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## SINOLOGY IN KAZAKHSTAN: PAST AND PRESENT

China is a strategic neighbor of Kazakhstan. Studying China is also crucial for Kazakhstan's scholarship. Sinology, a subdiscipline of Oriental Studies that comprehensively works on China, is a relatively new field in Kazakhstan. Sharing a common border with China and having different forms of relations with China throughout history, Kazakhstan has only recently created its school of Sinology. The reason was that, under the Soviet system, Kazakhstan had not had its institution working on Oriental studies.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the roots of Kazakhstan Sinology and analyze current developments in the school of Kazakhstan Sinology through a historical-analytical lens. The paper begins by introducing Sinology concepts and briefly describing Western and Chinese discussions on the concept of Sinology. Then, the historical evolution of Sinology in Soviet times unpacks the roots of Kazakhstan Sinology. The State of the Art of Sinology describes the latest developments in Kazakhstan, and in conclusion, the author proposes recommendations to advance Sinology studies in Kazakhstan.

The paper contends that by combining Soviet and Western scientific traditions with local knowledge, Kazakhstan has a strong chance of establishing its school of Sinology free of colonial legacy and Western-centric approach.

**Key words:** China, Oriental Studies, Sinology, Kazakhstan, Chinese studies.

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### Қазақстандағы қытайтану: өткені мен бүгіні

Қытай Қазақстанның стратегиялық көршісі. Қытайды оқу Қазақстан ғылымы үшін маңызды. Қытайды жан-жақты зерттейтін шығыстану ішіндегі синология Қазақстанда салыстырмалы түрде жаңа сала болып табылады. Қытаймен ортақ шекаралас және Қытаймен тарих бойы әртүрлі қарым-қатынаста болған Қазақстан жақында ғана өзінің синология мектебін құрды. Себебі, кеңестік жүйе кезінде Қазақстанда шығыстанумен айналысатын өз институты болмаған.

Бұл жұмыстың мақсаты – қазақстандық синологияның түп-тамырын зерделеу және Қазақстан синологиясы мектебіндегі қазіргі заман тарихын тарихи-аналитикалық тұрғыдан талдау. Мақала синология тұжырымдамаларымен таныстырудан және синология тұжырымдамасы бойынша батыстық және қытайлық талқылауларды қысқаша сипаттаудан басталады. Одан кейін Кеңес дәуіріндегі синологияның тарихи эволюциясы қазақстандық синологияның тамырын ашады. Кейін Қазақстанның синология саласындағы қазіргі даму жағдайын сипаттайды және қорытындысында автор Қазақстанда синология ғылымын ілгерілету бойынша ұсыныстарды ұсынады.

Мақалада кеңестік және батыстық ғылыми дәстүрлерді жергілікті біліммен үйлестіре отырып, Қазақстанның отаршылдық мұрадан және батыстық көзқарастан ада өзіндік синология мектебін құруға үлкен мүмкіндігі бар деп тұжырымдайды.

**Түйін сөздер:** Қытай, шығыстану, синология, Қазақстан, қытайтану.

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### Синология в Казахстане: прошлое и настоящее

Китай является стратегическим соседом Казахстана. Изучение Китая также имеет важное значение для казахстанской науки. Синология, субдисциплина востоковедения, всесторонне изучающая Китай, является относительно новой областью в Казахстане. Имея общую границу

с Китаем и имея разные формы отношений с Китаем на протяжении всей истории, Казахстан лишь недавно создал свою школу китаеведения. Причина заключалась в том, что при советской системе в Казахстане не было своего института востоковедения.

Целью данной статьи является изучение истоков казахстанского китаеведения и анализ текущего состояния школы казахстанского китаеведения через историко-аналитическую призму. Статья начинается с рассмотрения концепций китаеведения и краткого описания западных и китайских дискуссий о понимании китаеведения. Затем рассматривается историческая эволюция китаеведения в советское время, раскрываются корни казахстанского китаеведения. Современное состояние китаеведения описывает последние события в Казахстане, и в заключение автор предлагает рекомендации по развитию китаеведения в Казахстане.

В статье утверждается, что, сочетая советские и западные научные традиции с местными знаниями, Казахстан имеет все шансы на создание собственной школы китаеведения, свободной от колониального наследия и западноцентристского подхода.

**Ключевые слова:** Китай, востоковедение, синология, Казахстан, китаеведение.

## Introduction

China is a strategic neighbor of Kazakhstan. Studying China is also crucial for Kazakhstan's scholarship. Sinology, a subdiscipline of Oriental Studies that comprehensively works on China, is a relatively new field in Kazakhstan. The paper aims to scrutinize the roots of Kazakhstan Sinology and analyze the current developments in the school of Kazakhstan Sinology through the historical-analytical lens.

Sinology, according to the Western and Soviet disciplinary systems, is placed as part of Oriental Studies. Kazakhstan also sees Sinology as a subdiscipline of Oriental studies. Sharing a common border with China and having different forms of relations with China throughout history, Kazakhstan has only recently created its school of Sinology. The reason was that under the Soviet system, Kazakhstan had not had an institution working on Oriental studies. Other perspectives, such as history, philology, culture, and philosophy, were used to conduct Sinology and Oriental studies.

The independence of Kazakhstan and the subsequent formation of the education system in Kazakhstan coincided with the growing interest in China and Sinology. As a result, over the course of several years, Kazakhstan has organized its school of Oriental and Sinology studies. However, there is a lot of criticism about whether Kazakhstan managed to create a Kazakh school of Sinology (CAA Network, 2020; Zona. kz, 2019).

The paper first introduces the concepts of Sinology and briefly describes Western and Chinese discussions on the notion of Sinology. Then, the historical evolution of Sinology in the Soviet times unpacks the roots of Kazakhstan Sinology. The State of the Art of Sinology describes the latest developments in Sinology, and in conclusion, the

author proposes recommendations to advance Sinology studies in Kazakhstan.

The paper argues that by combining Soviet and Western scientific traditions with local knowledge, Kazakhstan has a strong chance of establishing its school of Sinology free of colonial legacy and Western-centric approach.

## Theoretical-Methodological Basis

The paper discusses Sinology studies in Kazakhstan through the Soviet notion of Sinology. By analyzing the historical evolution of Sinology, the author aims to demonstrate the challenges and prospects of Sinology. The author employs a historical-analytical viewpoint and a critical approach. The data on students provided by one of the departments of Oriental Studies in Kazakhstan is to demonstrate an interest in the field, not for information on student enrolment.

### *Conceptual Framework of Sinology*

According to the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, Sinology is a complex of sciences that studies the history, economics, politics, philosophy, language, literature, and culture of China. Sinology is a sub-field of Oriental studies, which traditionally focuses on China. In line with the debates over Said's Orientalism concepts, there has been extensive debate over the last decades about the meaning of the term Sinology.

The Soviet tradition of Oriental studies believes that Sinology not only acquires insight into Chinese civilization but also is an important tool of self-knowledge (Datsyshen, 2015). Soviet scholars believed that colonialism was of no concern to the Soviet Union. Therefore, Soviet Orientalism and, subsequently, Sinology, as a unique phenomenon, continued its legacy of comprehensive research on China, including its contemporary and classical studies. (Zakharov, 2017).

However, with the rise of postcolonial theories and concepts in Western discourse, the term Sinology has come under fire. During the 1990s, Sinologists in China itself were debating the conflicting images of China. If some were advocating that the colonial legacy of Orientalism is not related to Sinology, others were positioning Sinology as a product of this colonial legacy. They believe that Western Sinology knowledge about China is possessed by the West. In particular, scholars state that, following Said's concept, Sinology is part of Western cultural ideology in building the "other" for the "grand narrative" of Western modernity. While Sinology studies China, it does so by presenting an image of the "cultural Other" in which cultural processes in China are shown to be "temporally and spatially alienating" and rejecting China (Zhou, 2018).

In response to debates on the conceptual meaning of Sinology, a new term, Sinologism, was coined by Chinese scholars. Zhou (2004) proposes a new term, Sinologism, which is a conceptual category that criticizes issues in Sinological studies. His ideas were followed by Ming (2013), who proposed Sinologism as a cultural theory that goes beyond the concepts of Orientalism and postcolonialism. He believes Sinologism is not a product of Orientalism but a knowledge jointly undertaken by Chinese and Western scholars, and this goes in parallel with Said's notion of Orientalism (Ming, 2013). As a result, Chinese academics have coined the term Sinologism, which combines Sinology, Chinese cross-cultural knowledge, and China-West studies (Ming & Xian, 2018).

With an increasing interest in acquiring ongoing processes in China, the West differentiated classical Sinology from China studies, as seen in the Harvard University Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies model. China Studies refers to contemporary studies, and in comparison to Sinology, it works on "a real China", not on a China "constructed with dead texts" (Zhou, 2018).

The present study relies on Soviet Sinology, which separated its concepts from Said's notion of the Orient. Therefore, further Sinology is used in a classical sense as a subdiscipline of Oriental studies that focuses on the comprehensive study of China covering all historical periods.

#### *Evolution of Soviet Sinology*

Kazakhstan's Sinology is rooted in the foundations of Soviet and Imperial Russian Sinology. The Imperial Russian history of Chinese studies originates from the opening of its first Russian spiritual mission in China in 1711. The first courses for learning Chinese as a foreign language were provided by

Imperial Kazan University during 1837–1855 (Titarenko, 2013). From then on, Sinology was among the strategic foreign studies, while fundamental research on China made Russian Sinology one of the leading schools in Europe (Jacobs, 1990).

Soviet Sinology emerged during the 1920s–1930s when researchers incorporated the concepts of Marxism-Leninism into the development processes in China (Guleva, 2022). Soviet Sinology continued to be among the strategic research areas of foreign studies. In contrast to pre-Soviet sinology, which focused on in-depth source analysis, Soviet sinology was socialized and politicized. As a result, contemporary Sinology had two goals in terms of serving political objectives. Some scholars were tasked with supporting the political direction of its government, while others were interested in showing the imperfections of the Soviet system through the criticism of the Chinese government (Lukin, 2011). Ideologization and politicization of Sinology influenced all levels of research to vary degrees, depending on the specific circumstances of the ongoing political situation.

Regarding classical Sinology, the situation was different. In virtue of their remoteness in time and subject from the Soviet paradigms of the outside world, classical studies, including Sinology, enjoyed more freedom in their research. Classical Sinologists focused on Chinese history, philosophy, and language based on textual resources, which subsequently left a profound heritage in Sinology.

The development of Soviet Sinology was thus directly dependent on the political course of its leadership, which fluctuated dramatically throughout the Soviet years. In the early years of the independence of China, the Soviet Union left a huge imprint on the history of the development of China. Although the Soviets were struggling with the terrible consequences of WWII, in the international arena, the USSR established itself as a global actor. In line with the Soviet strategy of empowering the economic and social conditions of communist allies, the Soviet government initiated a massive transfer of technologies and knowledge to China. Between the 1950s and the 1960s, China was the largest recipient of Soviet assistance when the Soviets transferred 7.7% of their annual national income to China. In particular, scientific and technological cooperation in the form of aid was distributed in three major areas: 1) transfer of industrial technology through assistance in the construction of industrial projects; 2) development of Chinese capacity in science and technology through various forms of cooperation; and 3) communication between the academies of

sciences and other research institutions; assistance in adjusting Chinese technology colleges; and recruitment of a large number of Chinese students to study in the USSR. Such assistance was considered “the most systematic, complete, and effective effort to promote technology transfer in Chinese history” (Zhang et al., 2006).

Contemporary studies on Sinology during these times concentrated on the issues related to the activities of the Communist Party of China. Besides, the Soviet Sinologists believed that the core and methodological basis for the formation of Chinese civilization and spirituality was Chinese philosophy. In Moscow, a special group of researchers was established to research all Chinese theories regarding the Soviet Union (Bokshchanin, 2013). Simultaneously, in the 1960s, certain liberalizations in social sciences allowed for discussions of theoretical issues that were previously considered ideologically unacceptable (Pisarev, 2014). Chinese philosophy was also among the central topics of research (Titarenko, 2013).

The Institute of Chinese Studies existed in Moscow from 1956-1960. However, because Chinese authorities see Sinology as “the science of the colonialists” and the great Chinese people should not allow themselves to be “studied”, the Soviets accepted the Chinese appeal not to “interfere in the internal affairs of China” and closed the institute and allocated staff to the other institutions but without using China in their names (Delusin, 2018).

The deterioration of relations between China and the USSR in the mid-1960s led to a decrease in bilateral cooperation and an open confrontation between the two communist countries. As a result, all scientific cooperation was halted, Sino-Soviet relations became completely politicized in Soviet sinology, and China became one of the Soviet Union’s major adversaries. As expected, the political context of bilateral cooperation also influenced the development of scholarship. Until the 1990s, Sinology was available to a limited number of scholars, like a closed caste, where professional knowledge was valued (Delusin, 2018).

Nonetheless, despite being isolated from China for nearly three decades, Soviet Sinology had maintained its traditional focus on China, thanks to strong support and sufficient investments from the Soviet Central Committee. The Soviet research system, despite its ideological limitations, was secured by the state approach, which allowed for comprehensively investigating various aspects of the development of China both through universities and through the Academy of Sciences. The central science manage-

ment approach allowed scrutinizing every period of Chinese history, its culture, philosophy, linguistics, and other aspects, and the Soviet sinologists were enabled to further continue the tradition of fundamental research. As a result, in the late 1980s, Sinology was again considered among the strongest in world scholarship (Gabuyev, 2014).

Contemporary studies on China continued to be among the strategic areas, which is seen in the structure of the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies, where after 1956 restructure, there were six divisions, with only China and India having separate departments for country studies compared to the others, which were divided on a regional basis (Nisha, 1983).

Institutionally, the Soviet institutions focusing on China were the Institute of Oriental studies, the Institute of the Far East, and the Institute of Asia and Africa at the Moscow State University in Moscow, which concentrated major research both on classical Sinology and contemporary topics, along with Leningrad, which had its traditional branch working on classical Sinology. Regarding other Soviet republics in Central Asia, Tashkent used to be the only place where Chinese was taught at Tashkent State University.

#### *Sinology in Kazakhstan – State of the Art*

Relations with China were always among the strategic priorities in Kazakhstan’s foreign affairs. However, proper research and study of Chinese studies in Kazakhstan became available only after 1989. Although in Alma-Ata, during the 1940s, the University of Foreign Languages offered short courses in the Chinese language due to the call of the time, until 1984, Chinese language courses were not available in Kazakhstan (Khafizova, 2018).

Overall, during the Soviet times, Kazakhstan experienced a lack of Oriental studies research. At least three times, Kazakh scholars attempted to institutionalize Oriental studies centers in Kazakhstan, but in vain (Bustanov, 2015). Chinese studies, at that time, were researched within the Uighur sector of the Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography. The Uighur sector was focused on the issues related to the development of Xinjiang, along with the study of the history of the Uighur people (Karimova, 2016). Within Uighur studies, scholars were engaged in studying political developments in Xinjiang. Scholars had to monitor the internal politics of Xinjiang, including policies for minorities. Some scholars even had an opportunity to listen to radio broadcasts from Xinjiang in Chinese or Xinjiang languages and prepared operational materials for Moscow (CAA Network, 2020).

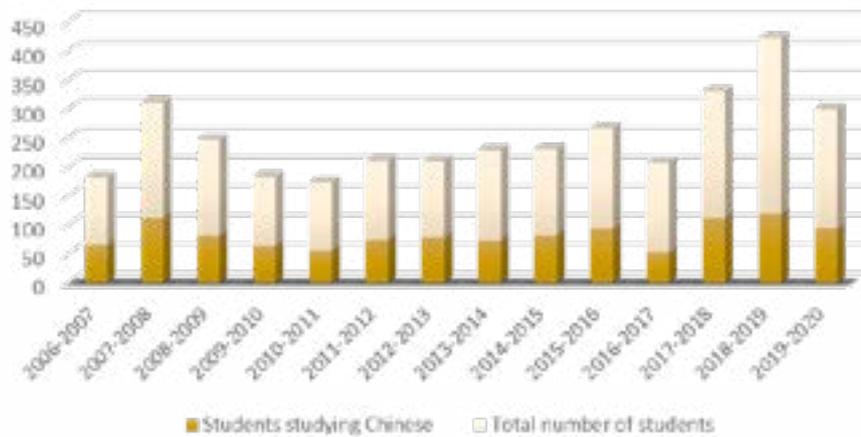
The Chinese language was first taught in Kazakhstan in 1984 when the Kazakh State University (now Al Farabi Kazakh National University) established the first department of Oriental philology. At that time, the department prepared specialists with knowledge of the Chinese language as philologists and historians, along with Arabic and Parsi languages. Later, in 1989, the Faculty of Oriental studies was established at Kazakh State University, which allowed the opening of the Department of Chinese Philology in 1991 (Derbisali, 2014).

With the opening of a department and courses in the Chinese language, the scholars faced several challenges due to a lack of textbooks and teaching materials. As Prof. Khafizova (2018) recalls, during the initial years, thanks to personal and institutional contacts, colleagues from Tashkent and Moscow sent textbooks and teaching materials. However, the copies were not enough to provide all students with the necessary materials. Only after establishing diplomatic contacts with China and opening the Chinese embassy in Kazakhstan, was the department of Chinese studies stocked with textbooks and additional materials from China.

At the outset, the department also faced a shortage of teaching staff. Before independence, Sinologists from Kazakhstan were educated in the Orientalology centers in Tashkent, Moscow, Leningrad,

and Kazan. After returning to Kazakhstan, they were mostly engaged in the work of research institutes or conducted courses on Chinese but not in university teaching. Therefore, in addition to the lack of teaching materials, the department was in urgent need of Chinese teachers. With the opening of borders, the situation has sharply changed. Ethnic Kazakhs from China obtained an opportunity to return to their historical homeland, and those who were educated as Chinese philologists in China were hired at the only Department of Chinese Philology. As a result, in 1993, out of 16 teachers, 13 were repatriated from China (Khafizova, 2018). The tradition of hiring Kazakh repatriates from China continues today, and the core of any Chinese philology department in Kazakhstan comprises Kazakh citizens born in China.

The establishment of political and business contacts with China, as well as China's growing globalization, increased demand for Chinese and Sinology. Accordingly, the departments and faculties of Chinese studies thrived throughout the country. In a short time, studying Chinese became the second most popular foreign language in the country. Figure 1. demonstrates the popularity of the Chinese language in comparison to six other Eastern languages in the Oriental studies faculty of one of the central universities in Kazakhstan.



**Figure 1** – Share of students who chose Chinese as their first foreign language at the Faculty of Oriental studies  
Source: Author

Nowadays, Sinology at universities is conducted within Oriental studies, Chinese philology, and translation studies. Together with teaching, academia conducts research. However, the majority of their research is focused on contemporary Chi-

nese studies. Topics related to the Belt and Road initiative and Chinese business in Kazakhstan attract more attention and funding than manuscripts. Similarly, students are interested in implementing their knowledge in business structures, while among

the major factors for choosing Chinese is perceived career prospects in business rather than academia. Besides universities, centers of Chinese languages and Confucian institutes provide Chinese language classes. At present, there are five Confucian institutes in Kazakhstan.

The growing popularity of the Chinese language does not affect the development of traditional Sinology in Kazakhstan. Classical Sinology, which needs a deep knowledge of Chinese, history, culture, and other specific qualifications, has become very rare in Kazakhstan. "Sinology in Kazakhstan survives despite rather than thanks to the state policy", commercial interest in investigating contemporary developments in China overwhelms fundamental research on classical Sinologist texts (Kaukenov, 2019).

Among the major reasons for this is the state funding system, which selects research topics based on the topicality of the theme rather than scientific interest. The classical studies in Sinology in Kazakhstan are conducted at the Institute of Oriental studies, the only state structure that works on classical Oriental studies. However, the structure and the funding system of the institute do not allow the deployment of classical Sinology to a greater extent. As a result, Sinology nowadays is considered a field that focuses on the contemporary dynamics and demands of China, excluding any interest in historical and cultural aspects of China.

## Conclusion

Given the growing global ambitions of China, the study and research of China demand

more sophisticated knowledge about China from a local perspective. Kazakhstan, being a direct neighbor of China, requires developing its understanding of processes in China. As a discipline that traditionally gathers scholars with proficient knowledge of Chinese, history, culture, and philosophy, Sinology is in great demand. However, the existing academic structure and support do not allow us to advance existing classical knowledge of China.

Universities possess good knowledge and an infrastructure base regarding Chinese studies, along with a wide range of opportunities for exchange with China. In addition, market demand and geopolitical interest boosted the support for contemporary studies of China. In line with the support of contemporary topics, it is advised to add more specific knowledge of China to the mix. Interdisciplinary research, which is also an emerging trend in Kazakhstan, requires more research on the development aspects of China.

Kazakhstan Sinologists are in high demand to create the Kazakhstan School of Sinology. While China attempts to transform the existing global structure and adjust IR theories that explain the processes in China and Western scholars shift towards non-Western-centric theoretical frameworks in response, Kazakhstan has the potential to find its niche in this process. By combining Soviet and Western traditions, Kazakhstan scholars could develop a relatively new perspective on Chinese studies that is free from any colonial legacy and based on good neighborhood policy.

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