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What Is China? Constructing China's Cultural Image Through Public Academic Events at the Harvard-Yenching Institute (2022–2026)

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Abstract

Since its establishment in 1928, the Harvard-Yenching Institute (HYI) has served as a significant bridge for academic exchange between China and the United States. Taking 85 China-related public academic events organized by the Institute between 2022 and 2026 as research materials, this study examines how HYI constructs China's cultural image through workshops, training programs, visiting scholar talks and conferences. Drawing upon Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation and Kenneth Boulding's theory of national image, the paper argues that HYI constructs multiple representations of China through five interconnected dimensions: China as a historical civilization, China as an intellectual tradition, China as a complex society, China as a global actor, and China as a contested cultural concept. These representations are produced through the selection of particular historical materials, intellectual traditions, social issues, transnational connections, and identity debates. The study suggests that academic discourse participates in determining which aspects of China become visible, meaningful, and legitimate in international academic discourse. Therefore, the cultural image produced through HYI's activities is multidimensional and continuously open to interpretation and negotiation.

Keywords

Harvard-Yenching Institute; China's Cultural İmage; National İmage; Academic Discourse

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Against the backdrop of intensifying strategic competition between China and the United States, people-to-people exchanges have become an important stabilizing force in bilateral relations. Thus, academic and cultural institutions function as significant channels of Track II diplomacy, complementing official interactions and facilitating mutual understanding. President Xi Jinping emphasized in the letter to

Lampros Liotsios, President of Kean University, that educational exchange and cooperation constitute "a project for the future of China–U.S. relations." So, academic exchange provides a space in which different understandings of countries, cultures, and societies can be produced and communicated.

The Harvard-Yenching Institute was jointly established in 1928 by Harvard University and Yenching University through a charitable endowment from Charles Martin Hall. According to Wan Xiaohong and Huang Weifan, the Institute's development can be divided into four stages: foundation and expansion (1928–1937), wartime survival (1937–1945), interruption and reform (1945–1979), and renewed cooperation (1979–present) (2026). And Zhang Feng notes that the Institute has continuously promoted China–U.S. academic exchange through fellowship programs, visiting scholar initiatives, conferences on Asian studies, publication grants, and library development projects (2004). Over the past century, more than 500 Chinese scholars have received support from HYI to conduct research at Harvard University, many of whom later became leading scholars and academic administrators in China (Wan and Huang 2026).

In addition to fostering academic mobility, HYI has become an influential platform for knowledge production concerning China. Through workshops, training programs, visiting scholar talks and conferences, the Institute provides opportunities for scholars from different countries and disciplines to discuss Chinese history, society, culture, and politics. These activities not only disseminate academic knowledge, but also shape international perceptions of China.

1.2. Literature Review

Existing scholarship on the HYI can be broadly categorized into four major areas. First, studies of its institutional history have examined the Institute's founding, organizational structure, and historical development. Scholars such as Elizabeth J. Perry and Wu Helin reviewed its century-long history through four major stages of transformation (2025).

Second, research on HYI's academic contributions has focused on its role in the advancement of Sinology. Zhang Feng evaluated the Institute's achievements over 75 years, particularly in classical Chinese translation projects, library construction, and the cultivation of China scholars (2004). Moreover, Zhang Yu and Cheng Huanwen examined the significance of the Yenching Library in supporting Chinese Studies in the United States (2018).

Third, bibliographical studies have explored the Harvard-Yenching Index Series and its scholarly impact. Ma Xueliang and other researchers have demonstrated how the Institute's indexing projects promoted the development of modern Chinese bibliography and reference studies (2017).

Fourth, scholars have analyzed HYI from the perspective of cross-cultural communication. For instance, Wan Xiaohong and Huang Weifan adopted Wilbur

Schramm's circular model of communication and characterized the Institute as a "cultural translator," a "communication medium," and a "cultivator of foreign cultural understanding" (2026).

While these studies provide valuable insights into HYI's historical significance and academic achievements, they largely adopt historical, bibliographical, or communication-oriented perspectives. Relatively little attention has been paid to how the Institute's contemporary academic activities construct and represent "China" as an object of knowledge. Accordingly, this study examines HYI's public academic events from 2022 to 2026 and investigates how academic discourse contributes to the construction and dissemination of China's cultural image.

1.3. Research Questions

Based on the above discussion, this study addresses two research questions:

RQ1: How does the Harvard-Yenching Institute construct and represent the cultural image of China through its public academic events from 2022 to 2026?

RQ2: What major dimensions of China emerge from these academic representations, and what do these representations reveal about the ways in which "China" is selected, interpreted, and negotiated in contemporary academic discourse?

These questions guide the following analysis of the Institute's public academic activities and connect the empirical materials with Boulding's theory of national image and Hall's theory of cultural representation.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1. National Image Theory

Kenneth Boulding's theory of national image provides a useful framework for understanding how perceptions of nations are formed. As Boulding observes, people make judgments about international affairs not on the basis of objective reality itself, but on the basis of images of reality constructed in their minds (1959). Therefore, national image is not a direct reflection of reality, but a cognitive structure shaped through communication and knowledge production.

Boulding also identifies three dimensions of national image: geographical image, material power image, and socio-psychological image (1959). The public activities of the HYI primarily contribute to the construction of China's socio-psychological image by shaping understandings of Chinese culture, values, historical experiences, and social conditions.

Nicholas Cull further extends Boulding's insights into the field of public diplomacy. He argues that national image is an ongoing process of representation through which meanings about a nation are created, communicated, and negotiated (2008). From this perspective, every lecture, conference, and workshop organized by HYI can be understood as a performative act that participates in constructing particular images of China.

Thus, this theory helps this study address the first part of its analytical problem: what kind of national image is produced through HYI's academic activities? However, national image theory alone does not sufficiently explain how particular images are constructed. For this reason, the study also draws upon Hall's theory of cultural representation.

2.2. Representation Theory

Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation offers a more detailed analytical tool for examining the production of meaning. Hall notes that meaning is produced through representational practices such as language, images, narratives, and discourse (2024). Hence, China does not possess a fixed meaning independent of representation. Rather, meanings of China are continuously produced and negotiated through discursive practices.

Furthermore, Hall highlights three key propositions. First, meaning is produced rather than discovered. Second, representation always involves selection and exclusion. Every representation highlights certain aspects while obscuring others (2024). Third, representation is closely connected to power. Questions concerning who has the authority to represent and whose representations are considered legitimate are central to any analysis of discourse (Hall, Encoding/Decoding 2003).

As a prestigious institution affiliated with Harvard University, HYI enjoys considerable symbolic authority. Consequently, its representations of China carry significant influence in international academic communities.

Taken together, Boulding and Hall provide complementary perspectives. Boulding helps explain the formation of China's national image, while Hall draws attention to the representational processes through which that image is produced. Therefore, the present study asks both what image of China emerges and how that image becomes possible through academic discourse.

2.3. Research Methodology and Data

This study employs qualitative discourse analysis to examine public academic events organized by HYI between 2022 and 2026. The Institute hosted approximately 160 public academic events in 5 years. Among these events, this study focuses on 85 events related to China, including workshops, training programs, visiting scholar talks and conferences, in order to examine how China is represented through academic discourse. Statistics about the selected events is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. HYI Public Academic Events by Type (2022–2026)

Year	Visiting Scholar Talk	Conference	Workshop	Training Program	Total
2022	12	0	1	0	13
2023	19	0	1	0	20

2024	22	2	2	1	27
2025	14	1	0	1	16
2026	6	2	0	1	9
Total	73	5	4	3	85

Based on thematic analysis, all activities were categorized into five major dimensions: historical civilization, intellectual tradition, complex society, global actor, and contested cultural concept, detailed information of which are in the Table 2. Through close reading of event descriptions, themes, and research agendas, the study identifies recurring patterns in the Institute's representation of China.

Table 2. Five Dimensions of HYI's "China" Narrative (2022-2026)

Category	Core Focus	Representative Topics
China as a Historical Civilization	Ancient political, material culture, archaeological discoveries, historical documents	Yuan grain, Tang manuscript culture, Austronesian origins
China as an Intellectual Tradition	Philosophy, religion, moral concepts, cosmology	Liu Jishan's moral psychology, Zhuangzi aesthetics, Daoist cultivation
China as a Complex Society	Contemporary social issues, political economy, governance	Digital governance, rural aging, migrant children's education
China as a Global Actor	Sino-foreign exchanges, cross-cultural comparison, global history	Funan-Sino-Indian relations, Cold War cultural diplomacy
China as a Contested Cultural Concept	Ethnicity, marginalized groups, identity construction	Tibetan narrative, Hui Muslim intellectuals, queer politics

3. Five Narratives of China at the Harvard-Yenching Institute

3.1. China as a Historical Civilization

Across 22 events, the HYI represented China as a civilization with a profound historical legacy. These activities focused on premodern political institutions, material culture, archaeological discoveries, and historical documents, covering a time span from the Neolithic period to the Qing dynasty.

Ancient Politics and Institutions. A number of events examined political practices and institutional arrangements in premodern China. For example, a 2023 lecture on the practice of lisi (heir adoption) in ancient China traced the evolution of succession principles from antiquity to the early imperial period, which reveals the complex relationship between patrilineal inheritance and ancestor worship. Another lecture on grain prices during the Yuan dynasty analyzed economic data to explore patterns of market development and state intervention in medieval China. These studies presented China as a civilization characterized by sophisticated institutional arrangements rather than the stereotype of "Oriental despotism."

Material Culture and Archaeological Discoveries. Archaeological perspectives occupied an important place in the Institute's activities. A 2022 lecture on newly discovered Buddhist manuscripts and visual materials from western Tibet introduced audiences to religious texts and artworks dating from the ninth to the

eighteenth centuries. A 2023 lecture on the origins of Austronesian-speaking peoples highlighted archaeological findings from the Neolithic coastal regions of southeastern China, placing China in the broader context of Pacific prehistory. Likewise, a 2024 study employing stable isotope analysis of food resources in Neolithic northern communities reconstructed everyday subsistence strategies and dietary practices in ancient China.

These archaeological studies represented China as a historical entity open to scientific investigation and empirical inquiry. Instead of relying solely on traditional historical narratives, they stressed material evidence and interdisciplinary methods, thereby enriching understandings of China's past.

Historical Documents and Archival Sources. The Institute has demonstrated particular interest in Chinese local archives and folk documents. In both 2024 and 2025, HYI organized training programs on "New Sources for Research on Chinese Rural Society" in Yongtai, Fujian Province. These programs introduced scholars to locally preserved land contracts, genealogies, account books, and other forms of grassroots documentation.

Many of these materials, as the Institute emphasized, continue to be privately preserved by descendants of those who originally created and used them centuries ago. Such records constitute "a vast and expanding source of historical data beyond traditional archives." By underscoring these documents, the Institute effectively shifted the authority of historical knowledge away from official dynastic histories toward local and community-based sources. The result is a vision of Chinese history that emerges from below, attaching importance to regional diversity and everyday experiences.

From the perspective of Hall's theory of representation, the selectivity of this historical narrative is particularly significant (Hall, Representation 2024). The China presented by the Institute is primarily a social history centered on ordinary people, local communities, and everyday life. Its historical narratives often draw on micro-historical research grounded in local archives and archaeological evidence, foregrounding local experiences and social practices. Through this approach, China appears as a complex and dynamic society shaped by diverse actors and everyday interactions.

This selective emphasis itself produces a particular image of China: a civilization that is historically deep, intellectually accessible to scholarly inquiry, internally diverse, and resistant to reduction into a single overarching narrative.

In short, in the dimension of historical civilization, the HYI tells the story of a China that is profound, researchable, pluralistic, and historically dynamic rather than culturally monolithic.

3.2. China as an Intellectual Tradition

Approximately 18 events arranged by the HYI presented China as a civilization

endowed with a distinctive intellectual heritage capable of engaging in dialogue with the wider world. These activities focused on philosophy, religion, moral thought, aesthetics, and cosmology.

Philosophical Dialogues in the Confucian Tradition. One lecture in 2022 examined the moral psychology of Liu Zongzhou (1578–1645), a late Ming Confucian thinker, and compared his ideas with David Hume's theory of moral sentiments. The speaker argued that Liu developed "a model closer to Humean sentimentalism" and that his philosophy represented a form of "Confucian moral sentimentalism." Through this comparative framework, a seventeenth-century Chinese philosopher was brought directly into contemporary debates in Western moral philosophy. Similarly, a 2024 lecture on the emergence of the aesthetic subject in the Zhuangzi connected East Asian aesthetic thought with broader global traditions of aesthetics, maintaining that Eastern and Western conceptions of beauty are fundamentally linked through shared human emotions.

The Diversity of Chinese Religious Traditions. The Institute's activities also highlighted multiple dimensions of Chinese religious life. A two-day Daoist Studies Symposium held in 2024 focused on the themes of body, gender, and cultivation in Daoist practice. A 2025 lecture on the iconography of the Great Compassion Mantra traced the evolution of Buddhist visual culture, while a 2026 lecture on Tibetan Buddhist autobiographical traditions explored the meaning of self-writing in Tibetan religious contexts. Collectively, these studies portrayed China as a society marked by diverse spiritual traditions and multifaceted religious practices, which reveals a religious landscape that extends far beyond the conventional framework of the "Three Teachings in Harmony."

Comparative Methodologies across Civilizations. Many events placed Chinese thought in broader comparative frameworks. A 2024 lecture comparing cosmological traditions in ancient Greece and China challenged simplistic dichotomies such as geometry versus arithmetic or hierarchy versus organicism. However, it proposed more fundamental cosmological categories that transcend cultural boundaries. Another lecture in the same year examined the concept of Tianxia and its potential contributions to contemporary discussions of global order. Such comparative studies portrayed Chinese intellectual traditions as valuable theoretical resources, demonstrating their capacity to inform and enrich global scholarly conversations.

From the perspective of Hall's theory of representation, claims to universality often function as strategies of meaning production (Hall, Representation 2024). By presenting Chinese intellectual traditions as resources that can engage in equal dialogue with Western thought, the Institute constructs a particular image of China that emphasizes philosophical reflection, ethical reasoning, and cosmological imagination while downplaying elements such as hierarchy and patriarchy that were also embedded in their historical contexts. In this dimension, the HYI tells the

story of a China that is intellectually sophisticated, dialogic, and globally relevant.

3.3. China as a Complex Society

Approximately 20 events represented contemporary China as a complex society characterized by tensions, contradictions, and governance challenges. Based upon methods from sociology, anthropology, political science, and history, these activities examined social problems, institutional transformations, and everyday experiences in contemporary China.

Political Economy and Governance. Several lectures focused on the changing nature of Chinese governance. The 2024 lecture "Governing China in the Digital Age" employed large-scale computational analyses of propaganda data, government documents, and public opinion to examine how Chinese authorities respond to new governance challenges. Another lecture on "Chinese Protectionism" explored how China promotes domestic industrial interests through subtle mechanisms such as media regulation, health and safety standards, and selective regulatory enforcement while formally complying with World Trade Organization rules. Likewise, a 2023 lecture entitled "From Planned Economy to Planned Governance" pointed out that socialist planning in China has been reshaped through new institutional arrangements and continues to play an important role in contemporary governance. These studies portrayed China as a sophisticated and evolving governance system that requires careful interpretation.

Social Inequality and Marginalized Communities. The Institute devoted considerable attention to the experiences of ordinary people and marginalized groups. A 2025 lecture on rural aging in China used phenomenological approaches to investigate how elderly villagers cope with care shortages resulting from urbanization and demographic change. Another lecture on the education of migrant workers' children followed patterns of circular migration between Beijing and Zouping over a ten-year period, and documents how these children maintain aspirations for upward mobility despite structural constraints. Additionally, a 2023 lecture on deaf workers in Chinese welfare factories employed life-history interviews to reconstruct the collective memories of more than eight hundred deaf laborers. Such studies represented China as a society marked by inequality, resilience, and everyday struggles.

Historical Trauma and Collective Memory. The Institute also addressed sensitive issues in modern Chinese history. A 2023 lecture on the Red Guard movement examined how contextual ambiguity and adaptive choices shaped political alliances during the Cultural Revolution. Another lecture in 2022 analyzed Ba Jin's Random Thoughts as a form of witness literature emerging from the traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution. These discussions portrayed China as a society that continues to confront and reinterpret its historical memories.

From the perspective of Boulding's theory of national image, this dimension

constructs a particularly complex social-psychological image of China (Boulding 1959). China appears as a society filled with internal tensions, social challenges and ongoing transformation. Although such an image may be less immediately appealing than simplified narratives, it possesses greater intellectual credibility (Cull 2008). In this dimension, the HYI presents a China that is imperfect, evolving, and open to critical analysis.

3.4. China as a Global Actor

Around 12 events situated China in networks of global interaction. These activities explored historical exchanges, transnational connections, and global processes that have shaped both China and the wider world.

Historical Interactions between China and the World. Several events examined China's historical engagement with neighboring regions and distant societies. A 2023 lecture on the Kingdom of Funan (first to sixth centuries CE) explored triangular cultural and diplomatic interactions among Southeast Asia, China, and India through archaeological evidence and historical texts. Another lecture in 2022 traced the history of the bookwheel, a European invention, and examined its reception in seventeenth-century China, illustrating differences between Chinese and European reading cultures.

Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War. The Institute also paid significant attention to Cold War-era cultural exchanges. A 2023 lecture on Latin American travelers in revolutionary China reconstructed the visits of intellectuals such as Pablo Neruda during the 1960s and 1970s and examined the formation of socialist cosmopolitanism. A 2025 lecture on the American Cultural Relations Program in China (1942–1947) explored how figures such as John King Fairbank promoted cultural interaction between China and the United States, which transformed cultural assistance into more reciprocal forms of exchange. Another lecture on the Sino-American film Cold War in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s compared the strategies employed by both countries to influence film production and distribution.

Contemporary Global Engagement. Training programs also reflected China's contemporary participation in regional and global affairs. The 2025 Advanced Training Program on Aging Societies in Asia, organized jointly with Tsinghua University, discussed China alongside other Asian countries confronting demographic challenges. Likewise, the 2026 Advanced Training Program on Technological Innovation and Cultural Interaction in the Indian Ocean World, jointly organized with East China Normal University, situated China in broader transregional networks extending across the Indian Ocean.

From Hall's perspective, the most significant contribution of this dimension lies in its normalization of China as a participant in global historical processes rather than an exceptional or isolated civilization (Hall, Representation 2024). This perspective

challenges both "Chinese exceptionalism" and narratives of Chinese isolation. Through these activities, the HYI portrays China as deeply interconnected with world history and contemporary global society.

3.5. China as a Contested Cultural Concept

Approximately 13 events treated "China" itself as an object of critical reflection. Rather than assuming a fixed and self-evident definition of China, these activities questioned how China has been imagined, defined, and represented across different historical and political contexts. This category represents the most theoretically self-conscious dimension of the Institute's discourse.

Ethnicity and Frontier Regions. Many events highlighted China's multiethnic character. A 2022 lecture on how early Qing emperors narrated Tibet examined how Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong employed concepts such as "promoting the Yellow Religion" and "great patron" to construct official narratives of Qing-Tibetan relations. Another lecture concentrated on nineteenth-century Hui Muslim scholars Ma Dexin and Yusuf, and delving into how Chinese Muslim intellectuals in Yunnan and Gansu negotiated religious belief, cultural practice, and ethnic identity. A 2023 lecture on the revival of non-Han ancestral memories in northern China investigated how memories of Yuan-era non-Han ancestors re-emerged between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. These studies complicated ethnically homogeneous understandings of China and emphasized its internal diversity.

Marginal Identities and Identity Politics. The Institute also explored marginalized identities in contemporary China. A 2023 lecture on queer politics and the rise of the "family-state" analyzed how LGBTQ communities navigate changing social and political environments. A 2024 roundtable on populist nationalism and gender in Asia compared developments in China, India, Japan, and South Korea. Through such discussions, China was portrayed as a society characterized by multiple and sometimes competing forms of identity.

Reflecting on the Concept of "China" Itself. Perhaps the most theoretically reflective example was the 2022 lecture "Faking Origins." Centering on the European impostor George Psalmanazar, who falsely claimed to be from Formosa and published an imaginary ethnography filled with Orientalist fantasies, the lecture probed how Britain actively reimagined and reinvented China. The study examined how Western knowledge systems have historically constructed images of China, which constituted a form of meta-reflection on the very category of "China."

Hall's theory is especially illuminating in this context. Representation is always intertwined with power, because it raises the question of who possesses the authority to define and describe others (Hall, Representation 2024). When the HYI hosts discussions on Tibetan narratives, Hui intellectual history, or queer politics, it participates in ongoing debates about who has the right to represent China and what counts as legitimate knowledge about China. In this dimension, the Institute

presents China as a diverse, contested, and continuously negotiated cultural concept.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined how the Harvard-Yenching Institute "tells the story of China" through its public academic events between 2022 and 2026. The analysis identifies five interconnected dimensions: China as a historical civilization, an intellectual tradition, a complex society, a global actor, and a contested cultural concept. These dimensions suggest that the China represented through HYI's academic discourse is produced through the selection of particular histories, intellectual traditions, social issues, global connections, and identity debates.

This finding also highlights the value of combining national image theory with cultural representation theory. From Boulding's perspective, HYI's activities contribute to the formation of China's socio-psychological image by providing audiences with particular ways of understanding Chinese history, society, and culture. And Hall's theory further shows that such an image does not simply emerge from the accumulation of factual information. It is shaped through processes of selection, emphasis, comparison, and interpretation. Hence, the five dimensions identified in this study reveal not only what aspects of China are presented, but also how China becomes intelligible in an academic discourse. In this sense, academic activities function as sites of meaning production, where the boundaries and significance of "China" are continually negotiated.

Moreover, this perspective is for great help to explain the significance of HYI as a platform for contemporary China-related scholarship. Its public events place China in multiple intellectual and historical relationships: between past and present, local experience and broader social structures, Chinese traditions and global intellectual debates, and national history and transnational processes. The result is a representation that allows different and sometimes competing understandings of China to coexist. The significance of such plurality lies in its capacity to keep "China" open to scholarly inquiry instead of reducing it to a predetermined cultural or political category.

At the same time, the study has limitations. The analysis focuses on publicly available event descriptions and selected academic topics, which cannot fully capture the discussions, disagreements, and interpretations that emerged during the events themselves. Future research could therefore examine recordings, transcripts, audience responses, or a longer period of HYI activities to investigate how representations of China are received and negotiated by different academic communities. Such research would further illuminate the relationship between academic knowledge production, cultural representation, and the changing meanings of "China" in international scholarly discourse.

Ultimately, the significance of examining academic representations of China lies in

recognizing that knowledge production and cultural image formation are closely connected. When China becomes an object of academic discourse, the process involves interpretation as well as description. The question "What Is China?" remains open to continuing scholarly discussion. Its answer is shaped through the histories that are remembered, the voices that are included, the relationships that are emphasized, and the questions that scholars choose to ask.

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