationalization: Guideline for Reflection on International Academic Collaboration* (Shih, Gaunt, and Östlund 2020). In 2021, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture published *Recommendations for Academic Cooperation with China.*

Some of these guidelines are specifically focused on China cooperation, such as those produced in Germany, the Netherlands, and Finland. But the Swedish approaches are different in the sense that their documents can apply to other countries that might raise risk concerns as well. They are not solely about China. It is also worth noting that not all of these guidelines were directly produced by their governments. Some were produced by large university associations, such as the German one. Hence, one cannot say that all of these documents are directly related to government policies. Furthermore, some documents go into greater detail while others are more general in language. Who has the responsibility to implement the guidelines is often left undefined, as these are not legally binding documents (D'Hooghe and Lammertink 2020).

Securitizing measures are in practice hard to carry out not just because not all of these documents are legally binding. University administrators and government officials also have a steep learning curve and need to adjust to the new 'culture' of trying to regard cooperation with China as a risk. There are also concerns about overt and mistaken racialization of the issue, labeling everything Chinese as a risk. In addition, some university administrators and researchers are hesitant about further securitization, arguing that if more control measures are put in place, academics will lose some of their academic freedom because they will have to disclose many things to the university and governmental authorities (de Bruijn 2023).[2]

Nevertheless, in the broadly defined Europe, including the EU, member states, and the UK, the discussion and coordination of policy improvement to enhance research security or knowledge security is ongoing. In 2024, the EU member states further adopted a recommendation to ensure that "international research and

[2] In November 2024, there was news about Australian secret services asking Australian scholars to spy on Chinese students in Australia, which led to a discussion about the counter-productive effect of over-securitization (Dziedzic 2024).

innovation cooperation can take place in a way that is both open and safe" and that measures would be put forward to "protect research and innovation from misuse" (European Commission 2024).

The US has keen interests in persuading and helping like-minded countries in Europe and elsewhere to step up the securitization of various kinds of research and educational cooperation with China. In particular, as the US–China rivalry in science and technology heats up, the US has asked that its allies monitor technology transfer more carefully, control Chinese acquisition or illegal theft of sensitive technologies, and limit dual-use technologies. Although the scope of these securitization measures is beyond the issue of China watching that this book explores, I believe that we need to address them because securitization has many uncertain impacts that will hinder research cooperation with Chinese researchers and access to China, which will ultimately limit China watchers' capacity to analyze, write about, and narrate China in the long run. In the following sub-section, I look into other non-European countries' similar efforts and see how securitization measures have been diffused to other parts of the world.

7.2.2 Like-minded states' securitization efforts

In the US, there is already a security clearance system that restricts those who can work on sensitive research topics. Universities and research organizations that do not report funding from foreign sources will be cut off from governmental funding. In 2024, the US National Science Foundation (NSF) further announced a five-year plan to set up an NSF SECURE Center, led by the University of Washington with support from nine institutions of higher education to "serve as a clearinghouse for information to empower the research community to identify and mitigate foreign interference that poses risks to the US" (US National Science Foundation 2024). Similar securitization ideas have been diffused to countries such as India, Japan, Australia, and Canada. But each country is at a different stage of policy discussion and preparation for actual measures. The years of 2019 and 2020 are generally the time when many countries started to have some securitization documents. The examples below are not exhaustive, but they do give us an idea of how the diffusion occurs across countries.

In the broadly defined West beyond the EU, the UK has also experienced greater tension in the sphere of higher education cooperation with China as a result of overall geopolitical tension between China and the West, let alone its stance on supporting Hong Kong, which has also caused a schism with China (Brown 2020). Universities UK (2020), a collective universities group voicing British universities' interests, released a document called *UK-Managing Risks in Internationalization: Security Related Issues* in 2020. The document was updated in 2022. In Australia, the Department of Education published *Guidelines to Counter Foreign Interference in Australian University Sector*

in 2019. In the same year, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (2019), a think tank, launched the China Defence Universities Tracker, to allow open access checking of Chinese institutions that are engaged in military or security-related science and technology research. A university decision maker can thus, for instance, check the tracker before deciding on whether to cooperate with certain Chinese institutions.

Beyond the West, India, for example, has also started various securitization discussions in higher education. In October 2019, the Indian government's University Grants Commission issued a circular asking universities to obtain approval from the central government before offering courses in association with any Chinese institutions. In early 2020, based on Indian security agencies' warning about Chinese influence in higher education in the country, the education ministry further announced that it would review CIs as well as fifty-four Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) signed between India's prestigious educational institutions, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology and the National Institutes of Technology, and Chinese institutions (Gupta 2020; Kamalakaran 2020). This came in the context of, first of all, similar heightened discussions about securitizing educational cooperation with China in other parts of the world, and secondly, due to intensified conflict along the Indian–Chinese border that aroused strong anti-China sentiments in India (Gupta 2020; Kamalakaran 2020).

In 2021, Japan was reported to be using new measures to prevent the theft of advanced technologies by foreign countries like China. This is considered part of Japan's efforts in boosting national security. Japanese and foreign researchers would have to seek government approval before they could access civil–military or so-called dual-use research and technologies. In addition, there would be tighter visa scrutiny for Chinese students and researchers.

Tokyo's increased monitoring of Japanese and foreign researchers is set against the background of the US government accusing Beijing of using generous funding schemes such as 'Thousand Talents' and other programs to attract foreign talents to work in China or work on research projects while affiliated with Chinese institutions. Through these schemes, Beijing has brought many Chinese scientists who were working on cutting-edge technologies back to China. In a report written by Kakuchi and Sharma (2021), around forty-four Japanese scholars have been involved in the Thousand Talents scheme and some reported pressure to produce publications while affiliated with Chinese institutions and that the Chinese universities were constantly checking their performance. In international practice, it is not rare for grant-receiving scientists to be under pressure to publish and report their performance to grant-giving and/or grant-administrating entities. But the controversy around the Thousand Talents schemes here seems to be around China's motive in using the grants to force scientists to share the results of cutting-edge technological findings and know-how, thus leading to Tokyo's decision to tighten controls.

Kakuchi and Sharma's (2021) report also points out mixed views from Japanese researchers about the new securitization measures. While the Japanese government might have good intentions, in reality, it is hard to detect all the problems. The Chinese system and tactics are opaque. Japanese scientists express appreciation of their Chinese peers' work and their desire for continuous collaborative work. There is a recognition that China is already a leading player in several scientific fields and that cutting the collaboration will only harm Japan's development (Kakuchi and Sharma 2021).

Securitization continues to diffuse to other countries. In 2024, the Canadian government released a new security policy which was believed to be the most detailed policy in the West so far to counter the same perceived challenge (Government of Canada 2024). Canada released a narrower initiative back in 2021, focusing on engineering council grant applications. The new 2024 policy aimed to be much broader. It denies federal Canadian funding for 'sensitive' research projects linked to any of 103 foreign universities and institutions in China, Russia, and Iran that Ottawa said would pose a national security threat. These institutions are on the government's so-called 'Named Research Organization List' (Government of Canada 2024). Grant applicants are required to disclose more of their work, and the Canadian security service will randomly double-check cases in the future. A broad range of academic disciplines is covered in the regulations, including artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and biomedical technologies. The measures include actual punishment mechanisms such as the axing of a researchers' present and future funding if they are found to be non-compliant with the regulations (Boutilier 2024; Greenfield 2024).

The Canadian initiative can be considered part of the so-called Five Eyes' recent efforts in coordinating actions on research security. The Five Eyes countries consist of the US, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Five Eyes is an intelligence-sharing arrangement between these five English-speaking countries that evolved from Cold War agreements but their recent coordination has included protecting research security (Boutilier 2024; Greenfield 2024).

7.2.3 China's policy reforms and securitization measures

The Chinese government has taken various measures in response to Western criticisms, skepticism, and securitization. Concerning CIs, many cooperating universities received a notification from the CI headquarters, Hanban, about a drastic change in the operation of CIs around 2020. The message was that the longstanding headquarters would be closed and two ostensible non-governmental organizations in China would take up the task of leading future CI cooperation, namely the Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF) would become the brand holder of CIs, while the former headquarters would be dissolved and replaced by the Centre

for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC). This dramatic change was later reported in various Chinese and Western news outlets (e.g., see Chen's 2020 report in *Global Times*). The decision from Hanban has received mixed reactions from collaborating universities. For many, this would entail legal re-arrangements concerning the cooperation agreement in different countries and universities. Li (2024) considers this decentralization part of the Chinese government's intention to de-link CIs' political connections and improve their image. While the rebranding and restructuring of CIs might aim to give CIs a more non-governmental aspect, there have been voices of skepticism. For instance, it has been revealed confidentially by some anonymous informants that the new non-governmental organizations are still strongly linked to the Chinese government. Former Hanban staff have moved to work for the new non-governmental organizations.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government seems to be securitizing the higher education sector's international connections too. Researchers and universities from many corners of the world have reported this trend. The news is widespread (e.g., see Sharma's report in *University World News* 2023). An anonymous interviewee compared his experience of being in China in 2013 and the current situation.

> In 2013, they (Chinese professors) were not completely free to discuss Chinese policies, but they did engage with us. But this time, they all kept their distance, and the fact is that all professors were forced to attend the politburo meeting at the amphitheatre. We couldn't visit our Chinese colleagues because they were forced to travel there. They also advised me to be cautious when discussing government, to avoid criticizing Chinese government policy, and so on.

This anonymous interviewee mentioned that his movement in normal places in China was monitored. A formal degree program involving a foreign university and a Chinese university in which he was involved could not continue anymore. The same interviewee expressed that he came from a non-Western country that has a good relationship with China in general. But he cannot be exempted from the stringent measures placed upon all foreign researchers in China nowadays.

The impact has spread through not just purely academic research but also journalistic reporting. Previously, we mentioned Danish journalist, Mette Holm. She lamented that,

> It is sad that present day China makes research and reporting so difficult for foreign researchers and correspondents, because the result is an incomplete, misleading, and often lop-sided picture of this great country, which is bad for both China and the rest of us. It is sad that international journalism has to rely on second-hand reports and impressions. (Holm 2024)

The Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the largest academic database on China, has reportedly notified various universities and research institutions in Europe, the US, Taiwan, and Hong Kong that their access will be limited from various points in 2023 onward (Sharma 2023). With limited possibilities to conduct fieldwork in China, and restricted access to even online databases such as the CNKI, conducting research on China is becoming challenging (Brussee and Von Carnap 2024). The impact is significant across various academic disciplines beyond sinology, Chinese studies, and China studies.

With restricted access to academic freedom and opportunities to co-produce knowledge about China with Chinese colleagues and institutions, there have been reports of decreasing student enrollment in China studies or Chinese studies programs in the West. Some HEIs also have trimmed budgets for their relevant study programs. Writing about the US experiences, Baum and Ma (2023), however, cautioned about extrapolating too much from this development. This is because this development is part of a larger trend of reducing support for humanities disciplines in many parts of the world (Baum and Ma 2023; Thelle 2020; Lodén 2016). It is not necessarily aimed at reducing Chinese studies or other relevant fields only. There have also been reports about scholars changing their research trajectory and study subject so that they do not directly touch upon China or require fieldwork in China. Martin Lavička (2025), an assistant professor at the Department of Asian Studies at Palacký University Olomouc in the Czech Republic, for example, indicated that the politicization of the field of Chinese studies has resulted in significant polarization in actual politics across various European countries, including his own. The tension in both academia and politics can be intense regarding matters related to China or collaboration with China. This situation poses considerable mental and emotional challenges for scholars. He sees a kind of sanctuary in returning to more historical research in the near future, partly distancing himself from contemporary research. There are also scholars and students who have decided to use Taiwan as the place for Mandarin training and fieldwork (Baum and Ma, 2023).

7.3 Chinese ethnicity and Confucianism as risks in Indonesia

In non-Western countries such as Japan and India, research and higher education cooperation with China has been more securitized too, sometimes to the level of being of risk to national security.[3] In Indonesia, however, cooperation with Chinese

[3] Depending on the country, not all reduction in bilateral educational collaboration can be ascribed to governmental securitization against China. For example, in South Korea, the number of students pursuing studies in China has significantly decreased since 2017 due to various factors, such

partners is deemed to present a risk of violating Indonesian national identity. Because this is a unique case, I have decided to talk about it here.

There have been several reports about the challenge of setting up CIs in Indonesia. Indonesians' perceived potential problem with CIs is different from those of the rest of the world as it touches upon Indonesian sensitivities concerning the country's local Chinese community and the issue of Confucianism. Indonesia has a well-documented ingrained anti-Chinese sentiment. The root of this racism can be traced back to centuries ago, when Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch. Fast-forward to the Cold War era, some Indonesians have perceived some ethnic Chinese's potential links to communist China and their success in business in Indonesia as problematic. In the mid-1960s, hundreds of thousands of suspected communists, some of them of Chinese descent, were killed after the military alleged that they had attempted a coup. Indonesian Chinese were also the main victims of the 1998 riots that accompanied the fall of Suharto, scapegoated for the country's economic downturn during the Asian financial crisis: many were murdered or raped (Toshio 2019; Rakhmatand Pashya 2020; Tanasaldy 2022).

Indonesian institutions have imposed various discriminatory measures against the Chinese, with the aim of curbing Chinese domination of the Indonesian economy. The cultural and social rights of Indonesian Chinese have also been restricted. In Chapter five, we met Hendry Jurnawan (2017) whose careers as an academic, politician, and journalist have helped elevate the life of Indonesians of Chinese descent and preserve Chinese traditions in Indonesia. Jurnawan (2017) explained that he had to tread cautiously in his work in order not to be accused of lacking loyalty towards Indonesia.

In conjunction with Indonesia's uneasy relations with its Chinese community, the treatment of Confucianism, which is a common heritage for many Chinese, has become a sensitive issue. Throughout various historical periods, Confucianism has been recognized and de-recognized by different governments in Indonesia. Confucianism had been practiced in Indonesia prior to the nation's independence, but it was not officially recognized as one of the six state-sanctioned religions—alongside Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Protestantism, and Catholicism—until 1965. However, that same year marked the onset of civil unrest in Indonesia, fueled by the broader context of the Cold War, which pitted Western powers against communist nations. Leftist activists, including some individuals of Chinese descent, were viewed as threats, leading to a campaign to sever ties with communist

as a decline in the school-age demographic, a change in the perceived economic advantages of studying overseas and increasing anti-China sentiment. This anti-China sentiment is complicated because it is not solely arising from diplomatic disputes. Perceived economic coercion and air pollution from China also exacerbate anti-China sentiment (Song 2024).

China. As noted above, Indonesia's authoritarian government under President Suharto alleged that China supported the unsuccessful coup attempt reportedly orchestrated by the Indonesian Communist Party. This resulted in a mandate for Chinese Indonesians to abandon their Chinese names and assimilate culturally, which included the suppression of their customs and traditions. Consequently, Confucianism was affected by these political shifts, and in 1967, it was removed from the list of officially recognized religions (Budianta 2000, 2007; Sutrisno 2018).

That said, during Suharto's New Order era, only five religions were recognized. During that time, Chinese or 'Tionghoa' commonly worshipped their ancestors without believing in a specific religion. Chinese people who did not want to create conflict in society would put Buddhism on their identity cards even though they were not Buddhist. It was still better than claiming that they did not have any religious belief. Had they claimed that they did not have any religious belief, they might be mistakenly conceived of as atheistic communists, who were not welcomed by the state.

Some Chinese fought hard for Confucianism, known as *Konghucu* in Indonesian, to be recognized as an official religion. According to the Indonesian government, a religion needs to fulfill three requirements. It must have something to be worshipped as 'gods,' and it needs to have prophets and scriptures. For Confucianism to be recognized, some Tionghoa had mobilized to advocate that Confucianism did meet the three requirements. In their argument, they mentioned that the god that is worshipped is Heaven itself, the holy scriptures are the Confucian classics *Si Shu* (Four Books), and that their prophet is Confucius. Despite the mobilization, they failed (Suryadinata 2023; Setiawan 2024).

In the modern era, most discriminatory policies are no longer in effect, even if they have not been officially lifted (Rakhmat and Pashya 2020; Tanasaldy 2022; Theo and Leung 2018).[4] Confucianism is currently recognized again as one of the six official religions. It is important to clarify that Chineseness should not be equated solely with Confucianism. In reality, most Chinese Indonesians practice Buddhism, followed by Christianity and Catholicism, while those who adhere to Confucianism as a religion represent a minority.

Nowadays, Chinese culture is prominently displayed in public spaces. A notable instance occurred in 2001 when the Chinese New Year was designated a national holiday, leading to widespread performances of dragon dances (Budianta 2000, 2007; Sutrisno 2018). Cultural expressions such as dragon dances and Chinese

[4] Nonetheless, unofficial and societal anti-Chinese sentiment persists. During the recent Covid pandemic, for example, we could find ample evidence on social media of ethnic Chinese being termed viruses (Rakhmat and Pashya 2020; Tanasaldy 2022).

puppetry are performed not only by the Chinese community but also by various other ethnic groups (Budianta 2000, 2007; Sutrisno 2018).

The increasing prominence of China on the world stage is contributing to the growing popularity of the Mandarin language in Indonesia. As a result, many private language centers and schools were founded. This period also marked the entry of the CIs into Indonesia, further promoting cultural exchange (Theo and Leung 2018: 6).

Because of this extremely sensitive and complex issue of Chinese identity and Confucianism in Indonesia, when Chinese and Indonesian universities were negotiating to set up CIs in the early 2000s, the Indonesian government could not accept an institute that used 'Confucius' in its name on the ground that this would not work well with other state-recognized religions in Indonesia. Theo and Leung's (2018) study detailed the difficult negotiations between the Chinese and Indonesian sides that took nearly two years. The Chinese side initially could not accept any alternative name because CI is the official brand. In a visit of Hanban officials to Indonesia's minister of education, the Indonesian minister explained that "If we set up a Confucius Institute, what will happen when the Muslims also want to establish a Mohammad Institute, the Christians a Jesus Institute?" The Chinese side eventually conceded and indicated that the Indonesian side could offer alternative names for consideration. The Indonesian Coordinating Board for Mandarin Language Education (*Badan Koordinasi Pendidikan Bahasa Mandarin, BKPBM*) had to act as mediator and offered five alternative names for the institute (Theo and Leung 2018). The Chinese embassy in Indonesia rejected two of them. The remaining three were left to the Indonesian Ministry of Education to decide. In the end, the term 'Mandarin Language Centre' (*Pusat Bahasa Mandarin*, PBM) was chosen over options such as the Mandarin Language and Cultural Centre (*Pusat Bahasa dan Budaya Mandarin*) and Tionghoa Language Centre (*Pusat Bahasa Tionghoa*) (Theo and Leung 2018). Since then, PBM has been used consistently in Indonesian, while CI is still used in English communications (Rakhmat and Pashya 2020; Theo and Leung 2018). For instance, the CI at the University Al-Azhar Indonesia is officially called *Pusat Bahasa Mandarin Al-Azhar* in Indonesian, but in English, it is referred to as CI Al-Azhar Indonesia. Another example is the CI at Universitas Negeri Malang being called *Pusat Bahasa Mandarin UM*.

In some cases, the local Chinese diaspora has been helping to advocate for the introduction of CIs and promoting the Chinese language and culture in Indonesia in the hope that they can build bridges to minimize misunderstandings and anti-Chinese sentiment in society. This is generally in line with the Chinese aspiration to project friendly and benevolent images of China to many parts of the world as a form of soft power. However, in the Indonesian example, local Indonesian partners still must walk a fine line to ensure that the existence of CIs, their names,

and their functions would carefully take society's deep-rooted uneasiness with anything Chinese and Confucian into account. It is hoped that the placement of the Indonesian case in this chapter provides nuance to the discussion on the securitization of knowledge production about China.

CHAPTER 8

China as a Knowledge Co-Producer

Abstract

Securitization seeks to de-link China from knowledge production about China. But China knowledge without China is not China knowledge anymore. For example, in contemporary geopolitical competition, China appears to be at the core of the whole construction of the Indo-Pacific geopolitical concept by Japan, the USA, Australia, and other countries, but Chinese actors find themselves excluded. Differently, China has been invited by various European actors to engage human rights dialogues. The comparison shows that whether China is included or excluded by the West in the knowledge production about Indo-Pacific politics or human rights or not, Chinese actors have not been absent in knowledge co-production about China.

Keywords: China, Indo-Pacific politics, human rights dialogues, socially engaged scholars, knowledge co-production

So far, this book has utilized a lot of space describing the historical and contemporary conditions under which knowledge about China has been generated. Politics, both domestic and international, has often affected China watchers' ability to produce knowledge about China. In this chapter, we discuss a relatively recent phenomenon that is equally political: that is, the creation of the Indo-Pacific politics and the knowledge production about it, where China appears to be at the core of the whole matter of constructing a new geopolitical concept called 'Indo-Pacific,' but the People's Republic of China (PRC) government finds itself missing or excluded from the process. Where does knowledge production about the Indo-Pacific interlock with knowledge production about China? Can China be a knowledge co-producer of this concept even though it did not initiate the concept? At the more concrete level, we may further ask how Chinese officials, scholars, and think tank analysts perceive Indo-Pacific politics. Do they believe that the Indo-Pacific strategy presented by various countries is an attempt to contain and exclude China? How does *realpolitik* interlock with knowledge production in this situation?

Because the issues concerning the 'Indo-Pacific' are new, they are not captured in Chih-yu Shih's oral history interviews, which this book has relied heavily upon. I hence use qualitative analysis of existing publications written by Chinese authors and Chinese media reports to understand how PRC scholars look at this new rising knowledge realm and China's role in this. This will be the major approach for the

first part of Chapter eight. In the second half of Chapter eight, I move on to compare PRC actors' role in the Indo-Pacific knowledge realm with a relatively older knowledge realm on 'human rights in China.' As human rights in China were covered in Shih's oral history data, I will then be able to refer to oral history interviews again for analysis.

8.1 Interlocking between China and the Indo-Pacific

As many scholars have rightly observed, the concept of the Indo-Pacific and thus the politics and strategies that connect with it are constructed and imagined (Pan 2014; Li 2022). This concept was coined by German geopolitician, Karl Haushofer, in the 1920s, but it did not attract much attention then (Pan 2014). In the much more contemporary context, it is the American "geopolitical imagination about the world in general and the rise of China in particular" (Pan 2014: 456) that has given the concept political currency (Li 2022). Ever since the concept was revived by American, Japanese, and Australian politicians in the last decade, academic literature on these countries' policies and approaches towards the Indo-Pacific have mushroomed (Pan 2014; Medcalf 2020a, 2020b; Calabrese 2022). There is also no lack of literature on other countries that has been grouped under the banner of the 'Indo-Pacific' and how they look at the opportunities and challenges presented to them by the emergence of Indo-Pacific politics (Krishnamurthy and Ghiasy 2020; Ghiasy, Chen, and Panda 2025). Geographically, these cover the views of Southeast Asian countries, South Asian countries, Taiwan, South Korea, and even countries in the broadly defined Europe and the European Union (EU). Each of them has a different view of the precise boundary of the Indo-Pacific. Rory Medcalf (2020a, 2020b), an Australian scholar who has been crucial in defining Indo-Pacific politics, sees the Indo-Pacific as the accelerating economic and security connections between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean region. The matter here is an interlocking between *realpolitik* and the construction of a new knowledge field, the Indo-Pacific, in academic and political debates. Despite variations in different interlocutors' conception of the Indo-Pacific, no one denies the existence of China in the Indo-Pacific. Many China watchers, including China-based observers, believe that the concept and policies around the concept are aimed at excluding or containing China. Medcalf (2020b) corrected this impression by arguing that this new construct sends messages to both China and the United States (US). To China, it is that Beijing "cannot expect others to accept its self-image as the centre of the region and the world" (Medcalf 2020b:7). To the US, the message is that "China and America are not the only two nations that count" (Medcalf 2020b:7).

Even though, politically and conceptually, the Indo-Pacific concept entails exclusion or containment of China, Chinese scholars, officials, and media outlets have

discussed and debated the concept, thus contributing to the knowledge production about the Indo-Pacific studies as well. As Pan (2014) points out, both Indo-Pacific alliances and China feed on mutual anxieties. Thus, even though China's actions are more reactive, Chinese actors contribute to the knowledge production of the Indo-Pacific too. Here, it is not easy to clearly distinguish the knowledge production realms of Indo-Pacific studies and Chinese/China studies. While they are essentially not the same, there are also overlaps in this particular case. I am inspired by Kemper and Kalinovsky's (2015) use of the concept of 'interlocking' in their studies on Soviet and Russian oriental studies. Hence, I borrow the term 'interlocking' to mean the direct and indirect interactions between different knowledge realms or sub-realms. China watchers around the world have contributed greatly to the discussion on the new realm of Indo-Pacific politics. There is a close link between *realpolitik* as well as knowledge production about Indo-Pacific studies and Chinese/China studies. They are thus interlocking. What is equally important is that PRC-based Chinese analysts have actively contributed views to this new realm. The fact that Indo-Pacific politics excludes China in name but has China at its heart has prompted the PRC-based experts to investigate the matter. However, as we know, China experts are also bounded by their political conditions and generally create analysis and views that would deny the emergence of any Indo-Pacific political alliances.

Figure 8.1 shows the trends of Chinese academic publications on the Indo-Pacific issues from the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the largest academic database on China. Scholarly publications normally appear after real-life events and news coverage. Back in 2013, there were already some Chinese academic writings on the topic, but the numbers were few (Chen, Pandan, and Ghiasy 2024). When the US started to offer more concrete policies and plans for the Indo-Pacific framework around 2018, Chinese publications on this topic also grew. Since then, the numbers of publications have risen significantly (Figure 8.1).[1]

Not surprisingly, Chinese scholars share many similar views with official state media.[2] This is particularly evident on US motives in containing China, on dismissing the US's success, and on finding faults with the US's traditional and potential allies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022; Liu 2013; Liu and Ma 2022; Tian 2022). Interestingly, compared with the state media,

[1] The keyword 'Indo-Pacific' (印太) was used in CKNI for the search of publications on February 13, 2025. As it was in early 2025, the numbers in 2025 were not complete.

[2] I cross-validate information gleaned from the *China Daily* with press releases and statements of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), as well as with information found in other state media sources such as the *People's Daily*, *Global Times*, *Xinhua*, and *China Central Television (CCTV)* to determine Beijing's centrally approved messages and narratives about Indo-Pacific politics. Since 2011, there have been more articles related to Indo-Pacific politics than before. This implies that Beijing increasingly feels the need to respond to and articulate its views on the emerging Indo-Pacific politics.

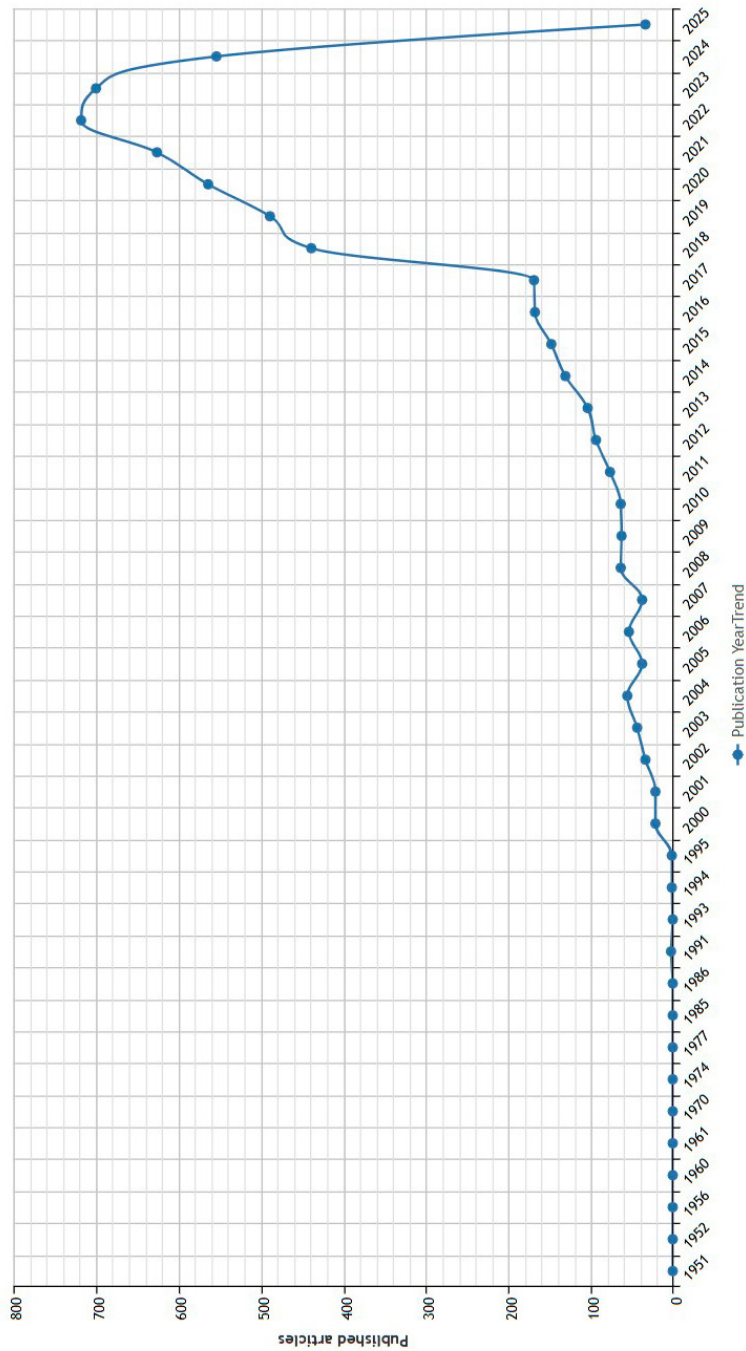

Figure 8.1 Publication numbers on the 'Indo-Pacific' in CNKI.
Source: Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) online database (https://oversea.cnki.net/index/).

Chinese scholars show more nuanced views when it comes to the issue of whether the US administrations have been consistent in the Indo-Pacific strategy and the issue of whether China and the US can have Indo-Pacific cooperation or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation. Wang and Zhang (2022) believe that China should discuss how to start Indo-Pacific cooperation. Hence, instead of rejecting the Indo-Pacific concept, Wang and Zhang (2022) show willingness to seek cooperation with the US in the region. This view is similar to that of Yan and Li (2021) who believe that the US's open and free Indo-Pacific approach echoes the interests of some EU and Asian countries well. They believe that such an approach is not necessarily different from China's approach. Hence, they believe that China and the US can try to discuss more, linking up with each other's projects in the region to promote the development of the Indo-Pacific region. But not all PRC scholars hold such sanguine views. Numerous PRC scholars believe that the US will not work with BRI projects to realize regional connectivity and prosperity. They also criticize what they deem as the US counter-response, the Blue Dot Network, for being short of concrete actions (Zhou 2021). Different views are not being presented as clearly competing views in the PRC context. They merely reveal different interpretations of the development of US policies and the space for US–China cooperation.

Until today, the Chinese government, state media, and scholars in general still prefer to use the term 'Asia-Pacific,' while acknowledging the existence of the term 'Indo-Pacific.' For example, Guo Yanjun (2021), director of the Institute of Asian Studies at China Foreign Affairs University, has rejected the concept of Indo-Pacific, and argues that the Asia-Pacific framework is in jeopardy of being replaced by the Indo-Pacific one (Guo 2021). The discussion of the knowledge production about the Indo-Pacific, Asia-Pacific, and China, and how compatible these realms are, indicates that China is closely related to other knowledge production even in a concept from which it seems to be excluded. PRC-based observers and interlocutors have been highly active in contributing their views to this new geopolitical concept. After all, China is too globally embedded in *realpolitik* and in our daily lives.

In the next section, we will introduce another case for comparison: human rights dialogues where Western and Chinese actors have been involved. This can be contrasted with the Indo-Pacific case where the PRC and their China experts are somehow excluded but still contribute significantly, although by producing very different kinds of discourse and knowledge, to counter the Indo-Pacific politics. The example of human rights dialogues is interesting in that even though there have been Western efforts to engage with Chinese actors, the result remains modest.

8.2 Human rights dialogues where China is involved

Like the issue of Indo-Pacific politics, human rights issues concerning China are a highly sensitive and contested area where China has typically shown no interest in cooperating with the broadly defined West. Unlike Indo-Pacific politics, however, China has been invited by various Western countries and actors to engage in discussions on China's human rights situations and on how to improve the situation. In other words, if the Indo-Pacific is a knowledge realm where Chinese actors are excluded by the West in producing knowledge, Chinese actors have been, to some extent, invited by the West to produce knowledge about human rights in China. Chinese actors also wish to act themselves to intervene in the situation at home and ultimately believe that if they desire change, the forces have to mainly come from within China. Despite the long history of dialogue, Western and Chinese players have not reached a consensus on how they could improve China's human rights.

In the following, I use examples of researchers who have been involved in various human rights initiatives at official, semi-official, or grassroot levels, to shed light on how knowledge production about China, particularly its human rights situations, have been intertwined with *realpolitik*. For example, we will examine legal scholar–practitioners' participation in the EU–China human rights dialogues. These dialogues were the EU's approach to managing the thorny issue of human rights concerning China. It was largely triggered by the violent crackdown against student protestors during the June 1989 Tiananmen Square incident that brought China's human rights conditions to international attention. Despite the long history of dialogues, European and Chinese players have not reached a consensus on whether they should and how they could further push for China's improvement of human rights. We will also study the oral history of Western scholar–activists to comprehend how they see that their connection with Chinese scholar–activists can help improve women's situation in China and at the same time how such collaboration might affect their own career development in the West.

In the early 1980s, with the US diplomatic rapprochement with China and gradual establishment of diplomatic relations between China and various countries around the world, the international community was in a good mood to welcome China after the country had been internationally isolated for nearly thirty years. China's human rights issues were originally not the international community's concern. It is also worth mentioning that during Mao's era, China's human rights conditions were dire, but the issue did not come to the fore internationally either.

In the US, human rights issues in China became salient more or less around the time that the general human rights movements and human rights diplomacy in the West began to take off. The event that fixed human rights as a core US–China issue was the aforementioned Tiananmen incident. Since then, the US has been on the

offensive at both governmental and non-governmental levels, using tactics such as public shaming, quiet diplomacy, and having China criticized at the annual meeting of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Commission in Geneva.

As Hatla Thelle (2020), a Danish scholar known for her research on China's human rights conditions, recalled,

> I think that we shouldn't say "especially after 89". I think that it was only after 1989, after June 4th, that there was a total shift in the international recognition or the international attitude to China, because, as I remember, during the eighties, everybody was so excited about China coming into the market [...] But it was completely changed after June 4th, and that's actually strange because, not so much changed. I mean, all these human rights violations, they were also happening before. (Thelle 2020)

The US and the EU both imposed an arms embargo on China in the wake of the 1989 incident. These sanctions have not been lifted to date. Thelle (2020) recalled that during the 1990s and afterwards,

> China was sort of branded as the most horrible government in the world [...] the human rights world, the UN circles where we from the (Danish) Human Rights Institute were involved was very hostile [...] it was difficult to work in the Danish setting, and I think in Finland, Sweden, Norway, and other countries too, it was difficult to work because you were easily accused of being collaborating with a brutal regime, and of blood on your hands, and things like that. (Thelle 2020)

The EU's approach to China's human rights has been to employ various levels of dialogue to foster mutual understanding and dialogue with the expectation of change (Kinzelbach and Thelle 2011; Taylor 2022). This is an approach that several other EU (e.g., Sweden, the Netherlands) and non-EU countries (e.g., Japan, Canada, Australia) have employed as well. In 1991, the EU issued its first official guidelines on human rights dialogues, in which the EU describes the dialogue concept as an instrument of the EU's external policy (Commission of the European Communities 1991). Academic networks have been embedded in the EU–China human rights dialogues. In the next section, I look at the views of legal scholars who have been participating in the EU–Human Rights Dialogues. As the content of the dialogues is meant to be classified, I mainly review the secondary literature produced by scholars who conducted confidential interviews to produce my analysis of the EU–China human rights dialogues. I also use oral history interview data, mostly collected by my direct colleague, Dušica Ristivojević, which was further integrated into Chih-yu Shih's global oral history interview project.

8.3 Scholars in the EU–China human rights dialogues

The EU human rights dialogues have been structured into three layers. At the top level, there are diplomatic dialogues. In the middle level, there are the so-called legal seminars sponsored by the EU, involving mainly academics, non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives, and sometimes officials. The last and lowest level consists of various bilateral and multilateral technical cooperation projects sponsored by European governmental or private entities (Kinzelbach and Thelle 2011; Kinzelbach 2015). Conceptually and ideally, there should be clear linkages between the three levels. One may see the top level as Track One Diplomacy and the other two, particularly the middle level, as Track Two Diplomacy to foster discussion and change. The EU side has understood the so-called civil society as including both NGO representatives and academic experts, and hopes that NGOs and academics can add vigor to the rather stiff political dialogues at the top level. The EU expects that by involving NGOs, NGOs would become less critical of China's human rights situations. The EU also prefers that human rights activists with expertise on China join the meetings. Despite all the EU side's views and expectations, however, the Chinese side has openly rejected European wishes, and refuses to allow activists to participate in the dialogues (Kinzelbach and Thelle 2011).

Ideally, before the political dialogue at the higher level, there would be a legal seminar preceding it. Then, a joint statement or report could be issued as a result of the meetings. During the fourth seminar, held in 1999 in Rovaniemi, Finland, Morten Kjaerum (2000), a Danish lawyer and practitioner in human rights who once directed the Danish Institute for Human Rights and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, argued that there should be linkages between the political dialogues, dialogues with academics, and other technical cooperation projects. These were all ideals. In reality, the meetings had not always been held in such an order. Kinzelbach and Thelle's (2011) research shows that academic participants in the legal seminars had different views on whether their work should and could have an impact on the political dialogues. Manfred Nowak, director of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights in Vienna and Xin Chunying, director of the Institute of Law at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, for instance, mentioned that the legal seminars should have monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (Nowak and Xin 2000: 14–15). But there were even European scholars who disagreed. As quoted in Kinzelbach and Thelle's (2011) paper, an anonymous interviewee expressed: "Why should an academic process impact on the political process? I am not concerned about the impact of our academic exchange. I do not have to justify my work in terms of impact" (Kinzelbach and Thelle 2011:71).

In legal seminars, Chinese counterparts, including officials, legal experts, and scholars had been principally included in the planning of these meetings. Hence, one

could say that China in general has been invited to co-produce knowledge or influence Western narration about China's human rights situations in these meetings. China's former Special Representative on Human Right Affairs, Shen Yongxiang, for instance, has said that the presentations made by Chinese experts can help Europeans understand China's efforts and accomplishments (Kinzelbach and Thelle 2011).

The main Chinese representative in legal seminars has been the Law Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, under the instruction of the Chinese MFA. The European side, however, has changed its representative or organizer for the legal seminars several times. The Irish Centre for Human Rights in Galway and the Belgium-based company, CECOFORMA, for example, have been contracted to organize the academic networks and legal seminars before. This has caused problems for the Chinese side because the Chinese MFA see this as privatization or contracting out of the legal seminars. Conflicts arose from this as the Chinese side felt reluctant to engage with the contracted European organizer. The Chinese side saw them as lacking legitimacy. It took strenuous diplomatic efforts to convince the Chinese side to continue engaging in the legal seminars (Kinzelbach and Thelle 2011).

In terms of topics, the Chinese and EU sides have divergent priorities. In general, the Chinese consider human rights as the collective people's right to developmental aspirations and prosperity, thereby elevating society from poverty (Grittith 2023), while the West tends to define human rights as individual rights to the expression of freedom, press, religion, and so on. In other words, when the Europeans look at China's human rights situations, they tend to focus on the political and civil dimensions of rights while the Chinese expect an emphasis on broader dimensions such as the economic and social rights of the Chinese (Freeman and Geeraerts 2012).

In the early days of the EU–China human rights dialogue, the European side prioritized issues such as the death penalty, torture, freedom of expression, and right to a fair trial. In the early years, the Chinese MFA typically chose racial discrimination as its focus because this would also help point to the EU's various challenges in regard to racial treatment. However, racial issues are as sensitive in the EU as they are in China. Later, the Chinese side opted for less sensitive topics such as the right to health, rights of persons with disabilities, women's rights, children's rights, and corporate social responsibility (Kinzelbach and Thelle 2011).

Has the inclusion of the Chinese side as a knowledge interlocutor and co-producer led to tangible outcomes in improving human rights conditions in China? It seems that activists, legal experts, and scholars have different views on the achievement based on their expectations. If one expected human rights in China to be significantly enhanced according to the general Western democratic definition, one might conclude that the dialogues have not achieved such results. However, as Hatla Thelle (2020) recalled from her work at the Danish Institute for Human Rights, they believed that the colleagues whom they worked with in China had

a certain level of influence. With transnational cooperation to give advice and support, she believed that they were able to make some slight progress. But she did mention that after 2008, the situation in China became more complicated, as such collaboration would be understood by the Chinese side as foreign influence, rendering it hard for meaningful and constructive cooperation between the West and China to occur (Thelle 2020). The Danish Institute for Human Rights believed that effective and lasting changes must come from Chinese society's own resources. This means that they worked in areas where there were already national initiatives. They had bilateral partnership programs with Chinese partners on specific topics funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the EU, and other bodies to work on issues such as fair trials in China and the awareness of international human rights standards among law enforcement personnel, academia, the judiciary, and the public in general. They also had a project to promote Chinese environmental NGOs' awareness and capacities to effectively use a rights-based approach through training in workshops, seminars, and Chinese study trips to Copenhagen. From 2007 to 2009, the institute also created an interdisciplinary human rights course in Northeast China funded by the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Beijing (Nilsson, Tota, Nordquist, and Andreasen, 2016).

The challenge, however, as revealed in Philip Baker (2002) and Thelle's (2024) views of success in the dialogues, was that the Chinese and the European sides have had different motives in engaging in the dialogues and were not interested in really understanding each other's positions. The Chinese side saw the dialogue as a mechanism to ensure that the European side would not sign any co-resolution at the UN level to pressure China on human rights. The European side's expectation was to have effective measures to prompt China to enhance its human rights. Thelle recalled (2024),

> It was a highly political process, where the Chinese side was under attack and therefore defended itself while the European side was interested in "forcing confessions" out of the Chinese scholars. The Europeans insisted that the Chinese comment on matters they were unable to talk about for political reasons. And the Europeans should have known the Chinese system well enough to understand the limits of what can be addressed in an open forum like the human rights dialogues. (Thelle 2024)

Thelle (2020, 2024) also reported that she had observed that some European scholars who took part in the legal seminar seemed to participate with the assumption that they were in a superior position to that of their Chinese counterparts.

> Therefore, they had not prepared well, in the sense that they knew very little (in general) about the Chinese system, so their comments and questions were not useful for the Chinese

> side. To have a dialogue you need to respect your counterparts and neither side respected each other: The Europeans saw the Chinese as serious violators of human rights and they were not able to distinguish between Chinese scholars and the Chinese government. And the Chinese felt humiliated and blamed for legal practices that many of them had in fact tried hard to improve. (Thelle 2024)

After depicting the background of how fora such as the human rights dialogues provided platforms for addressing and producing knowledge production about China, particularly its human rights situation, the next section explores how these scholars regard their experience of engaging in *realpolitik* and how this affected knowledge production about China.

8.4 Socially engaged scholars and their dilemma

Knowledge about human rights in China has often been produced by international networks of scholars, practitioners, and officials from both the Chinese side and the international community. The individuals mentioned in this chapter are mostly scholars who are also activists or practitioners. The lines between the two professions can sometimes be blurred in this particular context. Dušica Ristivojević, who has been involved in women's rights movement in China and abroad, has said, "I see myself as a socially engaged researcher, teacher, and activist who analyses and experiences the way in which global political currents influence social organizing in China and other post-socialist spaces" (Ristivojević 2021). It might be an exaggeration to contend that they co-produce knowledge about China, but they certainly interact with one another in the process of narrating China's human rights situations and practices.

Ristivojević (2021) shared that the academic space for organizing seminars and meetings can be used to achieve her aim of bringing activists to the discussion. The meetings can facilitate the actual discussion on how to improve women's rights, while at the same time allow scholars to collect data in writing up their analysis. However, Ristivojević (2021) confessed that in order to make the collaboration work, they need to exercise a certain level of self-censorship. She uses the term 'silence' to refer to her decision not to write about certain things to avoid the exposure of Chinese scholars and activists who have engaged in these academic meetings. As Ristivojević (2021) explains, the most common silence is joint agreement between her and her collaborators and friends to "keep certain types of research data out of the public gaze" (Ristivojević 2021). A negative example of how not adhering to such self-censorship may lead to catastrophes is the PRC arrest of human rights lawyers and activists in the July 9, 2015 crackdowns. This event has become known as the

709 crackdowns. It was a nation-wide action by the Chinese police after a Chinese court proved what it believed to be criminal activities of PRC activists visiting Taiwan. The court used data and reports gathered by (Taiwanese) participants in the Taiwan event as a basis to establish the verdict (Chiu 2018).

While this kind of silence has been deemed necessary to protect individuals engaging in activism, it harms junior scholars who need to publish in order to develop their careers. Ristivojević (2021) has sometimes wondered whether the opportunities for future collaboration might be closed if she writes about certain topics.

Thelle (2020) recalled that the Danish Institute for Human rights also had to exercise self-restraint. They would not openly invite the Dalai Lama to the institute's events for fear that the Chinese side would not collaborate with the Danes anymore. As she elaborated,

> We were very often attacked because we didn't strongly condemn things in China, when various things were happening […] Concerning the Dalai Lama, for instance, we wouldn't officially have him visiting the institute […]. We wouldn't do that because we thought that it would be really counterproductive in relation to the work we were doing […] it was all based on the premise that we believed that there were forces, groups, and institutions in China, which were seriously trying to improve the human rights situation. […]. And they were serious, and they were competent. (Thelle 2020)

The Chinese side was very cautious in collaborating too, because they understood the political and social boundaries clearly and saw certain issues as uncrossable. In order to continue the transnational collaboration, both sides had to respect the boundaries.

Another kind of silence that has been exercised by these socially engaged scholars has been to avoid misunderstandings and keep wrongful accusations against them away. Ristivojević (2021) shared her experience of being wrongly labeled as a Chinese nationalist during a peer review process by unknown but presumably Western colleagues because of her analysis, which criticized the Western approach to China, and "supposedly implied that I think China should have more power in international politics, regardless of its violation of human rights" (Ristivojević 2021). A Chinese scholar working in a European country also shared a similar experience in a blinded peer review process in which she was mistakenly considered a Chinese nationalist, while in reality she is known in the West as a critic of China's women's rights situation.

8.5 Transnational connections

Transnational connections where Chinese and non-Chinese experts, including scholars, officials, and activists meet have been a vital conduit for exchanging views on issues of human rights and sub-issues such as the death penalty and women's rights. Chinese women's rights and the activism around them have benefited greatly from overseas support. The Chinese state's permission for such interactions was vital in the beginning. For instance, the Chinese government supported state-sanctioned women's rights organizations such as the All-China Women's Federation to attend the UN World Conference on Women in 1995. This offered Chinese practitioners in the domain of woman rights a legitimate space in which to operate after the 1995 conference, under the banner that this was for China to connect to the world, at a time when China sought to make an international breakthrough in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen incident. Tapping into the Chinese government's interests, activists had some much-awaited windows of opportunity to operate and connect themselves with overseas organizations. Certainly, in the Chinese case, there is also a boundary that one has to observe. In this case of women's rights, self-censorship is needed to ensure that their work is not linked or framed together with 'human rights movements' or 'labor movements.' Their focus is on narrow but certainly daunting tasks of helping Chinese women gain more equality in a male-dominated society and culture. Thirty years have passed since 1995. Collaboration between scholars and activists in the realm of Chinese women's rights and the production of knowledge about it still faces daunting challenges.

As the Chinese state has a penchant for engagement with the Global South, including former Central and Eastern European socialist 'Second World' countries and the member states of the Non-Aligned Movement, scholar–activists have also worked around this concept to legitimize their events. In June 2019, for example, Professors Wang Zheng, Elisabeth Armstrong, and Kristen Ghodsee, three scholars who are researching post-socialist women's movements, organized a symposium at the University of Michigan, with the aim of fostering dialogues between scholars and activists from China, India, Bulgaria, Zambia, Poland, Vietnam, the former Yugoslavia, and Algeria. They discussed the histories of the experiences of women from the Second World and their unrecorded collaboration (Ristivojević 2021).

As previously discussed, the space for civil society is shrinking in the Xi Jinping era. Collaboration in and outside of China on Chinese women's rights has become difficult, as this can be easily framed by the Chinese government as having foreign connections and subjecting China to hostile foreign interference.

The so-called MeToo movement in China has faced particularly difficult challenges. If someone addresses issues of sexual harassment or domestic violence in the Chinese context, it is still permissible to some extent. But if the advocacy is

labeled part of the Western-bred MeToo movement, where female victims of sexual violence speak up to call attention to their plight and ask for solidarity, then it crosses the redline of the Chinese state. In other words, anyone who uses the MeToo label would expose herself in a completely different, highly politicized way and draw a direct reaction from the Chinese state.

Despite the taboo, in 2018, the term 'MeToo' was officially used in China. What happened in 2018? It began with a Chinese journalist who initiated a survey among some 250 female Chinese journalists. More than eighty percent of them answered that they had experienced some kind of assault by their bosses. After these surveys went public, one Chinese person, then living in Canada, opened up the stage for the official kick-off of the MeToo movement in China. She revealed how she had been sexually harassed by her famous Chinese professor when she was still in China. This was in a way the first rupture, the first in a line of women who spoke up one by one. In a way, the whole movement is a continuation of previous efforts, in and beyond China, that have been made in the past thirty years, but the rupture reached a different intensity (Xiong and Ristivojević 2021).

Unlike the previous state-sanctioned non-governmental activities to advocate for women's rights, the 2018 MeToo movement was mobilized in a decentralized way by women who had survived sexual harassment. It was sporadic, at times fragile, because there was no formal institution behind each individual's work, but a huge strength lies in the solidarity behind it. They created online archives to document these cases. Meanwhile, the Chinese government tried to delete these cases, thus erasing the memories of these victims. Some of these activists have now left China due to security risks at home. Those who remain in China do not have much space to operate anymore.

Dusica Ristivojević points out that these socially engaged scholars in China were much more directly involved in activism than is the case in Western academia (Chen 2021). The boundaries between academia and activism are very blurred. There is a group of Chinese professors and filmmakers who wish to continue to document and share their work in keeping memories of their activism alive for future generations and in minimizing the possibility of state manipulation modifying or erasing the memories and records. In a sense, the knowledge production about Chinese women's rights is a knowledge realm initiated by the PRC Chinese experts themselves. It is not, as the Chinese government has claimed, that they are produced and sponsored by wicked foreign or Western forces. The foreign label is only used by the Chinese state to discredit these Chinese scholars' efforts. A more accurate description is that China-based experts have generated and documented useful knowledge about Chinese women's rights, and they wish to continue to share and exchange views with similar forces outside China to seek inspiration and solidarity (Chen 2021). Their aim was originally not overtly political, but the

Chinese censorship system has made this aspiration a politically sensitive issue, placing it firmly under Chinese state control (Feng 2021).

As China is global in many ways, the globalness of China attracts transnational synergies. This book utilizes many pages talking about China watchers and their communities outside of China. Here the stories of Chinese women's rights scholars and activists lead us to see that knowledge production about China is transnational in nature. Although China is not included in the Indo-Pacific framework, the contributions of Chinese scholars, journalists, and officials in producing analyses and perspectives on this construct demonstrate their capabilities in global discourse and knowledge creation. China itself synergizes the ideas, talents, aspirations, and efforts of experts both in and outside of China. In the final chapter, Chapter ten, I will conclude with a discussion of the globalness of China and the importance of reclaiming the transnational nature of knowledge production about China. Before that, I will discuss the alternative China-watching venue of Taiwan in the next chapter.

Back to Transnational Knowledge Production about China

CHAPTER 9

Taiwan

Abstract

Taiwan has its unique path for becoming a site for China watching. But with the rise of the so-called Taiwan studies in academia, scholars have different views on whether Taiwan studies should stand alone as a new discipline or be part of China studies. To complicate the matter, the interlocking of Taiwan studies and China studies in Taiwan with the newly minted knowledge realm of the Indo-Pacific in the contemporary era will pose new challenges for Taiwan because Taiwan's international relations and knowledge production are unable to move toward genuine decolonization. A transnational approach is advocated to reduce the problem.

Keywords: Taiwan, Taiwan studies, Indo-Pacific, China watching, decolonization

It is nearly a cliché to talk about Taiwan as the other China. In Chapter five, when we mentioned the setting up of the prominent East Asian Institute (EAI) in Singapore, the early leaders of the EAI had carefully examined the development of Taiwan because Taiwan was believed to have good facilities for China watching during the Cold War. Taiwan's studies of 'bandits,' referring to the Chinese communists, have even earned the field a special name, *feiqing*, or bandit studies. But after investigating the capabilities of the United States (US) and Taiwan, the EAI's early leaders reached the conclusion that even these two supposed strongholds for monitoring China could not see into what was going on in *Zhongnaihai* (中南海), the headquarters of the Chinese communists. There are many things that can be said about Taiwan. In this chapter, I confine myself to three aims. The first is to present the views of those who have worked in, visited, or studied in Taiwan to evaluate the status of Taiwan as a place for China watching. The second is to assess the rise of the so-called Taiwan studies in academia. Clearly, this new field's emergence has much to do with the increasing numbers of Taiwanese intellectuals and Taiwan sympathizers with aspirations to support a distinct Taiwanese identity, even in the domain of academic disciplines. But how should we regard Taiwan studies? Is it part of the China studies, Chinese studies, sinology, or China watching that we have discussed at length so far? This is what I intend to debate here. The third goal of this chapter is to link this discussion to the contemporary framing of Indo-Pacific politics with regard to Taiwan. In Chapter eight, I noted the uneasiness of the Chinese government, commentators, and scholars with the Indo-Pacific framing. What

about Taiwan? My discussion will reveal that despite the overall open academic environment for the studies of Taiwan and China to prosper on the island, Taiwan has a serious problem of not being able to escape from a colonial or neo-colonial mindset to freely produce decolonized knowledge. The knowledge realm of the Indo-Pacific will unfortunately entrench Taiwan further within this problem.

9.1 Chinese studies in Taiwan

Taiwan does not just cultivate its own researchers for the purpose of watching China. Since the Cold War era to the present, there have also been various scholarship and study programs to attract foreigners to undergo their Chinese-language training and advanced education in Taiwan. We have met Russian sinologist, Alexander Pisarev, in previous chapters. As his research was on peasantry and the Kuomintang, Taiwan is naturally part of his research interests. In 1996, he originally went to Taiwan at the invitation of colleagues and did not have the intention to stay there long. At the time, he also had other options like visiting Italy as a scholar. But eventually, he stayed longer in Taiwan than originally expected, working in the Russian Studies section of Tamkang University in Taipei. Working for Russian studies might appear irrelevant to his training as a sinologist. But as he was asked to conduct research and teach about Soviet–Chinese relations and Russian–Chinese relations, which are borderline themes covering two countries, he could still use his training as a sinologist in his work (Pisarev 2012). This is again an example of the interlocking of knowledge realms between Chinese studies and Russian studies.

As Chih-yu Shih (2014) has observed, Pisarev represents some Russian and Polish sinologists who arrived in Taiwan quite early and managed to establish a new career there.

> With democratization taking place in Eastern Europe and Mongolia, not unlike in Taiwan, Taiwan exerts a special attraction on sinologists from the former regions. Moreover, Taiwanese academics adopt an American epistemology in China studies. Combined with Taiwanese academics' deep understanding, as well as daily practice, of Chinese culture, this makes Taiwan a practical node strongly connected to both the United States and China. Taiwan's vast and rich academic resources similarly comfort those senior sinologists from Eastern Europe and Mongolia who experience nostalgia for Chinese classic humanities. (Shih 2014: 83)

In Pisarev's (2012) view, Taiwan has preserved more Chinese traditions than the People's Republic of China (PRC) has. Pisarev (2012) contends that Russian scientists should study Taiwan because it is culturally much more traditional than the PRC.

Additionally, because Taiwan has been able to modernize in a 'humane form' (compared with what happened on the Chinese mainland), the society and authorities in Taiwan can work together to recognize their collective political responsibility to overcome mistakes in the past and find ways to move society forward (Pisarev 2012). "I don't mean to say that there are no Taiwan problems. There are quite a few problems in this society. However, what I observe gives me optimism and a desire to continue studying Taiwan," Pisarev (2012) clarifies.

Pisarev also notes that politicalization in Taiwan differs from politicalization in the Soviet system or in the PRC.

> Because the society itself participates very energetically in all political discussions, in a positive sense, politicization can be different. If politicalisation just expands one ideology, then this is bad. If this involves of citizens in political debates and processes, that is good. I see it here in Taiwan. (Pisarev 2012)

As Taiwan is formally still the Republic of China (ROC), Pisarev notes that Taiwanese sinologists devote relatively more time and energy to the study of the history of the ROC, Sun Yet-Sen, and events in the ROC in the 1920s and 1940s. One might also recall that in the early days of the Kuomintang regime on the island of Taiwan, there was very limited space for scholars to study alternative topics and offer alternative views. From 1945 to the late 1980s, the ideology of the Kuomintang did not mean that Taiwan should become part of the PRC but rather that the vast PRC would become part of the ROC. Having focuses other than the ROC would be labeled as opposition to the government and thus be suppressed. So, the early generations of Taiwanese sinologists focused significantly on studying the ROC (Pisarev 2012). If there was effort put into studying the Chinese mainland, the motive was to observe the 'enemy,' as noted in previous discussions of the bandit studies in Taiwan. The famous Institute of International Studies (IIR), for example, used to be a think tank of the Kuomintang but was later integrated into National Chengchi University. The IIR was an important research agency devoted to studying Chinese communist problems and international politics. It also had the mandate of communicating with foreign agencies, making it a vital research institution that performed scholarly diplomacy for the Taiwan government at the time (Liu 2013; Gordon 1968).

There were scholars who thought differently from Pisarev, though. For instance, Swedish sinologist, Torbjörn Lodén (2016), expressed that his leftist inclination had attracted him to Mainland China. Lodén (2016) recalls:

> Rather typically of students of my generation, I thought Taiwan was too conservative. In fact, I knew very little about what it was really like in Taiwan. I wanted to study in Mainland China, which I knew was not democratic but still thought was dynamic and

> developing in the right direction. But going to Mainland China was not possible at this time, in the middle of the Cultural Revolution, so I went to Hong Kong instead. (Lodén 2016)

I have previously mentioned South Korean students who went to China to study since China opened up from 1979. Some Korean students have opted to study in Taiwan instead. Prof. Moon Chung-Koo of Konkuk University in South Korea, for instance, received a tuition waiver to conduct his postgraduate studies at National Taiwan University, after completing his undergraduate studies in economics in Korea. National Taiwan University is the leading university in Taiwan. He liked the strict and solid training there but passing all the requirements was difficult. It took him four years to complete his master's studies in agricultural economics and then eight years of doctoral study in theoretical economics at National Taiwan University.

Foreign scholars whose work concerned the Republican period would usually have connections with Taiwan too, even though they would not necessarily have studied in Taiwan as students. Andreas Steen (2022), a Professor of China Studies at Aarhus University in Denmark, has focused on the Republican period for his entire career, especially Shanghai's history and culture. He has been to Taiwan a few times to conduct research on the history and memory of music. In more recent years, he began a project, 'Sounds of War: The Memory of World War II in Taiwan, East Germany, and Denmark, 1945-2015' in collaboration with his colleague, Wulf Kansteiner, sponsored by the Velux Foundations in Denmark. In their project, they analyzed how communities in Taiwan, East Germany, and Denmark have been using sound as interpretations of World War II—music, language, tones, or even noise—to build a collective memory and identity during and after the Cold War (Chen and Lodén 2023).

Another example would be Mette Halskov Hansen and Koen Wellens, two sinologists at the University of Oslo, Norway. They have a project called 'Transcendence and Sustainability: Asian Visions with Global Promise' that explores how religion contributes to combating or can potentially be a factor in combating climate change and loss of biodiversity in several Asian countries. They look especially at Asian religions, so they have sub-projects going on in India, Vietnam, the PRC, and Taiwan. In Taiwan specifically, they study religious or spiritually inspired organizations such as the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation and others that are focusing on environmental issues (Chen and Lodén 2023).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing geopolitical tension between China and the West, the numbers of students and researchers going to China have decreased, although the situation has improved slightly during the post-pandemic era. Taiwan has absorbed some of these foreign students and researchers. But Koen Wellens argues that Taiwan should be studied because it is Taiwan, not because

one cannot go to China. He shared his experience of first going to Taiwan to study the Chinese language in 1983. Since 2008, he has had problems obtaining a visa to China. The last time he was in China was in 2012. So, he thought that since he had already been studying issues regarding ethnic minorities in China, why could he not study ethnic minorities in Taiwan? Thus, he visited Taiwan several times to find topics to work on (Chen and Lodén 2023). In addition to the aforementioned collaborative project, Wellens (2022) has his own project that investigates how the indigenous Tsou community in Alishan relates their traditions, such as hunting, to the environment, and how these have come into conflict with the Taiwanese authorities (Chen and Lodén 2023).

Last but not least, as noted in Chapter eight, Taiwan has become an important site for socially engaged scholars, such as those working on human rights, to meet and collaborate because the opportunities for similar activities are few and far between on the Chinese mainland. The data and reports gathered by Taiwanese participants in these meetings in Taiwan, as noted in Chapter eight, were unfortunately used by the Chinese court to arrest PRC activists who had joined these meetings in Taiwan, becoming the infamous July 9, 2015 crackdowns. The Chinese government's continuous global crackdown and transnational repression of these activists has been called the 709 crackdown 2.0, putting relevant future events into hibernation.

The next section will investigate the emergence of the so-called Taiwan studies within and outside Taiwan. Does Taiwan studies belong to Chinese studies, or can it stand alone as an academic discipline? Halvor Eifring, a sinologist at the University of Oslo since 1995, does not see his Taiwan-related research as separate from Chinese studies. Eifring has long been working on a study of the psychological structures of the great mid-18th-century Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. He is currently in charge of an international cross-disciplinary project on 'mind wandering' in various traditions of meditation, contemplation, and self-cultivation. In the Chinese context, the project is about Confucianism and Daoism in the classical era, along with the Buddhism of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Furthermore, his project includes Indian yoga philosophy, the Christian Desert Fathers, and modern neuroscience and philosophy of the mind. Eifring believes that his research is not directly concerned with Taiwan. "I'm studying the early stages of Chinese history and Chinese culture, and Taiwan is a good place to do that. But it's not about Taiwan; it's about Chinese culture," he clarifies (2022). It might be easier to understand that Chinese studies or China studies could include Taiwan studies. But there have been debates among Taiwan-minded scholars in Taiwan and abroad who hold different views about whether Taiwan studies is part of Chinese studies or not. This is what we will explore next.

9.2 Taiwan studies

In a 2022 debate in *Taiwan Insights*, an online magazine of the Taiwan Research Hub at the University of Nottingham, T.Y. Wang and Christopher H. Achen (2022), two US-based scholars, argued that Taiwan studies should stand alone without being part of Chinese studies. Their argument is that as Taiwanese people have increasingly embraced a distinct identity separate from China, the academic field dedicated to Taiwan studies should be the same. They raised the example that many university centers for the study of Taiwan, particularly those in the USA and to some degree in the United Kingdom (UK), are located within the broader East Asian or Asian studies, in parallel with studies of China, Japan, Korea, and other nations. The Centre of Taiwan Studies at the University of London is part of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). It was founded in 1999 and has been the only institution in the world that offers a master's degree on Taiwan studies outside of Taiwan for decades as of early 2025. The University of Nottingham has the Asia Research Institute that houses the Taiwan Studies program. Taiwan studies programs in the US, such as those at the University of Texas, University of South Carolina, and University of Washington, have similar arrangements. In 2025, the University of Washington in the US would be the first in North America to offer a new East Asia studies program, a master's degree that includes a Taiwan Studies track (Website of the University of Washington 2025). The University of California, San Diego has a Centre for Taiwan studies funded with generous donations from alumni. These institutions are not blended into any China studies, Chinese studies, or sinology programs. Instead, they have the same standing as study programs for Japan, Korea, China, and other nations.

In September 2024, there was an international conference at National Cheng-Kung University in Tainan, Taiwan, that invited scholars dedicated to Taiwan studies from home and abroad to share their experiences. The theme of the conference was 'Becoming Taiwanese-Narratives on the Island and Overseas' (成為臺灣人—島嶼與海外敘事). The preface of the conference indicated that with the increasing 'de-sinicization' (去中國化) of Taiwan's society, the organizers hoped that Taiwan studies would gradually become different from sinology (期待「臺灣研究」逐漸可以別於「漢學」) (Website of Conference on Becoming Taiwanese-Narratives on the Island and Overseas 2024).

Beyond universities, there are also professional associations that are solely for Taiwan studies. In the academic field of Political Science, for example, a group called the Conference Group on Taiwan Study was created as a related group of the American Political Science Association in 1990. On either side of the Atlantic, there are the North American Taiwan Studies Association (NATSA), created in 1994, and the European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS), founded in 2004.

In terms of academic publications, there is the English-language *International Journal of Taiwan Studies* (IJTS) published by De Gruyter Brill (formerly Brill), a European publisher. The IJTS is the first internationally collaborative, multidisciplinary, and peer-reviewed academic research journal in English dedicated to all aspects of Taiwan studies, including social sciences, arts and humanities, and topics that are interdisciplinary in nature (Website of the *International Journal of Taiwan Studies 2025*). Currently, the journal is co-sponsored by Academia Sinica in Taiwan and the EATS. Its editorial office is supported by Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is hosted by the Centre of Taiwan Studies at SOAS. The same publisher for the IJTS, De Gruyter Brill, also recently published an Encyclopedia of Taiwan Studies Online (2024), edited by several known scholars and led by Michael Hsin-Huang Hsiao. The Taiwan-based Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly and the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation have sponsored this publication.

Although the US has relatively more independent institutions for Taiwan studies, one must recognize that many are either exclusively or heavily sponsored by government agencies, mostly under the Taiwan-identity-minded Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) government or received grants from foundations based in Taiwan. On the one hand, one could argue that it would be hard for a nascent field to take off without these sponsorships. On the other hand, one can clearly see the correlation between the politics of funding and the development of the Taiwan studies field. This development in the US also corresponds to the real political situation, where there are generally more Taiwan sympathizers in society, in the political arena, and in the academia than in other countries, allowing the birth of these various Taiwan-focused independent units in American universities.

On the other side of the Atlantic, however, there are still quite a lot of study programs that institutionally include the studies of Taiwan as part of their China studies, Chinese studies, or sinology programs (Perkuhn and Chien 2022; Chien 2022). The Centre of Taiwan Studies at SOAS, University of London, is a rare exception, but one has to bear in mind that its operations are heavily sponsored by the Taiwanese government (Fell and Lim 2021). On continental Europe, Germany has more Taiwan-related programs than other European countries. For instance, at the University of Tübingen in Germany, Prof. Gunter Schubert, who is Professor of Greater China Studies, directs the European Research Centre of Contemporary Taiwan. At another German university, the Ruhr-University Bochum, two sinology professors, Christine Moll-Murata and Christian Schwermann, head the Research Unit for Taiwanese Culture and Literature with funding from the German and Taiwan governments (Website of the Taiwan Research Unit 2024). As of 2025, in Vienna, Helsinki, Oslo, and Olomouc, we see examples of different arrangements for the studies of Taiwan under units that focus on Chinese studies. These arrangements might reflect the lack of sufficient resources to set up Taiwan studies units

as standalone units. People working on Chinese studies thus spare some of their resources, time, and efforts to foster Taiwan studies within Chinese studies. As students learning about Taiwan also should ideally know Chinese culture, history, and language, this kind of resource sharing is logical for most universities.

Some Taiwan-related courses are organized with an unsteady stream of resources and are offered sporadically. At the University of Oslo in Norway, for instance, there is a course called Taiwan Studies supported by Taiwan's Ministry of Education. The course is part of the Chinese studies curriculum but students from other master's programs can take the course too (Chen and Lodén, 2023). Halvor Eifring (2022) points out that it is not easy to secure funding for a Taiwan course from the Norwegian Research Council, so they look for funding from the Taiwan side, where there are funding initiatives from various ministries, such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Interestingly, not only non-Taiwanese institutions are confronted with the challenges of resources; institutions in Taiwan face hurdles too. Study programs solely dedicated to Taiwan studies are experiencing declining numbers of applications, and their graduates are concerned about not being able to find employment after graduation (Chien 2022).

As a tactic, some scholars in Taiwan literature have considered the Sinophone theory as a way to link Taiwan studies to the Sinic world and thus internationalize Taiwan studies with the aim of attracting new students. Elsewhere in the world, Sinophone studies as a rising sub-field has gained much recognition in the US, more so than in Europe. There is much potential for the Sinophone field to develop because its framework is highly transnational and trans-regional in nature. According to this line of thinking, sinology as a field and Sinophone studies as a sub-field is a medium in which Taiwan studies can grow. Sinitic knowledge becomes the common ground for these knowledge realms to interlock (Chien 2022).

In sum, both arrangements, Taiwan studies as part of Chinese studies versus Taiwan studies as an independent field, are in existence in Taiwan and in various parts of the world. But even independent institutions such as SOAS have benefited from integrating their Taiwan courses with other area studies and interdisciplinary programs to attract larger pools of students (Fell and Lim 2021).

If interlocking any sort of Chinese studies with Taiwan studies is stirring debates among the scholarly community, interlocking with the Indo-Pacific is the new uncharted frontier, with the potential to become the next point of contention. In Chapter eight, I mentioned the problem of the interlocking Indo-Pacific knowledge realm for the Chinese government and Chinese experts. This is not easy for Taiwan either, although from geopolitical perspectives, some may argue that Taiwan should be part of it and should play a more active role in situating itself within the Indo-Pacific framework.

9.3 Interlocking with the Indo-Pacific

As Shih (2022) rightly points out, decolonization requires a discourse that neither reproduces colonial relations nor commits binary thinking (Shih 2022:82). Taiwan historically missed the opportunity to decolonize when the Kuomintang relocated to the island of Taiwan in the late 1940s. Back then, the residents of Taiwan had just gained independence from Japanese rule. That would have been a golden opportunity for the locals to celebrate and learn to decolonize Taiwan properly. However, the incoming Kuomintang regime only had in mind the urgency of gaining hold of power in Taiwan and expected the local Taiwanese to promptly switch their loyalty and demonstrate their Chineseness to the new regime, leaving them no chance to articulate postcolonial sentiments (Chou 2024:163; Shih 2022:76). As the regime was not sympathetic to the local elites' emotions and desires, these elites turned to the former colonial power, Japan, for reconnection. Hence, a nostalgia emerged for the colonial modernity that Japan had instituted (Shih 2022:78). As long as the Kuomintang could not really regain the Chinese mainland as it claimed to wish to, it could only ever institute a pseudo-Chinese regime on the island of Taiwan (Shih 2022). As a result, the intensification of relations between local elites and Japan turned into a magnified desire for a separate statehood from China that the Kuomintang held on to. Those elites became both anti-Kuomintang and anti-Beijing, depending exclusively on Japan, the old colonizer, and the US, a metaphorical neo-colonizer, for their Taiwanese identity.

As the Indo-Pacific concept is highly advocated by Japan and the US for geopolitical motives, Taiwan has been drawn further into it (Yang 2018; Scott 2019, 2022; Yang and Hashmi 2022). It inevitably deepens Taiwan's connection with Japan and the US, and whatever does not belong to the US–Japan alliance, such as the PRC, becomes the ultimate out-group. The contradiction between the decolonial spirit and the Indo-Pacific concept is solid and transparent.

What happens at these geopolitical levels affects the direction of research and educational institutions as these institutions have strategically picked up the new term of Indo-Pacific for their work, aiming to demonstrate the relevance of their research to timely topics and in the hope of securing budgets for their operation (Chao 2025; Chen 2025). Taiwan's Ministry of Education has been the primary driver in educational reforms and the allocation of resources to Southeast Asia-related fields in the context of the so-called New Southbound policy, which is related to the wider Indo-Pacific framework.[1] At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

[1] Taiwan's Ministry of Education website (2021 and 2024) contains more information about how it links education policy to NSP. For instance, it created the New Southbound Talent Development Programme targeting Southeast Asian and South Asia countries to expand Taiwan's higher education market overseas and promote interflows of talented people between Taiwan and NSP countries.

think tanks and some research institutes have led the general development of the Indo-Pacific knowledge realm.

In terms of educational institutions, in response to the old Southbound policy, in 1996, Tamkang University in northern Taiwan set up a Graduate Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, the first of its kind in Taiwan. In 1997, the National Chi-Nan University in Nantou in Central Taiwan also established a Graduate School of Southeast Asian Studies and a Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (Chen 2025). Later, in southern Taiwan, the National Sun Yat-Sen University in Kaohsiung and the National Cheng Kung University in Tainan also founded a Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at the turn of the 21st century (Ku 2006). Today, with the arrival of the newly minted Indo-Pacific concept, each of these Southeast Asia-focused institutions has demonstrated various degrees of interlocking with it in their events and publications. Be that as it may, at the time of the writing of this book, they appear to continue focusing primarily on their conventional area studies. Publications related to Indo-Pacific topics are still predominantly published by think tanks that work on foreign policies and international relations.

As a result of these transformations, Taiwan's capacity to understand and study Southeast Asia has increased compared with decades ago. The attempt to attract Southeast Asian talents is also yielding results. More and more students from Southeast Asian nations—including Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia—are studying in Taiwan, displacing Chinese students from the Chinese Mainland, Macao, and Hong Kong as a major source of international students. Diversification away from the Chinese market is visible in the recruitment of international students (Website of the Ministry of Education of Taiwan 2024; Huang 2025).

To sum up, the above development arises out of the context of some Taiwanese elites' aspiration for further de-sinicization and yearning to be more active in the US–Japan-led Indo-Pacific politics at the international level. The de-sinicization aspect refers to the fact that many of Taiwan's current policies are driven by motives of creating and enshrining its own distinct identity apart from China. The process started with Taiwanization or indigenization already during the KMT's time and evolved further to become de-sinicization during various DPP administrations (Chang 2004; Lams and Liao 2011; Leibold and Chen 2025). A discourse of Taiwan subjectivity has been developed, and we can see that a Taiwan-centric worldview or cultural and educational policies prioritizing a Taiwan-centric view have become common. While the process does help decolonize Taiwan from the Chinese sphere of knowledge production, at the same time, the measures taken to achieve de-sinicization have pushed Taiwan closer to a metaphorical colonial dependence on the US and Japan, hindering Taiwan's genuine decolonization from its geopolitical past, present, and future.

What could potentially be more concerning is that for such new development to succeed, Taiwan must envision a fresh perspective on its relationships with nations

in Southeast Asia or the Pacific islands (Effendi 2025; Marinaccio 202). Although there are no real colonial relations between Taiwan and these countries, scholars (e.g., Marinaccio 2021) have argued that there is neo-colonial imagination because of Taiwan's one way of conceiving its relations with Southeast Asia or the Pacific islands, without the acknowledgement and acceptance from the locals in these countries. As delving into this would deviate from the kernel of this book, I have opted not to elaborate further on the problem here. In a nutshell, such politically motivated selections of relations are understandable from geopolitical perspectives. Nevertheless, they leave many questions about how Taiwan itself and all the people living there can genuinely decolonize its foreign relations and how it can uphold the principle of decolonization in its various policy domains.

I have not talked much about my views in this book. My view is that de-sinicization is the wrong way forward for Taiwan. In fact, Taiwan's strength is its different form of Chineseness. Some scholars noted above believe that Taiwan, rather than the PRC, has the most traditional Chinese culture. Taiwan's Chinese culture does not impede its growing distinct Taiwanese identity. It is an asset of the Taiwanese identity. Its richness lies not just in its Chinese roots but also in its rich tapestry of Japanese, European, American, and Southeast Asian cultures interacting in Taiwanese society.

Taiwan's identity struggle reminds me of Korean and Japanese scholars' struggle concerning China in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Both Korea and Japan had been influenced by Chinese civilization for centuries. Before the Japanese colonization of Korea, Korean intellectuals did not even clearly think that Chinese culture and history were 'the other' (Shim 2023). However, with the desire to reposition themselves as modern sovereign states distinct from China, Japanese scholars such as Shiratori Kurakichi (白鳥庫吉, 1865–1942), created the new academic discipline of *Tōyōshi* (東洋史), which literally means 'Asian history' to "provincialize their neighbours, especially China, as their Orient" (Shim 2023:296). The term *Chūgoku*, which is equivalent to *Zhongguo* (literally 'China') in Chinese, means that China is the center of the world. The Japanese replaced that term with *Shina* (支那) to tone down the meaning that China is the center of the world (Shim 2023). Japan liberated itself from the Chinese world order using this way and made itself become the center of *Tōyō* (東洋, Asia). While placing Japan as the center did not wholly lead to positive historical outcomes, the Koreans adopted the Japanese approach to build up modern Korean studies on Chinese history (Shim 2023). With this, Korea and Japan managed to generate new identities for their countries distinct from China while at the same time successfully internalizing the essence of Chinese civilization as one vital foundation of their respective civilizations (Shim 2023).

If Taiwanese policymakers, political elites, and intellectuals wish to interlock Taiwan closer with Southeast Asia, South Asia, or the Indo-Pacific, the desire for such a global linkage and framework should be built upon the premise that they

understand Taiwan's rich Chinese-plus many cultures. It is similar to the Korean and Japanese cases where the essence of Chinese civilization is internalized. Nonetheless, the two nation-states do manage to carve out distinctly new identities away from China. Within this context, one can then ask how to encourage a transnational and global framework in understanding and studying Taiwan's past, present, and future.

Ping-Hui Liao (2018), an internationally recognized authority on Taiwan studies active in both the Taiwanese and American academia, has been advocating for a transregional framework to understand Taiwan. His view is that Taiwan was globalized very early through encounters with European explorers in the 16th and 17th centuries. Liao (2018) mentions the work of an American scholar of Chinese history, Tonio Andrade (2008), who examined how the Dutch, Spanish, and Chinese colonial empires encountered one another and competed in the Far East. Andrade's (2008) book *How Taiwan became Chinese* explains how the Dutch facilitated the first and most profound sinification in Taiwan. At the end of what Andrade (2008) called the Sino-Dutch colonization, Taiwan became a welcoming place for more Chinese immigrants. Andrade's (2008) analytical framework breaks the boundaries between conventionally defined political or cultural entities, revealing the connections between several societies and cultures back in the early modern period (1500–1800). This is an example of a transnational approach to the study of Taiwan that does not exclude China proper in any way but places Taiwan within a much broader regional or global framework for analysis.

Some might cynically argue that transnationalizing Taiwan studies is also a path towards de-sinicization. Notwithstanding, I would maintain that transnational encounters between cultures and entities beyond nation-states have been a more prevalent state of affairs than the bounded nation-state framework can capture. Transnationalizing Taiwan studies in no way de-sinicizes Taiwan; instead, it complicates Taiwan's relations with China and other forces at play. It is also in line with the decolonial spirit in that it does not just put Taiwan in a binary framework. A similar debate is in the change of Taiwan's history textbooks, where Chinese history is no longer taught in detail, unlike decades ago. Rather, the emphasis is on Taiwan's interactions with regional players, shifting towards more of a study of the history of East Asia. Chuang (2020) reports that some critics believe this too is a kind of de-sinicization, while Taiwan's Minister of Education Pan Wen-chung explained that this has nothing to do with de-sinicization but rather prepares students to become global citizens by having a more comprehensive understanding of the world which they inhabit. In the next and final chapter of this book, I will propose that a similar approach, embracing the globalness of China, can be implemented within Chinese studies.

CHAPTER 10

Knowledge Production about Global China

Abstract

Knowledge production about China has historically been global, more than we think. Even the West is in China's own knowledge production about China. An increasing number of ethnically Chinese scholars working outside of China have successfully contributed to the English-dominated international knowledge production about China. Moreover, as China has become influential in many aspects of people's lives around the world, it has become part of 'us.' Studying China does not just involve doing fieldwork in China. We should widen the geographical locations of China watchers whom we may interact with to understand China. Cross-fertilization of China studies with more disciplines might promise new intellectual potential, although it cannot replace China studies ultimately.

Keywords: Knowledge production, China, global China, cross-fertilization

10.1 Reclaiming knowledge production about global China

Due to heightened political tensions, China watchers in the West can no longer access the People's Republic of China (PRC) easily (see Chapter seven), although not all scholars have the same experience and perceptions of the problem. Sometimes, PRC-based Chinese scholars are also excluded from knowledge production about China, as exemplified by the example of Indo-Pacific knowledge production, where China appears to be at the core of Indo-Pacific politics. Still, the PRC government and Chinese scholars find themselves missing or excluded (see Chapter eight). This leads us to the conclusion of this book, where I ask how knowledge production about China can continue.

Historically, political turmoil in China has never completely prevented foreigners from entering and studying it. As securitization in the West and China veers into seemingly dangerous territory, China watchers will tread with caution in continuing their work. Some China watchers have looked further into the possibilities of using online methodology to collect data for China research. In contrast, others have looked to Taiwan as an alternative studied subject or an alternative base to watch China (see Chapter nine). Some scholars believe that fieldwork in China is still possible but requires more effort in building up individual relationships and using that kind of social capital to open up opportunities for support in fieldwork and

even find collaborators on the ground to help keep collecting data (Tan et al. 2023). In addition, inviting individual partners to meet outside of the PRC to continue the discussion of collaboration is essential. However, one must still factor in how to protect Chinese collaborators no matter where they are located. These coping strategies, to be honest, were used in the old days when accessing the PRC was hard. They are still valid in the contemporary context (Heimer and Thøgersen 2005). It might be more costly, and funding agencies should include these concerns in their calculations to support knowledge production about China. China is already part of 'us,' and we need to step up, not decrease, such endeavors. In conjunction with this, we also need to reassess and reaffirm the global, transnational, transregional, and transcultural nature of the concept of China. Thinking creatively about our fields may also help us broaden the scope beyond the PRC territory to continue our research on China. Here are several reasons that support the effectiveness of a global approach.

First of all, knowledge production about China has historically been global, more so than we may think. The contentious and malleable concept of China naturally makes knowledge production about China a much more global realm than its mere geographic confinement to the current PRC. I agree with Caroline Sy Hau (2016), a Chinese-Filipino author and scholar at Kyoto University, Japan, that signifiers such as 'China' and 'Chineseness' cannot be taken for granted as simply something coming from China. In fact, many scholars have argued about the actual meaning of China. This is not just a political issue of what Chinese territorial sovereignty encompasses. There is no consensus on what China really is. As Hau (2016) comments,

> Is it the current government? Is it the nation-state? Is it the civilizational process? Is it cultural China?[…] Is it the Kuomintang-led government that used to call itself the Republic of China? […] The biggest challenge is to overcome, and think through, or break through, the barrier of thinking about the signifier called China, because we cannot take it for granted. (Hau 2016)

Back in the 1950s to 1970s, for example, "Taiwan was America's and Europe's substitute for China. It was where we went to learn Chinese. Hong Kong was where we went to watch China," as Gregory Lee (2023), a Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of St. Andrews, rightly recalls.

Second, global knowledge production about China is produced both within and outside the PRC. Even 'the West' appears in the PRC's knowledge production about China. Historically, there has always been a Western presence in China. Even in Chinese academia, Western knowledge, practices, and cultures have affected the contours of the development of some Chinese academic disciplines (Zhang 2026),

such as economics. Indeed, Chinese scholars do localize Western knowledge, but this does not deny the influence of Western knowledge in the PRC. Eduard Daniel Oviedo (2022) of Argentina expressed in an oral history interview that China has studied American scholar, Joseph Nye's literature on soft power and eventually used it in its foreign policy implementation. Non-Chinese language academic works are still translated into Chinese and introduced to Chinese academics, although sometimes certain contents are censored and thus do not present the original content in its full form.

All of these prove that a clear East–West divide in epistemology is unthinkable (Lee 2023; Zhang 2023). Knowledge production about China is accordingly global, beyond a rigid East–West divide (Franceschini and Loubere 2022). Caroline Sy Hau (2016) rightly points out that modern China exhibits a significant degree of hybridization, influenced by its interactions with Japan, Southeast Asia—particularly the Chinese communities in that region—and the Anglo-Pacific world. To grasp the complexities of China, it is essential to adopt a perspective that extends beyond a solely China-centric view. An effective study of China must consider its position within a broader regional and global context. This interconnectedness has played a prominent role in shaping both the Chinese nation and its civilization in contemporary times.

Finally, as China has become influential in many aspects of people's lives around the world, it has become part of 'us' (Klotzbücher 2023). "Studying China does not involve just doing fieldwork in China. We can study China in many countries around the world" (Hau 2016). China's increasing relevance for many of us in the world implies that the 'epistemological China' that is being produced is becoming ever more global. It is more global than centuries ago. A China-centered way of learning about China, as conventional sinologists used to implement, is still a vital way of learning about China, but it is no longer the only way. Other parts of the world also contribute to knowledge production about China (Klotzbücher 2023; Hau 2016). It is in this vein that we can see more exchanges between knowledge production realms. Previously, we mentioned Thai senior China expert, Khien Theeravit's comment that "Chinese studies in Thailand is virtually inseparable from Asian studies and Thai studies. Context-wise, they are all intertwined" (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021). Hong Liu (2001), a scholar based in Singapore, further speaks of "Sino-Southeast Asian studies" as an alternative paradigm to conventional studies of China. Caroline Sy Hau believes that given Southeast Asia's closeness and entanglement with China, "Sino-Southeast Asian studies" is "a fruitful area of research" where she can make her contribution from a Filipino perspective (Hau 2016).

This book concludes with an affirmation of a paradigmatic shift that has fertile ground to develop if we re-examine and re-embrace the idea that knowledge

production about China is global in nature due to its interlocking and interactions with other knowledge production realms (Dessein 2024). Southeast Asia is a high contact zone with China. The intersectionality of knowledge production about China and Southeast Asia is high. This leads to solid ground for an alternative paradigm, such as the Sino-Southeast Asian studies that Hong Liu proposes. Compared with Southeast Asia, Central Asia's intersectionality with knowledge production about China is lower. Still, several local Central Asian China watchers have been the bridge between Russian, Chinese, and Central Asian knowledge production about China.

Likewise, Maria Montt Strabucchi (2025), a Chilean historian and expert in Latin American studies, notes that most Latin American nations lack dedicated programs in Asian studies or area studies, unlike other regions. Instead, the examination of Asia primarily occurs within the frameworks of social sciences or humanities. This results in the study of Asia and more specifically, China, often serving as an intersection of various academic disciplines. The integration of these knowledge domains is a natural occurrence in the Latin American context. Table 10.1 lists examples of the interlocking of knowledge realms that have been mentioned in this book and may serve as inspiration for future cross-fertilization.

Table 10.1 Strong Examples of Interlocking of Knowledge Realms between Chinese Studies and Other Disciplines

Interlocking of disciplines	**Examples of countries or regions where this development occurs**
Sino-Southeast Asian studies	Southeast Asia
Chinese studies/China studies, Asian studies, and Thai studies	Thailand
China–African studies	Africa, Europe, North America, China
China–Latin American studies	Latin America

Source: Organized by the author.

Contemporary geopolitical tensions and international politics might have expedited the need to reaffirm the global nature of knowledge production about China, as China watchers seek to find new routes and fields beyond the territory of the PRC to continue watching the country. There is a functional necessity for the global China paradigm. But to be fair, with or without such external pushes, China watching should have been reassessed, reclaiming its original global, transregional, transnational, and transcultural status.

In Chapter nine, I already touched upon a similar attempt to place Taiwan and Taiwan studies in a much more transnational framework. We can and should also place China and China studies in a much more transnational framework. A parallel

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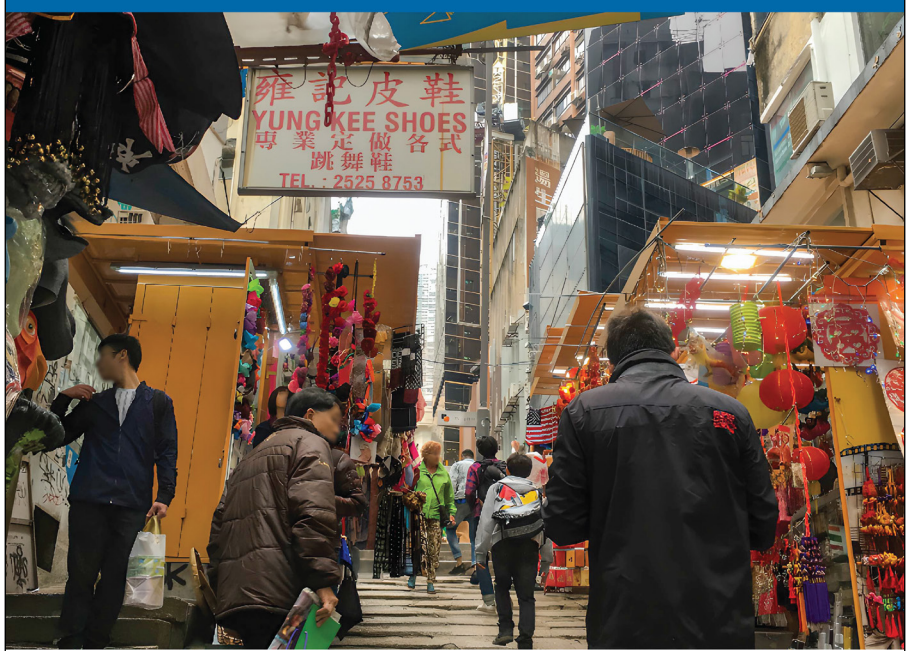

The Master in Sinophone Societies and Cultures offers a unique transregional and interdisciplinary approach that integrates advanced Chinese-language skills with comparative perspectives in social sciences and cultural studies. It focuses on Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Chinese-speaking communities around the world.

Social Sciences • Cultural Studies • Advanced Chinese language • Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Global China • Transregional and interdisciplinary approach • Comparative perspectives

Figure 10.1. Poster for the Master's Program Sinophone Societies and Cultures at the University of Vienna, Austria. Source and copyright of the poster: University of Vienna. Copyright of the image inside the poster: Liza Wing Man Kam.

example here could be Chien-Wen Kung's 2022 book *Diasporic Cold Warriors*, which explores how the Kuomintang sowed the seeds of anti-communism among the Philippine Chinese with the active participation of the Philippine state from the 1930s to the 1970s. Kung's book treats "Sinicization and de-Sinicization in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia, and in relation to Manchus, Uyghurs, the indigenous peoples of Taiwan, Tsinoys, Hong Kongers, and ethnic Chinese Singaporeans" (Kung 2022:223) as "comparable processes that span geographies and are enmeshed in distinct historical contexts and political processes" (Kung 2022:223). Kung's work speaks a lot to global Chinese history and Sinophone studies. Chinese language literacy is still necessary for this type of research.

The newly established master's program, 'Sinophone Societies and Cultures,' at the University of Vienna in Austria, is designed with a similar rationale to prepare students for research in the Sinophone realm (Website of the University of Vienna 2025). This program encompasses Sinophone societies and cultures located in Chinese-speaking areas and communities across East Asia, which include Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, North America, Europe, and various other regions globally (Figure 10.1). This serves as an excellent example of an educational initiative that has employed the global China perspective to disseminate information about China.

Furthermore, in order to contribute to the overall decolonization of knowledge production about China, which used to be dominated by the Global North and by English- or Chinese-language writings, globalizing China studies could give China watchers opportunities to interact with other related disciplines which might have been ignored before (e.g., Latin American studies, Central Asian studies) and China watchers from more regions of the world. This way, China experts can meet counterparts, generating multi-sited data and perspectives to enrich our continuous efforts in regard to watching China.

Networking certainly is the medium, but it does not stop at social interactions between China watchers. Indeed, the point here is to push different epistemological traditions to meet and interlock to the extent that they can harness nuanced, fresh, and consolidated understandings of China. The resistance against any easy binary thinking concerning 'China versus us' is in line with decolonial spirit. Rodolfo Maggio (2023a, 2023b), an anthropologist working on the Pacific Islands, for instance, has used a decolonial methodology, aided by ethnographic work, to delve into China in the Pacific Islands, demonstrating a new intellectual potential. During his 2024 fieldwork in the Solomon Islands, Maggio found a carver who presented a piece of artwork, a '*nguzunguzu*-dragon hybrid.' The dragon and the *nguzunguzu* serve as emblems of Chinese and Solomon Islands identity, respectively. Traditionally, *nguzunguzu* are used to embellish canoes and can embody either aggression or peace, influenced by the dynamics between the paddlers of

the canoes and those who see the canoes coming. In a similar vein, dragons in Chinese mythology can symbolize either fortune or calamity, contingent upon their interactions with humans. Therefore, both *nguzunguzu* and dragons represent supernatural entities whose influence can manifest as either beneficial or harmful, shaped by their relationships with people. As articulated by the carver, the hybrid artwork reflects his endeavor to contextualize China within a local framework. This concept drives Maggio's (2024a, 2024b) research, prompting him to utilize this hybrid figure as a foundation for exploring the grassroots connections between Solomon Islanders and the Chinese (Chen 2024).

A globalized China studies with decolonial spirits allows for a renewed significance of China studies within policymaking environments. The field of China watching, along with the wider discipline of Asian studies, has often engaged in excessive self-criticism, frequently characterizing itself as a byproduct of Western imperialism. This perception has contributed to a diminished credibility in the context of international relations. However, by integrating local perspectives and decolonial viewpoints, revised and globalized China studies can effectively educate and equip international relations analysts, fostering the advancement of these academic fields and *realpolitik*. In the context of the development on the Pacific Islands, as Maggio's (2024a, 2024b) work has demonstrated, this will allow policy analysts to move beyond the colonial conception that the region is either an American lake or Chinese Pacific, to rather an interstitial space where local players and agency can localize outside forces (Maggio 2024a, 2024b).

To this end, in the next concluding section, I will talk about pushing the boundaries of China studies to meet Global South studies and cross-fertilize, but with a realistic understanding of the limits of such an endeavor.[1]

10.2 Cross-fertilization of China studies and Global South studies and limits

The previous section has provided ample reasons why China studies and Global South studies cross-fertilization should be bolstered even if not on the scale that Sino-Southeast Asian studies have reached. Research or educational institutions in other regions of the world, such as Central Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, would need funding instruments to support mobility, research, and education schemes that can help cross-fertilize their area studies with China studies. I am not

[1] I use the term 'Global South' as a shorthand to expediate the discussion. As indicated at the outset of this book, I am aware of the problem of the North–South construct, and I do not want to repeat the mistake here. Global South here would then include areas such as Central Asia as well (see Chapter one).

blind to the fact that such funding may end up coming from the Global North, hence perpetuating the hierarchy of resources and knowledge production in the world.

The objective of mobility, research, and educational funding for the Global South must be to at least facilitate the meeting of different epistemological traditions. This could enable leveraging of the varying levels of development within Global South studies, covering regions of Africa, Latin America, the Middle East (or West Asia), Central Asia, and even Oceania. Of these Global South regions, China–African studies has become a distinct field or subfield with scholars supported by funds from China, America, and Europe (Mohan and Lampert 2013; Alden and Large 2018; Pepa 2020; Bolin, Carayannis, Niewenhuis, and Vlavonou 2022; Chiyemura, Gambino, and Zajontz 2023). While there are scholars working on China–Latin America studies, China–Middle East studies, and China–Central Asian studies, they are hamstrung by a lack of sustainable institutional backing (Longobardi 2022). Nonetheless, the deficiency in long-term institutional backing has not prevented individual researchers from reaching out and doing quality work on their own; it just makes it more difficult. For example, in the oral history interviews that we have reviewed throughout this book, many Global South researchers eventually obtained scholarships or funding from either China or Global North countries to help them continue their work. The downside is that these individuals tend mostly to work in silos. They do not have the means to cultivate disciples who will follow their path and thus form a critical mass to sustain whatever they have achieved (Jauregui, Gutierrez, Armijo, and Zheng 2022; Longobardi 2022).

Throughout this book, I have noted several times that Chinese funding is not always seen by the West as positive. However, China is actively contributing budgets to support knowledge production about China in the Global South. Through international agreements, the Chinese government and its various agencies have sponsored and facilitated expert exchanges between China and regions in the Global South (Bamba 2022; Jauregui, Gutierrez, Armijo, and Zheng 2022; Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022). For instance, China's partnership with the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (see Chapter six), a regional international governmental academic organization headquartered in Costa Rica, has facilitated educational and cultural cooperation with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (Jauregui, Gutierrez, Armijo, and Zheng 2022; Ibarra 2024). In addition, the Chinese government and universities have contributed to the development of a new generation of researchers from Latin America by providing a diverse range of scholarships (Strabucchi 2025). Thematically, while most research projects focus on topics on China's relations with the regions pertaining to the field of international relations, there are limited numbers of Global South scholars focusing on literature, history, and languages. In Central Asia, along with Chinese scholarships, China has collaborated with a number of Central Asian think tanks to facilitate the coordination

of research agendas and the advancement of pro-China viewpoints in the policy sphere (Jardine and Lemon 2025).

Importantly, it should be noted that these schemes and exchanges have yet to be translated into deep and enduring dialogues between scholars from China and these regions. However, China is doing more in producing knowledge about China in these regions than the rest of the world. As a result of China's efforts in facilitating collaboration, Chinese-language publications involving Chinese and Global South researchers are now common (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022). To expand on this, if the West tends to look at Chinese funding in a negative light, one could argue that Western or Global North funding schemes should prioritize further cross-fertilization of China studies and Global South studies.

At the time that this book was written, however, the Global North, which has mostly been the source of funding, is having budget cuts in many domains due to the political and economic turmoil that many of them are facing now. The current defunding of universities and interference by the federal government in American universities is a quintessential example of the result of political and economic turmoil. In Europe, the war in Ukraine and economic slowdown have affected many countries' research and development budgets. This would affect the traditional receivers of funding in the Global South because there is less funding for them compared with before (Käppeli, Gavas, and Granito 2025). An alternative view is that if the Global North can no longer provide funds to the Global South, it might lead to positive change. Without the ability to give money, the Global North may lose its traditional donor's power over the Global South. The traditional donor's power is much more transactional in nature, dominated by the donor's agenda and interests, where grants will be given in exchange for certain actions. When the Global North can no longer give much, this situation could mean that the Global North and Global South start to share the struggles of financial constraints and find other ways to work together. While it is true that diminished funding from the Global North will most likely decrease offline mobility and exchanges with the Global South, nowadays experts can move meetings and exchanges online. The COVID-19 pandemic somehow facilitated the widespread usage of online meetings. Even if online and offline meetings would never 'feel' the same, at least online ones can still induce exchanges at a low cost.

Also, when there is less money to give for the Global South countries, it becomes easier to look for more balanced partnerships that focus on mutual support rather than dependency. Partnership between Global North and Global South communities cannot be built simply on a transactional basis anymore. It might take some time for both sides to adjust to a new mentality that partnership for cross-fertilization is beneficial for the development of a sound understanding of global China. It is a common good that deserves efforts in partnership regardless of the lack of funding.

Online meetings, as said, can be some kind of imperfect solution. This idea suggests a profound change in how people in the Global North cooperate with the Global South to study China.

Clearly, not all Global South countries can offer grants. But there are some Global South countries that are developing nations that can offer grants for scholarly activities. Some of these grants must be applied for with the support of local Global South partners. The process is transformative in the sense that China watchers in the Global North might realize that they have to learn to understand and follow the rules of certain Global South grant-giving institutions. The traditional power relations may change in line with the decolonial spirit while we are cross-fertilizing China studies with Global South studies.

In the long run, to redress the power imbalances between the Global North and the Global South and support local sustainability, local institutions in the Global South must learn to prioritize local resources rather than pursue external funding anyway. For example, in Chile, the National Agency for Research and Development has funded the 'Millennium Nucleus Impacts of China in Latin America' (*Impactos de China en Latinoamérica y el Caribe*, ICLAC) initiative, which allows universities to offer free online courses in Spanish designed to improve the comprehension of China (Website of the Millennium Nucleus Impacts of China in Latin America 2025). Maria Montt Strabucchi (2025), a participant in ICLAC, noted that Spanish-speaking nations in Europe, North America, and Latin America often maintain distinct channels for disseminating information and knowledge regarding China. These complimentary online courses in Spanish, as a kind of common good, contribute to enhancing awareness and understanding of China for both Spanish speakers in Europe, North America, and Latin America, cross-fertilizing China studies with Global South studies. It also makes it more even in the traditional power relations between the Global South and the Global North academic communities.

This book concludes with advocacy for revised and globalized China studies that expand the geographic range of people with whom we may communicate, particularly with the Global South communities. Although it cannot eventually replace conventional China studies, cross-fertilization of China studies with Global South studies may offer new intellectual possibilities.

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