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**CHINA
INSTITUTE**
中國研究院

SOAS University of London

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Academic Research and Development of China Studies at SOAS in London

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1. Overview

SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), a member institution of the University of London, has a distinguished record in the study of China and Chinese languages dating back to its foundation as the School of Oriental Studies in 1916.¹ China's economic growth and its increasing importance as a major political power in international affairs have led to a rise of interest not only among professional constituencies concerned with China, but also among a wider public keen to travel to and to learn about the country's history, languages and culture, as well as its more recent political, economic and social transformation. Chinese media, film, music, literature, and social media apps have become a fascinating and integral part of global popular culture. At SOAS, we have over 40 full-time academic staff who study these subjects across the disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, a growing community of students, visiting scholars and research associates, and over 1200 alumni in China.²

The SOAS China Institute (SCI) is the overarching institute for promoting Chinese studies at SOAS and engagement with greater China and the wider world.

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Its academic members usually hold a teaching or research position at one of the academic departments. It is the outward facing umbrella unit responsible for reaching out to other academic institutions, the business communities, the media, the public sector and the general public. The SCI is responsible for implementing the School's China Strategy. The Institute works with scholars in Chinese studies across the School to generate synergy and to deliver impact for research. It brings people together in a spirit of dialogue and inquiry.

The SCI's mission is to make SOAS the hub for promoting the study of China in the UK and beyond, as well as making SOAS highly relevant to the public sector and the corporate world. It promotes interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and critically informed research and teaching on China. Through its research and outreach activities, the Institute seeks to inspire, excite and inform all those who wish to gain a deeper understanding of China and its place in the modern world. It works in partnership with government policy makers, the corporate sector and through the media to the general public to make our research based knowledge applicable. It provides a forum in which global business, academia, politics, media and NGOs can meet to share their experience and expertise. The Institute is dedicated to facilitate a fuller and more nuanced understanding of China, its politics, society, economy, people, law, language and civilisation. It does so without fear or favour.

The research and teaching of China at SOAS is supported by its library, which is one of five designated national research libraries in England.³ It has extensive holdings from and about China, including 200,000 volumes of printed material. It has 5,000 periodicals and newspapers, 600 '*congshu*' and has several collections of materials on the endangered languages of the region. The Library also houses the Morrison Collection of over 800 Chinese titles from the 17th and 18th centuries, the Johnston Collection of over 16,000 volumes, the John Swire & Sons Collection, China Maritime Customs Service Collections, and The China Association Collection.⁴ The Percival David Library of rare books and study materials is a special collection on long-term loan to SOAS in collaboration with the British Museum.

2. Research Projects in the Social Sciences

SOAS is actively engaged in cutting edge research. The summary below only lists the major on-going projects in the social sciences which are closer to the interests of the WTO. Projects in the Humanities are not listed.

A. Doing Intimacy: A Multi-sited Ethnography on Sex and Family Life in Greater China

This project is supported by a major European Research Council (ERC) grant at approximately Euro 1.5 million in 2015-23. It is led by the Deputy Director of the Institute Dr. Jieyu Liu, who is also a Reader in Sociology and Gender Studies. By setting a new agenda that moves from structures of family relationships to the quality of relationships and through examining “doing intimacy,” this project takes a closer, fresher, critical look at the Chinese family dynamics as they are lived. Informed by the emerging literature on gender, intimacy and modernity, it examines intergenerational relations as well as gender and sexual relations in the family. It takes a comparative approach that compare and contrast the realities in both the urban and rural areas, as well as across the Mainland of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. It also compares practices of intimacy in various sites and examine whether/how they are by-products of particular socio-cultural configurations.⁵

B. China’s Global Strategy

This project is supported by a grant of USD200,000 from the Smith Richardson Foundation in the US in 2022-24. It is led by Professor Steve Tsang, Director of the Institute, with Research Fellow Dr. Olivia Cheung as co-investigator. This project goes beyond conventional international relations analysis in addressing what really drive and shape China’s global strategy under the leadership of Xi Jinping, and examines the implications for the rest of the world. It ascertains China’s global strategy as conceived in the new state ideology, Xi Jinping Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era. This is necessary as China has come under the strongman rule of Xi, who is in the process of elevating his Thought into the state ideology. His vision is now the most basic factor that steers China’s global strategy. This project investigates what the guidelines and roadmap China uses to achieve the kind of global leadership it seeks: what China will do should it need

to make hard choices in order to secure “national rejuvenation”; and what China’s solid red lines are. It also develops an analytical framework, Sino-centric party-state realism, to evaluate how domestic factors and international factors interact to shape China’s approach to foreign relations.

C. The Political Thought of Xi Jinping

This Project is supported by alumni of SOAS and is led by Professor Tsang with Dr. Cheung as co-investigator in 2019-23. This project is nearing completion, and the end product is a book by the same title, scheduled to be released by Oxford University Press in January 2024.⁶ This project provides a contextualized reading of Xi Jinping Thought and examines how it has been implemented in practice.⁷ While China’s political system remains a Leninist party-state, how it operates has been substantially modified following the introduction of Xi Thought. What has happened is akin to replacing the operating system of a computer. This project conceptualizes the modified system as a Sino-centric consultative Leninist system. The Chinese Communist Party is being reinvigorated as a Leninist machine, by which the Party leads everything. A new *de facto* social contract is offered to the Chinese people, who are being indoctrinated by Xi Thought so they will think like “one patriotic people.”

China’s economy is being restructured following Xi’s vision of a “socialist market economy.” Its interactions with the rest of the world is now guided by Xi’s reconstruction of the traditional *tianxia*, or all-under-heaven, world order, which commits to a “China First” principle. The end goal set in Xi Thought is the fulfilment of “the China Dream of national rejuvenation” by 2050 at the latest. Whether this will come to pass or not, the introduction of Xi Thought has already changed China, with significant implications for the rest of the world. The book concluding this project explains these issues in an accessible way.

D. Factional-ideological conflicts in Chinese Politics

This is a project conducted by Dr. Olivia Cheung, Research Fellow in 2020-23. Its completion will be marked by the publication of a book, *Factional-Ideological Conflicts in Chinese Politics: To the Left or to the Right* by Amsterdam University Press in the summer of 2023. It will be released on open access basis with a UK Research and Innovation grant. The project examines high-level debates

on socialist transformation and political reform in the Chinese Communist Party for over six decades, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping. These debates powerfully shape policy changes through the mechanism “factional model-making,” which publicly flouts the rules on party discipline, but is tacitly tolerated by the party leadership.

E. China and World Order

This project is led by Dr. Yuka Kobayashi, Lecturer in Politics and International Studies. It examines China as a normative actor in international institutions, in particular at the WTO and the UN. In terms of subjects, this project covers climate change, digital order, trade, investment, human rights and outer space. It uses empirical data on how China approaches these policy areas at the UN and the WTO to examine China as a normative player in the world.

F. China in Central Asia

This is a collaborative research project of Dr. Bhavna Dave, Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations and Dr. Kobayashi. It examines China’s investments and engagements in Central Asia within the context of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). They also study the China-Russian strategic partnership and its impact on the world order. The main primary sources for this project are interviews and data collected in China, Central Asia and Russia. Their research findings have been shared with various governments which consulted them for insights on different dimensions of this project.

G. Central Asia and Eurasian order

This project is led by Dr. Dave with a focus on Sino-Russian partnership in building Eurasian order and institutions. She addresses three key questions in this project: How different stakeholders in Central Asia respond to China’s BRI?; How Central Asian states position themselves within China and Russia-led multilateral organisations?; and How they respond to the dynamics of Sino-Russian partnership in the region?

H. Sino-US relations, NATO and the Ukrainian War

This is a joint project of Dr. Kobayashi and Dr. Yanan Song, Lecturer in

Global Politics. Its binding theme is the impact of the Ukraine War on Sino-US competition. They also examine how NATO and Europe have become focal points and how changes unleashed by the war dynamically impact upon the world order. This project takes a balanced approach and takes into account the diversity of views presented in debates in both the English and Chinese languages, as well as perspectives across Europe, China and the US.

3. Publications and Platforms

A. The China Quarterly

SOAS produces THE CHINA QUARTERLY, which is the world's leading academic journal on contemporary China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.⁸ Dr. Tim Pringle, Reader in Labour, Social Movements and Development, is the Editor. Four issues are published every year. Its articles and research reports make it an invaluable aid to understanding modern China. Its book reviews are also a helpful guide to recent scholarship on China.

B. The SCI Blog

The Blog is an online platform which the Institute provides for academic and other experts on China to share their research findings, insights and informed opinions on China.⁹ It is edited by Dr. Verna Yu. Articles can focus on any subject, in both the social sciences and the humanities which are being taught at SOAS, though the majority is on the more contemporary issues in greater China. They are authored by the SCI members and researchers located in different parts of the world and showcase a wide spectrum of perspectives on China.

C. China in Context Podcast

China In Context is a weekly podcast launched in February 2021 which offers expert analysis on China's politics, economy, society, culture and international relations.¹⁰ It is hosted by Duncan Bartlett with over 110 episodes aired by May 2023. It features interviews with leading academics and associates at the SOAS China Institute, as well as guests from around the world.

4. Teaching

SOAS offers the full range of university courses in Chinese Studies, from the undergraduate, post-graduate taught to the doctoral levels. Students who are enrolled in disciplinary departments can also take China focused modules. The main China-centred undergraduate programme is the four year B.A. in Chinese Studies, which includes spending one year abroad, in Mainland China or Taiwan for immersion language training. It is offered by the Department of East Asian Languages and Culture. Students choosing to pursue a MA related to China can choose from the MA in Chinese Studies, MA [in a discipline] and Intensive Language (Chinese), MA in History of Arts and Archaeology of East Asia, MA in History of Arts and Archaeology of East Asia and Intensive Language, and MA in Taiwan Studies. At both the undergraduate and taught post-graduate levels, students are required to take a number of core modules, but are then free to choose from a wide range of elective modules. For the academic year 2022-23, we recruited 82 undergraduate and 46 postgraduate students majoring in the study of China.

The main research degree we offer is the Ph.D., which can focus on Sinology or the study of China in any of the disciplinary subjects on offer at SOAS. The Ph.D. programme is co-ordinated by the Doctoral School. Each Ph.D. student is usually mentored by a team of two academic supervisors.

The SCI hosts an ambitious programme of interdisciplinary research seminars and workshops, high-profile lectures, intimate roundtable meetings on current affairs, specialist briefings, international conferences, and intensive workshops. While some of the events are invitation only, the overwhelming majority of them are open to all. They bring to the student and wider academic community academic expertise from outside SOAS. For academic year 2021-22, we hosted 40 events on campus and via Zoom with 2,829 total recorded attendance.

5. Academic Partners

We already work with and will further develop our academic relationships with China and leading Chinese Studies centres throughout the world. Our key partners

in China include Zhejiang University, the Yenching Academy at Peking University and Beijing Normal University.

Apart from formal partnerships, academic members of the SOAS China Institute also run collaborative projects with colleagues in Chinese institutions. For illustrative purposes, there are collaborations between SOAS academics and Chinese scholars at Tsinghua University, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Fudan University, and the Shanghai International Studies University. This list is not exhaustive.

6. External Engagement and Impact

A. The Corporate Membership Scheme

The SCI runs a Corporate Membership scheme to make insights based on its academic research put to practical use in the corporate world. This involves the sharing of cutting-edge research-based knowledge to companies in a readily digestible format to facilitate their strategic planning. Our members include British companies and major multi-nationals ranging from leading financial services firms, consultancies to industries.

B. Media Outreach

The SCI provides analytical commentaries to a wide spectrum of media, both domestically in the UK and globally, with well over 200 annual appearances per year on average. They include appearances on leading platforms such as the BBC's Today, World at One, PM, World Tonight, 10 o'clock News, Newsnight; ITN, 5 News, C4 News, Sky News, CNN, Al Jazeera's various programmes, Deutsche Welle, France 24, ABC, AP, AFP, Bloomberg, Reuters; New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, The Times, The Guardian, The Telegraph, The Globe and Mail, Washington Post, La Monde, Japan Times, South China Morning Post, Strait Times, Newsweek, as well as other media in multiple countries in the EU, in the USA, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere.

The SCI is a key contributor to major documentaries, which aired on the BBC, Channel 4, Netflix, Al Jazeera and other platforms. They include, for example: Channel 4's *Britain's Forgotten Army* (Channel 4, 12 November 2017); BBC's *I*

was there (on the Tiananmen Massacre (BBC4, 1 & 10 June 2018); BBC current affairs documentary, *China: A New World Order* (BBC2, August-September 2019); and Al Jazeera current affairs documentary, *The Big Picture: The China Complex* (Al Jazeera, December 2019).

C. Government Advisory

The SCI regularly provides expert assessments for British government departments, such as the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and the Cabinet Office. Its Director and academic members have also been called to testify repeatedly at various parliamentary committees, at both Houses of the UK Parliament. They have also provided expert advice to foreign diplomatic missions in London, including that of Australia, Canada, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, US, and Vietnam. The Institute Director has testified at the Canadian Parliament, as well.

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