

# 150 Years of Oriental Studies at Ca' Foscari

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## Chinese Studies in Venice: a Timeline of Change

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**Abstract** Chinese Studies have historically been shaped by change in political, social, and scientific institutions. Since the '80s, China's emergence into the world stage and change in scientific paradigms have spurred debate about the epistemological foundations of the field. Sinologists have been confronted with the need of identifying pathways to ensure that the knowledge they produce is relevant for science and society. The engagement with theoretical and empirical approaches employed by different disciplines, most notably the social sciences, has been a key element to their endeavours. This paper contributes to this on-going reflection, by benchmarking recent changes in Chinese Studies at Ca' Foscari University against global trends of evolution in area studies. Results show that the field has now multi-disciplinary features and has initiated a transition towards inter-disciplinarity. By endorsing the holistic approach to knowledge informing this transition, scholars in the field may strengthen the centrality of Chinese Studies in scientific production processes concerned with the sinosphere.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Evolution of Chinese Studies. Change Within Continuity. – 3 Recent Trends in the Evolution of Chinese Studies at Ca' Foscari. – 4 A Possible Pathway Toward Transformation.

**Keywords** Chinese Studies. Venice. Social sciences. Disciplinarity. Change.

### 1 Introduction

Defining the nature of Chinese Studies is by no means an easy task. Throughout history the epistemic milieu of the field has been enriched by heterogeneous contributions. This makes it challenging to draw clear-cut boundaries based on disciplinary features, a common practice in other fields. Things get easier if we seek to define Chinese Studies through their aim: i.e. to generate knowledge about peoples and places of the sinosphere, both present and past. Boundaries of the sinosphere cannot be superimposed on physical or political ones. They are drawn by the diffusion of


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cultural and social institutions originating from the epicentre(s) of the Chinese civilisation. These boundaries are porous and constantly reshaped by relations with other cultural and social systems (Wang 2002; Barmé 2005; Previato 2017; Fumian 2018). This dynamic process represents both a source and a receptor of adaptive behaviours by scholars in the field. By coping with change induced by factors out of their control – historical events, the evolution of science, etc. – they incessantly redefine their field of inquiry and their methods. This paper contributes to this dynamic process, by discussing change in Chinese Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice against wider trends of evolution in the field. The first section sketches the trajectory of evolution of Chinese Studies since their inception in the XVI century, by identifying motifs of continuity and change. The second introduces a systematic review of recent scientific works authored by researchers<sup>1</sup> with formal sinological training, employed by the Department of Asian and North African Studies.<sup>2</sup> A total of 955 works have been extracted from the university database,<sup>3</sup> filtering them based on (a) date of publication (2000-2018); (b) authors' department of affiliation; and (c) authors' names. Publications have been then categorised based on their disciplinary approach, by triangulating information about their (a) title; (b) disciplinary field(s)<sup>4</sup> of publication; and (c) authors' disciplinary field. Results of the review are presented and discussed against wider trends at play in the field. The conclusive section of the paper introduces potential areas for reflection relevant to the future evolution of Chinese Studies, drawing from the international debate on area studies and transdisciplinarity.

## 2 The Evolution of Chinese Studies. Change Within Continuity

The origin of Chinese Studies can be traced back to the late XVI century, when the expansion of maritime trade toward Asia created the preconditions for intensifying relations between Europe and the Ming empire. At the time, the production of scientific knowledge had not yet been normalised into the narrow branches that we call today disciplines. Science was the pursuit of a holistic comprehension of the human and physical nature (Capra 1982). The first pioneers of Chinese Studies – mostly Jesuits – who set foot on the shores of South-East China were imbued with such an epistemological imprinting. Clearly, establishing accurate and reliable means

1 Including faculties, post-docs and PhD candidates.

2 Formerly Department of East Asian Studies.

3 Data are partially available here: URL <http://www.unive.it/data/19126/>.

4 *Settore scientifico-disciplinare*, SSD.

of communication was their first preoccupation. The study of language therefore played a vital role in their efforts, as did the inquiry into texts that constituted precious sources of information about China's cultural, social, political and religious institutions. Besides these core skills, first sinologists were also trained in natural philosophy. The inquiries into astronomy, geometry and mathematics, etc. were part of their scientific work. As a matter of fact, they acted as proxies between the European and Chinese scientific traditions, collecting, crafting and transferring knowledge about humans and the natural environment they inhabited (Iannaccone 1996; Hsia 2008; Jami 2011). Change came with the compartmentalisation of knowledge and the institutionalisation of higher education in the XIX century. This period witnessed the emergence of canonical Chinese Studies, shaped by the humanities. Besides language and philology, the field came to include the study of philosophy, religion, arts and history, as well as archaeology and anthropology. Scholars in the field continued to be regarded both as a source of knowledge on China and brokers of the intellectual and scientific dialogue between China and the West. This exchange was all but fair, as it often served political, economic, military and religious interests of colonial powers. In fact, the prestige achieved by area studies in this period can be largely explained with their being instrumental to the interests of European élites. This paradigm entered into crisis in the XX century once again, when the social sciences emerged as an important locus of scientific production on China's social and political institutions (Dutton 2002; Walder 2004). Political science, sociology, and economics complemented the humanities in the production of societally relevant knowledge on China. This trend was also fuelled by the increasing importance attributed in academia and policy circles to the adoption of 'objective' methods of inquiry, based on standardised metrics, quantitative analytics and a detached approach to the subject of inquiry (Carlson et al. 2010). Against such a background, traditional Chinese Studies were understood in many quarters as ancillary to other disciplines. The marginalization of the field and the increasing disciplinary specialisation over the second half of the century resulted in different outcomes in Anglo-Saxon countries and continental Europe. In the US – and partially UK – Chinese Studies soon embraced multi- and inter-disciplinarity,<sup>5</sup> blending their traditional areas of interests and methodological approaches with those prevalent in the social sciences. In continental Europe change was slower in taking roots and the focus on humanities long remained dominant (Leiden University 2012). A generalised opening-up of the field to the contribution by other disciplines came with the China's reforms in the '80s-'90s. The

5 Multidisciplinarity implies the collation of inputs from different disciplines, without a unified analysis or synthesis. Interdisciplinarity is the collaboration among different disciplines oriented towards a comprehensive and integrated knowledge of the subject (Bernstein 2015).

political and economic dynamics triggered by the emerging role of China generated a greater heterogeneity in interests and pathways of scientific inquiry in/about China. Moreover, her opening-up to the West made it possible once again to conduct field research, while unprecedented access was given – at least until the first decade of the 2000s – to a variety of sources useful for the study of the country's contemporary institutions (Carlson et al. 2010).<sup>6</sup> In a long-term perspective, the trajectory of evolution of Chinese Studies can be therefore understood as characterised by both continuity and change. Continuity lays in that, since its inception, the field was been shaped by political, economic and social contingencies. Also, despite developing a robust and coherent core centred on the humanities over the centuries, Chinese Studies have often been a locus of encounter for different scholarly traditions. The field has been constantly changing to adjust to the wider socio-political and scientific environments, by selectively expanding to encompass other scholarly traditions, or otherwise retrenching into its core. This capacity to adapt has constituted an important source of resilience for the field. As we shall see in the next paragraphs, this dynamic continuity persists to the present day.

### 3 Recent Trends in the Evolution of Chinese Studies at Ca' Foscari

Chinese Studies have a relatively recent history in Venice, dating back to the mid-'60s. Its roots however run deep in the tradition of continental sinology. Professor Lionello Lanciotti—the initiator of Chinese Studies in Venice—had been student of Giuseppe Tucci, one of the main figures in Classical Oriental Studies. In his young age he had known first hand the work of scholars representing the late apogee of the XIX century sinology, such as Bernhard Karlgren and Jan Julius Lodewijk Duyvendak (on prof. Lanciotti, cf. Scarpari, Lippiello 2005). This important legacy has long nurtured the development of Chinese Studies in Venice, centred on philology, linguistics, literature, and philosophy. This has remained the norm until recently. In the last decade the contribution of other disciplines has become more robust. The figure below shows the composition of research carried out by Chinese Studies scholars at the Department of Asian and North African Studies. Publications are subdivided into four areas: the humanities, contemporary history,<sup>7</sup> social sciences and law. Data show a clear trend towards an increase in the diversity of scientific work conducted at the department, thanks to a marked increase in research informed by Social Sciences and Legal Studies.

6 These processes were sustained also by technological development.

7 Contemporary history is considered separately due to the role it has played in Ca' Foscari in bridging the humanities with the study of contemporary political and social institutions.

Graph 1. Publications by disciplinary field. Department of Asian and North African Studies (2000-01/2018-06)

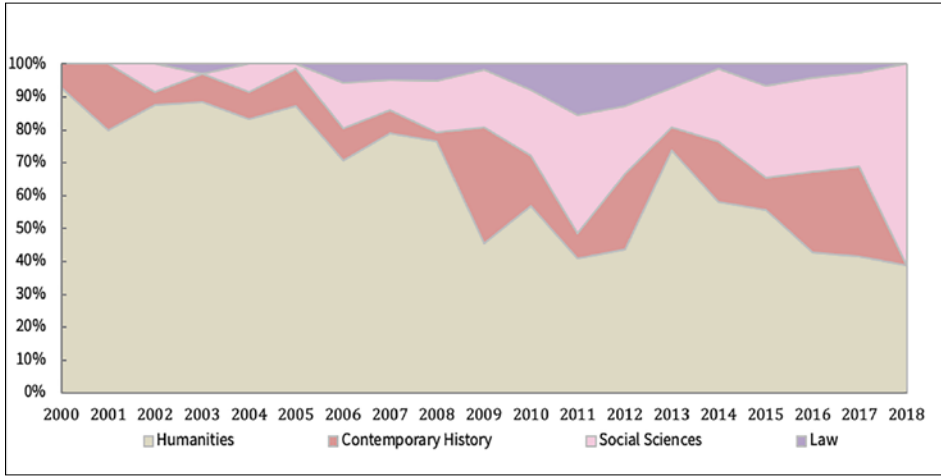
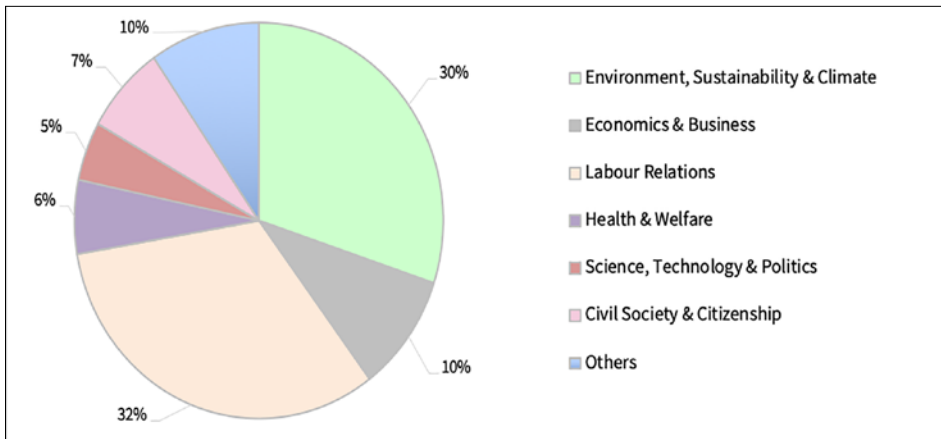


Chart 1. Publications that have employed social sciences approaches, subdivided by subject. Department of Asian and North African Studies (2013-01/2018-06)



Research informed by social science has revolved around major governance challenges and institutional transformations that have characterised China in the post-reform era. Albeit to a lesser extent, it has also focused on topics relevant to Sino-Italian relations. Subjects include the environment and climate politics, sustainability policies, labour relations, welfare and health care policies, business and economics, civil society and citizenship, and the science-politics nexus (chart 1).

For a considerable part, researchers have employed theoretical frames and empirical tools utilised in the field of political sciences, as well as sociology and organisational studies. It is worth noting that the inquiry into the legal dimension and regulatory structures has constituted an important transversal component of research conducted on the above-mentioned subjects. The strive toward a meaningful engagement with these issues has resulted in a deeper integration of disciplines, based on systemic theoretical and analytical framings. Almost one third of works published in the last five years have been co-authored by researchers with diverse disciplinary backgrounds. One out of ten publications – particularly in the field of environmental and social sustainability – has been co-authored by scholars of natural and health sciences. These dynamics are a tangible sign of the establishment of a interdisciplinary research agenda within Chinese Studies in Venice, whereby research subjects are chosen, framed and inquired into by integrating concerns, concepts and methods of different disciplines.

#### 4 A Possible Pathway Toward Transformation

Since the year 2000 Chinese Studies in Venice have been characterized by the gradual establishment of multi- and inter-disciplinary research. At the same time, the core of the research agenda has remained rooted into the humanities. This has generated considerable scientific results and allowed the wider scientific community in Ca' Foscari to tune in to China's evolving social, political and economic reality. This trend is consistent with the one observable in continental Europe, where the field has opened to the contribution of different disciplines, albeit preserving the humanities at its core. In recent years, further evolution of the field has been subject to lively debate. Despite a certain degree of heterogeneity, many scholars tend to agree in endorsing the idea of a holistic epistemology of the sinosphere, open to integration between the humanities and other disciplines (Barmé 2005; LIAS 2012; Brombal 2017; Previato 2017; Fumian 2018). This approach appears to echo transdisciplinary propositions,<sup>8</sup> according to which Chinese Studies may work as a locus where not only boundaries among disciplines can be crossed at ease – this is happening already – but these very boundaries can be radically challenged and new approaches established from scratch. Based on the current debate on transdisciplinarity (Capra 1982; Bernstein 2015) and the future of area studies (Dutton 2002;

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8 Transdisciplinarity differs from interdisciplinarity in that it “challenges the entire framework of disciplinary thinking and seeks to assemble new approaches [...] using materials from existing scholarly disciplines for new purposes” (Bernstein 2015). On the pursue of holism in the sciences, see the seminal work by Capra (1982).

LIAS 2012), further reflection on this proposition may focus on four aspects, namely scientific awareness, ethical drive, societal engagement and positional consciousness. The first aspect – scientific awareness – refers to the capacity of scholars of being conscious of and responsive to transformations in knowledge production. Today, these transformations mostly regard the establishment of a systemic perspective, whereby interconnections among human, social and natural phenomena replaces boundaries arbitrarily established by scientific disciplines. This sense of interconnectedness closely relates to ethical responsibility stemming from relations among human beings and between human beings and nature. It is worth noting that Chinese Studies possess tremendous potential at this regard, as they have been traditionally concerned with interconnections between people(s), their cultural and social institutions and spaces they inhabit (LIAS 2012). Such an ethical approach would empower the humanities lying at the core of our field, unearthing their potential in reflecting on life, the human condition, values and beliefs. To some extent, societal engagement can be understood as a by-product of such an ethical drive, as scholars become concerned with challenges faced by contemporary societies and pursue the co-creation of knowledge on subjects of pressing public concern. Finally, a critical reflection on positionality has been as well a practice that has long informed the daily practice of Chinese Studies. Rather than focusing on the divisive trait of dichotomies (self/other; we/them; researcher/subject; knowledge/matter), positional consciousness may both facilitate the production and exchange of knowledge, and the identification of novel solutions for long-standing problems of human origin, within and beyond the sinosphere.

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