



**EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF
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NAVIGATING THE DRAGON'S REALM

- **CHINESE-WESTERN LESSONS
FROM HISTORY: CHINOISERIE,
WESTERNIZATION OR
DECOUPLING?**
- **TUNGUS AND
„PALAEO-SIBERIAN” STUDIES
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ON AMBIVALENCE,
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- **CHINA'S ECONOMIC IMPACT
IN LATIN AMERICA
AND THE CARIBBEAN**

European Journal of Chinese Studies 7 (2024)

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Chinese-Western Lessons from History: Chinoiserie, Westernization or Decoupling?

中国——西方的历史教训：
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Abstract

The tensional relation between China and Europe, later also between China and the USA, developed like a pendulum between phases of mutual admiration, inspiration and idealization and phases of decoupling and competition. Phases of cooperation were mostly win-win situations in all fields like economy, culture, politics, sports, internationalization, globalization etc. High civilizations overcome violent confrontation with reason and insight. Contemporary political tensions become smaller if seen in front of the macroperspective of economical, civilizational and intellectual development and global modernization.

In times of polarization and political tensions like today, Chinese Studies needs to stand like a rock in the surf and to keep its independence, it must keep the fact-based view open and serve with learned

competence and insights, with the ability to change the perspective and to see the whole picture. It must withstand political recapture. This kind of exchange, cooperation and integration that we live as Chinese Studies scholars is existential for the development of mankind, which needs to meet the global challenges in a united future.

Key words

China, the „West“, Europe, USA, admiration, inspiration, idealization, decoupling, competition, internationalization, globalization, high civilization, confrontation, macroperspective, modernization

摘要

中国和欧洲之间的紧张关系，后来也包括中国和美国之间的关系，像钟摆一样在相互钦佩、激励和理想化的阶段和脱钩和竞争的阶段之间发展。合作阶段是经济、文化、政治、体育、国际化、全球化等所有领域的双赢局面。高级文明以理性和洞察力克服暴力对抗。如果从经济、文明和知识发展以及全球现代化的宏观角度来看，当代的政治紧张局势就会变小。

在今天这样一个两极分化、政局紧张的时代，中国研究需要像磐石一样屹立于浪涛之中。它必须保持以事实为基础的开放性视野，以学识能力和洞察力为服务，具有转换视角、洞察全局的能力。它必须经得起政治的重塑，始终保持其独立。作为汉学学者，我们的这种交流、合作与融合，对于需要团结一致应对全球挑战的人类发展来说，是有存在意义的。

关键词

中国、“西方”、欧洲、美国、钦佩、灵感、理想化、脱钩、竞争、国际化、全球化、高度文明、对抗、宏观视角、现代化

I. China and the ‘West’ in History

The relation between China and the ‘West’ was one of exchange, never of isolation. The exchange was sometimes confrontative, e.g. during times of war, persecution, the Chinese exclusion act etc. The few times in history, when the walls were actually closed, like the forbidding of private sea trade in Ming Dynasty (海禁 1368-1405, 1550-1567), it was not all-encompassing and short-living (altogether 54 years).

Genetic analysis of domesticated animals and plants has revealed, that the trade road, which became known as the Silk Road much later, already in 11,000 BCE served as a road to bring domesticated cows and horses from Mesopotamia to China and Europe, in 10,000 BCE for millet, a kind of crops. Since 10,000 BCE, the pre-silk road also served for the trade of domesticated pigs from China to Mesopotamia and Europe, followed by chicken 8,000 BCE and silk 5,000 BCE. Except trade relations, also ideas travelled along the road, including archetypes for the Shijing, Shanhaijing and the Bible. Also the maritime Silk Road saw trade and also the influx of Western knowledge through missionaries.

Tang Dynasty was open to foreigners and foreign religions, and it was the peak of Chinese civilization. Literature has been considered a selection criterion for civil servants for thousands of years; to this day,

Tang and Song poems are unrivaled worldwide; everybody is enchanted by novels such as the *Red Chamber Dreams*.

In the European Enlightenment, thanks to Jesuit whitewashing (Du Halde), China was received as an ideal country in which the emperor ruled like a virtuous philosopher-king. Even Voltaire had a portrait of Confucius hanging on the wall behind his desk, and Leibniz saw China as a model in many ways. Recent research has analyzed the impact of classical Chinese philosophy on European Thinkers of the Enlightenment movement (Kow 2016).

During the Chinoiserie (collecting porcelain with Chinese motifs, building entire parks and palaces in the alleged Chinese style, etc.) especially in the 18th century, all of Europe was China-crazy, so to speak.

China fell behind with the Industrial Revolution in Europe.

The tide turned with the rise of imperialism, where China was understood and mediated as backward and stagnant due to the missed Industrial Revolution, e.g. by Hegel and Marx. Suddenly there was talk of the 'Yellow Peril' and the positive image of China in Europe and Germany turned into the opposite, up to punitive expeditions with the infamous Hun speech of Wilhelm II: „Pardon will not be given! Prisoners will not be taken!“

After opium wars, semi-colonial period and uprisings against Western foreigners in the Middle Kingdom, China embarked on the path of modernization and democracy at the beginning of the last century, but it ended with the civil war between nationalists and communists, as well as the invasion of the Japanese and the Second World War.

In 1949, the socialist experiment started in China with a lot of historical

failures like the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and political campaigns and famines with millions of deaths.

China caught up to the tie with the economical miracle since the 1980s, creating a new competition for global leadership between the USA and China.

In the European view, China appears as a country of extremes: The most populous country on earth was a leader in history for a long time and sees itself as the ‘cradle of human civilization’. Today, it has become the equal of the USA in size and economic performance and is now self-confidently seeking its new place in the world. With the myth of the ‘peaceful cultural nation’, attempts are now being made to make the world more Chinese, with Chinese language courses in Confucius Institutes and with cultural exports.

We Europeans have already learned a lot from China and are still fascinated by the exotic, distant culture.

While eating Chinese food is fashionable in the West, many try Chinese martial arts or acupuncture, Chinese characters are popular tattoo motifs, Chinese movies are popular and more and more foreigners learn the Chinese language – China has never been able to reach the attraction of the USA for Europe. The *American Times* sees China as the „leader of the unfree world“. While Chinese people would certainly disagree to this assessment, it may explain why Europeans pay tribute to China’s rise, and China is perceived as fascinating, but not as attractive as the USA in Europe.

II. “Zeitenwende”: The Turning Point of History

Who had imagined, that a third power, Russia, would reshuffle the cards? (Haucap 2022) Today, seemingly for the first time since the 2nd world war, a taboo has been broken by Russia, which instrumentalized economical power (especially fissile energy resources like gas, oil and coal) to pressure nation-states and even to invade a sovereign country, therefore violating not just UN regulation, but the security architecture after the 2nd world war.

This breaking of a taboo let the countries of the free world reconsider their attitude towards authoritarian regimes: While the maxim of „change through trade“ was prevailing after the 2nd world war, the calculation that close economic ties make it simply too costly to invade another country, and the acceptance of Russia as veto member of the security council was seen as the lesser of two evils – Russia at least was bound into the international security architecture – these maxims seem not work

any longer. The invasion of the Ukraine was understood as a wake-up call, making it necessary to reflect and to define the relation to authoritarian regimes.

From the perspective of people getting civilized from barbarianism, this is a step back. Also from the perspective of global cooperation to solve the joint global challenges, it is a step back. Finally, from the perspective of the development of disciplinary action to control, from action resulting from fear to action resulting from insight, it is a step back. Like in the 2nd world war, a much stronger alliance is necessary to fix the global security architecture.

The main concern for economies is that a falling superpower uses its economical power directly for blackmailing. Some economies discovered that they were not free in their political actions because the economical dependencies were too

strong. Like with Basel II, when the banks agreed to assess the creditworthiness of the customers also by the diversity of their business relations, governments wanted their economies now to reduce economical dependencies from authoritarian countries.

In August 2023, the German government published a „Strategy on China”, some other European countries already have one and the EU is going to follow with its own one soon. The Strategy paper has been prepared for years and some drafts became public and were discussed earlier. The drafts had a more direct speech. The final version is a compromise of the three coalition parties. Especially the Liberal Democrats had hoped to place a „China Stress Test” for businesses into the strategy, so that every bigger company would have to demonstrate that they can react on global crises and can survive if delivery chains, most often from China, are cut and

alternative delivery chains need to be activated.

As a consequence of its invasion of the Ukraine, Russia was condemned by the United Nations and sanctioned by an alliance of Western countries. Economic ties were reduced, Russian citizens cannot travel and work without restrictions in the West any longer, Russian and Slavic Studies becomes unpopular among students and Russian Studies Sections at universities are closed. Economic, scientific, academic and political cooperation with Russia is stalled. Also some authoritarian regimes, which do not condemn Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine get into the focus of public attention. Cooperations of German universities with Chinese universities are checked, if they could used dually, i.e. also for military purposes. Some exchange students with scholarships from the CSCC are refused by the German university (Erlangen-Nürnberg).

III. The concept of „Decoupling”

The idea of decoupling in general means to reduce the dependency on one or a small number of economical/academic/scientific/political partners by diversifying the portfolio to reduce the risk to get affected by a crisis, which may lead to the temporary loss of the cooperation. This is a concept best known from stock shares. It is recommended to hold a portfolio of different shares to avoid that all the fortune is gone when one sort of the shares is affected from a crisis. This diversity in the portfolio is especially important for pension funds, because a loss of the value of the pension fund would directly affect thousands or millions of pensioners.

Similarly, the ranking of businesses has been revised through the reform „Basel II”. In it, a business enterprise is evaluated

according to the dependencies of Suppliers and Customers. For example is a new company, that was outsourced from a bigger company and still works mostly for the bigger company, ranked with a low credit score, because it is expected that the newly founded company acquires new customers on the free market to become more independent and therefore to reduce risks, e.g. if the former mother company one day finds a different supplier and withdraws its protecting hand.

While rankings in the West are limited to factors that indicate economical aspects, the Social Credit System in China also takes into account the political loyalty to the Chinese government for its ranking.

IV. China’s Strategy

Has China a „Strategy on the West” or a „Strategy on Germany”?

The 5-year plan says to increase foreign dependencies on China (Chinese Government 2021). These dependencies should then be used to build up pressure and deter at neuralgic points. This became clear, for example, when China exploited its monopoly on rare earths through artificial scarcity, e.g. for Germanium. Why does China state its own interests so bluntly in the 5-Year-Plan? First of all, the plan is written for the local population. While in Europe, nations are merging like in the European Union and national feelings are questioned, in China nobody would question why one should strive to tell the „China Story” better to the world (and not the French story or the story of the Australian aborigines).

So in the 5-Year-Plan (Chinese Government 2021), it is stated bluntly, that foreign companies are not welcome in seven sectors of the economy.

Historically, China has longterm and geographically far-reaching goals, like the Belt and Road Initiative, the successful SoftpowerCampagin with the Confucius Institutes, the setting up of navy capability to protect Chinese interests on the high sea, including regarding areas where China builds artificial islands or claims islands to be Chinese, the modernization of the military etc.

In general, Geert Hofstede has discovered that the greatest difference between Chinese and other nations is, that the Chinese people are far more long-term oriented.

One of the centralizing ideas is the centralization of all express deliveries domestically and internationally under the roof of Cainiao.

China also follows a strategy to reduce the power of international organizations, e.g. the WTO, by establishing bilateral

trade agreements with single countries and by increasing its influence in these organizations by placing Chinese people at key positions. The USA follows a similar strategy by not nominating judges for the WTO and by promoting clauses against corruption, which mostly harm Chinese enterprises in global biddings.

China also tries to increase its influence in standardizing organizations.

China also decouples its car market from Western and Japanese gas-based brands by promoting domestically produced electric cars.

State ministries and agencies work closely together to acquire globally leading companies in the West.

The USA (and partly the EU) have banned some entertainment toys (puppets that record video and audio in the customers' children rooms) and some

software (like TikTok, which sends personality profile data to Chinese servers).

China has set up a data rights law which basically claims ownership of all data which has touched a Chinese server.

The China Strategy makes it more difficult to establish cooperations with China, because a checklist needs to be reviewed.

China engages in restrictive laws similarly to Russia (like the Law against foreign agents, which mostly disturbs the work of foreign political foundations, or the Law against the public promotion of homosexuality, which mostly discriminates against people on the basis of their sexual orientation).

Germany tries to ease the human rights violations in China with a „Lieferketten-Gesetz“.

Still, the higher standards in the EU regarding environmental measures e.g. in the production process, make it more expensive to produce in Europe and make it more difficult for products produced in Europe to compete with Chinese products, especially in state protected industries like the solar energy market.

In 2023, a new narrative comes up in China, which wants to decouple Modernization from Westernization, which is historically incorrect.

China responded (e.g. in the *Global Times*) to the „China Strategy” with de-escalation, stressing the „partnership” over the „competition” and „systemic rivalry”.

Since China openly publishes its own interests in the 5-year-plans, the „China strategy” is not something unique or unilateral, it is also not „hostile”. However, strategies in democracies need a long time to be developed, seem to be less sharp,

since they are based on compromises of different parties, and are short-lived, they hardly survive a change of power. In comparison China’s strategy was compiled univocally, is sharp and long-term oriented.

For a long time, Germany’s trade balance with China was balanced, since the two nations are global export champions. With the Corona pandemic, this equilibrium has shifted in favour of China. And with the new switch in the car industry from German brands to Chinese e-cars, this trade deficit is likely to rise. Decoupling is the wrong direction here, only by learning from and cooperating with the Chinese e-car producers this trade deficit may find back to an equilibrium.

Conclusion

China and the ‘West’ as well as China and Germany profit more from exchange,

cooperation and integration than from decoupling and confrontation. Decoupling is stated in both, China's Five-Year Plan 2020-2025, as well as in Germany's „Strategy on China” (2023). Currently, social media polarizes and politics stress competition and rivalry between China and the ‘West’. The trend of decoupling has been reinforced by Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, since it became clear that Russia misused economic dependencies for political goals. The ‘West’ argues that China is comparable to Russia in its authoritarianism.

Chinese Studies itself is necessary in both, a cooperative and a confrontative world. Although Chinese Studies in the West faces pressure from politics and social media, it has to keep up its independence, and communication, exchange and cooperation with Chinese Studies in China in order to serve mankind best.

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