

*School of Arts and Humanities*

*Sinology, Sinologism, and New Sinology*

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**Citation:**

Gu, M. D., and X. Zhou. 2018. "Sinology, sinologism, and new sinology." *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 49(1): 1-6, doi: 10.1080/10971467.2018.1534494

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To cite this article: Ming Dong Gu & Xian Zhou (2018) Sinology, Sinologism, and New Sinology, Contemporary Chinese Thought, 49:1, 1-6, DOI: [10.1080/10971467.2018.1534494](https://doi.org/10.1080/10971467.2018.1534494)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10971467.2018.1534494>



Published online: 28 Mar 2019.



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### ABSTRACT

Sinologism 汉学主义 is a recent cultural theory that focuses on Sinology, China–West studies, and cross-cultural knowledge production. Since its proposition at the turn of the 21st century, it has aroused substantial interest and given rise to discussions and debates both in and outside China. The special issue has selected seven articles in full or excerpted form to offer an initial introduction to the topic.

Sinologism 汉学主义 is a cultural theory that focuses on Sinology, China–West studies, and cross-cultural knowledge production. It is a theory proposed mainly by Chinese scholars in China and abroad. As a recent coinage that has yet to be defined and accepted into a dictionary, the term first appeared around late 1990s. In 1998, two scholars, Kam Louie and Adrian Hsia, used the term around the same time, though they had rather different intentions. While the former considers “Sinology” an obsolete and inexact term for China studies that should be replaced by Sinologism, the latter, inspired by Edward Said’s Orientalism, used the term as a branch of Orientalism in China studies.<sup>1</sup> In 2004, Zhou Ning, a scholar in Xiamen University, published an article, “Sinology or Sinologism,” that employed Said’s Orientalism and other Western theories of ideological criticism and proposed the notion of Sinologism as a conceptual category for critiquing issues and problems in Sinological studies.<sup>2</sup> Then the idea went into dormancy until 2010, when Ming Dong Gu published three articles with Sinologism as their theme and focus in three leading Chinese journals. Acknowledging initial indebtedness to Orientalism and postcolonialism, Gu reconceives Sinologism as a cultural theory that should go beyond the political and ideological orientations of Orientalism and postcolonialism. This new conception rekindled a strong interest in the concept and led to the publication of a dozen articles in various Chinese journals, which argue for or against proposing Sinologism. At the end of 2012, Routledge Press published *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism* with a preface by J. Hillis Miller (Chinese translation, 2015). It constructs ideas related to the topic into a cultural theory of self-conscious reflection and critique on Sinology, China–West studies, and cross-cultural knowledge production. It marked the establishment of Sinologism as a coherent topic for theoretical and critical discussions and debates in Chinese academia.

As a term yet to be defined, “Sinologism” has multiple meanings and dimensions. It is, however, most directly related to Sinology, New Sinology, Sinophone studies in

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conception, epistemology, methodology, and scope of coverage, despite their wide-ranging differences. A summary of its major ideas embraces the following aspects: (1) a knowledge system that focuses on the study of China and its civilizations; (2) a knowledge processing system controlled by certain ideologies related to China; (3) the totality of all the problems in the production of knowledge on China; (4) a theory of critique on problems in Sinological studies; (5) an intellectual product jointly created by intellectuals across the world; (6) alienated knowledge and scholarship in China–West studies; (7) an intellectual ideology born of the transformation of epistemology and methodology in China–West studies; and (8) a cultural theory of self-conscious reflection that calls for as scientific, objective, and fair knowledge production as possible. The eight categories can be classified into two large groups: (1) Sinologism as a totality of problems in China studies and (2) Sinologism as a theory of critical reflections on cross-cultural studies. Simply put, while the former broadly covers Western misrepresentations of China and the East, the latter refers to a critical theory that challenges the misrepresentations and seeks to reveal the inner logic behind them and rethink our approaches to scholarship and knowledge production in China studies and cross-cultural studies. As a new critical theory, Sinologism has undergone two major phases of development: (1) the early period (1998–2010), in which ideas and growth were heavily influenced by Orientalism and postcolonialism with its focuses on political and ideological critique of various problems in Sinological and China–West studies; and (2) the recent phase (2010–present), in which it seeks to go beyond Orientalist and postcolonial influence by overcoming the limitations such as the East–West paradigm of binary opposition, and excessive concerns with politics and ideology; reflects on the inner logic underlying the epistemology and methodology of China–West studies; and emphasizes the necessity of exposing the cultural unconscious at work in scholarly activities and recognizing the relative neutrality of scholarship and the demarcation between politics and scholarship.

In the most recent phase of development, Sinologism shares much affinity with New Sinology, an academic orientation and intellectual disposition advocated by some scholars working at the Australian Center on China in the World, among whom the most vocal and innovative proponent is Geremie R. Barmé. Interestingly, the proposal of New Sinology was first made in 2004, the same year as Zhou Ning’s proposal of Sinologism as a critical category. In Barmé’s manifesto-like article, New Sinology is described as a “robust engagement with modern China and indeed with the Sinophone world in all of its complexity,” with a strong emphasis on “scholastic underpinnings in both classical and modern language and studies,” and an enthusiastic encouragement for “an ecumenical attitude in relation to a rich variety of approaches and disciplines.”<sup>3</sup> Although Sinologism has a somewhat different orientation from New Sinology, we can find several common grounds. First and foremost, both Sinologism and New Sinology were inspired and influenced by Said’s Orientalism. Barmé acknowledges his indebtedness to his teacher Simon Leys’s scathing critique of Orientalism and Said’s criticism of the abuse of Sinology. Second, like proponents of Sinologism, Barmé is “aware of the unsettling history and much-discussed limitations of area studies in post-WWII Anglophone academic institutions, and in particular the history of ‘Oriental Studies.’” Third, like Sinologism, “‘New Sinology’ supports an approach that is “alert to the complex—and often disturbing

(as well as disturbatory)—issues at the heart of much of what is understood today by the term ‘Sinology.’” Fourth, like Sinologism, New Sinology emphasizes the shared sense of common humanity and opposes any parochial view on China studies. Last but not least, like Sinologism, it highly values the traditional mode of intellectual inquiry exemplified by *kaozheng* scholarship, and encourages new and innovative approaches to China studies. While Sinologism shares with New Sinology much common ground, it differs from the latter in a few ways, one of which is to argue for a broader scope that goes beyond China studies and Sinophone studies to include cross-cultural studies. A distinctive feature in the discourse of Sinologism emphasizes a theoretical orientation that does not reject postmodern theories, a focused interest in in-depth inquiries into the inner logic of the problems underlying Western and non-Western knowledge on China, a proposal for the need to bring STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) issues into Sinological and cross-cultural studies, and a call for as fair, objective, and neutral approaches to scholarship as possible. In many ways, the discourses on Sinologism and New Sinology mutually enrich and complement each other.

Because of its overtly critical spirit, Sinologism has since 2010 aroused heated discussions and debates among Chinese and Western thinkers and scholars. In the West, there have so far appeared nearly a dozen discussion articles and reviews (*Journal of Asian Studies*, *Journal of Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, *China Quarterly*, *Chinese Literature Today*, *Book News*, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, *Philosophy East and West* [two articles], *Asiatische Studien–Études Asiatiques*, and *Postcolonial Studies*).<sup>4</sup> In China, it has become the focal point for one international symposium (held in Nanjing University, 2010), three forums of discussions in three journals—*Kuawenhua duihua* (Cross-Cultural Dialogue), *Fujian luntan* (Fujian Tribune), and *Zhejiang gongshang daxue xuebao* (Journal of Zhejiang University of Technology and Commerce)—and numerous articles in journals.<sup>5</sup> A few dozen Chinese and international scholars have participated in the discussion and critique of Sinologism. Among the Chinese scholars, three views have been expressed: (1) To propose the theory of Sinologism is both meaningful and valuable and the efforts should be commended and encouraged. (2) Although it is meaningful and significant to posit the notion of Sinologism, the efforts at conception have problems, which should be challenged and critiqued so as to improve it. (3) The idea of Sinologism is a duplication of Orientalism, and since there are already mature theories of postcolonialism, there is no point in proposing a new and uncreative theory. Moreover, the critics state that as the criticisms of Orientalism and postcolonialism have their own drawbacks and limitations, to duplicate the problem-laden theories will entail fundamental problems that cannot be overcome. The enthusiastic discussions and heated debates over Sinologism have testified to the necessity of exploring the theory in a more deep-going way. For this purpose, China Social Science Press recently published the book *Hanxue zhuyi lunzheng jicui* (*A Comprehensive Collection of Discussions and Debates on Sinologism*) (2017). It gathers all the Chinese review essays, critical articles, and assessments available up to the beginning of 2017, with an appendix that lists foreign reviews, articles, and commentaries on Sinologism in international journals.

To present a picture of the discussions and debates and to encourage more participation, we edit this issue of *Contemporary Chinese Thought*. The special issue consists of

articles selected from the most recent book. As there are numerous articles and reviews, we decided to select seven articles most directly relevant to the purpose of this issue. Since Ning Zhou was the first to propose the idea of Sinologism in China, the selected first article is his “‘Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge.” This article opens with a question on the nature and function of Sinological studies and expresses doubt about the legitimacy of Sinology as a pure and objective branch of learning. After briefly reviewing the rise of Sinology as Western knowledge of China, it conducts a critical analysis of its major premises, orientations, and methodologies. Subjecting them to a scrutiny in terms of postmodern and postcolonial theories of knowledge production, it draws a conclusion that Sinology differs from Oriental studies only in degree, but not in kind. In the author’s view, Sinology comes more closely to a narrative, a type of discourse, which produces knowledge of China not entirely on objective reality, but with cultural and ideological imaginations.

The second article is Yunlong Zhou’s “‘Sinologism,’ or Anxiety of the Thinking Subject.” This article situates the rise of Sinologism within the larger context of cultural theory and the intellectual uneasiness experienced by many Chinese intelligentsia caught in the tide of theoretical turn. By examining how Said’s theory of Orientalism and post-colonialism traveled to China and what problems the “traveling theory” aroused in the field of China studies, it views the rise of Sinologism as a response to the anxieties of cultural consciousness experienced by scholars of Sinological and China studies as a result of the confrontation between Chinese and Western academic discourses. It also examines what contributions the theory of Sinologism has made to the urgent need for an indigenous conceptual methodology for China studies free from constraints of ideology and political agendas. While affirming the insights of Sinologism, it regrets the heavy dose of Western theory in the construction of Sinologism, which unwittingly produces a sense of irony in critiquing Western misrepresentation of China.

Among the scholars who have discussed Sinologism, Xifang Zhao has examined it on several occasions and published two articles. We have selected his “A Critical Review of ‘Sinologism’” as the third article. This article reviews the theory of Sinologism as proposed by Ning Zhou and Ming Dong Gu and critically examines its similarities to and differences from Said’s Orientalism and postcolonialism. In his view, the publication of Gu’s *Sinologism* marks the preliminary establishment of Sinologism as a theoretical discourse, and the theory of Sinologism, instead of borrowing directly from Orientalism, advances the concept of “cultural unconscious” as a core idea to replace political and ideological critique. It applauds such a move as more meaningful and significant than simply borrowing ideas and methodologies from Orientalism and postcolonial theory. While endorsing the innovative contributions made by the proponents of Sinologism, it also identifies some problems in the theory and suggests possible directions in which Sinologism may further develop in the future.

The fourth article is chosen with the aim to show the major difference between Orientalism and Sinologism. For this purpose, we have selected from the discussion forum in *China Book Review* “Sinologism: A New Critical Perspective,” co-authored by Xiaoming Chen and Ziqiang Gong. It is a detailed review of *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism*, and focuses in particular on the conceptual core of Sinologism, “cultural unconscious.” In their opinion, the cultural unconscious is a

concept of cultural criticism, which is not merely intended to alert people to the phenomena of Sinologism, nor is it limited to the purpose of exposing the inherent, hidden logic of Sinologism. It goes a step further by cautioning people to be on guard against various snares of Sinologism, to treat de-Sinologization as a major focal point in China studies, and to make the necessary changes to existing paradigms in Sinological studies. Thus, they believe, the strength of the book does not lie in creating a cultural theory, but in constructing a critical theory of self-conscious reflection.

Xiping Zhang is the most vocal critic of the theory of Sinologism. Apart from voicing his opposition to Sinologism, he has written two long articles to explain his position. We have selected his most recent one as the fifth article. “A Critical Analysis of ‘Sinologism’” expresses a strong discontent with Sinologism and argues that its rise is the result of an uncritical application of Said’s Orientalism and postcolonial theory to Sinology, and its proponents have committed a grave error in treating Sinology as a discourse of ideology full of subjective imaginations, to the neglect of the fact that Sinology is a branch of objective scholarship. After reviewing the evolution of the concept of Sinology in history, it critically analyzes the major ideas of Sinologism in relation to Orientalism and postmodernism and draws the conclusion that the proponents of Sinologism are unaware of the inherent problems in Said’s theory and postmodern theory, have inadequate knowledge of Sinological history, and oversimplified the complex issues in Sinological studies.

The sixth article is from a proponent of Sinologism. “The Theoretical Debate on ‘Sinologism’: A Rejoinder to Mr. Zhang Xiping” is a direct response to Zhang Xiping’s criticism in particular and to the overall critique in general. With a succinct account of what Sinologism is, it provides detailed answers to the questions: Is the conceptual basis of Sinologism that of postmodernism? Is its paradigm based on the binary opposition of Orientalism? Have the proponents of Sinologism self-consciously reflected on the limitations of Orientalism? What exactly is the theoretical basis of Sinologism? What paradigm should Sinology and China knowledge production follow? By offering answers to these questions brought up by the critics, it attempts to clarify the relationship between Sinologism on the one hand and Orientalism, postcolonialism, deconstruction, New Historicism, postmodernism, and ideological theory on the other, and to rethink the issues of paradigms for Sinological studies, China–West studies, and cross-cultural studies.

It is necessary to examine Sinologism from a perspective that goes beyond pros and cons. The seventh and last article, “The Problems of Sinologism and Strategies to Cope with Them,” serves this purpose. It acknowledges the fact that Sinologism as a new cultural theory has aroused controversies and questions with regard to its nature, function, epistemology, and methodology. Situating the controversy within the larger context of geopolitical and economic rebalance of power in the globalized world, it seeks to provide a few strategies to tackle the problems arising from problematic production of China knowledge on the one hand and to rethink the approaches to cross-cultural research and knowledge production on the other. By analyzing a case of misinterpretation of Chinese art, it shows how the indiscriminate use of Western theory makes it possible for scholars to misrepresent China both intentionally and unintentionally. The article highlights the importance of self-conscious reflections on epistemology and methodology in China studies, the need to be on guard against conscious and



unconscious political ideology, and the difficulty in effecting a “paradigm shift” in Sinological research. In conclusion, it calls on scholars to treat Sinologism as both a local and a global concept, to enter the mind and culture of the Other by means of intersubjectivity, and to bring about a fusion of horizons between the self and the Other in the process of academic research so as to go beyond the local horizon of Sinological studies and enter a global horizon of cross-cultural studies.

The special issue only presents a small portion of discourses on Sinologism. Because of space constraints, we are compelled to select articles for their suitable length, relevance to discussion and debate, and potential to stimulate further interest. Even with the selections, we were unable to use all the selected articles in full but had to provide some excerpted versions. The editors are fully aware of the limitation in scope that the selected articles cover, and only intend to provide a meaningful introduction of Sinologism as a cultural theory. Right now, scholars both in and outside China have repeatedly called for a paradigm shift in and innovative approaches to China studies. We sincerely hope that this special issue will stimulate further discussions and debates on the state of the field in Sinology and make some positive contributions to New Sinology, Sinophone studies, China–West studies, and cross-cultural studies. When Sinology is cleansed of Sinologistic limitations and develops in the direction indicated by the cultural theory of Sinologism, there may appear a kind of New Sinology that appeals to both traditional Sinologists and postmodern China specialists.

## Notes

1. See Bob Hodge and Kam Louie, *The Politics of Chinese Language and Culture: The Art of Reading Dragons* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 12–13; Adrian Hsia, *Chinesia: The European Construction of China in the Literature of the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1998), p. 7.
2. Zhou Ning, “Hanxue huo Hanxue zhuyi” (“Sinology or Sinologism”), *Xiamen daxue xuebao* (*Journal of Xiamen University*) no. 1 (2004): 5–13.
3. Geremie R. Barmé, “Towards a New Sinology,” the *Chinese Studies Association of Australia Newsletter* no. 31 (May 2005): 4–9.
4. For detailed information about reviews and discussions of Sinologism in international journals, please see the Appendix at the end of this issue.
5. For detailed information, see *Hanxue zhuyi lunzheng jicui* 《“汉学主义”论争集萃》 (*A Comprehensive Collection of Discussions and Debates on Sinologism*) (Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2017). The most recent study is an article by Guo Minghao, “On the Dialectical Relationship Between Sinologism and Orientalism,” *Kuawenhua duihua* (*Cross-Cultural Dialogue*) 37 (September 2017).