

Chinese Studies in the UK: an Interview with Professor Henrietta Harrison

Henrietta Harrison (University of Oxford)

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Abstract:

Professor Henrietta Harrison of Oxford talks about the structure of Chinese Studies courses in the UK, their relationship with Modern Languages departments, and the admissions requirements for undergraduate courses in Chinese Studies in the UK. She provides a brief overview of the historical developments of modern Chinese Studies in Oxford. She also discusses the challenges faced by Chinese Studies BA courses in the era of the pandemic.

Jane Qian Liu (hence forth JQL): Please allow me to introduce this project a little bit: It is part of a major grant sponsored by Professor Ji Jin of Suzhou University. The grant's name is "The Dissemination of Sinology Overseas". The sub-project that I participate in is sponsored by Professor Yao Jianbin of Beijing Normal University in Zhuhai. He is Head of the School of Chinese Language and Literature there. I'm going to interview a few Sinologists, translators and editor of Chinese Studies books. You are my first interviewee. Thank you very much for accepting my interview!

I am wondering if you could talk a little bit about the features of Sinology in the UK, because you've been in both the UK Sinological field and the US one. What, do you think, are the main features of UK Sinology?

Henrietta Harrison (henceforth HH): In the UK we have Chinese Studies departments for undergraduates, and because of the nature of the undergraduate education system where students apply to university to study a certain subject, we have more students doing majors in Chinese and studying Chinese as the core of their degree. Whereas when I taught in the US there were huge numbers of students taking Chinese courses, but rather few students doing Chinese or East Asian Languages and Civilizations as their major.

JQL: That actually links to my next question. The majors of Chinese Studies are arranged very differently across the universities in the UK. For instance, at Warwick, Chinese is just one minor or subsidiary that students can select.

HH: Yes, but there were a number of universities in the UK which do have

majors in Chinese. So there's a core group of universities that have a tradition of Chinese studies majors and significant Chinese departments: Oxford, Cambridge, SOAS, Leeds, Durham, Edinburgh, Sheffield, Westminster, and, more recently, Nottingham and several other growing departments... Those are the places that have this tradition and then of course there were other places, like Warwick, which have some Chinese on offer or Chinese as part of other things and that's a slightly different category.

JQL: So I've also noticed that in some universities Chinese studies come under Modern Languages. I didn't realize that before, until I went to Warwick...

HH: But that makes sense because Chinese is a modern language, isn't it?

JQL: Yes, but then traditionally, Modern Languages refer to modern European languages, doesn't it?

HH: Sort of. But it shouldn't really be, should it? Logically, all modern languages should be considered as modern languages.

JQL: That's true. That was Eurocentrism.

HH: Exactly, it was Eurocentrism.

JQL: So do you think it's better for Chinese studies to be under Modern Languages? Or is it better to be under, say, Area Studies?

HH: Well, there aren't usually undergraduate degrees in area studies. So once you're in area studies, you're talking about masters programs. I don't know how they were organized before, but basically traditionally, most Chinese departments in the UK have been in modern language departments. I think. In Oxford it is in Oriental Studies, but not many universities have a faculty of Oriental Studies, because that's a very odd 18th-century idea.

JQL: I see. That's really interesting. So could you talk a little bit about the course of Chinese Studies in undergraduate studies in Oxford?

HH: So our course is very much what we call "front loaded". The students do a lot of Chinese language in the first year: both modern and classical Chinese. They do this in the first year even though some of our students are coming to us with no background in Chinese at all.

JQL: Really?

HH: Did you not know that? (laugh)

JQL: I thought you only admit students with background in Chinese... So how do they get admitted?

HH: So we don't admit native speakers. The Chinese course is designed for learners of Chinese, so some of them will have done GCSE Chinese. But we don't want to only admit people from the few schools which teach Chinese. So some of

our students will have self studied a little and some will have done none at all. And they arrive (JQL: That's really interesting!) And then they learn classical Chinese from scratch in the first year.

JQL: That really surprised me because I thought when you do admissions, the Chinese level would be one of the entry requirements.

HH: No, the Chinese level, that's not one of the entry requirements. The program is designed for complete beginners.

JQL: So what would be the expectations of the qualities of the students if Chinese level is not one of those?

HH: They will be very diligent and hardworking because it takes a lot of work to learn Chinese, doesn't it? And that they will be intelligent and interested.

So we do expect them to have done reading on their own. But Chinese is taught here and I think everywhere in the UK as a subject that students start at university, because only a very small number of schools teach Chinese. There are schools that teach Chinese but they are disproportionately private schools. We don't want to limit ourselves to only taking students from this relatively small group of private schools. In fact, we definitely don't want to only take students from private schools. The vast majority of students in the UK attend state schools. And obviously Oxford should make its opportunities open to them all.

JQL: Right. That makes very good sense. So is this situation the same among Chinese and other languages that students learn from school?

HH: No. Obviously there are several languages which many British students study in school. So for example Spanish is the most popular language in British schools, and then, I think, French. Students who want to study Spanish or French will be expected to come to university with an A-level in that language. But it is the same with other languages that people don't study at school. So Russian or Arabic, or any kind of language that you wouldn't do at school, or even ancient Greek and Latin nowadays. Those are subjects that you start at university.

JQL: So why do these prospective undergraduate students choose Chinese studies? Do you think?

HH: A whole variety of reasons, I remember a nice girl who was studying Chinese at Leeds when I taught there. And she'd been told as a small child that every fourth child in the world was Chinese. She was the fourth child of her parents, so she thought herself as Chinese. Some of young people have become interested in China and Chinese: they visited museums, they've been inspired by looking at Chinese objects. They've read books about China. Sometimes they've traveled to China, maybe they had relative who worked in China.

JQL: That's really good to know. I think now I'm going to bring back the question of Sinology in Oxford, because you did your undergraduate in Oxford, didn't you?

HH: I studied classics and I did it in Cambridge.

JQL: Ah (laugh), I actually did double check, but I did not find this information.... But can you talk a little bit about your memory or your past experience of Chinese Studies in Oxford?

HH: I did my DPhil here in Chinese. (JQL: yes I guess that's what I meant.) I'm not sure it has changed very much, actually. The program is very much the same. Professor Dudbridge very sadly died, he was, you know, such a big feature of the Chinese department for so many years. And he and Mr. Kan set up the... in fact, if you really want to know about Chinese studies in the UK you should talk to Mr. Kan, Mr. Kan Shio-yun, who is our senior language lecture (JQL: He is still teaching here?) He's still teaching here. And he has spent his whole life promoting Chinese in the UK.

JQL: Right. Did he establish Chinese studies here?

HH: No, that dates back to the 19th century, but he established an effective modern language program. Because early Chinese studies at Oxford was only classical. If you think about it in the Cultural Revolution, it wasn't possible for Western students to go to China. David Helliwell, our librarian, used to tell a story of how when he was a student of Chinese at Durham, they asked for courses to study modern Chinese and how to speak it. When they asked the university "Please can we have courses in speaking modern Chinese", the response was "Well, who do you want to speak to?" Obviously there were some very left-wing British people who went to China in that period, but there were very, very few. So then it was after the Cultural Revolution that you get these courses in modern Chinese. So Chinese when it was first taught here at Oxford was all classical.

JQL: Since the Cultural Revolution, there were modern Chinese courses as well.

HH: So when Mr. Kan and Professor Dudbridge, Glenn Dudbridge, arrived, they really got the modern Chinese language program going. There must have been some modern Chinese before that. But they were the people who really established a vibrant modern Chinese language program here.

JQL: Amazing. I never met him before.

HH: You must have met Mr. Kan, you would recognize him. You would. He would be much the best person for you to interview and he'd like to be interviewed because it's his life's work.

JQL: Yes, I'll do that!

JQL: So my last question is that some people think in some UK universities where Chinese Studies used to be a very strong discipline, Chinese studies is disappearing. What do you think of it?

HH: I think that's true. I think there's been a massive drop in applicants the last two years, because it's not possible to do the year abroad. So, obviously, no one wants to do an undergraduate degree if they can't go to China... Our degrees all have a compulsory year abroad (JQL: And students really like it?) It's absolutely crucial to why students are doing the course. And moreover, no one wants to do an online year abroad. So many students during Covid had to do their year abroad sitting at home in their bedrooms online. That was just the worst thing: you're supposed to be in a foreign country, having a wonderful time learning lots about the foreign country. And you're sitting in your bedroom at home. So it was just a disaster. So applications just collapsed. And I think once the year abroad recovers... but at the moment we don't know when China will reopen for short term language students. So it's very difficult. We were lucky to be able to send our students to Taiwan, but lots of other universities haven't been able to arrange that.

JQL: I am aware that you are about to start your class very soon. I'm going to end my interview here. Thank you so much.

HH: Not at all!

Author Profiles:

Henrietta Harrison is Professor of Chinese History at the University of Oxford. She is also Stanley Ho Tutorial Fellow of Pembroke College. Her research interests lie in what ordinary people's lives have been like in China from the Qing Dynasty until today. Her research has included the 1911 revolution, nationalism, Confucianism in the twentieth-century, Catholicism, interactions between China and Europe, and above all the history of Shanxi province. She has worked across different periods, writing two books about the early twentieth century, and two that go back to the eighteenth century. Her current research is on experiences of the 1949 revolution in China. Her latest monograph is *The Perils of Interpreting: The Extraordinary Lives of Two Translators between Qing China and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

Jane Qian Liu is Associate Professor of Translation and Chinese Studies at the University of Warwick. She completed her DPhil degree in Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford, and taught four years at Beijing Normal University. She also

taught modern and contemporary Chinese literature at the University of British Columbia before joining Warwick. She has published in English and in Chinese on modern Chinese literature, translation studies, and comparative literature, including *Transcultural Lyricism: Translation, Intertextuality, and the Rise of Emotion in Modern Chinese Love Fiction, 1899-1925* (Brill, 2017), and “The Making of Transcultural Lyricism in Su Manshu’s Fiction Writing” (*Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 2016).