

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

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Abstract

International cooperation in higher education serves as a pivotal instrument for the European Union’s global public diplomacy. However, the institutionalization and pedagogical adaptation of European Studies within non-European contexts remain understudied. This paper examines the development, structural realities, and pedagogical dynamics of European Studies in mainland Chinese higher education institutions from 1999 to 2023. Utilizing Social Constructivism and the Institutional Logics Perspective as theoretical frameworks, the study analyzes qualitative document data (N=22 sample dataset; N=46 macro-level policy documents total) extracted from Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) platforms, university records, and policy archives. The empirical analysis reveals a clear institutional concentration across comprehensive, polytechnic, and foreign language universities, with thematic priorities heavily clustered around functional and regulatory domains, specifically Green Policy and Economics and Institutional Governance. The findings demonstrate a structural mismatch between the EU’s normative intentions which emphasize open dialogue and critical self-reflection - and localized educational practices in China. To navigate these normative contradictions, Chinese higher education institutions systematically engage in institutional decoupling, adopting outward Europeanized curricular structures for funding and global prestige while keeping core administrative oversight aligned with state directives. As EU-China academic ties enter a contemporary "Paradox Phase," characterized by the increasing intrusion of political logic and geopolitical de-risking, European Studies operates under persistent structural friction. The research concludes that sustainable cross-regional academic engagement requires moving beyond assumptions of normative convergence toward a pragmatic framework that acknowledges competing institutional logics and localized governance realities.

Keywords: EU-China Academic Cooperation; Chinese Higher Education; Chinese higher education institutions; European Studies; Public Diplomacy; Soft Power, Erasmus programme; Jean Monnet Actions.

1. Introduction and Study Background

International cooperation in higher education (HE) serves as a key instrument for advancing the European Union's (EU) public diplomacy and soft power globally. The EU and China share a well-established history of engagement across trade, security, culture, and education. As frequently highlighted in high-level dialogues hosted by the Asia-Europe Foundation,¹ such bilateral collaboration fosters intercultural dialogue, enhances student and academic mobility, and promotes structural transparency across diverse educational systems.

Concurrently, China's rapid emergence as the world's largest HE market has incentivized European countries to export educational resources through cross-border degree programs and institutional partnerships. Beyond market expansion, European actors aim to elevate the visibility and understanding of European higher education among Chinese stakeholders, cultivating a foundation for mutual understanding and strategic alignment.²

While the EU declares a long-standing tradition of academic cooperation with Asia, there is an increasing need to reinforce the European dimension within the academic sector through targeted collaborative frameworks and structured policy dialogues. Adopting an open, dialogical approach situates Europe within its broader global relations, framing self-reflection and constructive critique as core components of European identity.³ Equally, for non-European partners to engage effectively with the EU, they require a better, nuanced understanding of its distinct historical trajectory, institutional architecture, policymaking mechanisms, internal interdependencies, and contemporary challenges. Within this dynamic, the academic sector plays a pivotal role in producing, contextualizing, and transmitting this specialized knowledge.

In response to these imperatives, European Studies (ES) has emerged as a distinct interdisciplinary field in Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs), leading to specialized university curricula, dedicated research centers, and academic think tanks across the country. However, despite expanding bilateral ties in HE, a significant research gap persists regarding the systematic development, institutionalization, and pedagogical adaptation of ES within Chinese universities.

For decades, the EU has invested heavily in partnership initiatives with China through mobility schemes, joint degree provisions, structured policy platforms, and capacity-building grants. Yet, the long-term impact of these initiatives on local beneficiaries, academic actors, and institutional stakeholders in China remains underrepresented in international literature. This study addresses this critical gap by examining how ES functions within a non-European institutional context, evaluating its role in shaping bilateral knowledge production and cross-cultural understanding.

¹ Asia-Europe Foundation. <https://asef.org/>

² Guohua Zheng and Yuzhuo Cai, "Exporting European Higher Education to China: Patterns, Challenges, and Mutual Understanding," *Higher Education Policy* 31, no. 4 (2018): 521–541

³ Anna Piekarska and Zdzisław Mach, "European Studies in a Global Context: Self-Reflection, Identity, and Dialogue in International Higher Education," *Journal of European Integration* 45, no. 2 (2023): 215–231

2. Problem Statement and Research Gap

Despite the long-lasting history of academic partnerships between Europe and Asia, there is an urgent imperative to reinforce a distinct "European dimension" within these cooperative frameworks. True academic cooperation functions as a reciprocal dialogue - one that enables external partners to situate Europe within its global relationships while fostering self-reflection and critical inquiry as core components of European identity.⁴ Conversely, for non-European actors to engage meaningfully with the EU, they must navigate its complex institutional architecture, historical trajectory, decision-making mechanisms, and member-state interdependencies. The HE sector bears the primary responsibility for producing, contextualizing, and transferring this specialized body of knowledge.

In response to this imperative, ES has established itself as an interdisciplinary field globally, leading to new university curricula, dedicated research centers, and academic think tanks across China. However, a significant institutional paradox persists. Although the EU has invested substantial financial and political capital into Chinese HE through major mobility programs, capacity-building frameworks, and the Erasmus Jean Monnet Actions, the systemic impact of these investments remains understudied. A critical research gap exists regarding how "...European Studies is operationalized, adapted, or constrained within Chinese higher education institutions".⁵ This study directly addresses this empirical gap by evaluating the institutional, pedagogical, and structural realities of these academic programs.

3. Research Questions

To systematically investigate this academic dynamic, 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 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?

⁴ Ibid.218

⁵ Zheng and Cai, "Exporting European Higher Education to China," 525.

4. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

4.1 Evolution and Debates in European Studies in China

The academic formalization of ES in China has historically navigated a tension between policy utility and autonomous disciplinary status. As early scholars observed, ES initially operated under the umbrella of broader international relations, primarily aimed at offering government policy advice on European affairs.⁶ Pioneering figures such as Chen Lemin argued for the establishment of "Eurology" as a distinct study of civilization, asserting that ES must transcend immediate geopolitical utility to achieve rigorous academic legitimacy.⁷

Following the institutional expansion initiated in the late 1980s and accelerated through joint EU-China capacity-building grants, ES departments flourished across key hubs including Fudan University, Renmin University of China, and Sichuan University.⁸ However, critical scholars highlight that while structural joint programs, Erasmus+ projects, and Jean Monnet Chair appointments expanded rapidly, the field has struggled with a persistent pedagogical dilemma: reconciling European norms of critical inquiry and self-reflection with the ideological expectations and governance frameworks of Chinese higher education.⁹

4.2 Internationalization Rationales and the "Paradox Phase"

Traditional scholarship analyzing cross-border HE relies heavily on rationales of internationalization. Foundational frameworks developed by Knight¹⁰ and Zha¹¹ classify internationalisation drivers into four core motivations: academic, economic, political, and socio-cultural. Further expanding this perspective, Balbachevsky et al.¹² emphasize the necessity of embedding these rationales within broader national political economies, while de Wit¹³ and

⁶ Chengyu Shen, "Thirty Years of European Studies in China: Retrospect and Prospect," *Chinese Education & Society* 33, no. 5 (2000): 18–32.

⁷ Lemin Chen, "Ouzhou Xue de Gouxianyu Fangfa" [Conceptions and Methodologies of Eurology], *Ouzhou Yanjiu* [Chinese Journal of European Studies] 19, no. 2 (2001): 4–11.

⁸ Shen, "Thirty Years of European Studies in China," 24

⁹ Piekarska and Mach, "European Studies in a Global Context," 222; Zheng and Cai, "Exporting European Higher Education to China," 530.

¹⁰ Jane Knight, "Internationalization Remodeled: Definition, Approaches, and Rationales," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 8, no. 1 (2004): 5–31

¹¹ Qiang Zha, "Internationalization of Higher Education: Towards a Conceptual Framework," *Policy Futures in Education* 1, no. 2 (2003): 248–270.

¹² Elizabeth Balbachevsky, Yuzhuo Cai, Heather Eggins, and Svetlana Shenderova, *Building Higher Education Cooperation Between the EU and Asian Countries: Policies, Motivations, and Realities* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2022).

¹³ Hans de Wit, "Reimagining the Purpose and Societal Impact of Internationalization in Higher Education," *Higher Education* 87, no. 1 (2024): 89–105

Altbach & de Wit¹⁴ call for a critical re-evaluation of internationalization outcomes beyond uncritical assumptions of mutual benefit.

Recent studies demonstrate that traditional rationale frameworks struggle to explain the growing friction in EU-China academic ties. As scholars like Zha¹⁵ and Shih¹⁶ point out, broader geopolitical shifts - including US-China strategic rivalry, European discussions on "de-risking," and evolving security regulations - have created deep uncertainties for academic actors on both sides. Policymakers and university administrators find themselves caught in paradoxes where institutional goals are misaligned, leading to what Altbach and de Wit term an increasingly complex and cautious landscape for cross-border collaboration.¹⁷

4.3 Theoretical Lens: The Institutional Logics Perspective

To overcome the analytical limitations of traditional rationale approaches, this study adopts the Institutional Logics Perspective, drawing directly on the empirical framework established by Cai and Zheng.¹⁸ Grounded in foundational institutional theory¹⁹ and refined by Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury²⁰, institutional logics are defined as the socially constructed, material practices, assumptions, and values by which individuals and organizations produce and reproduce their material subsistence and render their experiences meaningful. Applying this lens specifically to HE, Cai and Zheng²¹ identify three predominant field-level logics operating within EU-China university partnerships:

- **Scientific Logic:** Focuses on knowledge creation, scientific discovery, shared research capacity, academic freedom, and open intellectual exchange.

¹⁴ Philip G. Altbach and Hans de Wit, "Crisis and Transformation in Higher Education Internationalization: Geopolitics and the Changing Global Landscape," *International Higher Education*, no. 114 (2023): 3–5.

¹⁵ Qiang Zha, "Geopolitics, De-risking, and the Shifting Dynamics of China-Western Higher Education Partnerships," *Higher Education Policy* 36, no. 3 (2023): 441–460.

¹⁶ Chih-Yu Shih, "Academic Freedom and Geopolitical Boundaries: China-Europe Scholarly Ties in a Re-polarizing World," *Globalizations* 21, no. 4 (2024): 610–627.

¹⁷ Altbach and de Wit, "Crisis and Transformation," 4; also Alica Braun Střelcová, "Navigating Europe–China Academic Cooperation in an Age of Geopolitical Anxiety," *European Journal of Higher Education* 13, no. 3 (2023): 312–329.

¹⁸ Yuzhuo Cai and Gaoming Zheng, "Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation: An Institutional Logics Perspective," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 29, no. 2 (2025): 145–168, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153241296209>

¹⁹ Robert R. Alford and Roger Friedland, *Powers of Theory: Capitalism, the State, and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Roger Friedland and Robert R. Alford, "Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions," in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, ed. Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 232–263.

²⁰ Patricia H. Thornton, William Ocasio, and Michael Lounsbury, *The Institutional Logics Perspective: A New Approach to Culture, Structure, and Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²¹ Cai and Zheng, "Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation," 148; see also Yuzhuo Cai and Nicola Mountford, "Institutional Logics and Higher Education Research: Methodological Advances and Applications," *Studies in Higher Education* 47, no. 8 (2022): 1601–1615.

- **Economic Logic:** Driven by institutional competitiveness, international rankings, financial benefit, talent recruitment, and global market presence.
- **Political Logic:** Guided by state sovereignty, geopolitical alignments, national security regulations, public diplomacy, and ideological alignment.

Cai and Zheng categorize the historical development of EU-China HE cooperation into four distinct phases: the Growth Phase (1975–2002), the Golden Phase (2003–2012), the Expanded Golden Phase (2013–2018), and the contemporary Paradox Phase (2019–present).

While earlier eras saw high compatibility between scientific and economic logics, the current Paradox Phase is defined by the overwhelming intrusion of political logic. Frictions arise not because cooperation has lost value, but because European and Chinese actors operate under fundamentally divergent interpretations of what constitutes legitimate, safe, and productive academic engagement.

By operationalizing Cai and Zheng's institutional logics model, this study evaluates how these competing field-level forces manifest at the ground level within Chinese university departments offering ES programs.

5. Methodology

The present research provides a critical perspective on the introduction and evolution of ES within a non-European institutional context. HE discourses - encompassing official policy statements, institutional norms, and academic practices - are complex phenomena shaped by localized socio-political environments. Consequently, educational Europeanization is interpreted and operationalized differently across distinct geographic and institutional settings. This study investigates how these localized HE discourses interact with the broader public diplomacy objectives of the EU in non-European contexts.

At its core, this study seeks to systematically examine how HE discourses operate across national, local, and institutional levels in mainland China. It analyzes the multi-layered interactions between Chinese academic actors and European frameworks, evaluating the degree to which these educational discourses are facilitated, constrained, or reshaped by EU policy instruments.

Study Purpose

Specifically, the overarching purpose of this research is to evaluate the institutionalization, pedagogical adaptation, and programmatic development of ES within mainland Chinese HEIs. By mapping the historical evolution of these programs alongside contemporary field-level dynamics, the study investigates how European educational models are negotiated, operationalized, and perceived by local institutional actors amidst shifting geopolitical realities.

5.1 Constructivism and Interpretivism

To interpret the complex institutional dynamics, structural mismatches, and ideological tensions inherent in developing ES in mainland China, this study utilizes Social Constructivism as its epistemological foundation. In international relations and policy analysis, Constructivism posits that institutional interactions, policy frameworks, and actor identities are fundamentally constructed by shared ideas, norms, and intersubjective meanings rather than purely material interests.²² This analytical lens is particularly valuable for examining how the EU projects its identity as a "normative power" through academic collaboration,²³ and how Chinese academics and university leadership decode, adapt, or reconstruct these imported European values within their localized socio-political environments.

Complementing Constructivism, the research adopts an Interpretivist approach to social reality.²⁴ Recognizing that educational policy and academic discourse deal with symbolic materials open to multiple valid interpretations,²⁵ an interpretative design allows the researcher to understand phenomena in their natural institutional settings, capturing the social and institutional meanings assigned to these programs by local actors over time.

5.2 Research Design: Qualitative Document Analysis

To investigate these dynamics systematically, this study employs a qualitative, document-based research design. Qualitative document analysis offers an objective, rigorous framework for tracing how international policy initiatives are translated into localized educational realities through policy texts, open-access institutional data, and university documentation.

Desk research served as the primary instrument to evaluate national policy directives, university internationalization strategies, curricula frameworks, and institutional rationale statements across target Chinese HEIs.

The research design follows a consecutive, three-stage methodological workflow optimized for qualitative document analysis:

1. **Collection and Primary Screening (1999–2023 Temporal Scope):** Systematic gathering and preliminary tracking of secondary policy texts, official EU-China dialogue

²² Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

²³ Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 235–258

²⁴ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2003); Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, "Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects," *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People* 7, no. 1 (2018): 23–48.

²⁵ Margrit Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012).

documentation, university strategy papers, open-access program records, and academic literature spanning 1999 to 2023.

2. **Qualitative Analysis & Coding (Thematic Analysis):** Application of qualitative content and thematic analysis²⁶ to code and synthesize the gathered textual data, identifying recurring institutional patterns, policy alignments, and localized adaptations.
3. **Interpretation & Synthesis (Mapping Structural Tensions):** Translating synthesized documentary findings into a coherent narrative, directly mapping systemic tensions and highlighting structural mismatches between European policy intentions and Chinese university practices.

5.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis Methods

The empirical foundation of this study relies on a diverse corpus of qualitative secondary data collected across a twenty-four-year timeframe (1999–2023). This chronological scope encompasses pivotal shifts in EU-China bilateral relations, tracing the transition from early institutional consolidation at the turn of the century, through the "Golden Phase" of expansion, to the post-pandemic "Paradox Phase" of geopolitical re-alignment.

To ensure analytical depth and triangulate findings, documentary data were retrieved from four distinct source categories:

1. **Official EU policies and strategic papers:** European Commission policy papers, foreign policy agendas toward Asia/China, strategic communications on higher education internationalization, and official program calls.
2. **EU Programmes and projects databases:** Implementation reports, project monitoring databases, and impact evaluations published by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), focusing on Erasmus+ and Jean Monnet Actions in China.
3. **Institutional and open-access records:** Publicly accessible institutional records, course curricula, university press releases, and conference proceedings from major Chinese centers for European Studies (e.g., Fudan, Renmin, and Sichuan Universities).
4. **Peer-Reviewed Academic Literature:** Empirical studies, policy analyses, and historical accounts examining EU-China higher education partnerships, transnational mobility, and academic diplomacy.

5.4. Analytical Methods

Once compiled, the qualitative data were processed using four interconnected analytical methods to ensure systematic rigor, enhance construct validity, and mitigate interpretive predisposition:

²⁶ Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*, 42–58.

- **Content and Thematic Analysis:** Open-text policy documents, evaluation reports, and academic texts were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns, core themes, and institutional narrative shifts.²⁷
- **Discourse and Policy Analysis:** Building on the thematic coding, official policy texts and institutional strategic papers were critically analyzed to examine how educational concepts (e.g., "normative power," "academic freedom," "mutual learning") are framed, translated, or contested across European and Chinese policy arenas.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Cross-institutional and cross-temporal comparisons were conducted to evaluate how ES directives were implemented across different Chinese universities and across distinct historical phases (1999–2012 vs. 2013–2023).
- **Generalization and Systematization:** In the final analytical synthesis, localized empirical findings were grouped into broader theoretical categories. Operationalizing the institutional logics framework,²⁸ this phase synthesized raw textual data into systemic conclusions, directly mapping structural mismatches between European policy intentions and Chinese university practices.

Limitations of the research

The initially planned interviews with informants involved in teaching ES 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 HE.

²⁷ Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*, 60.

²⁸ Cai and Zheng, "Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation," 150.

6. Findings and Discussion

6.1 Evolution of European Studies in Non-European Contexts

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

In non-European settings, the establishment and development of ES are closely intertwined with wider geopolitical, economic, and institutional rationales. For external actors, understanding the EU is not merely an academic endeavor, but a strategic necessity for navigating the legal, regulatory, and political frameworks of one of the world's major economic blocs. Consequently, the evolution of the field demonstrates a gradual transition from an exclusively Eurocentric pedagogical model toward a more diverse, globally interconnected area of study. In these contexts, local scholars, institutions, and students do not passively receive knowledge about European integration; rather, they actively decode, interpret, and adapt it to align with their own domestic priorities and institutional realities.²⁹

Within the East Asian context, pioneering comparative research by Holland and Chaban³⁰ on external perceptions of the EU demonstrates that regional priorities strongly condition how "Europe" is conceptualized and taught. In China specifically, the foundational structural development of the field catalyzed by key initiatives such as the 1997–2001 Sino-European Higher Education Cooperation Programme facilitated the transition of ES from narrow, policy-driven International Relations into a broader, institutionalized network across major Chinese universities.³¹

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

²⁹ Craig Calhoun, "European Studies in a Global Age," *Items & Issues* (Social Science Research Council) 4, no. 1 (2003): 1–7; Fatih Başak, "De-centering European Studies: Pedagogical Adaptations and Local Knowledge Production in Non-EU Contexts," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 30, no. 3 (2022): 412–427.

³⁰ Martin Holland and Natalia Chaban, eds., *The EU Through the Eyes of Asia: Media, Public, and Elite Perceptions* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2007).

³¹ Bingran Dai, "The Development of European Studies in China: Historical Trajectory and Institutionalization," *Chinese Journal of European Studies* 23, no. 4 (2005): 45–58.

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.

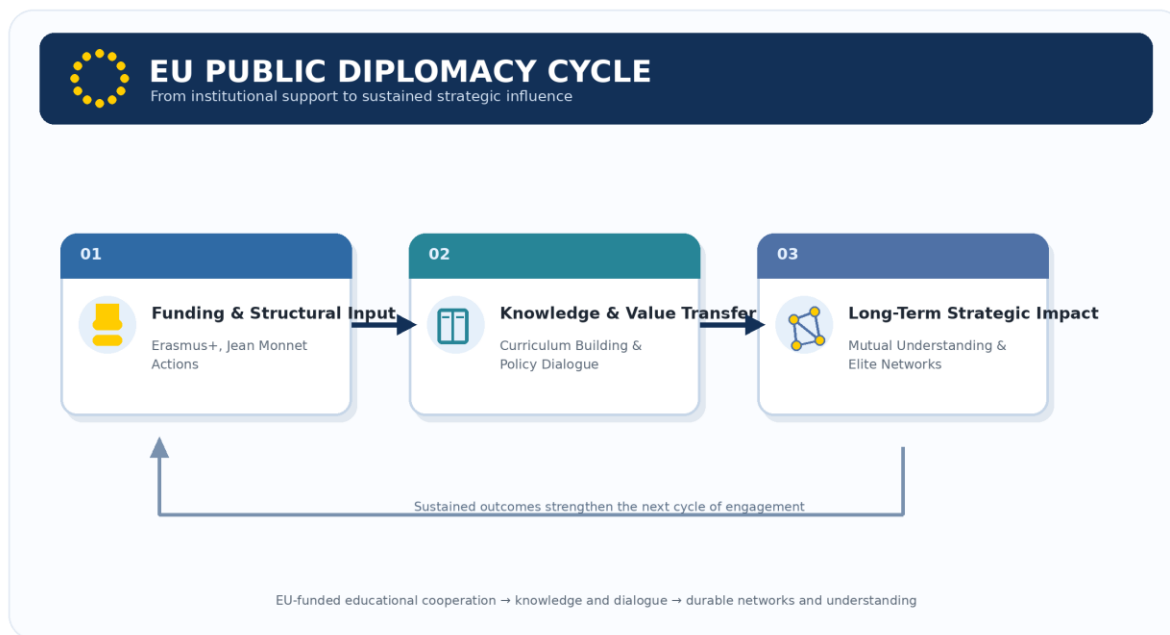


Fig. 1The EU Public Diplomacy Cycle. (AI generated)

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 power³², and institutional identity to the rest of the world.

Thus, the first stage that can be titled **“Funding and Structural Input”** 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 Action, 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

³² Manners I., "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 235–258.

Melissen (2005), this step transforms local professors and syllabi into active channels for open policy dialogue³³.

At the third stage **“Long-Term Strategic Impact”** 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 efforts³⁴. 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.

6.2 Conceptualizing the "Europeanization" of Higher Education in China

In public policy and political science, "Europeanization" classically describes the process by which domestic institutions, policymaking structures, and cognitive discourses adapt to European Union governance frameworks and normative expectations.³⁵ When extended beyond the borders of EU member states into international higher education, the concept acquires a distinct, cross-border dimension. In non-EU contexts like China, Europeanization rarely operates as direct institutional replication; instead, it functions through a dialogical process where European educational frameworks encounter well-established domestic governance traditions.

³³ Melissen, Jan. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

³⁴ Yang

³⁵ Claudio M. Radaelli, "The Europeanization of Public Policy," in *The Politics of Europeanization*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Claudio M. Radaelli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 27–56; Kevin Featherstone and Claudio M. Radaelli, eds., *The Politics of Europeanization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Within HE scholarship, Europeanization is deeply intertwined with broader dynamics of globalization and internationalization, though theoretical distinctions between internal EU convergence and external Europeanization remain subject to debate:

*"Europeanisation is often employed for describing the phenomena of internationalization on a 'regional' scale."*³⁶

Expanding on this definition, Ulrich Teichler offers a more comprehensive formulation, conceptualizing Europeanization as:

*"...the regionally defined version of either internationalization or globalization... addressed frequently when referring to cooperation and mobility. Beyond that it also covers such issues as integration, convergence of contexts, structures and substance... or segmentation between regions of the world."*³⁷

When transplanted into mainland China, this regionalized internationalization process reveals clear systemic tensions. While the European academic tradition prioritizes critical inquiry, institutional autonomy, and constructive self-criticism as foundational elements of academic identity,³⁸ the Chinese higher education landscape operates under a distinct state-centric institutional logic, prioritizing national strategic alignment and ideological regulation.³⁹

As Zheng and Cai observe, when European educational resources enter Chinese universities, local institutional actors strategically position and adapt these inputs to serve domestic capacity-building goals.⁴⁰ Consequently, as Piekarska and Mach emphasize, Europeanization in Chinese higher education is inherently non-linear: while EU initiatives foster valuable capacity building and academic exchange, their long-term reception continually fluctuates between local institutional adaptation and structural resistance whenever Western pedagogical ideals intersect with national sovereignty and domestic governance priorities.⁴¹

6.3 Macro-Context: China's Innovation Policy and Bilateral Educational Frameworks

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Chinese government has made significant efforts to transform the country from a global manufacturer of low-cost goods into an innovation-driven

³⁶ Marijk van der Wende, "On the Definition of Internationalisation," Higher Education Management and Policy 16, no. 2 (2004): 229–241, quote at 231.

³⁷ Ulrich Teichler, "The Changing Debate on Internationalisation of Higher Education," Higher Education 48, no. 1 (2004): 5–26, quote at 22.

³⁸ Piekarska and Mach, "European Studies in a Global Context," 220.

³⁹ Zheng and Cai, "Exporting European Higher Education to China," 528; Cai and Zheng, "Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation," 152.

⁴⁰ Zheng and Cai, "Exporting European Higher Education to China," 533.

⁴¹ Piekarska and Mach, "European Studies in a Global Context," 225

economy, leading to a substantial increase in investments in higher education and advanced technology.⁴² Starting in 2012, China has consistently allocated approximately 4% of its GDP to education. Furthermore, by 2018, China directed 2.1% of its GDP toward research and development (R&D). Although this figure remained lower than that of EU nations like Germany (3.1%) or the Netherlands (2.2%), it outpaced several European partners, including the United Kingdom (1.7%)⁴³.

Strategic partnerships have significantly influenced the trajectory of bilateral interaction.⁴⁴ In particular, during the EU–China Summit in 2013, both parties adopted the "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation," establishing higher education, mobility, and scientific research as central pillars of bilateral engagement. The operational directives of this partnership were further detailed in the joint Roadmap for EU-China S&T Cooperation.⁴⁵

As analyzed by Cai⁴⁶ and broader policy evaluations,⁴⁷ the strategic rationale driving higher education cooperation between EU member states and China revolves around three principal objectives:

1. **Increasing the Attractiveness of European Higher Education:** Elevating the reputation and enrolment of European universities among Chinese students and academic talent.
2. **Enhancing Openness and Institutional Competitiveness:** Fostering structural transparency, joint capacity building, and mutual competitiveness across both higher education systems.
3. **Establishing Shared Platforms for Strategic Dialogue:** Identifying common institutional and academic grounds to deepen long-term socio-economic and diplomatic engagement.

6.4 Alignment of Interests and Interdependence Between the EU and China

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

⁴² State Council of the People's Republic of China, National Medium- and Long-Term Program for Science and Technology Development (2006–2020) (Beijing: State Council, 2006); State Council of the People's Republic of China, Outline of the National Strategy for Innovation-Driven Development (Beijing: State Council, 2016).

⁴³ OECD, Main Science and Technology Indicators (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020); UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Global R&D Expenditure Database (Montreal: UIS, 2021).

⁴⁴ Robert Sutter, *China's Strategic Partnerships in Europe: Assessing the Mechanics and Impact* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁵ European Commission, Roadmap for EU-China S&T Cooperation (Brussels: European Commission, 2014); EU-China Summit, EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation (Joint Statement, Beijing, 2013).

⁴⁶ Yuzhuo Cai, "China's Policies and Practices with Respect to Higher Education Cooperation with the EU: Towards EU-China Higher Education Cooperation 2.0," *Frontiers of Education in China* 14, no. 2 (2019): 173–198.

⁴⁷ Sutter, *China's Strategic Partnerships in Europe*, 88.

the development of mutually beneficial cooperation.⁴⁸ 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 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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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.⁵³ 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

⁴⁸ Yuzhuo Cai, "Chinese Higher Education Openness and External Partnerships," in *European and Chinese Higher Education Engagement*, ed. Y. Cai (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 99.

⁴⁹ Ingrid D'Hooghe et al., *China's Influence in the European Higher Education and Research Area* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2018), 15.

⁵⁰ Cai, "Chinese Higher Education Openness," 100.

⁵¹ D'Hooghe et al., *China's Influence*, 4.

⁵² D'Hooghe et al., *China's Influence*, 2.

⁵³ D'Hooghe et al., *China's Influence*, 4.

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.⁵⁴

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 higher education and research cooperation with China across several major initiatives:

- **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Doctoral Networks / Innovative Training Networks (ITN):** Collaborative research networks providing structured doctoral training and international mobility.
- **MSCA COFUND:** A co-financing scheme supporting regional, national, and international doctoral and postdoctoral fellowship programs.
- **Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters:** Prestigious joint master's degree programs delivered by international consortia, offering full scholarships for non-EU students and academics.

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).⁵⁵ Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, China was the third-largest recipient of funding from the "Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees" program during 2014–2017.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷

The largest numbers of Chinese students traditionally study in the UK, Germany, and France.⁵⁸

- **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.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Qiaomu Fu, "International Students as Carriers of Soft Power: Educational Mobility and Cultural Diplomacy in Chinese Higher Education," *Journal of International Higher Education* 12, no. 1 (2019): 5–18.

⁵⁵ Cai, "China's Policies and Practices," 169.

⁵⁶ Fu, "International Students as Carriers of Soft Power," 4.

⁵⁷ European Commission, *Erasmus+ Annual Report 2018: Country Annexes* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018).

⁵⁸ D'Hooghe et al., *China's Influence*, 4.

⁵⁹ Fu, "International Students as Carriers of Soft Power," 5.

Most Chinese students in the UK specialized in business and economics.⁶⁰ During the implementation of China's government grant programs (2008–2014), the UK hosted 3,884 scholarship recipients.⁶¹

- **Germany:** Ranks second in popularity. In 2018, 32,368 Chinese students studied in Germany.⁶² The country's popularity is driven by high demand for technologies in the industrial sector and a strong base for training engineers.⁶³ Accordingly, the most popular subjects among Chinese students in Germany are the exact sciences: natural and technical disciplines, engineering, and mathematics.⁶⁴ Germany was also the leader in hosting grant recipients subsidized by the PRC government, receiving 3,998 individuals.⁶⁵
- **France:** In 2017, about 28,000 Chinese students studied here, making China the country's second-largest educational partner.⁶⁶ Under the PRC state grant programs, France hosted 2,194 individuals.⁶⁷
- **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.⁶⁸ Under government grants, 1,607 individuals went there.⁶⁹

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.⁷⁰

Student mobility has significant positive consequences at several levels:

⁶⁰ Yasemin Soysal, "International Student Flows and Asian Higher Education Dynamics," *Global Higher Education Review* 6, no. 2 (2018): 5.

⁶¹ D'Hooghe et al., *China's Influence*, 16.

⁶² Fu, "International Students as Carriers of Soft Power," 5.

⁶³ Fu, "International Students as Carriers of Soft Power," 5.

⁶⁴ Soysal, "International Student Flows," 5.

⁶⁵ D'Hooghe et al., *China's Influence*, 16.

⁶⁶ Fu, "International Students as Carriers of Soft Power," 6.

⁶⁷ D'Hooghe et al., *China's Influence*, 16.

⁶⁸ Fu, "International Students as Carriers of Soft Power," 6.

⁶⁹ D'Hooghe et al., *China's Influence*, 16.

⁷⁰ Eurostat, "Learning Mobility Statistics: Mobile Tertiary Students in the EU by Country of Origin," *Eurostat Statistics Explained*, 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Learning_mobility_statistics. [⁶⁸]: Fu, "International Students as Carriers of Soft Power," 7.

- **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.⁷¹

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).⁷²

6.5 "Soft Power," Public Diplomacy, and Systemic Tensions

In contemporary geopolitical strategy, the internationalization of Chinese HE functions as a pivotal instrument for exercising soft power, directly influencing the scope and sustainability of bilateral political and economic relations. In particular, higher education has served as a strategic baseline for establishing long-term, multi-sectoral cooperation under the overarching framework of the “Belt and Road Initiative”.⁷³

The operational integration of HE into the “Belt and Road Initiative” functions along two mutually reinforcing axes:

1. **Human Resource Infrastructure and Technical Capacity Building:** The execution of complex, cross-border infrastructure and energy projects relies heavily on localized technical expertise and joint talent training. By cultivating specialized engineering, administrative, and technological talent, Chinese and partner HEIs establish the requisite human capital foundation to sustain interconnected economic corridors and industrial sectors across Eurasia and beyond.⁷⁴
2. **People-to-People Connectivity and Cultural Diplomacy:** Beyond technical training, academic mobility directly fosters intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding between citizens of European nations and the People's Republic of China.⁷⁵ Within this

⁷¹ Xia Jiang and Chao Shen, "Post-Doctoral Scientific Collaboration Patterns Among Returnee Chinese Scholars," *Studies in Higher Education* 44, no. 2 (2019): 185–198, specifically 192.

⁷² Xia Jiang and Hui Shi, "The Way of the International Cooperation of Higher Education Under the Strategy of 'The Belt and Road'," *Science Journal of Education* 7, no. 3 (2019): 73–80, <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.sjedu.20190703.12>.

⁷³ Jiang and Shi, "International Cooperation of Higher Education," 75.

⁷⁴ Jiang and Shi, "International Cooperation of Higher Education," 77.

⁷⁵ Fu, "International Students as Carriers of Soft Power," 12.

framework, international student flows operate as a key diplomatic mechanism: by engaging in academic and social exchanges with European peers, Chinese students act as direct cultural ambassadors, incentivizing foreign scholars to study China while strengthening the state's broader soft power potential and international narrative.⁷⁶

Concurrently, through state-sponsored scholarship schemes (such as the Silk Road Scholarship Program) and joint research platforms, the Chinese government leverages educational internationalization not merely for academic exchange, but to align global knowledge networks with its national development vision. Consequently, HE acts as a soft-power bridge—facilitating economic integration while fostering a favorable normative environment for Chinese foreign policy objectives across Europe and partner states.

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.⁷⁷

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.⁷⁸

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,

⁷⁶ Fu, "International Students as Carriers of Soft Power," 14

⁷⁷ J: D'Hooghe et al., *China's Influence*, 132, 176

⁷⁸ Hans Bekkers et al., *Navigating Risks in Academic Exchanges with Asian Partners* (Amsterdam: University Press, 2019), 16.

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.⁷⁹

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 HE between the PRC and Europe.

7. The EU-China Higher Education Policy (1999–2023)

7.1 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 observed in the socio-political dynamic through 1999–2023 is closely linked to how ES is understood as an academic subject in non-European settings. As Stoicheva, Sreejith, and Gupta argue, ES serves a critical dual purpose when exported to Asia.⁸⁰ 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."⁸¹ Observing how Europe systematically

⁷⁹ Thorsten Benner et al., *Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Influence in Europe* (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute / MERICS, 2018).

⁸⁰ Maria Stoicheva, S. G. Sreejith, and Indranath Gupta, eds., *Relevance of European Studies in Asia* (Singapore: Springer, 2023), 35–58, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-7786-4>.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 42

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 political exchanges have actively supported such academic initiatives. For instance, on April 1, 2014, during a state visit to Belgium, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote address at the College of Europe in Bruges. Appealing to the Flemish meaning of Bruges ("bridge"), the Chinese leader emphasized the imperative to build "four bridges" for peace, growth, reform, and civilization between China and the European Union - framing China and Europe as representatives of Eastern and Western civilizations, respectively.⁸² Coinciding with this high-level visit, the EU-China Research Centre was officially inaugurated at the College of Europe in Bruges to foster interdisciplinary research, organize policy conferences, and promote structural collaboration among scholars specializing in EU-China relations.⁸³

The challenges facing HE in any modern state are deeply intertwined with the political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions of society. Within the contemporary international landscape, the evolving cooperation between China and European nations in HE serves a dual purpose: it aims to cultivate highly qualified global specialists capable of addressing complex worldwide challenges while acting as a catalyst for economic growth, innovation, and institutional prestige.

For China, transforming its university system into a globally competitive network is a strategic imperative. The state seeks to elevate Chinese HEIs into recognized global leaders while simultaneously guaranteeing its citizens equitable access to high-quality degree programs and international mobility. Consequently, economic and scientific collaboration in higher education has become an essential pillar of modern university governance and national development strategies.⁸⁴

⁸² Jinping Xi, "Building a Bridge of Friendship and Cooperation Across the Eurasian Continent" (Keynote Speech at the College of Europe, Bruges, Belgium, April 1, 2014), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, https://ie.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zt/diplomacy/201404/t20140408_2540471.htm.

⁸³ College of Europe, "EU-China Research Center Opens in Belgium," China Daily / Xinhua, April 3, 2014, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2014-04/03/content_17414563.htm.

⁸⁴ N. Kazakova, G. Neustroieva, and V. Hromov, "Economic Cooperation in Higher Education Between China and Europe," Bulletin of the National Technical University "Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute" (Economic Sciences) 2023, no. 1 (2023): 94–98, <https://doi.org/10.20998/2519-4461.2023.1.94>.

Beyond its economic and technological dimensions, HE functions as a foundational element within the broader framework of EU-China people-to-people and humanitarian dialogue. As highlighted in regional economic and educational analyses, strengthening academic collaboration provides the indispensable socio-cultural baseline for sustaining a stable, long-term strategic partnership between Europe and China.⁸⁵

This systemic integration reflects what scholars conceptualize as a paradigm shift from "EU-China Higher Education Cooperation 1.0" which was limited to isolated academic exchanges and localized university projects to "Higher Education Cooperation 2.0," wherein higher education is formally embedded into the core diplomatic, economic, and strategic agenda of EU-China relations.⁸⁶ Within this high-level political architecture, joint education initiatives not only facilitate cross-border knowledge production but also establish institutional trust, deepen mutual understanding, and create resilient channels for bilateral dialogue across diverse socio-political systems.

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.⁸⁷ Addressing a notable gap in both international relations and HE 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 HE 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

⁸⁵ Kazakova, Neustroieva, and Hromov, "Economic Cooperation in Higher Education," 96

⁸⁶ Ibid, 96

⁸⁷ Cai, "China's Policies and Practices," 175.

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.

7.2 The Chinese Higher Education Landscape: Modernization, Organizational Culture, and Global Integration

The modernization of higher education constitutes an indispensable pillar of China's national development strategy, serving as a prerequisite for its transition toward an innovation-driven knowledge economy and a globally competitive state.⁸⁸ Crucial to this systemic transformation is the unique organizational culture of Chinese universities - an institutional framework that blends modern administrative mechanisms with deep-rooted national values and cultural traditions.⁸⁹

Historically, the structural foundation of China's contemporary higher education system traces back to Deng Xiaoping's economic reform and opening-up policy initiated in the late 1970s. Deng positioned education and scientific modernization as core drivers of national renewal, recognizing that systematic academic training and human capital development were essential for restoring domestic infrastructure and launching sustained economic growth.⁹⁰ Over the subsequent four decades, state-led excellence initiatives - most notably Project 211 (1995), Project 985 (1998), and the contemporary Double First-Class University Initiative (*Shuangyiliu*, launched in 2015) -

⁸⁸ State Council of China, Outline of the National Strategy (2016); Zha, "Internationalization of Higher Education," 250.

⁸⁹ Vadim Shumsky, "Modernization of Higher Education Systems and Organizational Culture: The Case of Chinese University Transformation," *Journal of Higher Education Strategy and Governance* 14, no. 2 (2018): 45–59.

⁹⁰ Xiaoping Deng, "Respect Knowledge, Respect Trained Personnel," in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1983); Ruth Hayhoe, *China's Universities, 1895–1995: A Century of Cultural Conflict* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996).

directed unprecedented capital and institutional resources toward building world-class research universities.⁹¹

By 2019, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China officially announced that China had constructed the world's largest HE system in terms of total student enrollment and institutional scale, boasting over 40 million HE students and an gross enrollment ratio exceeding 50%.⁹² Concurrently, this rapid expansion transformed mainland China into the world's largest higher education market, creating vast domestic demand for international academic cooperation, joint degree programs, and cross-border research platforms.⁹³

Over the past four decades, Asia has overtaken Europe and North America in student enrolments, creating the largest higher education ecosystem in the world. The report estimates around 12,600 higher education institutions across the sampled territories and more than 90 million students enrolled by 2023. This expansion has been accompanied by significant growth in research capacity. Asia's scientific output has surged, particularly in China, which now produces approximately one-quarter of global research publications. Together with India, Japan and South Korea, China forms part of a dominant research bloc that is reshaping global knowledge production patterns.⁹⁴ Another prominent example of China's advancing the level of HE is the fact that China is the Asian country which stands out for most significantly increasing the number of its institutions in the top 500, going from 21 in 2018 to 38. Analysis: Why Asia is striding ahead in global rankings. China's Peking University continues to make gains and is ranked 13th compared to joint 38th in 2018. Also, Tsinghua University has moved up to 14th place from 25th spot in 2018. The Chinese University of Hong Kong breaks into the top 20 climbing to 19th place, rising from 32nd last year or 46th in 2018. Of the 85 universities from Mainland China, 52 institutions moved up in rank, with six of them ranking among the world's top 100 and another four ranking in the 101-200 band. This improved performance was driven by higher scores in both the academic and employer reputation surveys, while employment outcomes was the weakest indicator for them.⁹⁵

Driven by national strategies to elevate institutional standing and absorb global scientific best practices, Chinese HEIs actively sought structural partnerships with European counterparts. For

⁹¹ Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, Implementation Plan for Promoting the Construction of World-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines (Double First-Class Initiative) (Beijing: MOE, 2015); Rui Yang, "Toxic or Nourishing? Internationalization of Higher Education in China," *International Higher Education*, no. 84 (2016): 12–14.

⁹² Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, Statistical Report on National Educational Development (Beijing: MOE, 2019); Shumsky, "Modernization of Higher Education Systems," 52.

⁹³ Zheng and Cai, "Exporting European Higher Education to China," 522.

⁹⁴ Hamish Coates and Angel Calderon. Understanding Asian higher education is no longer optional. *University World News*. 29 May 2026. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2026052911073636>

⁹⁵ Angel Calderon. Analysis: Why Asia is striding ahead in global rankings *University World News*. 20 June 2026. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2026062008360595>

Chinese academic and institutional actors, engaging in cross-border education and welcoming European resources served three primary strategic imperatives:

1. **Capacity Building and Quality Enhancement:** Partnering with European universities allowed local Chinese institutions to rapidly upgrade their curricula, integrate international quality assurance benchmarks, elevate research outputs, and enhance global institutional visibility.⁹⁶
2. **Strategic Market Access and Globalization:** Joint education programs fulfilled an escalating domestic demand for globalized qualifications, positioning leading Chinese HEIs as central nodes within the global academic network while retaining talent domestically.⁹⁷
3. **Intercultural Mutual Understanding and Institutional Alignment:** Collaborative educational platforms provided a structured space for Chinese scholars and administrators to engage directly with European counterparts, bridging administrative, pedagogical, and policy gaps across distinct socio-political systems.⁹⁸

Ultimately, this massive, highly receptive, and resource-rich HE landscape provided the ideal empirical environment for the EU to deploy its public diplomacy instruments, such as Jean Monnet Actions, and academic mobility programs.

7.3 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 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

⁹⁶ Zheng and Cai, "Exporting European Higher Education to China," 526; Zha, "Internationalization of Higher Education," 255.

⁹⁷ Knight, "Internationalization Remodeled," 15; Cai and Zheng, "Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation," 150.

⁹⁸ Piekarska and Mach, "European Studies in a Global Context," 224; Zheng and Cai, "Exporting European Higher Education to China," 531

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.⁹⁹

Impact Factor of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Projects

Jean Monnet Activities are designed to promote excellence in teaching and research in the field of European Union studies worldwide.¹⁰⁰ 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 yield:

- 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 researchers (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;

⁹⁹ European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide: Focus on Jean Monnet Actions in Third Countries Non-Associated to the Programme (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020), 85–99; Jan Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 44.

¹⁰⁰ European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Actions Overview, European Commission, http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/jean-monnet_en.

- Increased allocation of financial resources to teaching and research on EU subjects within the institution;
- A 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.

These 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 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. 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 future leaders.

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:** For Chinese faculty and researchers, Jean Monnet projects hypothetically 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.

7.4 Tensions, Mismatches, and Pedagogical Divergence

Despite the documented structural growth and project milestones, a conducted content and thematic analysis of the empirical policy and documentary data reveals sharp structural mismatches between the EU's normative collaboration intentions and localized educational practices within Chinese universities. Rather than producing seamless institutional convergence, the transplantation of ES curricula into mainland China frequently exposes fundamental friction points rooted in divergent educational philosophies, institutional governance, and political expectations.

The primary source of divergence stems from a fundamental conflict in educational philosophy. The contemporary European HE model is built upon an open, dialogical approach that views critical inquiry, intellectual pluralism, self-reflection, and institutional self-criticism as constitutive, healthy elements of European identity and academic life.¹⁰¹ Under this framework, ES is delivered not merely as technical knowledge about legal directives or market mechanisms, but as an analytical practice that encourages students to critically deconstruct governance structures, state power, and historical narratives. However, when this value-laden paradigm enters the highly centralized, state-aligned Chinese HE landscape, deep institutional tensions inevitably emerge:

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

Table adapted from Zheng and Cai (2018)

In Chinese universities, higher education is explicitly aligned with state priorities, ideological stability, and national development goals.¹⁰² Consequently, pedagogical elements that involve open critique of governance models or normative political values encounter strict institutional boundaries. ES curricula are thus frequently subject to localized filtering - retaining technical, economic, and legal content regarding EU market access or trade regulations while diluting or

¹⁰¹ Piekarska and Mach, "European Studies in a Global Context," 219.

¹⁰² Cai and Zheng, "Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation," 155; Zheng and Cai, "Exporting European Higher Education to China," 529.

marginalizing critical political theory, normative power concepts, and human rights frameworks.¹⁰³

To navigate these normative contradictions, Chinese higher education institutions frequently engage in mechanisms of organizational adaptation that are best explained through the lens of sociological neo-institutionalism.¹⁰⁴

Faced with conflicting external expectations - satisfying European partners to secure international grants, Jean Monnet Chair designations, and global prestige on one side, while adhering to domestic state directives on the other - Chinese universities systematically resort to institutional "decoupling."¹⁰⁵

Mismatches at the Institutional Level and Practice

In this context, decoupling describes a process where Chinese universities adopt the outward, formal structures of Europeanized syllabi, international course titles, and mobility benchmarks to secure external funding, international visibility, and global ranking metrics. Internally, however, actual classroom delivery, administrative oversight, and pedagogical evaluation remain firmly anchored within traditional, state-aligned institutional frameworks. Through this strategic decoupling, local academic actors buffer their core administrative operations from external normative demands.¹⁰⁶ While European policy instruments (such as Erasmus+ and Jean Monnet Actions) assume that structural funding will automatically foster deep normative alignment and critical self-reflection, the empirical reality demonstrates a more pragmatic outcome: Chinese institutions selectively absorb functional, technical knowledge while insulating their core governance structures against normative Western political ideals.¹⁰⁷

Logic Clashes in the "Paradox Phase"

Applying the Institutional Logics Perspective,¹⁰⁸ these structural mismatches reflect an underlying clash between competing institutional field logics:

¹⁰³ Piekarska and Mach, "European Studies in a Global Context," 226; Shih, "Academic Freedom and Geopolitical Boundaries," 615.

¹⁰⁴ John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 2 (1977): 340–363; Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (1983): 147–160.

¹⁰⁵ Meyer and Rowan, "Institutionalized Organizations," 341; Cai and Mountford, "Institutional Logics and Higher Education Research," 1608.

¹⁰⁶ Cai and Zheng, "Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation," 158.

¹⁰⁷ Braun Střelcová, "Navigating Europe–China Academic Cooperation," 320; Zha, "Geopolitics, De-risking, and Shifting Dynamics," 450.

¹⁰⁸ Cai and Zheng, "Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation," 147; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury, *The Institutional Logics Perspective*, 12.

Dimension	European Union Framework	Chinese University Context
Dominant Logic	Scientific & Normative Logic: Prioritizes open inquiry, value translation, academic autonomy, and critical discourse.	Political & Sovereign Logic: Prioritizes state alignment, social stability, technical capacity, and strategic utility.
Curricular Objective	Promoting critical understanding of European integration, norms, and global self-criticism.	Acquiring functional expertise on EU market regulations, trade policies, and technology frameworks.
Institutional Strategy	Academic diplomacy, normative power projection, and institutional convergence.	Pragmatic capacity building, institutional prestige, and selective curriculum adaptation (decoupling).

As EU-China relations enter what Cai and Zheng term the "Paradox Phase," the intrusion of state-level political logics on both sides has heightened these operational frictions.¹⁰⁹ European actors increasingly demand strict adherence to academic freedom, values-based internationalization, and risk mitigation, while Chinese actors reinforce ideological oversight and national security boundaries.¹¹⁰ Consequently, European Studies in China operates within a persistent structural paradox: it remains an essential bridge for bilateral economic and technical understanding, yet its deeper pedagogical ambition - transplanting critical, normative European educational values - is continually constrained by the sovereign institutional reality of Chinese higher education.

8. Institutional Typologies and Institutionalization Pathways

The operationalization of ES in China is not uniform across HEIs. Rather, institutional profiles dictate whether European engagement emphasizes political-normative research, joint technical mobility, or language-based curriculum modernization.

The Case of Tongji University: Multi-Disciplinary approach

Reflecting its pragmatically oriented, applied-science profile, European Commission project archives do not heavily link Tongji University to pure political science or Jean Monnet policy

¹⁰⁹ Cai and Zheng, "Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation," 160.

¹¹⁰ Shih, "Academic Freedom and Geopolitical Boundaries," 620; Zha, "Geopolitics, De-risking, and Shifting Dynamics," 455.

networks. Instead, Tongji functions as a primary hub for high-volume International Credit Mobility (ICM) and Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees (EMJMD).

Rather than relying on public-facing political policy centers, Tongji embeds European mobility directly into its renowned engineering, architecture, urban planning, and environmental science disciplines. Its extensive project footprint is recorded in bilateral Erasmus+ Key Action 1 (KA107/KA171) mobility agreements and multi-university technical consortia, facilitating high-frequency student and faculty exchanges between Shanghai and leading European technical consortia (e.g., TU9 in Germany and ParisTech in France).

Specialized Foreign Language Universities: Beijing Foreign Studies University and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies

In contrast to comprehensive or polytechnic institutions, specialized foreign language universities leverage language proficiency to drive interdisciplinary curriculum modernization in European Studies.

- **The EURASIA Project:** The most explicit secondary evidence documenting the central role of Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GDUFS) comes from the European Commission's Erasmus+ Key Action 2 (Capacity Building in Higher Education) archives. Both institutions served as the primary Chinese partner institutions in the landmark EURASIA Project ("European Studies Revitalized Across Asian Universities", 2017–2020).
- **Curricular Embedding:** The EURASIA consortium specifically targeted the systemic modernization of Asian higher education by designing original B.A. and M.A. course modules in European Studies, permanently integrating them into Chinese and Indian university curricula.¹¹¹
- **High-Frequency Mobility:** Furthermore, both BFSU and GDUFS appear prominently in European registries as major operators of Erasmus+ Key Action 1 grants, utilizing language-driven academic exchanges to bridge linguistic training with broader area studies on European integration, legal frameworks, and trade dynamics.¹¹²

¹¹¹ EURASIA Consortium, European Studies Revitalized Across Asian Universities (EURASIA): Final Project Implementation and Curriculum Development Report (Project ID: 585968-EPP-1-2017-1-BG-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2020), <https://eurasiaproject.eu/>.

¹¹² European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide: Key Action 1 (International Credit Mobility KA171) and Key Action 2 (Capacity Building in Higher Education) (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021).

9. Empirical Dataset & Sample Analysis

Sample Overview and Empirical Distribution

The qualitative dataset extracted from the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) platforms and institutional project reports comprises 22 recorded Jean Monnet projects (N=22) implemented by Chinese higher education institutions across the defined timeframe.¹¹³ This dataset serves as a structured, representative empirical sample designed to trace project distribution, thematic priorities, and institutional concentration, rather than an exhaustive historical repository of all bilateral grants.

Content and structural analysis of this dataset reveals three primary patterns:

- **Institutional Concentration and Geographical Diversification:** Grants in this dataset are heavily concentrated within a select tier of major research universities. Notably, **Sichuan University** emerges as the single most frequent beneficiary, holding 7 distinct Jean Monnet project actions (spanning Modules, Chairs, and Center of Excellence designations). It is followed by key specialized research hubs, including **Wuhan University**, **Tsinghua University**, and the **China University of Political Science and Law**, each accounting for 2 recorded projects.
- **Project Typologies:** The empirical distribution is dominated by individual capacity-building and curriculum-embedding mechanisms specifically Jean Monnet Modules (short teaching programs) and Jean Monnet Chairs (teaching posts with a specialization in European Union studies) which serve as the primary entry points for institutionalizing European Studies in Chinese university departments.
- **Thematic Scope and Policy Alignment:** Thematic focus is concentrated on functional, regulatory, and legal domains, primarily focusing on EU governance architectures, environmental and green transition policies, international trade law, and legislative harmonization. This distribution directly mirrors the strategic priorities of the Jean Monnet Actions during this period, emphasizing practical regulatory alignment and trade governance over normative political theory.

¹¹³ European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), Erasmus+ Project Results Platform: Jean Monnet Actions in the People's Republic of China, European Commission, <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/>.

Table 9.1: Project Distribution Across Chinese HEIs (N=22)

Chinese HEI Beneficiary	Number of Projects	Primary Focus / Action Type
Sichuan University	7	Chairs, Projects, Modules
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
Beihang University	1	Module
Hunan Normal University	1	Module
Jilin Chemical Technology Achievement Center	1	Module

While the qualitative subset analyzed in this study focuses on 22 detailed project cases (N=22), official macro-level statistics published in European Commission *Erasmus+ Country Factsheets* indicate a broader institutional footprint. Specifically, during the 2014–2020 Erasmus+ programming period, **46 Jean Monnet projects** were officially selected and directly awarded to

applications led by Chinese higher education institutions.¹¹⁴ In addition, Chinese HEIs participated as official consortium partners in **25 international Jean Monnet academic networks** during the same period.

This distinction underscores two complementary tiers of engagement:

1. *Direct Institutional Grants* (Jean Monnet Chairs, Modules, Centers of Excellence) awarded directly to Chinese applicants to build local capacity;
2. *Multi-Lateral Network Consortia*, where Chinese scholars collaborated as international partners within broader European and global academic consortia.

Table 9.2: Thematic Categorization of Jean Monnet Projects in the Sample Dataset (N=13)

Core Topic Category	Focus & Pedagogical Scope	Key Participating Institutions & Project Distribution
Green Policy & Economics	Low-carbon transition strategies, ecological civilization law, green finance, and EU-China environmental policy integration.	3 Projects: Sichuan University
Institutional Governance	Direct mechanics of European integration, legal harmonization, comparative administrative law, and multi-level structural governance.	4 Projects: Nankai University, Tsinghua University, China University of Political Science and Law, Southwest Jiaotong University
Systemic Crisis Studies	European sovereign debt crisis management, post-crisis institutional reforms, and navigating multi-level modern institutional frictions.	2 Projects: Fudan University, Sichuan University (<i>Jean Monnet Centres of Excellence</i>)
Trade & Domestic Policy	Global commerce regulations, EU internal market directives, external legal impact on labor standards, and bilateral trade law.	2 Projects: Wuhan University, Hebei University

¹¹⁴ European Commission, Erasmus+ 2014–2020 Country Factsheet: China (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021), https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/china-erasmus-2020-numbers_en.

Core Topic Category	Focus & Pedagogical Scope	Key Participating Institutions & Project Distribution
Visibility & Public Perceptions	Capacity building and professional training for early-career faculty, surveying Chinese youth perceptions of the EU, and public diplomacy.	2 Projects: Sichuan University

As illustrated in Table 9.2, the empirical distribution of Jean Monnet projects within the sample dataset reveals a clear thematic alignment with the EU's strategic policy priorities.

The dominant clusters - **Green Policy & Economics** and **Institutional Governance** -demonstrate a strong emphasis on functional, regulatory, and environmental topics. This distribution reflects a pragmatic convergence: Chinese HEIs actively seek European expertise in green economic transitions and legal frameworks to support national capacity building, while European funding bodies utilize these thematic areas to promote regulatory alignment and global public diplomacy. Conversely, broader topics like **Systemic Crisis Studies** and **Public Perceptions** are primarily anchored within established Jean Monnet Centres of Excellence (such as Fudan and Sichuan Universities), which possess the institutional capacity to conduct high-level policy evaluation and cross-regional research networks.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Synthesis of Findings

This study has systematically evaluated the development, structural implementation, and institutional reception of ES within mainland Chinese HEISs between 1999 and 2023. By analyzing policy documents, program calls, and curriculum data, several critical conclusions can be drawn to directly answer the core research questions. This study examined the institutionalization, pedagogical adaptation, and structural realities of ES within Chinese HEIs. By synthesizing qualitative secondary data across a 24-year timeframe (1999–2023) through the theoretical lens of the Institutional Logics Perspective¹¹⁵ and sociological neo-institutionalism,¹¹⁶ the research offers four central conclusions corresponding to the study's core inquiries:

1. **Achievements and Challenges in Teaching and Learning:** The primary achievement of the EU's academic diplomacy instruments, particularly the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Action, has been the physical and structural expansion of

¹¹⁵ Cai and Zheng, "Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation," 145–168.

¹¹⁶ Meyer and Rowan, "Institutionalized Organizations," 340–363.

ES curricula in China. These grants successfully established dedicated courses, research modules, and prestigious institutional anchors such as Jean Monnet Modules, Chairs and Centers of Excellence across elite and provincial universities. However, the core challenge remains a fundamental pedagogical divergence: the EU's open, self-reflective, and self-critical educational framework frequently clashes with highly centralized domestic administrative demands. While the EU views Jean Monnet Actions and HE mobility as instruments for transmitting normative values, critical inquiry, and democratic self-reflection.¹¹⁷ Chinese university departments selectively filter these offerings.

2. Pragmatic Thematic Convergence

The empirical analysis of the Jean Monnet Action project dataset (N=22) highlights that ES serves as a critical catalyst for cross-border cooperation primarily when aligned with shared pragmatic priorities. The dominant project clusters - Green Policy, Economics and Institutional Governance-reveal that collaboration thrives where European expertise directly intersects with China's domestic policy imperatives (e.g., ecological civilization law, low-carbon economic transitions, and international trade harmonization). Through bilateral capacity-building frameworks such as Erasmus+ KA2 (EURASIA) and Key Action 1 International Credit Mobility, ES provides a valuable infrastructure for academic exchanges and institutional visibility, even amidst heightened geopolitical tensions. Framed within Cai and Zheng's institutional logics model,¹¹⁸ ES in China has entered a "Paradox Phase." In the contemporary environment, however, the overwhelming intrusion of political logic-driven by EU discussions on "de-risking" and values-based internationalization on one side, and heightened national security and ideological oversight on the other -has restricted the space for open academic exchange.¹¹⁹ Despite these growing frictions, ES remains an indispensable intellectual bridge. Moving forward, sustainable academic cooperation between Europe and China will require a mutual recognition of these underlying institutional logics—transitioning from uncritical assumptions of normative convergence toward a pragmatic, transparent framework for coexisting across distinct educational systems.

3. The Role of European Studies in University Cooperation: ES has acted as a vital structural bridge that facilitates institutional internationalization, academic mobility, and capacity building. For top-tier hubs like Renmin University and Fudan University, it served as a platform for elite policy input and global networking. For multi-disciplinary centers like Tongji University or foreign language institutions like BFSU and GDUFS, it provided channels for international student mobility and structural academic exchanges.

¹¹⁷ Piekarska and Mach, "European Studies in a Global Context," 215–231

¹¹⁸ Cai and Zheng, "Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation," 145–168

¹¹⁹ Meyer and Rowan, "Institutionalized Organizations," 340–363.

4. **Mismatches Between Intentions and Practices:** A significant systemic mismatch exists between the EU's normative collaboration intentions and localized university practices. Viewed through the lens of sociological neo-institutionalism, Chinese HEIs frequently display institutional mismatches. To secure external resources, academic prestige, and international visibility, universities adopt the formal, outward structures of Europeanized syllabi. Internally, however, they insulate their traditional, state-aligned administrative logic, filtering out the critical, self-reflective components of the discipline. The findings demonstrate that while ES has successfully established a multi-institutional footprint across Chinese universities (spanning comprehensive hubs like universities Fudan and Renmin, regional centers like Sichuan University, specialized polytechnics like Tongji, and language institutions like BFSU), its operationalization remains asymmetric. Pedagogical practices prioritize technical, administrative, and economic knowledge regarding EU market regulations, trade directives, and governance mechanics, while diluting or insulating classroom discourse from critical political theory and normative European value projection.
5. **Institutional Policy as an Organizational Strategy**
To resolve the fundamental contradiction between European normative expectations and centralized, state-aligned university governance, Chinese HEIs systematically employ institutional decoupling.¹²⁰ Chinese universities adopt the formal outward exterior of Europeanized syllabi, Jean Monnet Chair designations, and international mobility benchmarks to secure prestige and global ranking metrics. Internally, however, core administrative oversight, pedagogical evaluations, and ideological boundaries remain strictly anchored within traditional state governance structures. Decoupling thus allows local academic actors to buffer their operations, absorbing European technical resources while safeguarding institutional alignment with domestic state priorities.

Despite these growing frictions, European Studies remains an indispensable intellectual bridge. Moving forward, sustainable academic cooperation between Europe and China will require a mutual recognition of these underlying institutional logics transitioning from uncritical assumptions of normative convergence toward a pragmatic, transparent framework for coexisting across distinct educational systems.

Concrete Policy Propositions

To bridge the gap between initial collaboration intentions and actual institutional practices, the following actionable recommendations are proposed for international policymakers and university administrators:

¹²⁰ Meyer and Rowan, "Institutionalized Organizations," 341.

- **Contextualize Project Calls:** Future Erasmus+ and Jean Monnet Action calls should move away from a one-size-fits-all model. Funding criteria should explicitly account for the localized socio-political realities and institutional profiles of non-European partner states to prevent superficial curriculum decoupling.
- **Enhance Longitudinal Monitoring:** The EU should transition from purely quantitative metric evaluations (e.g., counting the number of courses or student enrollments) toward qualitative, long-term impact monitoring that tracks how specialized knowledge is structurally embedded or altered over time.
- **Encourage Disciplinary Depth:** Specialized language and regional provincial institutions should move beyond treating ES as a secondary linguistic or business utility tool. Administrators should support multi-disciplinary tracks that integrate international law, environmental economics, and comparative public governance to achieve true academic capacity building.
- **Foster Mutual Transparency:** Institutional leaders should use the data points generated by successful Jean Monnet projects to cultivate genuine, mutual transparency between divergent educational frameworks, reducing systemic friction during cross-border project execution.

Perspectives for Future Research

As the global geopolitical environment continues to shift in the post-2023 landscape, the relationship between academic diplomacy and international higher education will face new structural pressures. Future scholarly research could expand by conducting longitudinal tracking of Chinese students and junior faculty who participated in these Europeanized projects and programs.

Investigating whether these academic tracks result in long-term diplomatic alignment or if localized institutional filtering entirely reshapes external values remains a vital avenue for researchers at the intersection of international relations, public diplomacy, and higher education policy.

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