



The SOAS China Institute (SCI): A world-leading centre for China expertise

The SOAS China Institute officially launched in 2014 as an expert resource for the wider world of business, policy and media with more than fifty China experts in the social sciences and the humanities, as well as international perspectives from the School's regional expertise in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, drive forward the Institute's activities and collaborations. In 2016, Professor Steve Tsang was appointed as the new Director of the Institute and has helped establish international relationships. Professor Tsang enlightens us on the impact the Institute has had for Chinese research and the study of China as well as expands on the development of China's position as a new leading science powerhouse.

The SOAS China Institute (SCI) is one of the world-leading centres for China expertise located in the heart of London. With more than 55 academics working on different aspects of China at SOAS, it is home to the largest community of Chinese Studies scholars in Europe. The Institute promotes interdisciplinary, critically informed research and teaching on China. It works with colleagues at SOAS with expertise beyond China to promote collaborative research on China and its relations with the rest of the world, particularly in the rest of Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

The SCI engages with SOAS alumni and international partners in fostering international collaboration. Building on its history, the concentration

of expertise, fantastic resources for research and strategic location, SCI welcomes collaboration with colleagues and institutions across the world in promoting the study of China. We interviewed their Director Professor Steve Tsang to discuss the role of SCI and the development of Chinese research in more detail.

Can you tell us more about the SOAS China Institute in terms of its background, history and core mission?

The SOAS China Institute is the over-arching institution at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London for the study of China. It promotes interdisciplinary, critically informed research and teaching on China. It channels the unrivalled

breadth and depth of expertise and insights across a wide spectrum of disciplines on China to the wider worlds of government, business, media, education, the arts, NGOs and beyond. It works with colleagues at SOAS with expertise beyond China to promote collaborative research on China and its relations with the rest of the world, particularly in the rest of Asia, the Middle East and Africa. It promotes excellent work conducted by academics and students at SOAS. It also encourages and supports colleagues based elsewhere to take advantage of its facilities to strengthen their scholarship and insights on China. The SOAS China Institute was founded in 2013 and is an indirect successor to the Contemporary China Institute at SOAS.

The China Debate 2018 'How sustainable is the Chinese Model?' Left to right: Prof Nicholas Lardy, Prof Shi Yinong, Prof Steve Tsang, Prof Jane Duckett, & Prof Minxin Pei.



Sir John Key delivering the first WSD Handa Distinguished Lecture 'Engaging with China: A view from the neighbourhood', September 2017.

The SOAS China Institute now maintains the highest public profile as a centre of excellence and insights on China for the media in the UK and beyond.

Can you tell us more about your research background and your Chinese research interests?

I was educated at the University of Hong Kong and St Antony's College, Oxford where I was a Swire Scholar and then a Beit Senior Scholar. After finishing my D.Phil. at Oxford, I stayed on and was later elected to a Professorial Fellowship at my alma mater. I performed various roles there, ranging from being Dean of St Antony's College, to Director of its Asian Studies Centre, Director of the Pluscarden Programme for the Study of Intelligence and Transnational Terrorism, Director of the Taiwan Studies Programme, and Director of the Hong Kong Programme. I left Oxford in 2011 to become the Director of the China Policy Institute and then the

Head of the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies at the University of Nottingham. I joined SOAS in December 2016. I have published 18 books, of which five are single-authored, and two others which focus on countering transnational terrorism.

My research interest is broad and is not restricted to the study of China, though Greater China is my primary focus. My research covers not only the politics, international relations and history of Mainland China but also that of Taiwan and Hong Kong. I introduced 'consultative Leninism' as an analytical concept for understanding the nature of the political system in post-Mao China. I am currently engaged in two main research projects, a very long-term

one on a biography of Chiang Kai-shek and one on 'Xi Jinping Thought'.

What have been the highlights/greatest achievements at the Institute for you as the Director?

Transforming into reality the potential of the SOAS China Institute as a hub for promoting the study and understanding of China in London, both within academia and beyond. The Institute hosts lectures and seminars not only for students and staff at SOAS but also for members of the public in London. Colleagues from North America, Asia, Australia and Europe who head to the UK have offered to address SOAS at the Institute. It hosts two distinguished lecture series – the A.C. Graham Lecture on Sinology, and the WSD Handa Distinguished Lecture,

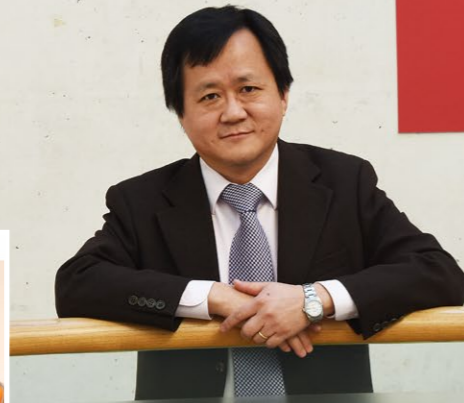
China in Asia, Africa and the Middle East

SOAS is the world's leading institution for the study of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. This theme leverages the School's regional expertise to better understand the global context of China, outside of the typical US-China relationship. It will consider China as a nation that explores and expands through trade, soft power, and potentially through military power, including both contemporary and historical perspectives.



China: Population and Change

Fundamental demographic changes are taking place in China and their impact on specific groups differs according to many factors, including gender, age, ethnicity and urban or rural location. Looking through the lens of changes in family life and related cultural values and traditions will be one of the areas focused on within this theme.



Prof Steve Tsang at the SOAS China Institute.

The SOAS China Institute now maintains the highest public profile as a centre of excellence and insights on China for the media in the UK and beyond. It is regularly consulted by NGOs and governments in Europe and North America. It has also introduced a Corporate Membership scheme, through which its expertise is now available to some leading companies.

What impact has the SOAS China Institute had for China, international collaboration and promoting the study of China?

The SOAS China Institute helps to promote public understanding of Chinese politics, society, economics, law, cultural heritage, arts, language and history through very regular expert commentary in the international media. In-depth analysis is also presented in programmes such as Channel 4's 'Britain's Forgotten Army' (about China's role in the First World War) or the BBC's 'Briefing Room' (about the Belt and Road Initiative) or 'I was there' (about the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989).

The Institute is building up collaborative relations with leading Chinese universities,

including Peking University, Tsinghua University, Zhejiang University and others. The collaborations take many different forms and can range from joint research projects, conferences, and student visits. An additional and unusual form of collaboration is to hold an invitation-only workshop in Mandarin with a Chinese partner institution for frank exchange of views on a sensitive subject for which the Chinese partner reports the findings to the Chinese authorities. Insightful but critical assessments otherwise not channelled to Chinese policymakers are provided through this collaboration. Mandarin is used to minimise the risk of critical comments being lost in translation as they are recorded and transmitted to the Chinese authorities.

While Europe and the US have traditionally led in scientific development, China, in particular, has emerged as a new science and technology (S&T) powerhouse – what are your thoughts on China's global fast-growing impact, position and importance in the world of scientific research right now?

China has not always lagged behind in invention or innovation. Gunpowder,



Sir John Key (Prime Minister of New Zealand, 2008-16) delivering the WSD Handa Lecture 2017.

paper, and the compass were some of the notable Chinese inventions that had a huge impact on human civilization in the pre-modern world. China clearly fell behind as Europe or the West catapulted itself forward following the Renaissance and the industrial revolution.

The enormous investment the Chinese Government has made in the recent past and the return to China of Chinese scientists and technologists educated and trained in the best universities in the world have helped China to catch up spectacularly. The political system and its control over universities will continue to constrain the scope for China to develop its potential to the full.

There is as yet only a very small area of scientific research in which the Chinese are truly world-leading. But what holds back advancement in many areas may turn out to be beneficial in some new areas of research, particularly in the application of artificial intelligence such as facial recognition. The consultative Leninist political system imposes a very low threshold in the protection of individual rights in China, compared to that in democratic countries. It means that big data can be used extensively to advance such technologies that is prohibited elsewhere on grounds of research ethics and individual rights.

The implications are that there are pockets of excellence that China will be able to race ahead of others, but the general advancement of science and knowledge is unlikely to be able

to keep pace without a change to the restrictive academic environment. Human inventiveness tends to flourish best in an environment where individuals are respected and free to think unorthodox thoughts and push boundaries. As long as the Communist Party remains in control of China, this is unlikely to happen.

Chinese investment is paying off with serious advances in biotech, computing and space. Are they edging ahead of the west?

What is paying off is not the scale of investment but the low ethical standard in research. Some Chinese scientists are advancing ahead of their colleagues in democratic countries in biotech or the application of AI because research ethics requirements forbid the others from conducting such research or experiments. This is what enables the Chinese to race ahead. The same is not true of space technology, for which Chinese scientists are mostly still playing catch up.

Why is it important for Chinese research teams to collaborate and engage with Western research teams?

Exchange of ideas and pushing of boundaries are essential for the advancement of knowledge. This applies not only to scientific or technological advancement but to philosophical ones too. We are all better off working with each other and testing our ideas on colleagues who approach the same subject from different perspectives. Cutting off or significantly reducing collaboration and engagement between researchers

Thought Leader

SOAS
CHINA
INSTITUTE
亚非学院
中国研究院

in China and the wider world will be unhelpful to human advancement.

It is important for Chinese research teams to display their work to a western audience – we see lots of high-quality public outreach originating from Canada and the US, and Europe, should the Chinese be engaging more?

Yes, science and knowledge should not be constrained by national boundaries or nationalism. The world is getting increasingly interdependent and research findings originating in any country should be shared as widely as possible. Chinese scientists and scholars should be encouraged to embrace this idea too. But, realistically, politics will not allow this to happen in the foreseeable future.

Visit the SOAS China Institute website to see how they can enhance your understanding and study of China and things Chinese – www.soas.ac.uk/china-institute/.



Professor Steve Tsang
Director, SOAS China Institute
SOAS University of London
London WC1H 0XG
UK

E: st82@soas.ac.uk
T: +44 (0) 20 7898 4222
W: www.soas.ac.uk/china-institute/

The Institute is building up collaborative relations with leading Chinese universities, including Peking University, Tsinghua University, Zhejiang University and others.