

Introduction

Abstract

If all the world is a stage, and if what is happening in China and between China and other countries constitutes a spectacle, China watchers spend significantly more time than laypeople watching this, documenting it, and presenting it to other China watchers and laypeople. China watchers are not objective spectators. By narrating China, they contribute ideas about how the world should interact with China.

Keywords: China watchers, knowledge production about China, narrating China, comparative epistemological approach

Mizoguchi Yūzō (溝口雄三) is emeritus professor of history and sinology at the University of Tokyo. Born in 1932, his generation experienced the Sino-Japanese War while they were in elementary school. When he was a child, he saw a photo of Japanese troops slaughtering Chinese people. That memory still remains in his mind. In his personal account, he said that the memory of that photo was suddenly awakened when he was at college, twenty years later. There he started to engage in Chinese studies. He read a book series on the development of Japanese capitalism published by a Japanese publisher, Iwanami Shoten (岩波書店), and learned about the brutal behavior of the Japanese army in Asian countries and China and the situation of the Anti-Japanese War. As Mizoguchi (2007) recalls,

I have always been concerned about the awakening of this memory. Memory is based on ideology. Therefore, in my subsequent Chinese studies, I have been very concerned about the issue of 'subjectivity'. This is how I understand myself. But please don't misunderstand me. I don't mean to say that I am also responsible for the war of aggression against China, so I conduct research on China from the perspective of apologizing. I am particularly opposed to including political motives in research. I just regard it as a conscious lifestyle and call it the 'origin.'

This book is about that origin. But it has differed from Mizoguchi's view in that I believe that politics and the study of China have been intertwined more closely than we think, leading to perpetuated interactions between them. I do not mean to argue for means to liberate knowledge production from politics because I do not

think that this can be completely achieved. But I believe in the value of awakening and self-consciousness towards the knowledge that we produce, re-produce, and consume. It is with this motive in mind that this book is written.

1.1 The perpetuated interactions between politics and knowledge about China

The rise in the importance of the People's Republic of China (PRC, primarily called China as shorthand in this book) has increased the numbers and diversity of China watchers in our contemporary era. China watchers comprise a variety of experts, primarily university scholars (some of them are called sinologists), think tank analysts, journalists, activists, and government officials in various countries worldwide (Solin 1975; Keller, Dornschneider-Elkink, and Tung 2025). Although each profession has its own duties, in general these China watchers observe, document, analyze, present, narrate, provide comments, and may offer policy advice on China. If all the world is a stage, and if what is happening in China and between China and other countries constitutes a spectacle, China watchers spend significantly more time than laypeople watching this, documenting it, and presenting it to other China watchers and laypeople (i.e., 'non-China watchers' or 'casual China watchers'). Not all of them would see themselves as having a social or political impact (e.g., Janhunen 2016; Lodén 2016) but there are indeed some China watchers in epistemic communities with networks of like-minded professionals who may have authoritative claims to policy-relevant knowledge (Haas 1992).

The term 'China watcher' might have a negative connotation in the contemporary world. This is because this term is associated with the Cold War, when the US dedicated significant resources to gather information about the communist world (Wong 2016a, 2016b). Not only people working in the intelligence circle but also journalists and researchers were recruited formally or informally to join the China watching business. Their work included laborious documentation and deciphering of what was going on inside the communist world. In addition to China watching, Kremlin watching or Kremlinology was also part of the US's mission. Western media had received great benefits from these groups of China watchers in generating knowledge about China, although the information provided by China watchers was not always correct, and the politically driven motive might induce bias and civilizational stereotyping in the knowledge produced (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b; Shih 2019). The term 'China watching' has been used in derogatory ways due to its service to politics and thus China watchers are not considered neutral and objective providers of knowledge about China (Wei 2016; Wong 2016a, 2016b).

In this context, it might not be adequate to equate China watching with a formal academic discipline like Chinese studies or sinology. A sinologist most likely

would not like to be called a China watcher. In Paternicò's (2023) documentation of Italian sinology, for example, she mentioned that some sinologists believe that they are not 'influencers' in politics. Another way of looking at this issue is that there are different generations of China watchers. Those in the Cold War era were conditioned and restricted by their political context to watch China for political purposes. In the post-Cold War era, as the political needs to observe China waned, researchers could study China in various ways beyond the traditional focuses on politics and economies. Post-Cold War China experts have also had more access to fieldwork in China and could have benefited from the availability of newer and more sophisticated methodological tools to advance their data collection and analysis. This is a view shared by both Western and non-Western scholars (Shim 2023; Lodén 2016). Thus, the post-Cold War China watchers might in some contexts become closer to China scholars or sinologists.

Knowing that the term 'China watcher' might carry negative meanings due to its Cold War connection, I still decide to use the term widely in this book. This book examines university researchers, think tank researchers, journalists, and sometimes politicians who have studied China in their professions. Sometimes a person's career could straddle along these different professions while naturally, there are also people who have stayed solely in their professions all their lives.

China watchers are not objective spectators. By narrating China, they contribute ideas about how the world should interact with China. Although not all of their ideas can have real impacts on changes in China's relations with the world, some do. In recent years, the Chinese government felt increasingly uneasy about China watchers and even created legal and regulatory frameworks that might impact them, such as the Hong Kong National Security Law. Their capacity to continue to watch China has become an issue of contention in the media, academic debates, and policy discussions. In the process, China watchers have become part of the spectacle.

This book is essentially about the local, regional, and global politics of China watchers from the 20th century to the present, with a focus on the past and its connection to the present. There is a burgeoning body of literature on the challenges facing China watchers and the institutions where they work in the contemporary era. However, this study differs by showing the *longue durée* perspective of China watchers' conditions and the enduring interactions between politics and the knowledge about China being produced. Politics created and conditioned China watchers and China watching, not the other way around. But China watchers may also exercise their own agency to defy the circumstances imposed on them. This is what this book aims to illustrate.

Historically, there have been various ways of viewing, understanding, and narrating China. These predate the contemporary ascension of power of China. It is necessary to study and compare different societies and countries to see how

so-called China knowledge has been formed and continues to be formed in different contexts. The approach that this study will use is to give examples of various countries, particularly but not exclusively from Central Asia and Southeast Asia, to illuminate the evolution of China knowledge in these societies. While countries and societies are compared, I aim to tease out commonalities, differences, and inter-connections between the myriad societies and China watchers.

It is important to acknowledge that as historical evidence will be examined too, the definition of ‘China’ in this book is rather comprehensive, including also other ‘China’ than the PRC. The Republican China both on the Chinese mainland and later on the island of Taiwan are also considered. Taiwan and Hong Kong are actually Chinese societies where knowledge production about China is generated from within. There is also a plethora of outside ‘watchers’ who study, observe, and narrate about Hong Kong and Taiwan too. As China watchers’ interests and focal points do not align, this book treats the term ‘China watcher’ in a rather flexible way. Primarily, my focus is on the PRC, but I do keep Hong Kong and Taiwan in mind as one cannot exclude these two places’ unique roles in the China-watching business.

China knowledge, being a constructed product conditioned by objective circumstances and subjective narrations, has existed for a long time. Professor Chih-yu Shih (石之瑜), Professor Emeritus at National Taiwan University and Visiting Chair Professor at Tongji University in the PRC, leads a global project that has recorded the oral histories of China experts and/or sinologists around the world. His comparative epistemological approach has enabled researchers to understand how research and knowledge about China have been constructed and have evolved in different countries (Ayrodiguno and Shih 2023). My study is largely indebted to the data from his project to exemplify the entanglement of China watchers and China knowledge production across the world. The transcripts of oral history interviews used in this study can be found on the website of Shih’s project, situated at the Research and Educational Center for China Studies and Cross Taiwan-Strait Relations at National Taiwan University (2025).

While historical examples are drawn in this book, this book is strictly not a book about the history of China studies or sinology. Rather, this is a book that shows how the current China field came to be and how some contemporary challenges remind us of old challenges that the field has encountered.¹ There are other publications that aim at detailing the history of China studies or sinology, such as *Sinology during the Cold War* edited by Antonina Łuszczkiewicz and Michael Brose in 2022. In Łuszczkiewicz and Brose’s work, they also have discussed the definitions

¹ This book is multidisciplinary in nature. It speaks closely to the fields of China/Chinese studies and cultural studies. Chih-yu Shih often refers to his work as an anthropology of knowledge (Shih 2012), which I consider related to this book too.

of sinology, Chinese studies, and China studies (Łuszczkiewicz and Brose 2022: 5), which are not exactly the same but sometimes have been used interchangeably in some contexts (Łuszczkiewicz and Brose 2022). While acknowledging these terms' differences, for the purpose of this book, I do not differentiate them and use the terms interchangeably.

This book will highlight current political changes and how they are affecting China watchers in various parts of the world as well. In 2021, the European Union's (EU) Horizon Europe program called for a grant competition under the title 'Upgrading Independent Knowledge on Contemporary China in Europe' (European Commission 2021). The call specified that the EU aims to sponsor consortia that can enhance 'independent European knowledge and expertise on contemporary China.' It also mentioned that the ultimate objective is for Europeans to have the independent capacity to bring forward coherent and fact-based analyses of China that can impact policies. The EU's desire to craft 'independent' knowledge of China, expecting that this would improve the European capacity to form better policies toward China, raises many questions. What is 'independent' knowledge of China? What is it meant to be 'independent' from? Is it independent of the knowledge produced by the Chinese government and its agents (e.g., scholars, think tank analysts, and officials)? Who is allowed to produce and narrate China in the EU? Can ethnically Chinese experts or watchers narrate independent knowledge about China in the EU?

On the other side of the Atlantic, in 2022, the New York-based Social Science Research Council (SSRC) conducted a scoping study of how China knowledge is researched and produced in what they called the 'Global South' of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.² The aim was to comprehend the research capacities of various institutions and countries in these regions. Resources and research capacity are closely associated. Richer countries, such as Singapore in Southeast Asia, shine in all measurements of research capacity and in producing knowledge about China (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022; Zheng and Carayannis 2023). Excluding Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Brunei were reported to have considerable research capacity, while Vietnam and the Philippines have moderate capacity, and Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia have limited capacity to study China in the overall Southeast Asian region (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022). The latter three countries are now known to have a much warmer relationship with the PRC and have reportedly experienced surging Chinese economic and political influence. However, they lack sufficient capacity to conduct research on China.

In South Asia, India was reported by the SSRC to have managed to attain critical mass in China studies, while there is still a lot of uneven development in nearby

² The contentious nature of the term 'Global South' will be mentioned in a later part of this chapter.

countries (Zheng and Carayannis 2023). In Africa, unevenness has been observed, with visible expertise clustered in major urban institutions in Johannesburg (South Africa), Accra (Ghana), Dakar (Senegal), and Nairobi (Kenya) (Zheng and Carayannis 2023; Bolin, Carayannis, Niewenhuis, and Vlavonous 2022). In Latin America, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile fare better than the rest of the region (Zheng and Carayannis 2023; Jauregui, Gutierrez, Armijo, and Zheng 2022). Central Asia and West Asia reportedly lagged behind all other regions in the Global South (Zheng and Carayannis 2023; Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022).

The SSRC project has produced good although not exhaustive lists of key China knowledge producers in various parts of the Global South. Its aim is to contribute to policy advice to strengthen weaker regions' capacity to research China. Capacity may include a financial budget to hire and educate teachers, conduct research, organize events for exchanges of views and debates, and support the development of teachers, students, and others. However, as the aforementioned EU grant competition indicates, concerns about a lack of capacity to understand China do not exist only in the Global South. European institutions face similar challenges. Comparatively speaking, European institutions may have greater capacity than some countries in the Global South, but there is still a fear that there is not enough capacity or not sufficient 'independent' capacity among European institutions themselves. A lack of resources, either in the Global South or in more developed parts of the world, has led to such challenges.

While institutions in these regions can try to obtain external funding, who is funding them has become a topic of heated debate in local, national, and international politics. There has been much discussion about the issues regarding Confucius Institutes (CIs), which are largely financed by the Chinese state and placed in educational institutions outside China to produce knowledge about China. The overly one-sided Chinese contribution to the operation of CIs—and thus knowledge production about China—has raised serious concerns in many countries. But there are also scholars who understand that CIs are a kind of 'risky' projects. If managed well, however, CIs can add value to host institutions' Chinese teaching capacity (Janhunen 2016; Lodén 2016). Issues about CIs have been well covered in other academic writings (Li 2025; Li and King 2024; Repnikova 2022; Franceschini and Loubere 2022; Hubbert 2019; Hartig 2015). Some of these works examined CIs through the lens of the PRC's exercise of soft power outside of China (Jardine and Lemon 2025; Hubbert 2019; Hartig 2015). In 2025, Jinghan Zeng, a Professor at City University of Hong Kong, released a memoir detailing his experiences as the Director of the CI at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom (UK). This type of publication, based on personal experiences, is relatively uncommon. Indeed, both Zeng's memoir and many Western academic publications express similar perspectives regarding the oversimplification of the complexities surrounding CIs

in the West. This study will not discuss them in detail but will only highlight the parts where they are relevant to the kernel of its arguments. That is, there is a trend for China watchers outside the PRC to have to show their distance from the Chinese state and other affiliated Chinese institutions to convince their audiences of their credibility and independent capacities to study China, even though not all China watchers can professionally and privately disentangle themselves entirely from their study subject of China. China watchers have been pushed to choose between keeping a distance from their subject or being questioned about their integrity and professionalism. This book will show that this is not just a trend in contemporary Western societies. From a *longue durée* perspective, we see similar patterns in both Western and non-Western societies, as exemplified by empirical cases in Central Asia and Southeast Asia, which we will delve into in Chapters three and four.

This trend has resulted in, and is also part of, a series of securitization efforts in the EU and the United States of America (USA) in the contemporary era. Some (albeit not all) ethnically Chinese or China-originating China watchers face greater challenges than non-ethnically Chinese China watchers. Western institutions' desire for 'independent' knowledge of China poses a significant challenge for those whose knowledge of China is underpinned by their ethnicity and their inseparable personal relations with China. There are ethnically Chinese China watchers who do not face such pressures as their peers if they have proven their distance from China. Ironically, their proven distance or decision to distance themselves from China might hinder their actual ability to study China. This book provides an update and analysis of this challenge from the past to the present. Although the scope of my examination is global, I make no pretence that I can cover all countries around the world. As much as I can, I try to provide reasons for choosing certain cases for comparison throughout the book. My ultimate aim is not to pretend that I can have a comprehensive evaluation of intellectual systems or knowledge systems about China in the world. Rather, I wish to offer a humble invitation for discussion and continuous reflection on this subject. As noted at the outset of this book, I believe in the value of awakening and self-consciousness towards knowledge production about China.

As this book will reveal, although China watchers are conditioned by the larger political climate to produce a certain situated knowledge of China, China watchers are not just passive individuals constrained by the political climate and structure. China watchers may exercise individual agency to make choices regarding what they wish to present about China to their audiences. These choices may not be underpinned solely by scientific principles of neutrality. Many attributes of a China watcher, ranging from family ties, personal ideologies and beliefs, and intellectual journeys to career considerations, can also influence the outcome of a particular path taken. Sometimes lack of choice could also accidentally lead to the creation of a China watcher. For instance, many sinology graduates have not been able to

find jobs related to the study of Chinese classics and thus have had to move on to work on contemporary political issues, becoming diplomats, government officials, or think tank analysts.

As the individual agency of a China watcher does matter, the author of this study has decided to follow anthropologists' practices in disclosing her positionality at the outset of this study. I believe that our knowledge is situated and affected by the context of its production. It can never be free and subjective. I acknowledge my dual role of being both sometimes an insider and other times an outsider with regard to this subject. In my role as an insider, I am a Taiwan-born professor of Chinese Studies, so a kind of China watcher, based in Finland with seven years' of leadership experience of being the Finnish director of a CI (January 2016–January 2023); I led a failed European consortium to bid on the aforementioned EU Horizon competition and have been a participant-discussant in the aforesaid SSRC project. I have also participated in several national and international networks to discuss the risks of higher education cooperation with China. These insider experiences have endowed me with rich resources to study this subject. I am also a participant in the above global oral history project 'Comparative Epistemology of China Studies,' which has allowed me to interview various sinologists and China watchers in Central Asia and Nordic countries.

In the process of writing this book, I have presented different versions of my work formally or informally to academic audiences in Germany, Finland, Kyrgyzstan, Sweden, Czechia, USA, and Thailand. There is a common bond between me and my audience, as we share similar (but not the same) experiences in dealing with the development of Chinese studies or China studies in our own institution. My insider role permits me to create a conducive environment where scholars feel comfortable revealing information to me that would otherwise be silenced and thus help improve my research. But to prevent my insider view from creating biased pictures of my subject due to over-familiarity, I have adopted an outsider approach when recording, documenting, and analyzing the collected materials and data. There is a constant self-reminder that I need to reflect critically on how my insider and outsider positions could affect the collection and interpretation of the data. Switching between insider and outsider roles is a process that I have gone through with the aim of presenting a balanced and holistic picture of the subject.

1.2 Geographic scope

I am not a historian, but I have written this book in a way that can speak to scholars working on global history, exploring commonalities, deviations, and inter-connections between the myriad societies and China watchers on Earth. Other than North

America, Europe, Australia, Southeast Asia, and India, China Studies as a field is largely missing everywhere (Zheng and Carayannis 2023). This book strives to be global in spirit, but it does not include empirical examples from every corner of the world. Southeast Asia has to be covered because even though there is uneven development among Southeast Asian countries, the region has benefited from its unique bond with China to produce a lot of publications and networks. Some would even argue that Sino-Southeast Asian studies is already an alternative paradigm to conventional studies of China (Liu 2001).

Central Asia³ is covered here as the author happens to have conducted research in the region for several years. Central Asia, as will be shown in Chapter four of the book, has struggled to develop its own school of sinology. But this does not mean that there have not been experts in the region who have worked in their own capacity and sometimes with institutional support to contribute to knowledge production about China.

Another motive to include Central Asia is to show cognitive limitations of how the world conceives the region and how a region such as Central Asia, as part of the broader post-Soviet space, is cognitively made invisible from the global knowledge production system by scholars from the rest of the world (Tlostanova 2015; Müller 2020; Kuzhabekova 2020). Economically, Central Asia may be considered like many so-called Global South countries, but geographically it is located in the Global North. The simplistic North–South dichotomy is rather a colonial construct, treating the North as the developed part with advanced knowledge production systems in contrast to the South, which is inferior in comparative terms. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union somehow made the broader Eurasian region as a post-Soviet space cognitively obsolete as the old Soviet enemy disappeared from the West’s radar. Situating in an interstitial space that does not fit easily into any Global North or Global South conceptualization, Central Asia often becomes invisible to the world’s scholarly communities. Plus, as Soviet research is sometimes perceived as inferior by the West, Central Asia is thus regarded as even more backward because it inherits much of its research and innovation system from the Soviet system. This broader context has affected how China experts, China watchers, and sinologists from the rest of the world look at Central Asia. Basically, most of them do not see any Chinese studies developed in the region, and even if some do, they only vaguely guess that there are some sort of Chinese studies, but they do not believe that it is worthwhile to look at research results and talk to

³ Geographically, Central Asia covers the post-Soviet countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. But more broadly, some use the term ‘Greater Central Asia’ to include even Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. This book covers the first five countries in Chapter four and touches upon Mongolia, Iran, and Pakistan sporadically.

scholars in the region. This reluctance prompts me to create a stand-alone chapter on the study of China in Central Asia.

Aside from Central Asia, there are two other regions that come to mind: Africa and Latin America. These two regions do not have vibrant China studies as a field, as in India or other Southeast Asian countries. But their development is ahead of Central Asia's. So, comparatively speaking, among the Global South regions, Africa⁴ and Latin America⁵ are in the middle in terms of networks and capacity in conducting studies on China. These two regions' focuses on China are also rather limited, with a strong emphasis on international relations and thus their relations with China, and may lack in-depth knowledge or specialization in China itself (Jauregui, Gutierrez, Armijo, and Zheng 2022). Some scholars might not think that the academic discipline of international relations would be related to conventional Chinese studies. But as scholars from Africa and Latin America are highly concerned about their countries' relations with China, these topics naturally cut across the studies of China and their countries. I call them China–African studies and China–Latin American studies. They have to be included in this book too.

Lastly, the development of China watching in West Asia or the Middle East is reportedly weaker than in Africa and Latin America. But I have sought to include examples from Israel, Egypt, and Iran to show what is currently available. The Pacific Island countries are of interest to me too, but either due to the lack of indigenous Chinese studies or my inability to find such studies, I have omitted the region from the book.

1.3 Methods and datasets

As noted earlier, for more than two decades, Chih-yu Shih has run a global project at National Taiwan University attempting to document the oral history of these

⁴ One can find institutions that produce knowledge about China in big cities in the African continent. Most of them are located in anglophone countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Botswana (Hoemissen 2021; Zheng and Carayannis 2023; Bolin, Carayannis, Niewenhuis, and Vlavonou 2022). In francophone countries, some operate bilingually (i.e., English and French), such as in Senegal, and others solely in French, such as in Cameroon. International research on China remains largely influenced by English-speaking scholars, which can lead to francophone researchers working in isolation. Consequently, they may need to navigate their work in both languages (Zheng and Carayannis 2023; Bolin, Carayannis, Niewenhuis, and Vlavonou 2022).

⁵ Latin American countries have different levels of capacity and networks to support the production of knowledge about China. Mexico has some capacity (Ciglić 2016), but less so in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. As Jauregui, Gutierrez, Armijo, and Zheng (2022) point out, there are individuals in Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Venezuela doing work on China–Latin America relations, but they lack institutional support.

various China experts. The author of this book, as a professor of Chinese studies at the University of Helsinki in Finland, has been in charge of the Nordic and Central Asian part of this project, conducting oral history interviews with senior China experts in these two regions.

The transcripts of oral history interviews used in this study can be found on the website of Shih's project, situated at the Research and Educational Center for China Studies and Cross Taiwan-Strait Relations at National Taiwan University (2025). As the ambition is to cover the world, Shih's project is long term, beginning in 2004 and continuing today. For each country, he had to find funding and interviewers willing to help. Thus, one should view Shih's project as a mega project that includes many individual projects. Today, Shih is continuing his piecemeal efforts to get more countries included (Shih 2012). As of August 2025, there are four hundred thirty-six interview transcripts on the website. Interviews have been conducted in sixty-three countries around the world. Japan was the first country to be focused on. The largest number of completed interviews, fifty, were conducted in Russia.

The local interview partners are mostly researchers conducting research on China or imparting knowledge about China. These partners help identify local China experts to be interviewed and implement the interviews. The China experts in the studied countries range from scholars, think tank experts, public intellectuals, and journalists to diplomats. The primary focus is on senior experts who produce knowledge about China through their work. Accordingly, most of these interviewees are scholars, but in some countries, other types of professionals may also be included. The assessment of who is to be interviewed is grounded in the local reality, and the outcomes depend on the willingness of the selected potential interviewees.

Seniority is a vital criterion, as the assumption is that we are racing against time to capture the life stories and intellectual journeys of the most senior China watchers in the studied countries before they pass away. The project hence also has the objective of preserving the local and global heritage of the Chinese studies discipline by interviewing, ideally, senior China experts in the world.

Although senior China experts or China watchers are the primary focus, sometimes, local partners will make compromises in terms of finding interviewees. For instance, in some countries, the development of Chinese knowledge production might be relatively more recent, and there may not be a significant number of senior experts. Hence, middle-career experts have been included, too (e.g., in Uzbekistan and Pakistan). There are also countries in which no real China expertise exists, but there are experts of other more general Asian disciplines (e.g., Tajikistan) or even other science fields (e.g., Guinea) who have dealt with China in their professional capacity.

Shih has a template of a list of questions that interviewers should adjust for their local conditions when conducting interviews. In general, these questions

cover educational background, origin of interest in learning about China, career development, self-perceived contributions, networks, and perceptions of bilateral relations between the studied country and China. Transcripts have been publicized in different languages on the project's website depending on the available resources for each local project. There are indeed clear variations of transcripts in terms of length, style, and languages due to the available resources and style of the transcribers. Some transcripts are not made public at the interviewees' request. If I felt that an existing transcript lacked certain information, I sometimes (re) contacted the interviewee to ask for further information, even if I was not the primary interviewer. Some local partners provided notes about their interview experience and results, and these notes are on the website. I consulted these notes during my analysis, too.

I also conducted separate interviews for this book when I felt that the existing information was insufficient (e.g., in Costa Rica and Zambia). For instance, I tried to collect new data to explore the situation of knowledge production about China in countries that Shih had not covered. Some of these interviews are kept anonymous at the wish of the interviewees. These new interviews were not oral history interviews. They were unstructured interviews. Unstructured interviews allowed me to adjust the conversation based on the interviewee's responses, exploring countries of which I have lacked knowledge of and where I needed experts to help me grasp the relevant China watching communities on the ground and potentially uncover unexpected insights. In some developing countries, for example, this kind of approach is better because China studies programs have not yet been developed. Although I did consider Shih's semi-structured interview questions when I conducted these interviews, I found some of his questions irrelevant for certain developing countries. Hence, an unstructured approach led to more meaningful conversations.

Similarly, I included some younger generations of experts to compensate for the lack of them in Shih's project (e.g., in Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Latvia, and Iran). Like Shih, I was not strict regarding the exact ages to decide who qualified as a senior or young scholar. A lot of judgments had to be made, taking each studied country's conditions into account. Because young generations were never Shih's focus, and neither are they mine in this book, I used unstructured interviews with young researchers (from PhD students to assistant professors) to cross-check if their views align with those of the senior experts in Shih's data. Interestingly, I found that when juxtaposed with current circumstances and the perspectives of younger scholars, one could unexpectedly observe similar challenges encountered in the field of Chinese studies or China watching from the past to the present. The politicization of knowledge production regarding China and the polarization among stakeholders are consistent features throughout history.

Because I did not conduct all the oral history interviews in Shih's project, it was not always straightforward for me to assess the quality of the oral history data across different countries. My partial involvement in data collection in some countries, while not being involved in most, allowed me to navigate between insider and outsider perspectives to provide an honest evaluation of these interviews. I believe that quality does vary from one country to another. In certain countries, I am confident that local partners made commendable efforts to select the clearest and most experienced experts available at the time for the interviews. However, in a limited number of countries, I believe that the absence of the most suitable local partners may have led to questionable interviewee selections. In other words, the positionality, networks, and relationships of local partners with local scholars could have influenced the choice of interviewees. Selection bias was indeed present in some of the countries in which oral history data was collected. Nevertheless, this selection bias allowed me to investigate the context in which the bias arose. Without specifying these countries, I would assert that this phenomenon typically occurred in countries where the political establishment of the elites is closely tied to the Chinese state. These countries tend not to be democracies. Local partners and interviewees may excessively demonstrate their close affiliation with the Chinese state, potentially producing perspectives that outsiders might perceive as those of a Sinophile and 'not critical enough,' as one anonymous observer whom I asked to help cross-check the data commented. I would argue that 'not being critical enough' is not a criterion for Shih's local partners to exclude any interviewees. In fact, the value of his data and why I used his data was exactly because his data covers a diversity of known China watchers in different countries, whether or not they are critical of China. In this way, I was able to learn about the context in which the China-watching field has developed in different countries. I could also use the data to test my hypothesis to see if it is true that experts increasingly prefer to show their distance from the Chinese state (and thus try to show that they are critical) with less 'sinological Chineseness' these days. I will elaborate on the concept of sinological Chineseness in Chapter three.

Another type of possible bias is that the interviewees, who are the most senior experts in their respective countries, may have withheld information that did not favor them or may influence the way in which they narrated their experiences during the interviews. Consequently, transcripts were examined critically and are presented with appropriate reflections and interpretations from my side to illuminate potential issues within the data. Additionally, I consulted some anonymous experts to cross-verify the data when I had questions. My positionality as Shih's former student and thus strictly observing our teacher-student relations according to Chinese norms certainly restricted the ways in which I have been willing to openly criticize the data. What I aim to convey to readers is that careful consideration has been applied in utilizing the data critically for the analysis.

Lastly, although interviews constitute the primary data source for this book, I have also incorporated existing literature, including academic publications, policy documents, newspapers, magazines, and podcast episodes, to gather information and enhance my analysis. Depending on the purposes of some sections of this book, I do not always use oral history data but rather these other sources to write up certain sub-chapters (e.g., the first section of Chapter eight on Indo-Pacific politics).

1.4 Structure of the book

1.4.1 *Three major parts*

This book is divided into three major related parts. The first part, ‘CHINA WATCHERS: THE AGENCY AND DIVERSITY,’ comprises Chapters two to five. In the first part, I discuss the diversity of knowledge producers of China in the world and the difficulty in finding satisfactory definitions and categories to conceptualize them. Although some traits may be common among certain individuals, variance and outliers do exist. I have not written this book to follow a clear structure of theory, hypothesis, and empirical testing. However, if any empirical social scientist is looking for traces of a theoretical or interpretative framework, as well as methodology and data to test the hypotheses in this book, they will find clearer evidence in the first part of this book. More evidently, after Chapter two’s description of the diversity of individuals in creating their own routes or being forced by conditions to undertake several intellectual journeys to understand China, Chapter three begins with an interpretative framework laid out by Chih-yu Shih to conceptualize different types of China watchers. The most relevant framework might look simple, but it is very pertinent to this book: the contrast between China watchers who exhibit extensive scientific Chineseness versus those who exhibit sinological Chineseness. China watchers with scientific Chineseness tend to see China as ‘the other’ that must be objectively studied and handled. Differently, China watchers with sinological Chineseness tend to value having a solid grasp of China, starting from understanding its language, culture, history, and society (Shih 2018a, 2018b) (see Chapter three for more information).

There is a hypothesis that China watchers tend to decide to show more of their scientific Chineseness regardless of their sinological Chineseness. China watchers have agency to adjust their different manifestations of Chineseness due to concerns of personal ideology, belief, career development, peer pressure, or other reasons. I test the hypothesis using cases of China watchers in Southeast Asia (Chapter three) and in Central Asia (Chapter four). Chapter five further gives examples of different individuals and institutions to show the diversity of examples that cannot

be bound by the rigid conceptual framework that I use here. In Chapter five, I also demonstrate that it is challenging to establish a normative position regarding whether sinological Chineseness or scientific Chineseness is better, as even experts are unable to reach a consensus on this matter.

The second part of this book, 'THE STRUCTURE WHERE CHINA WATCHERS OPERATE,' is composed of Chapters six, seven, and eight. The second part seeks to deepen the discussion that agents cannot act in a vacuum, even if they have their own agency. The context, structure, or political conditions in which they operate affect their work in producing knowledge about China. The openness of that structure for them to operate has changed over time. Chapter six looks at historical examples and paves the way for a discussion of contemporary developments in Chapters seven and eight. The politicalization and securitization of China knowledge is ultimately what I intend to bring up for discussion. To contextualize the contemporary issues, I spend time describing some relevant political and policy changes in recent years in various parts of the world. These descriptions might read like policy briefs, but the ultimate intention is to show how the production of knowledge about China is nowadays interlocked with some new political realities and knowledge realms (e.g., 'Indo-Pacific') and that China watchers may be restricted by these contextual changes in their own work.

The third and last part of this book, 'BACK TO TRANSNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION ABOUT CHINA,' comprises Chapters nine and ten. Although this book focuses a lot on the China that is the current-day People's Republic of China (PRC), it is undeniable that Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore have also been important sources of inspiration historically and in the contemporary era when it comes to alternative bases for imparting knowledge about China and for observing the PRC. Chapter nine particularly explores Taiwan as a place for China watching and for cultivating and hosting China watchers. I also discuss the Taiwan identity issue, which affects its development of Chinese studies and Taiwan studies. In light of the increasingly censored environment on the Chinese mainland and in Hong Kong, Chapter nine offers a timely discussion on alternative China watching.

Another focus of Chapter nine is the increasing interlocking of the knowledge realms of Taiwan, China, the Indo-Pacific, and Southeast Asia. Politics have driven the formation of these intersections. The key knowledge-producing nodes are certain think tanks, higher education institutions, and the media in Taiwan. The Ministry of Education has been the primary driver of educational reforms and allocation of resources to Southeast Asia-related fields, whereas the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, think tanks, and some research institutes have led the general development of the Indo-Pacific knowledge realm. Taiwan may have no choice but to be part of it in this irreversible trend. However, this exercise of bringing Taiwan further into the Indo-Pacific realm is challenging because Taiwan's international relations

and knowledge production are unable to move toward genuine decolonization. In this book, I propose that transnationalizing Taiwan studies might be a solution, although it cannot solve the entire problem. This is in line with the decolonial spirit in that it puts Taiwan in a much broader framework for analysis beyond binary thinking ('Taiwan is part of China' or 'Taiwan is not part of China').

In the final chapter, I propose that a similar approach, embracing the globalness of China, can also be implemented within Chinese studies. The context is how China can still be a knowledge co-producer of China on the world stage if there have reportedly been mounting challenges to accessing China. Even watching China from outside of China does not make all China watchers feel safe anymore because they fear the impacts of Chinese transnational repression. Chapter ten offers some ideas for coping strategies. I also stress that one solution is to recognize and re-acknowledge the globalness of knowledge production about China. China watching should reclaim its original global, transregional, transnational, and transcultural status. This would broaden the geographical pool of China watchers with whom we may interact and even collaborate to explore China. It is also in this vein that Chapters nine and ten constitute the third part of this book because both advocate for transnationalizing Taiwan studies and China studies.

1.4.2 Overview of the next nine chapters

Chapter two will give further examples of how knowledge about China is conditioned by a lot of political and social factors. The agency of China watchers is noteworthy. Where China watchers come from and how they are trained affect what they think the study of China and the narration about China should be like. When China watchers study and produce knowledge about China, the acts constitute efforts to (re)connect China watchers with China. Knowledge of China is produced through China watchers' (re)connecting efforts. In this vein, knowledge about China itself is epistemological.

Chapter three looks at Southeast Asian China watchers' endeavors and conditions in (re)connecting China, while Chapter four examines the situation in Central Asia. These two chapters, to some extent, are compared because they both regions are neighbors of China. But Southeast Asia has been considered to have, to various degrees, a more advanced level of capacity for studying China than Central Asia. This makes the comparison edifying.

Chapter five studies individuals whose careers have straddled academia, politics, and journalism in Indonesia and Denmark. As individuals cannot operate in a vacuum, we also look at non-Western institutions that have fostered the flow between research and politics, such as the Pakistan-China Institute in Islamabad and East Asian Institute in Singapore.

Chapter six looks at the general trends in the evolution of Chinese studies and China watching in different societies, and points to the pervasive problems of orientalism and politicalization. Chapter six notes that the post-Cold War period allowed a more open and conducive development of Chinese studies and China watching in many corners of the world, which de-politicalized and normalized Chinese studies. But in Chapter seven, we will see a return of politicalization in our contemporary era. We will examine a new form of appropriation of risk in relation to higher education cooperation and knowledge production about China on European, North American, and Japanese and Indian soil, and their securitizing measures in educational sectors.

Following that discussion, Chapter eight investigates the situation when China and Chinese scholars are excluded from the knowledge production about China. I use the example of the creation of the so-called Indo-Pacific politics by the USA, Australia, Japan, India, and other countries and the relevant knowledge production of it to show that China appears to be at the core of the matter, but the PRC government and Chinese scholars find themselves missing or excluded from the knowledge production process. Chapter eight also includes a comparative case of Human Rights Dialogues with China where Chinese actors are involved in knowledge production about China, but they are not necessarily able to achieve significant transformation of China's human rights practices. The identities and strategies of socially engaged scholars in this context will be examined.

Chapter nine specifically examines Taiwan as a location for observing China and for nurturing and accommodating those who observe China. Chapter ten concludes the book by returning to the broader issue of knowledge production about China. I advocate widening the geographical locations of China watchers whom we may interact with to understand China. Cross-fertilization of China studies with Global South studies might promise new intellectual potential, although it cannot replace China studies ultimately.

