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. With more than fifty China experts in the social sciences and the humanities, as well as international perspectives from The SOAS China Institute (SCI) continues 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 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 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 background, history and core mission? 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.

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 two distinguished lecture series – the WSD Handa Distinguished Lecture. Engaging with China: A view from the neighbourhood, September 2017.

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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.

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 institute 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, 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.

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.

Visit the SOAS China Institute website to see how they can enhance your understanding and study of China and its influence on the world. www.soas.ac.uk/china-institute/