

**“Developing European Studies in a Non-European Context:
The Case of China”**

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Iryna Sikorska, PhD
Mariupol State University
Kyiv, Ukraine

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1. Study Background

International cooperation in the field of higher education is an effective tool for reinforcing the EU’s public diplomacy efforts around the world. The EU and China have a long history of collaboration across various sectors, including trade, security, culture and education. As it has been often emphasized at the high-level meetings of the Asia-Europe Foundation <https://asef.org/> such cooperation helps promote cultural exchanges between the two regions, aiming among other goals to strengthen cooperation and mobility between Asia and Europe and to improve transparency and understanding of the different education systems.

As China is now becoming the largest education market in the world, European countries are keen to export their European educational resources to the Chinese education market by providing cross-border education. In addition, Europe also wants to enhance the visibility and knowledge of European higher education for Chinese actors thereby increasing the mutual understanding between Europe and China (Zheng&Cai, 2018).

While the EU has a long history of higher education cooperation with Asia, this international academic networking increasingly needs to enhance the European dimension in academic sector through support for cooperation and policy dialogues. Such an open, dialogical approach allows for seeing Europe in its global relations, and understanding self-reflection and self-criticism as constitutive elements of European identity (Piekarska & Mach, 2023). On the other hand, to interact with the EU its partners from other regions need to understand the uniqueness of its historical development, institutions, processes, policies, and challenges, and the politics and

interdependence of its member-states. Academic sector commits to produce and transfer this knowledge.

In response to these challenges, the ES as a separate academic field have been created, new courses have been introduced into university curricula, new research units and think tanks have been put in place in universities across the world including China. However, in contrast to the growing collaboration between Europe and China in higher education there is definite research gap about development of the European Studies in Chinese higher education institutions. For decades the EU has invested immensely into cooperation with China through various programs and funds, enhanced student mobility, diversified joint education provision, more structured policy dialogues and capacity building platforms, however the impact of these initiatives on the beneficiaries and stakeholders in China remains underrepresented in the international academic literature.

Today, China has evolved into the largest education market in the world. This dramatic growth has incentivized European countries to actively export their educational resources into the Chinese market through cross-border educational programs. Through these initiatives, European actors seek to enhance the visibility of European HE, cultivating a shared space for mutual understanding and intellectual alignment¹.

Problem Statement and Research Gap

Despite the long history of partnerships between Europe and Asia, there is an urgent need to strengthen the specifically "European dimension" within these academic frameworks.

Undoubtedly, academic cooperation should ideally be a two-way dialogue. It should allow external partners to view Europe within its global relationships, while encouraging self-reflection and critical inquiry as core elements of European identity. Concurrently, for non-European partners to engage meaningfully with the EU, they must comprehend its unique historical trajectory, complex institutions, policy-making processes, and the structural interdependence of

¹ H. Zheng and Y. Cai, "European Higher Education Initiatives in China: Institutional Perspectives on Cooperation," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 22, no. 4 (2018): 315-334. See also the official mandates of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) at <https://asef.org/>.

its member states. The academic sector is uniquely responsible for producing and transferring this specialized knowledge.²

In response to this need, European Studies (ES) has been established as a distinct academic field worldwide. In China, new curricula, dedicated research units, and university think tanks have been set up to study Europe. However, a significant paradox exists. While the EU has invested immense financial and political capital into Chinese HE through initiatives like the Erasmus+ and Jean Monnet Actions, the actual impact of these programs remains heavily underrepresented in international academic literature. There is a distinct research gap regarding how ES is actually developing, adapting, or facing resistance within Chinese higher education institutions.³ This study is a direct attempt to reduce this gap by examining the institutional realities of these academic programs.

Research Questions

To systematically investigate this academic phenomenon, this study addresses three central research questions:

1. What are the specific achievements and challenges related to the collaboration between Europe and China in the teaching and learning of ES?
2. What is the precise role of ES in driving or facilitating cooperation between European and Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) and organizations?
3. What are the key challenges and structural mismatches that occur between initial collaboration intentions and actual university practices, particularly regarding the differences between European and Chinese HE systems?

² A. Piekarska and Z. Mach, "European Identity and Global Relations: The Role of Dialogue in Higher Education," *European Review of Education* 58, no. 2 (2023): 145-162.

³ This lack of representation forms the primary baseline for the empirical inquiry conducted within this monograph, specifically regarding the localized reception of EU funds between 1999 and 2023.

2. Theoretical Lens

A valuable theoretical lens for analysing EU–China cooperation in higher education is offered by Yuzhuo Cai and Gaoming Zheng (2025) through the institutional logics perspective. Their study asks: How have contextual factors shaped the underlying logics of Europe–China higher education cooperation from 1975 to the present, particularly at critical junctures of change? More specifically, the authors examine both the evolution of the logics guiding European and Chinese cooperation strategies and the changing compatibility between these logics. Cai and Zheng (2025) build on institutional theory, particularly the work of Alford and Friedland (1985), who first developed the concept of institutional logics, and Friedland and Alford (1991), who defined them as socially embedded material practices and symbolic constructions that organise institutional life. Their approach is further informed by Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012), whose influential work distinguishes multiple societal logics, including state, market, profession, corporation, community, family, and religion. In the higher education context, Cai and Zheng also draw on the methodological contribution of Cai and Mountford (2022), who stress the importance of identifying field-level logics and ensuring a strong fit between theory and research method. The authors connect this perspective with established scholarship on the rationales for higher education internationalisation. In particular, they refer to Jane Knight (2004) and Zha Qiang (2003), whose work identifies academic, economic, political, and socio-cultural motivations as central drivers of international cooperation. They also engage with Balbachevsky, Cai, Eggins and Shenderova (2022), who emphasise the need to situate internationalisation policies within wider national political and economic contexts, and with Hans de Wit (2024), who calls for greater attention to the purposes, outcomes, and societal implications of internationalisation. However, Cai and Zheng argue that the rationale approach alone is insufficient because it does not fully explain how such motivations are interpreted, legitimised, and transformed under changing geopolitical conditions.

They therefore distinguish three principal field-level logics in EU–China higher education cooperation: scientific logic, focused on knowledge production, research capacity, and academic exchange; economic logic, connected with competitiveness, reputation, student recruitment, financial benefits, and market presence; and political logic, related to state priorities, diplomacy, regulation, security, and ideological expectations. Their historical analysis identifies four phases:

the Growth Phase (1975–2002), the Golden Phase (2003–2012), the Expanded Golden Phase (2013–2018), and the Paradox Phase from 2019 onwards. While scientific and economic logics were relatively compatible in earlier phases, the current period is characterised by the growing influence of political logic and declining compatibility between European and Chinese interpretations of legitimate cooperation. This framework is particularly useful because it explains current tensions not simply as a reduction of cooperation, but as the outcome of competing institutional logics shaped by wider geopolitical change.

3: METHODOLOGY

The present research intends to provide an additional perspective towards introducing and developing European Studies in a non-European context. The Europeanization of HE discourses (statements and practices) are complex phenomena represented through various ideas and practices. Hence they can be understood differently in different places, by different people, and also may lead to different outcomes. The present research examines how these discourses interact with the general EU public diplomacy towards other regions in the world via education.

Additionally, the research seeks to study how the higher education discourses operate at institutional, local, and national levels in mainland China in order to examine the complex interactions that occur within and across these levels, and also to analyze how such discourses are constrained or stimulated by the EU education policies.

As it was stated in the Introduction, the purpose of the research is to study about development of the European Studies in Chinese HEIs.

For the research purpose I employed the mixed-method approach, which proves advantageous and reliable for qualitative research, and used thematic analysis for the analytical work, which is one of the most common approaches to qualitative data/ I chose qualitative research, which is designed to explore and understand the reality as perceived by the people engaged and to study phenomena in their natural surroundings while attempting to obtain or interpret phenomena in light of the meaning the research subjects put into them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

I also used the desk research to consider the influence of national policies and institutional strategies and policies of the chosen universities and their rationales for internationalization and commitment, complimented by reviewing the documents, open data resources, and academic literature.

The basis of qualitative research lies in the interpretive approach to social reality and the description of the lived experience of human beings (Mohajan, 2018). Qualitative researchers are comfortable with the idea that there can be multiple meanings, multiple interpretations and that these can shift over time and across different people (Schreier, 2012). Qualitative research is interpretive in three ways: It deals with symbolic material that requires interpretation; different interpretations of the same material can be valid, and it deals with research questions exploring personal or social meanings (ibid, p.48).

To interpret the complex institutional dynamics, structural mismatches, and ideological tensions inherent in developing ES in mainland China, this study utilizes combining Social Constructivism as a theoretical framework. In international relations, Constructivism pioneered by theorists such as Wendt (1999) asserts that state interactions, policies, and identities are shaped by shared ideas, norms, and values rather than purely material interests. This lens is essential for analyzing how the EU uses academic programs to project its identity as a normative power, as conceptualized by Manners (2002). It allows us to examine how Chinese academics and institutions decode, reshape, or reconstruct these imported European values within their localized socio-political reality.

To investigate the complex dynamics, institutional practices, and systemic mismatches involved in developing ES within mainland Chinese HE, this study employs a qualitative, document-based research design. Qualitative document analysis is uniquely suited for this study as it allows for an objective, systematic exploration of how international policy initiatives are translated into localized educational realities through academic works, official reports and publications via open access.

The research architecture relies on a consecutive, three-stage methodological workflow optimized for secondary data:

1. **Collection and Primary Study:** Systematic gathering and preliminary tracking of all relevant secondary policy texts, academic literature, and university documentations from 1999 to 2023.
2. **Analysis of Findings:** Application of content, thematic, and comparative analytical techniques to synthesize the textual data and identify core institutional patterns.
3. **Interpretation and Proposition:** Translating synthesized documentary data into a coherent narrative that directly maps systemic tensions and highlights structural mismatches.

Data Collection and Methods of Data Analysis

The empirical baseline of this research relies heavily on a wide array of qualitative secondary data collected across a defined chronological framework spanning from 1999 to 2023. This timeline captures critical shifts in EU-China relations, starting from the early consolidation of HE cooperation frameworks around the turn of the millennium up to the post-pandemic academic landscape.

Data are gathered from the following distinct source categories:

- **Official EU Policies and Commission Papers:** European Commission policy papers, foreign policy agendas towards Asia and China, and specific descriptions of European educational program calls.
- **EACEA, Erasmus+ and Jean Monnet Resources:** Official implementation reports, project monitoring databases, and impact evaluation assessments published by the European Commission, with particular attention paid to the outcomes of implemented Erasmus+ Jean Monnet projects.
- **Academic Literature:** Academic coverage of the EU-China academic partnerships, open internet sources, and relevant peer-reviewed international academic literature.

Once compiled, the qualitative data are processed using four interconnected analytical methods to ensure academic rigor and minimize subjective bias:

Content & Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is utilized to interpret open-text policy documents, media coverage, and evaluation reports. By identifying repeating patterns, this method helps extract core qualitative themes regarding perceived project achievements, or structural barriers.

Generalization and Systematization

In the final analytical phase, localized findings are synthesized into broader conceptual categories. This enables the researcher to move from raw data to structural conclusions, mapping systemic mismatches between the European and Chinese educational architectures.

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4. Discussion and Findings

Evolution of European Studies in Non-European Context

European Studies originated primarily as an internal academic project designed to foster integration, identity, and institutional knowledge among the member states of the EU. However, as the EU's global footprint expanded, ES underwent a significant transformation, evolving from an internal civic curriculum into a globalized academic discipline taught in non-European contexts. When transplanted into geographically and culturally distant regions, the discipline sheds its purely inward-looking character. Instead, it becomes a crucial locus for studying external perceptions of European governance, market mechanics, and foreign policy.

In non-European contexts, the establishment and development of European Studies are often connected to wider geopolitical, economic, and institutional interests. For external partners, understanding the European Union is not solely an academic endeavor; it may also be a practical necessity for navigating the legal, economic, and political frameworks associated with one of the world's major economic and regulatory actors. The evolution of the field therefore demonstrates a gradual movement beyond an exclusively Eurocentric pedagogical model towards a more diverse and globally interconnected area of study. In this setting, scholars, institutions, and students outside Europe do not simply receive knowledge about European integration but interpret and adapt it in relation to their own domestic contexts, interests, and experiences (Calhoun, 2003; Başak, 2022). (Calhoun, C. (2003). *European Studies: Always Already There and Still in Formation*. *Comparative European Politics*, 1, 5–20. Başak, A. (2022). *Teaching and Learning "Europe" in "the Periphery"*. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*).

In the specific context of East Asia, international scholars like Holland and Chaban (2007) have pioneered extensive comparative research on how the EU is perceived externally, demonstrating

that local regional priorities suggest how "Europe" is understood and taught. Furthermore, the early structural development of this academic subject within China, including the foundational 1997–2001 Sino-European Higher Education Cooperation Programme, has been documented by political scientists like Dai (2005), who traced the historical expansion of ES centers from a highly localized International Relations framework into a broader institutionalized network across Chinese universities.

Higher Education in EU Public Diplomacy

Higher education has long been recognized as a primary pillar of “soft power”, serving as a subtle yet highly effective vehicle for public diplomacy. For the EU, academic diplomacy is deliberately deployed to project institutional values, promote normative power, and build long-term networks of influence among foreign elites. Within the framework of the EU’s foreign policy towards Asia, and mainland China in particular, cooperation in education acts as a structural bridge designed to build trust and foster mutual transparency between divergent governance models.

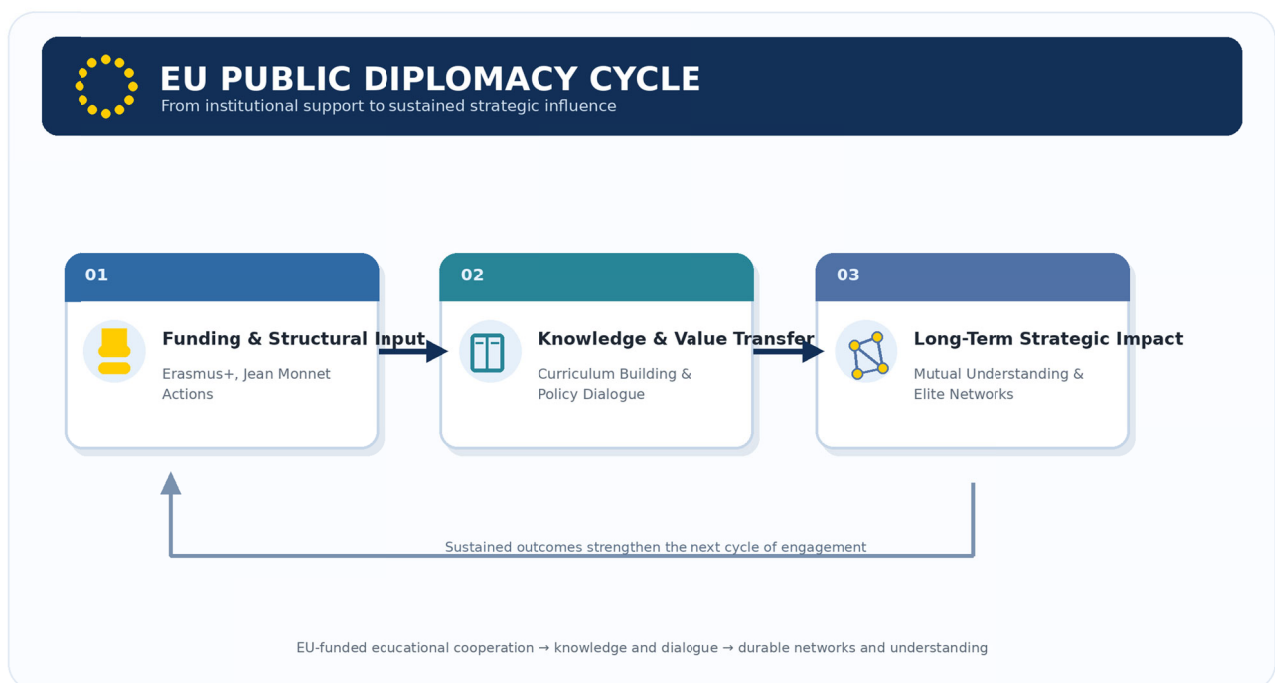


Fig. 1 The EU Public Diplomacy Cycle. (AI generated)

The EU Public Diplomacy Cycle represents the overarching foreign policy agenda driven by the European Commission. Before money is spent, a diplomatic goal is set specifically using academic networks to project Europe's normative power (Manners, 2002), and institutional identity to the rest of the world.

Thus, the first stage that can be titled "Funding and Structural Input" it shows where policy becomes practical action through financial investment, how the EU invests concrete resources into the Chinese educational market. By funding specialized programs like Erasmus+ and Jean Monnet Actions, the EU physically establishes new courses, dedicated research units, and university think tanks inside Chinese HEIs.

The second stage "Knowledge and Value Transfer" represents the daily academic and pedagogical activity inside the Chinese HEIs' classrooms. With funding secured, ES is introduced into the university curricula. It shows the transfer of specific, specialized knowledge on European integration, history, law, institutional governance and similar knowledge areas. According to Melissen (2005), this step transforms local professors and syllabi into active channels for open policy dialogue.

At the third stage "Long-Term Strategic Impact" it shows the ultimate, qualitative goal that completes the cycle. Public diplomacy is a long-term investment, and this final stage tracks the generation of socio-political capital over time. By teaching Chinese students to navigate European systems, the EU aims to achieve two primary outcomes: increasing mutual understanding between two very different educational systems and building elite networks by shaping the perspectives of future Chinese professionals and policymakers who will interface with Europe.

Scholars of public diplomacy note that by funding intellectual spaces abroad, the EU seeks to enhance its visibility and establish a shared conceptual vocabulary with international partners. Rather than relying on traditional direction, this approach leverages the academic sector to produce, cultivate, and transfer specialized knowledge, transforming universities into critical actors within the broader landscape of the EU-China international relations.

The operational efficacy of these initiatives has been critically evaluated by international researchers such as Yang (2015), who investigated the explicit relationship between public diplomacy mandates and the implementation of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet projects in China, looking at how the academic environment acts as a strategic "filter" for the EU's role-projecting efforts. This aligns with broader arguments by Melissen (2005) on the evolving nature of soft power, where university classrooms and professors effectively serve as diplomatic proxies or "para-diplomats" to establish regional goodwill.

Conceptualizing the "Europeanization" of Higher Education in China

In contemporary academic literature, "Europeanization" typically describes the process by which domestic institutions, policies, and discourses adapt to European-level mandates or norms. When applied to international HE outside of Europe, the concept takes on a nuanced, cross-border dimension. Europeanization in non-EU contexts is rarely a process of direct policy replication; rather, it is characterized by an open, dialogical approach where European educational structures encounter well-established domestic traditions. Europeanisation is often related to both globalization and internationalization. Moreover, no systematic distinction is clearly determined between: a) Europeanisation related to internal phenomena within the EU; and b) Europeanisation going beyond the EU. For instance, Van der Wende (2004) says that "Europeanisation" is often employed for describing the phenomena of internationalization on a 'regional' scale". In comparison, Teichler (2004) is more inclusive, stating that Europeanization is the regionally defined version of either internationalization or globalization ... is addressed frequently when referring to cooperation and mobility. Beyond that it also covers such issues as integration, convergence of contexts, structures and substance... or to segmentation between regions of the world". This encounter inevitably reveals systemic tensions. While the European model emphasizes an analytical framework where self-reflection and self-criticism are viewed as foundational elements of academic identity, external educational systems may operate under entirely different institutional logic, state priorities, and pedagogical norms. Scholars like Zheng and Cai (2018) closely analyzed these cross-border dynamics within Chinese HEIs, mapping the complex institutional perspectives, strategic positioning, and capacity-building mechanisms that occur when European educational resources enter the Chinese market. Additionally, European scholars such as Piekarska and Mach (2023) have underscored that this form of academic

internationalization is highly non-linear. They argue that while the EU promotes an open, critical model of European identity, its global reception often fluctuates between active domestic adaptation by local actors and structural pushback when Western pedagogical ideals clash with sovereign institutional frameworks.

Strategic Frameworks, Funding, and Regulatory Foundations

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Chinese government has made significant efforts to transform the country from a global manufacturer of goods into an innovation leader, which has led to a gradual increase in investments in higher education and advanced technologies over recent decades [136, 1]. Starting from 2012, China has invested about 4% of its GDP in education, and in 2018, it directed 2.1% of its GDP toward the development of science. Although this figure is lower than that of Germany (3.1%) or the Netherlands (2.2%), China still outpaces most European countries in terms of spending in this sector, such as the United Kingdom (1.7%) [135, 8]. Strategic partnership has a significant impact on the development of bilateral interaction [107, 169]. In particular, during the EU–China summit in 2013, the "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation" was adopted, and the directions of cooperation in the field of science and technology were outlined in greater detail in a corresponding roadmap [136, 13]. The main goals for developing this cooperation between EU member states and the PRC are: increasing the popularity of acquiring higher education in Europe among Chinese students; strengthening the openness and competitiveness of European and Chinese higher education; and identifying a common foundation for further deepening interaction [Cai 2019, 171; 107, 170-171].

Alignment of Interests and Interdependence Between the EU and the PRC

The development of cooperation in higher education and student mobility is significantly facilitated by the alignment of EU expectations and PRC interests regarding internationalization. Analyzing the relevant profile data, it can be concluded that the expectations of European countries and the interests of China in developing higher education coincide, creating a solid foundation for the development of mutually beneficial cooperation [Cai 2013, 99]. According to the research in [Cai 2013, 99], the interests of the parties are distributed as follows:

- **EU higher education institutions are interested in:** increasing the number of Chinese students studying in Europe; exporting educational programs and services to China; developing educational and research cooperation with Chinese higher education institutions, and sending more European students to study in Chinese universities.
- **China, for its part, is interested in:** increasing the number of Chinese students studying abroad; improving its international reputation and competitiveness through cooperation with prestigious European higher education institutions.

Consequently, university-level cooperation focuses on talent recruitment, student and faculty exchanges, and joint research projects. For some European HEIs, fee-paying Chinese students make a substantial contribution to university revenue, though most European universities do not have specific designated policies for recruiting prospective Chinese students [D'Hooghe et al. 2018, 15]. A prime example of successful European-Chinese cooperation is the "Erasmus Mundus" program. An analysis of its benefits and challenges proves that such programs contribute to strengthening people-to-people contacts and improve the balance of cooperation in higher education between the EU and the PRC [Cai 2013, 100].

For a decade, China has been the world's leading country in terms of the number of students studying abroad. For instance, according to data from the Ministry of Education of the PRC, in 2017, 608,400 Chinese students left the country to study abroad, which is an 11% increase compared to 2016. In total, in 2017, 1,454,100 students studied in higher education institutions outside of China [D'Hooghe et al. 2018, 4]. Generally, the PRC traditionally has focused on cooperation in education and science with countries such as the USA, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. Although European countries are not the absolute top priority in this field, they are an important part of China's innovation development strategy. Furthermore, given the expansion of the "Belt and Road" initiative, the role of Europe is gradually growing [D'Hooghe et al. 2018, 2].

Chinese students have constituted the largest proportion among international students in the EU. For instance, as of 2015, 11% of all students enrolled in EU higher education institutions were Chinese [D'Hooghe et al. 2018, 4]. One of the key factors significantly driving the growing popularity of European universities is that studying in Europe is more affordable compared to the

USA. Certain European universities require no tuition fees at all, or the cost of educational services is inexpensive. In addition, to increase the number of Chinese students, some European universities have simplified the visa process by shortening the examination period [Fu 2019].

Student exchange between the macro-regions is carried out at all levels of HE, ranging from short-term study visits during summer schools to full PhD programs, where the main motivation for youth is the desire to gain new experience, meet people from different backgrounds, and obtain a world-class education. The European Commission actively develops cooperation with the PRC within several major initiatives:

- The "Innovative Training Network" project within the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions research fellowships;
- The "COFUND" project;
- The "Erasmus Mundus" scholarship program.

During 2012–2016, around 5,000 Chinese students and researchers visited the EU, while 2,000 European scholars and educators visited the PRC under European mobility programs (simultaneously, more than 200 European students received Chinese government scholarships to study at Chinese universities) [Cai 2019, 169]. Prior to the COVID-2019 pandemic, China was the third-largest recipient of funding from the "Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees" program during 2014–2017 [Fu 2019, 4]. In total, 153 scholarships were selected for participation in this program during 2014–2018, and under the "Erasmus Mundus Master Scholarships" track, Chinese students received 234 scholarships during the same period [European Commission, 2018].

The largest numbers of Chinese students traditionally study in the UK, Germany, and France [D'Hooghe et al. 2018, 4].

- **The United Kingdom:** Is the most popular European country among Chinese students. In 2016–2017, they accounted for one-third of all non-EU students studying in this country [Fu 2019, 5]. Most Chinese students in the UK specialized in business and economics [Soysal 2018, 5]. During the implementation of China's government grant

programs (2008–2014), the UK hosted 3,884 scholarship recipients [D’Hooghe et al. 2018, 16].

- **Germany:** Ranks second in popularity. In 2018, 32,368 Chinese students studied in Germany [Fu 2019, 5]. The country's popularity is driven by high demand for technologies in the industrial sector and a strong base for training engineers [Fu 2019, 5]. Accordingly, the most popular subjects among Chinese students in Germany are the exact sciences: natural and technical disciplines, engineering, and mathematics [Soysal 2018, 5]. Germany was also the leader in hosting grant recipients subsidized by the PRC government, receiving 3,998 individuals [D’Hooghe et al. 2018, 16].
- **France:** In 2017, about 28,000 Chinese students studied here, making China the country's second-largest educational partner [Fu 2019, 6]. Under the PRC state grant programs, France hosted 2,194 individuals [D’Hooghe et al. 2018, 16].
- **The Netherlands:** Also demonstrates stable partnership growth. In 2017–2018, around 4,500 Chinese students studied here, forming the second-largest group of international students in the country [Fu 2019, 6]. Under government grants, 1,607 individuals went there [D’Hooghe et al. 2018, 16].

The most recent Eurostat data indicate that China (including Hong Kong) remained one of the principal countries of origin of internationally mobile students in the European Union after the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2024, Chinese students accounted for 5.6% of all tertiary-level students from abroad enrolled in EU countries. Given that the EU hosted approximately 1.83 million internationally mobile tertiary students that year, this represents an estimated 102,000–103,000 students from China and Hong Kong. China was the second-largest country of origin after India, demonstrating the continued importance of Chinese student mobility for European higher education systems (Eurostat, 2026). (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Learning_mobility_statistics)

Student mobility has significant positive consequences at several levels:

- **At the individual level:** studying abroad stimulates intellectual development, enhances creative thinking, and improves communication skills.

- **At the national level:** international mobility leads to the systemic internationalization of education and the building of multilateral cooperation.
- **At the global level:** it substantially strengthens bilateral relations between countries, popularizes partnership, and reinforces mutual understanding between different cultures [Fu 2019, 7].

Another important advantage of mobility is the establishment of long-term scientific ties. Research proves that most Chinese students who pursued doctoral studies in Europe continue to actively publish joint research with their European academic supervisors after returning home or graduating. However, this trend has a clearly defined sectoral character: it is highly relevant for applied specializations—such as agriculture, engineering, exact sciences, and medicine—but practically does not continue among graduates of humanities and social fields (literature, law, history, management, or pedagogy) [Jiang and Shen 2019, 192].

"Soft Power," Public Diplomacy, and Systemic Tensions

The internationalization of higher education today in China is an important component of exercising geopolitical influence and a country's "soft power," directly affecting the state of political and economic cooperation. In particular, higher education served as a baseline for establishing long-term cooperation within the framework of the massive "Belt and Road" ("One Belt – One Road") initiative [Jiang and Shi 2019; 183]. First, joint talent training is critically important for the implementation of major infrastructure projects, which lays the foundation for the further development of related sectors of the economy. Second, educational exchanges directly stimulate cultural exchange, leading to the establishment of mutual understanding between ordinary citizens of European countries and the PRC [Jiang and Shi 2019; 183]. In this context, international students become an effective channel for a nation to represent itself and its values: communicating with European colleagues, Chinese students act as direct carriers of their culture, encourage foreigners to study China, and strengthen the political potential of their state's "soft power" [Fu 2019, 7].

Another powerful tool of the PRC's public diplomacy is the network of Confucius Institutes, the opening of which since 2004 has become an integral part of China's global educational and

cultural strategy. Already at the beginning of 2013, more than 400 Confucius Institutes and 473 Confucius Classrooms operated in over 100 countries worldwide. The main goal of these institutions, toward the funding of which the Chinese government directs significant financial resources, lies in popularizing the Chinese language and culture, as well as shaping a favorable perception of China abroad. In most cases, they are established as joint institutions based at foreign universities, which also participate in their financing. Tellingly, there are institutions that specialize not only in language courses but also in other strategic directions. For example: the Confucius Institute at the University of Leeds (UK) and NEOMA Business School (Rouen, France) specialize in business interaction; the Confucius Institute for Innovation and Learning in Aalborg (Denmark) focuses on the innovation track. Furthermore, by actively cooperating with foreign and Chinese HEIs, Confucius Institutes provide students with a real opportunity to obtain an official educational diploma [132, 176].

Despite the benefits, most agreements between European and Chinese universities concern exchanges at the Master's and doctoral levels where a substantial quantitative imbalance is observed, with a massive numerical advantage in favor of Chinese students in Europe. One reason for this discrepancy is the need to teach academic disciplines in English and the mutual recognition of course credits, which is significantly simpler for the Chinese side. Given this prolonged and sensitive imbalance, certain European universities restricted the number of Chinese students independently [Bekkers et al. 2019, 16].

Alongside obvious benefits, cooperation in HE involves certain risks and challenges. A collective of authors led by S. Benner, in analyzing the interaction between the PRC and Europe in this field, focused primarily on identifying China's key instruments of influence within the European educational space. The researchers highlighted two key instruments of such influence:

- Investments and the purposeful shaping of educational curricula.
- The mobilization of student organizations to exert pressure on universities [Benner et al. 2018].

Overall, this study makes a significant contribution to forming a critical understanding of the existing challenges and risks associated with the systemic development of cooperation in higher education between the PRC and Europe.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE EU-CHINA HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY (1999–2023)

The Evolution of EU Policy Agendas toward China

The chronological period between 1999 and 2023 represents a transformative era in the geopolitical and economic relationship between the EU and the PRC. At the turn of the millennium, the EU policy towards China was heavily characterized by an optimistic, integrationist approach. HE was viewed as an ideal, neutral platform to foster long-term diplomatic alignment, enhance mutual transparency, and cultivate shared norms between the two regions. However, as the geopolitical landscape shifted over the two decades, the strategic undercurrents of these academic agendas evolved. The EU's foreign policy instruments increasingly had to balance traditional soft power projection with a more realistic, competitive approach toward Asia. Academic cooperation was no longer just an act of goodwill, it became a structured arena where the EU sought to project its unique identity as a global actor and safeguard its normative interests. Within the framework of this project timeline, evaluating these shifting dynamics led to questions about the specific strengths and weaknesses of the EU foreign policy in the academic sector.

This evolution from early optimism to pragmatic realism is observed in the socio-political dynamic through 1999-2023 and is closely linked to how ES is understood as an academic subject in non-European settings. As Stoicheva, Sreejith, and Gupta (2023) argue, ES serves a critical dual purpose when exported to Asia. In their monograph they note that ES offers a highly organized, objective framework for accounting for European society, polity, economy, and integration. For external regions like China, having access to this standardized, reliable knowledge is a vital tool for designing policies and strategic imaginations aimed at strengthening partnerships, helping researchers look past subjectively motivated or highly politicized domestic discourses. They also point out the "constitutive potential of regional studies." Observing how

Europe systematically studied itself to foster internal integration shows Asian institutions how an academic discipline can actively contribute to macro-level society-building and cross-regional cohesion. The authors emphasize that building clear legal and structural awareness of "Europe"—particularly through the lens of international law—is essential for the long-term survival of cross-regional cultural engagement and diplomatic durability.

By integrating this perspective, we can see that the EU's policy shifts from 1999 to 2023 were not just about funding courses. They represented a strategic effort to embed a reliable, institutionally credible version of Europe within the world's largest education market, attempting to bridge the gap between European intentions and local administrative practices. High level officials exchange visits have supported such initiatives. For instance, on April 1, 2014, during his visit to Europe, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium. In his speech at the educational institution, the Chinese leader emphasized the need to build a "bridge of shared cultural prosperity connecting the two cultural civilizations: European and Chinese." According to the Chinese leader "China primarily represents Eastern civilization, while Europe is the cradle of Western civilization." A few days later, the EU-China Research Centre was inaugurated at the College of Europe aimed to conduct research, publish, organize conferences, and promote collaboration between scholars specializing in EU and China studies (EU-China research center).

China is one of the largest economic partners of Europe, and cooperation in the field of HE is becoming more and more intense. The problem of high education in any country is associated with many aspects of the political, economic, cultural life of society. The process of cooperation between China and European countries in the sphere of high education, which is currently unfolding, aims to prepare future specialists to find the solutions for many worldwide problems. Economic cooperation in the field of higher education between China and Europe has become an important element of modern universities of the country should become recognized in the world, and the government should guarantee every citizen of China a real opportunity to receive a higher education diploma. The field of education has become an important element in the system of humanitarian cooperation between the EU and China. In a joint statement following the results of the summit in Helsinki in September 2016, the parties noted, "strengthening cooperation in the

field of education is the socio-cultural basis for the sustainable development of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the EU and China” (Kazakova, Gromov, 2023).

In their pivotal study, *"Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation: An Institutional Logics Perspective,"* Yuzhuo Cai and Gaoming Zheng provide a nuanced, theoretically grounded analysis of how macro-level geopolitical and societal shifts reshape the foundational drivers of Euro-Chinese academic partnerships. Addressing a notable gap in both international relations and higher education literature, the authors move beyond traditional, static descriptive rationales of internationalization. Instead, they apply historical institutionalism and institutional logics analysis to decode the complex dynamics of this cross-regional relationship from 1975 to the present. The authors construct an analytical framework centered on three field-level logics that legitimize international higher education cooperation. The scientific logic prioritizes knowledge growth and academic capability, the economic logic focuses on market presence, institutional revenue, and university-enterprise synergies, and the political logic demands adherence to state regulations, diplomatic strategic alignment, and "political correctness". Through a rigorous thematic analysis of historical policy documents and secondary literature, Cai and Zheng conceptualize the evolution of EU-China cooperation across four distinct chronological phases, evaluated through cross-regional logic compatibility.

The relationship began with the Growth Phase spanning 1975 to 2002, which was initiated by historical opening-up policies and diplomatic ties, quickly becoming dominated by a highly compatible, shared adherence to a mutually understood scientific logic. This shifted into the Golden Phase from 2003 to 2012, marked by a robust, complementary alignment of logics where European institutions were driven heavily by economic incentives like recruitment and revenue, while Chinese counterparts focused on absorbing advanced knowledge via scientific logic. This was followed by the Expanded Golden Phase from 2013 to 2018, representing the peak of historical collaboration, which seamlessly merged powerful economic and scientific logics on both sides and yielded unprecedented proliferation in joint degree programs, research funding mechanisms, and capacity-building initiatives. Finally, the contemporary Paradox Phase from 2019 to the present was sparked by a dramatic geopolitical watershed - namely the EU's recalibration of China as a collaborator, competitor, and systemic rival - and is defined by extreme institutional complexity and a sharp decline in cross-regional compatibility.

Crucially, the authors illustrate that during the current Paradox Phase, political logic has aggressively resurfaced on both sides, yet its internal definition is deeply fragmented. While the European academic sphere interprets "political correctness" as safeguarding academic freedom, protecting data security, and mitigating foreign interference, China aligns it with state-directed ideological frameworks, such as the "Dual Circulation" paradigm and the Belt and Road Initiative. Ultimately, Cai and Zheng make a vital scholarly contribution by demonstrating how identical institutional labels carry drastically different ideological meanings across borders. For research on EU-China cooperation, their work offers an indispensable conceptual foundation, warning that contemporary academic practitioners must navigate deeply conflicting internal and cross-regional logics rather than a singular, unified cooperative framework.

The Chinese Higher Education Landscape

Modernization of the education system is an important component of China's strategy, an indispensable condition for the transition to a knowledge society and the construction of an advanced competitive state. A powerful potential for comprehensively improving the quality of higher education in China is the organizational culture of the university, based on national values and spiritual traditions of Chinese culture. In 2014, the China economy was declared the second largest economy in the world. One of the directions of Xiaoping's reform program and a factor that influenced China's economic progress was the modernization of the education system. It was through the systematic academic training of personnel that the process of launching mechanisms for economic development and restoring the country's internal infrastructure began. In 2019, the Ministry of Education of China announced that China had created the world's biggest higher education system. (Shumsky,2018)

Concurrently, the domestic HE sector in mainland China has gone unprecedented expansion, eventually positioning the country as the largest education market in the world (...). Driven by national strategies to build world-class universities and transition toward a knowledge-based economy, Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) actively sought international partnerships. For Chinese actors, participating in cross-border education and welcoming European educational resources served multiple strategic purposes:

- **Capacity Building:** It allowed local institutions to rapidly upgrade their curricula, adopt international quality standards, and enhance global institutional visibility.
- **Strategic Market Access:** It fulfilled a domestic demand for globalized education, positioning Chinese HEIs among the central hubs in the global academic network.
- **Mutual Understanding:** It provided a platform for Chinese scholars to engage directly with Western counterparts, helping to bridge cultural and administrative gaps.

This massive, receptive education market offered the perfect ground for the EU to deploy its academic diplomacy resources.

The Architecture of the EU Funding Instruments: Erasmus+ and Jean Monnet Actions

To systematically embed ES into Chinese universities, the EU relied heavily on dedicated funding mechanisms and structured capacity-building platforms. Foremost among these initiatives were the Erasmus+ Programme framework and the highly specialized Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Action.

In general the EU funding architecture layout covers:

- Erasmus+ Mobility Framework (Institutional & Student Mobility)
- Jean Monnet Action Projects (Jean Monnet Modules, Chairs, Centers of Excellence, Networks dedicated to the EU and European integration)
- Local Curricular Output (Syllabi Integration, Specialized Think Tanks, Centers, Institutes)

These programs were launched to provide financial and structural resources directly into mainland Chinese HEIs. By funding specific Jean Monnet projects (Modules, Chairs, Centers of Excellence and Networks), the European Commission aimed to institutionalize the study of the EU and European integration. The architecture of these grants required recipient universities to introduce dedicated study courses, build European-focused research units, and launch policy dialogues. Over the 1999–2023 period, these instruments acted as the primary engine for the "Europeanization" of specific curriculum tracks, attempting to leave a lasting impact on local academic communities, even if institutional practices varied widely across different cases.

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EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Impact Factors of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Projects

At the outset, it will be reasonable to introduce briefly the Erasmus+Jean Monnet Action. (http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/jean-monnet_en). Jean Monnet Activities are designed to promote excellence in teaching and research in the field of European Union studies worldwide. The activities also foster the dialogue between the academic world and policy-makers, in particular with the aim of enhancing governance of EU policies. European Union studies comprise the study of Europe in its entirety with particular emphasis on the European integration process in both its internal and external aspects. The discipline also covers the role of the EU in a globalized world and in promoting an active European citizenship and dialogue between people and cultures. The Programme supports the following types of activities:

- Teaching and Research: Jean Monnet Modules, Chairs and Centres of Excellence.

- Policy debate with the Academic World: Jean Monnet Networks and Jean Monnet Projects.

Key activities include courses, research, conferences, networking activities, and publications in the field of EU studies. The projects are expected to be:

- enhanced employability and improved career prospects for young graduates, by including or reinforcing a European dimension in their studies;
- increased interest in understanding and participating in the European Union, leading to a more active citizenship;
- support for young researcher (i.e. who have obtained a PhD degree in the last five years) and professors who want to carry out research and teaching on EU subjects;
- increased opportunities for academic staff in terms of professional and career development.

For participating organizations:

- increased capacity to teach and research on EU matters;
- increased allocation of financial resources to teaching and research on EU subjects within the institution;
- more modern, dynamic, committed and professional environment inside the organization; ready to integrate good practices and new EU subjects into didactic programmes and initiatives, open to synergies with other organizations.

The abovementioned opportunities are available to higher education institutions worldwide. Furthermore certain actions are open to organizations active in the European Union subject area and associations of professors and researchers specializing in European Union Studies.

Erasmus+Jean Monnet projects, located in many countries, including China are an important resource that Brussels can use to promote dialogue and understanding between nations. These projects specialize in EU-related issues and are managed by the European Commission, working in close cooperation with the EU Delegation in the host country. They spread knowledge about the EU, its policies and values through research, partnerships and community engagement

programmes. Chinese and European scholars for instance from the Jean Monnet Centres of Excellence meet regularly to discuss issues related to the EU, its history of reconciliation and European integration, using the Chinese language. They spread knowledge about the EU, its policies and values through research, partnerships and community engagement programs. The EU provides political and financial support to various seminars and initiatives organized for young students with the aim of promoting mutual understanding and strengthening friendly relations between the future leaders of these three countries.

The analytical tracking of secondary data, policy evaluation documents, and university records between 1999 and 2023 reveals distinct tiers of impact generated by the EU Programme Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Action within mainland China. These outcomes are categorized across individual, institutional, and local community levels:

- **Individual Level (presumably):** For Chinese faculty and researchers, Jean Monnet projects can serve as powerful catalysts for academic professionalization, granting local scholars access to international research networks, specialized training, and European publishing pipelines. For students, exposure to these modules significantly enhanced, multi-lingual competency, and historical literacy regarding European institutional mechanisms.
- **Institutional Level:** At the university level, the influx of targeted EU grants allowed selected Chinese HEIs to diversify their joint education provisions, set up new ES courses, and establish structural research units and specialized think tanks.
- **Local Community Level:** Beyond the university walls, these projects functioned as public diplomacy nodes. Through localized policy dialogues, public lectures, and media coverage, Jean Monnet Actions elevated the broader visibility and understanding of European education and governance paradigms among local stakeholders and civic actors in mainland China.

Tensions, Mismatches, and Pedagogical Divergence

Despite these documented achievements, a rigorous content and thematic analysis of the collected documentary data reveals sharp structural mismatches between the EU's initial collaboration intentions and localized educational practices on the ground.

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| EU Collaboration Intentions | Chinese Institutional Practices |
| Open, dialogical approach | Strict state-aligned logic |
| Critical self-reflection | Resource-driven adaptation |
| Deep value Europeanization | Superficial decoupling |

The primary divergence stems from the fundamental philosophy of the European educational model. As emphasized by Piekarska and Mach (2023), the European paradigm promotes an open, dialogical approach that views deep self-reflection and structural self-criticism as constitutive, healthy elements of European identity. However, when this model enters the highly centralized and state-aligned Chinese HE landscape, deep institutional tensions emerge.

Rather than fully absorbing the critical, value-laden components of Europeanization, many local practices adapt the curriculum through the lens of sociological neo-institutionalism. Chinese universities frequently engage in structural "decoupling"—adopting the outward, formal exterior of Europeanized syllabi to secure international funding and prestige, while internally keeping traditional, localized administrative frameworks intact. This creates a persistent friction where the EU's normative expectations clash with the practical, sovereign governance structures of mainland Chinese universities.

Comparative Analysis of the Selected Universities

From 2008 to 2013 China was a leader among Asian countries in the number of the projects implemented under the Jean Monnet Programme, having 21 approved applications. Based on a cross-reference of external academic publications, European Commission archives, and international consortium press releases, the structural roles and specific project involvements of these top-tier institutions are well-documented beyond their primary web pages. While these universities rarely list their comprehensive project tallies on their public-facing portals,

secondary data from academic registries, European Commission tracking databases, and international consortium disclosures explicitly verify their statuses as top-tier recipients of Erasmus and Jean Monnet funding:

1. Elite Research Hubs: Renmin University of China & Fudan University

- **Renmin University of China:** European Commission registries and academic profiles identify RUC as an institutional focal point for the early EU-China European Studies Centres Programme (ESCP), which heavily funded the infrastructure of European Studies (ES) across mainland China. RUC's Centre for European Studies was spearheaded by Professor Song Xinning, a globally renowned scholar who held a prestigious Jean Monnet Chair at the university. Under his leadership, the center consolidated its status as an official Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence, embedding macro-political and structural integration research into elite social science tracks.
- **Fudan University:** Academic registries and project tracking databases confirm that Fudan University operates as a critical hub for European economic integration and policy dialogue within the wealthy Yangtze River Delta. Professor Ding Chun, the long-standing director of Fudan's Center for European Studies, explicitly holds a **Jean Monnet Chair** and serves as the Executive Director of the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence there. His center has presided over numerous EU-funded modules, high-level policy forums, and cross-border research initiatives tracking European social welfare and economic models.

2. Multi-Disciplinary HEIs: Tongji University

- **Tongji University:** True to its highly pragmatic, applied-science orientation, European Commission project archives do not heavily link Tongji to pure political science Jean Monnet projects; instead, they document Tongji as a powerhouse for competitive international credit mobility and **Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees (EMJMD)**. Tongji handles massive student volumes by embedding European mobility into its world-renowned engineering, architecture, and environmental science tracks. Rather than relying on public websites, its massive project footprints are recorded in international

university network partnerships and bilateral **Erasmus+ Key Action 1 (KA107/KA171)** mobility frameworks, which facilitate extensive student and faculty flows between Shanghai and premier European technical consortia.

Specialized Foreign Language Universities

- **Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GDUFS):** The most explicit secondary evidence documenting their status as top-tier project beneficiaries comes from the European Commission's Key Action 2 (Capacity Building in Higher Education) archives. Both BFSU and GDUFS were selected as the primary Chinese partner institutions in the landmark **EURASIA Project** ("*European Studies Revitalized Across Asian Universities*").
- The EURASIA project consortium specifically targeted the modernization of higher education by designing original B.A. and M.A. modules in European Studies to be permanently embedded into Chinese and Indian university curricula. Additionally, both institutions are highly visible in European data registries as extensive operators of Erasmus+ Key Action 1 grants, managing high-frequency, language-driven cultural and academic exchanges.

Summary of Institutional Diversities

| Institutional Profile / Type | Representative Case Examples | Primary Approach to ES | Core Systemic Mismatch |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|--|--|
| Elite Research Universities | Renmin University | Macro-political & economic integration; high-level policy input. | Friction between Western critical inquiry and domestic state mandates. |

| Institutional Profile / Type | Representative Case Examples | Primary Approach to ES | Core Systemic Mismatch |
|--|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| | Fudan University | | |
| Multi-Disciplinary HEIs | Tongji University | Erasmus Mundus joint master tracks; focus on student mobility and applied sciences. | Disciplinary decoupling; ES treated as an international utility tool. |
| Specialized Foreign Language HEIs | BFSU, GDUFS | Language immersion, translation consortia, and cross-cultural history. | Lack of deep policy, structural governance, or legal analysis. |

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Data Analysis Overview

The dataset collected from the EACEA platforms and various publications comprises 22 recorded projects implemented by the Chinese universities during the last decades and represents a structural subset rather than an exhaustive historical repository. The distribution reveals that these initiatives are concentrated in a select group of major research universities, with Sichuan University (<https://en.scu.edu.cn/>) emerging as the most frequent partner in this specific dataset.

The key findings include:

- **Institutional Concentration:** Sichuan University benefits the highest number of projects (7), followed by Wuhan University, Tsinghua University, and the China University of Political Science and Law (2 projects each).
- **Project Types:** The projects are diverse, with "Jean Monnet Modules" and "Jean Monnet Chair" being the most common forms of engagement.
- **Scope:** These projects primarily focus on the EU governance, environmental policy, trade, and legislative alignment, reflecting the thematic priorities of the Jean Monnet Actions during this period.

| Chinese HEI, beneficiary | Number of Projects | Primary Focus / Action Type |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Sichuan University | 7 | Chairs, Projects, Modules |

| Chinese HEI, beneficiary | Number of Projects | Primary Focus / Action Type |
|---|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Wuhan University | 2 | Modules |
| Tsinghua University | 2 | Chairs |
| China University of Political Science and Law | 2 | Modules |
| Nankai University | 1 | Chair |
| Fudan University (Centre for European Studies) | 1 | Centre of Excellence |
| Renmin University of China | 1 | Chair |
| Southwest Jiaotong University | 1 | Module |
| Hebei University | 1 | Module |
| University of International Business and Economics | 1 | Module |

| Chinese HEI, beneficiary | Number of Projects | Primary Focus / Action Type |
|---|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Beihang University | 1 | Module |
| Hunan Normal University | 1 | Module |
| Jilin Chemical Technology Achievement Center | 1 | Module |

Source: EACEA project results database.

According to official Erasmus+ country factsheets published by the European Commission, the actual number of Jean Monnet allocations in China is higher. Between 2014 and 2020 alone, the European Commission officially reported 46 selected projects explicitly applied for and won by institutions from China. Additionally, there were 25 academic networks involving Chinese HEIs as partners during that same period.

Thematic Distribution of Project Topics

| Core Topic Category | Focus of the Topic | Related Projects from the Dataset |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Green Policy & Economics | Low-carbon strategies, ecological laws, and green economic integration. | 3 Projects (Sichuan University) |

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Institutional Governance | Direct mechanics of integration, legal innovation, and structural governance. | 4 Projects (Nankai, Tsinghua, CUPL, Southwest Jiaotong) |
| Systemic Crisis Studies | Financial debt crisis management and navigating multi-level modern institutional friction. | 2 Projects (Fudan, Sichuan University Centres of Excellence) |
| Trade & Domestic Policy | Global commerce regulations and external legal impact on labor/trade. | 2 Projects (Wuhan University, Hebei University) |
| Visibility & Perceptions | Professional training for younger faculty and surveying Chinese youth perspectives. | 2 Projects (Sichuan University) |

Conclusions

Significance of the Study

This research holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the limited literature on the external impact of EU academic diplomacy in East Asia, providing a fresh perspective on how Western educational paradigms are received in non-European contexts. Practically, by identifying the tensions and mismatches between the two educational systems, this study offers certain findings and insights for educators, policymakers at the European Commission and university administrators in mainland China. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing more sustainable, mutually beneficial educational programs in the future.

Limitations of the research

The initially planned interviews with informants involved in teaching European Studies either as part of regular curricular courses or within Erasmus+ Jean Monnet projects could not be

conducted. This was primarily due to the lack of direct contact details for potential respondents. In addition, the exceptionally difficult electricity-supply situation during the previous year significantly affected internet connectivity and made the organization of online interviews unreliable and, in some cases, impossible.

A further methodological challenge was the limited public availability of information on relevant initiatives. Many Chinese universities that have benefited from Erasmus+ funding do not publish detailed information about their projects on their official websites. Likewise, course descriptions, curricula, and syllabi, institutional materials, project data are often not available in open access. Consequently, the study relies predominantly on secondary data, including publicly available databases, policy documents, academic publications, and other accessible online sources. This limitation should be taken into account when interpreting the findings, particularly regarding the practical implementation and internal institutional perceptions of ES teaching in Chinese higher education.