

Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation and China: A Paradigm of Strengthening Cultural Ties



Communication between East and West throughout history has not always been easy. During antiquity and the Middle Ages, distance was an obstacle to contacts and interaction between the two worlds. Thus, the two ancient civilizations present many differences, mainly in terms of political and social structures as well as human behaviors. It is noteworthy, however, that philosophical thought developed in parallel in ancient Greece and China.

The conquests of Alexander the Great brought the two civilizations closer. However, while fragments of antiquities and remains from the Hellenistic era show signs of osmosis, the two worlds continued to follow parallel but largely independent paths over the centuries.

In the following centuries, the situation in Central Asia did not favor communication between East and West. Huns, Turks and Mongols, brought down the Western Roman Empire and forced Byzantium and China to entrench themselves defensively, while the dominance of the Arabs further south also did not facilitate direct communication between Europe and China.

During the European Middle Ages, merchants and travelers like Marco Polo returned from the Far East with information about a great civilization, while the overland Silk Road indirectly connected the two worlds through trade.

While the European Renaissance was in full swing, Chinese literature and arts under the Qing Dynasty also flourished, but in the early nineteenth century, China

entered a period of political, economic and social decline. It was the period of European expansion of power and colonialism. The “Opium War” left deep wounds on the Chinese, which have not yet fully healed, while the wars with Japan that followed inflicted new collective wounds.

With the end of World War II, the People's Republic of China emerged, which, after a period of internal reorganization, developed rapidly, having now reached the economic level of the United States of America.

Today, the great geopolitical footprint of modern China in a world that is getting smaller, has a catalytic effect on global diplomacy, trade and economy. Creative cooperation can be greatly enhanced through better knowledge and understanding of the historical and cultural identities in the East and the West. This need is being met by cultural and educational organizations in America, China and Europe.

The Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation and China

The Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation, among its main statutory objectives, includes the promotion, at the Greek and international level, of Greek culture in general, and particularly of Greek letters and historical and maritime research.

In the direction of promoting & highlighting the Greek language, culture and historical knowledge, the Foundation invests in Western Europe with the creation and support of the “Marilena Laskaridis” Chair of Modern Greek Studies at the University of Amsterdam and with other educational and cultural initiatives in Europe and America. In this same context, it is the Foundation’s ambition to strengthen Greek Studies in China. Thus, since 2015, the Foundation has also initiated contacts with Chinese educational and cultural institutions, which have led to initiatives and activity that bring Greece and China closer in the field of culture.

Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation and Tsinghua University

In October 2015 the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation and the Research Center for China-EU Relations of the School of Social Sciences of Tsinghua University took a decisive first step towards strengthening East-West understanding at the international level.

Together they launched an intercultural program, sponsored by the Foundation, whose purpose is to support and promote Classical and Modern Greek Studies

through academic research and exchanges of university professors and students from the two countries.



This collaboration was inaugurated on September 25, 2016, at the Tsinghua University Library, where the Foundation presented a book exhibition entitled “Greek Language: The Roots of European Civilization”. Until the end of 2016, rare editions belonging to the foundation’s library were exhibited, which were printed between 1534 and 1850. They represented a wide range of topics related to the Greek language: grammar, syntax, phonetics, dialects, the history of the language, as well as methods for learning ancient, Byzantine and modern Greek, as a mother tongue and as a foreign language.

On the occasion of the inauguration event, a seminar was held at the University on the topic of “Greek Language: Guide to Western Thought” with a keynote speech delivered by Professor Georgios Babiniotis, former Greek Minister of Education and Rector of the University of Athens, while the President of the Foundation, Mr. Panos Laskaridis, presented at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Diplomatic Research, the relations of Greek-owned Shipping with China and future prospects.

Since 2016, with the exception of the years of the pandemic health crisis of 2020 - 2022, the Foundation has been sending two Greek professors to Beijing every year who deliver seminar lectures and courses on ancient and modern Greece

and its culture. Among them, professors of Greek and European history and philosophy and former ministers of the Hellenic Republic. At the same time, each year the Foundation accepts a small number of students from the University and brings them into contact with Greek professors, depending on the subject of their studies.

A very important moment in the Foundation's cooperation with Tsinghua University was the speech of the then President of the Hellenic Republic, Mr. Prokopios Pavlopoulos, at the University, on May 15, 2019, as part of his official visit to Beijing.



The Greek President of the Republic delivered a speech on the contribution of the Greek language to the dialogue of civilizations. In his speech, he pointed out the differences between Eastern and Western Culture, as captured by the French intellectual André Malraux in his essay of 1926, and concluded that "Greek Culture is, by birth, the most suitable and available for a fruitful dialogue between Cultures! The teaching of the Greek Language in China, which your university cultivates with such wisdom and "affection", brings, beyond the self-evident value of learning a foreign language, a real contribution to the Dialogue between our two great Civilizations."

Collaboration between the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

In November 2019, the President of the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation, Panos Laskaridis, and the President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Professor Xie Fuzhan, in the presence of Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Greek

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, signed at the Maximos Mansion the establishment of the “Aikaterini Laskaridis-Tsinghua Center for Chinese Studies”.



The Center for Chinese Studies, which is housed in the Foundation’s premises in Piraeus, was created in the spirit of cooperation and the promotion of cultural and academic relations between the two countries, with a focus on the Humanities and Social Sciences. The Center for Chinese Studies promotes the knowledge of Chinese culture in Greece and Greek culture in China and the production of scientific work in the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences with lectures, seminars and conferences in Greece and China.

In the conferences and seminars that have taken place since then, personalities with knowledge and influence on Greek-Chinese cultural relations, academics, ministers and ambassadors of Greece to China and China to Greece, have attended and spoken, analyzing the pivotal role of Greece in trade, shipping and the economic interconnection between East and West, through the prism of cultural relations and exchanges between the two countries.

Covid 19 Pandemic.

In the fall of 2019, the covid-19 pandemic broke out. At the beginning of the crisis, the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation donated a significant number of masks and other health supplies to China. This gesture was duly appreciated by the Chinese side, which very soon, when the crisis also touched Greece, responded dynamically, offering 13.5 million masks to the country's health system. Thus, to

cover the country's healthcare needs, the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation, from early March to late May 2020, procured and donated to the Ministry of Health 80,000 medical masks, 15,000 surgical masks, as well as 25 ventilators, suitable for the treatment of 275 patients. The Foundation also donated 1,000 children's masks to the Penteli Children's Hospital and a hemofiltration device to the Alexandroupolis Hospital.



During the forced interruption of travel and collaborations with physical presence due to the coronavirus pandemic, activities between the Foundation and Tsinghua

University as well as with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences had to be limited to online conferences and seminars, with topics related to the history of Greek-Chinese relations since antiquity and the interaction of the two peoples through contacts, influences and the mutual collective image from antiquity to the present day.

Resumption of joint activities.

With the end of the pandemic in the spring of 2023, the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation activity in relation to China has returned to normal, with exchanges of university professors and students and conferences and seminars in Athens and Beijing. The Foundation has been a key contributor to the Academy of Social Sciences in its effort to open the Chinese School of Classical Studies in Athens, following the model of the British School in Athens and other similar schools of classical studies. The inauguration took place in the fall of 2024. At the same time, the Foundation funded the Preliminary Study for the creation of a Museum of Underwater Antiquities on the site of the Piraeus Port Authority / COSCO, paving the way for the construction of the Museum by the Ministry of Culture with European funding.

In September 2023, the President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Mr. Gao Xiang, accompanied by staff from the Academy's Institute of European Studies, visited the Foundation. The meeting took place in a particularly warm atmosphere and it was agreed to further deepen relations between the two sides, with an emphasis in the field of culture.



Correspondingly, in November 2024, the President of the Foundation, Mr. Panos Laskaridis, visited the headquarters of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and was appointed honorary professor at the University of the Academy.



Establishment of the “Marilena Laskaridis Center for Modern Greek Culture” at Shanghai International Studies University.

In 2025, the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation proceeded with a most emblematic collaboration with Chinese educational institutions. In May 2024, the President of the Foundation, Mr. Panos Laskaridis, visited the Songjiang Campus of Shanghai International Studies University (SISU). The Rector of SISU, Mr. Li Yansong, welcomed the visitors.

The Foundation's particular interest in SISU was sparked by the fact that this great university is distinguished in the fields of linguistics and literature, while it has developed an interdisciplinary educational system of seven disciplines, such as literature, pedagogy, economics and cross-cutting fields. Among the 54 languages taught at SISU, the Department of Modern Greek Language, the first and oldest in China, has for five decades made significant contributions to the trade and cultural exchanges between China and Greece, educating over a generation of Chinese Modern Hellenists.



Following the meeting, the President and the General Director of the Foundation visited the Department of Modern Greek Language, where they participated in a dialogue with students and professors on language education and cultural exchanges. The visitors were impressed by the recitation of Greek poetry and the thematic speeches presented by the students in fluent Greek.



The result of the visit of the President and the General Director of the Foundation to the Shanghai International Studies University is the establishment of the “Marilena Laskaridis Center for Modern Greek Culture” in the Department of Modern Greek Studies of the university, with the support of the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation. Its purpose is to promote Greek culture through literature, poetry and the arts. The inauguration of this Center took place on October 11, 2025. The University provided a suitable space within the Songjiang campus and the Foundation appropriately transformed it into a multi-cultural space, with a library, study and workspace, suitable for meetings and conferences as well as seminars and events. To facilitate students’ immediate access to Modern Greek literature, the Foundation endowed the Center’s library with the most important literary works of modern Hellenism. The agreement between the Foundation and the University is valid for 20 years, with the possibility of renewal indefinitely.

Epilogue.

Both Greek and Chinese Culture are beacons that show the way to a world where mutual respect and understanding lead to peaceful coexistence and progress for the benefit of humanity.

The support of Greek studies in Western Europe through the Chair of Modern Greek Studies of the University of Amsterdam is supplemented in the East by the support through three important educational and cultural institutions in China, the Tsinghua University in Beijing, the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Shanghai International Studies University.

In this way, the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation contributes to the work of promoting Greek Literature abroad, in the West and the East. In a reciprocative way, through the CASS-ALF Center for China Studies, the Foundation promotes Chinese studies in literature and art in Greece.

The actions and collaborations of the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation constitute an important example of a substantial contribution to the work of promoting Greek Literature abroad, not only in the West, which is directly related to Greco-Roman culture, but also in the East, where Chinese thought and culture developed in parallel but largely independently of the West. In a reciprocative way, through the CASS-ALF Center for China Studies, the Foundation promotes Chinese studies in literature and art in Greece. This is a textbook paradigm for strengthening cultural ties in the quest for a better world for future generations.