

How to Write a Master Thesis?

The following short manual is designed to answer frequently asked questions when composing sinological master theses. From a formal point of view, the **structure** of such works in general is as follows:

- Title page (the title provides information on the subject as well as the spatial and temporal dimension of the work; furthermore, name, postal and email address of the candidate, the exact study programme, and the submission date of the work should be listed; 1 page)
- Foreword, with acknowledgments (about 1 page)
- Table of contents (about 1 page)
- List of tables, diagrams, maps and illustrations (about 1 page)
- List of abbreviations used (about 1 page)
- Introduction (usually contains statements about the **state of the field**, **research questions**, **sources** and **source criticism**, **methods** and **theories**; about 10 pages, see also below)
- **Analytical, discursive body** of work (about 50 pages)
- Summary of the **results** and **conclusions** (contains answers to the research questions; about 5 pages)
- Appendix with translations, documentation or statistics (about 10 pages)
- Bibliography (about 10 pages)
- Explanation that the work was written independently, etc. (a form called “non-plagiarism statement” (“Nichtplagiatserklärung”) can be found on the homepage of the institute; 1 page)

In addition to the **analytical, discursive main part** of the work, essential components of a master thesis in particular and scientific works in general are explanations of the **state of the field**, **research questions**, **sources** and **source criticism**, **methods** and **theories**, as well as **results** and **conclusions**:

The **state of the field** deals with the results of the most important literature (secondary literature) on a particular subject. Recent research written in Western languages and Chinese is at the forefront, but works in Japanese, Korean or Russian can also be used.

The **research questions** are generated by building on the state of the field and its investigation. They serve to define new and innovative aspects in a research area and at the same time help to narrow down the thesis meaningfully in terms of time, space and topic. Especially for the purpose of delimiting the work and thus to economize one’s effort, it is important to generate research questions as early as possible and to link them with hypotheses and theories appropriate to the subject of investigation. The research questions can change in the course of time due to new findings.

The **sources** (primary sources) are presented and subjected to a **source-critical analysis**. What counts as a primary source and what counts as secondary literature is decided on the basis of specific research questions. For topics dealing with the life and work of Wang Anshi in the Song era, works by modern Chinese historians on Wang Anshi are secondary literature. However, when doing research on the importance and reception of Wang Anshi in modern Chinese historiography, these texts would constitute primary sources.

The **methods** (content analysis, statistical analysis, field research, philological-historical approach, social, cultural, literary, religious-historical, comparative methods, etc.) used in the thesis are described as well. The subjects of research in Sinology and China studies extend over a wide range. This applies not only to the temporal dimensions comprising the five-thousand-year history up to contemporary China and the spatial extensions of the Chinese core region and its peripheral and neighbouring areas, but also to the factual variety of possible topics. Depending on the selected research focus, it is necessary to familiarize oneself with the **methodical and theoretical tools** of the relevant discipline so that they can be profitably applied to the chosen topic. Although the concept of **theory** is very wide-ranging in various individual disciplines, it generally refers to a system of statements based on scholarly research. It serves to explain excerpts of reality and the underlying law-like regularities and, in some disciplines, to make predictions about the future. Theories are systematically ordered and characterized by intersubjective verifiability. A theory is, e.g., Thomas S. Kuhn's (1922-1996) statement that modern scientific revolutions follow a three-phase model (pre-paradigmatic, paradigmatic, and revolutionary phase).

At the end of the thesis a summary of the **results** and a discussion about the **conclusions**, which the candidate draws from them, are carried out. These concluding remarks should answer the research questions formulated in the beginning. In addition, they can provide an outlook on other possible topics in the future, i.e. research perspectives.

Sinological master theses at least must be based on the analysis of sources written in Chinese. According to past experience, **three types of sinological master theses** can be distinguished:

1. Works based on an analysis of a number of sources and including a translation of one or more texts in the appendix. The translated texts should be closely related to the topic of the thesis and should be often referred to. In other words, the translated texts should be exemplary, typical or significant for the topic being addressed.
2. Works based on an analysis of a number of sources and incorporating translated excerpts from them at various points in the thesis.
3. The work to a large extent consists of a philological and source-critical translation of a text not yet translated into a Western language. This type of thesis is especially adequate in the case of texts from pre-modern China, where we are often dealing with linguistically difficult sources and thus the

philological exploration of a text with accompanying notes on content and context already constitutes an invaluable scholarly contribution.

Depending on the topic of the work, the number of sources and literature used may vary. When working on a subject of historical, modern or contemporary China, experience shows that thirty Chinese-language essays of medium length from scientific journals or collected works can already provide a sufficient basis for a master thesis.

The **scope of a master thesis** should be around 80 pages, each with approximately 350 words.

For the selection of a topic mainly from the fields of economy, society, politics, philosophy, history, literature, language and religion of pre-modern, modern and contemporary China as well as the history of science and technology of China please consult the full professors and tenured staff entitled to examine (Prof. Mittag, Prof. Schubert, Prof. Vogel, Junior Prof. Huang, Junior Prof. Niedenführ, Junior Prof. Tseng, Dr. Theobald) as well as our extraordinary professors (Prof. Bumbacher, Prof. Rohrer). However, own initiative and ideas are important components in the search for a topic because according to experience own interests and preferences promote the motivation to a considerable extent. The subject of a master thesis should be chosen in such a way that search for sources and literature should not be a time-consuming and resource-intensive problem. In other words, sources and literature should ideally be available in Tübingen or in Germany in sufficient number.

Since the linguistic and analytical comprehension of Chinese-language texts often proves to be time-consuming, and since it cannot be assumed in all cases that literature and sources for an interesting research question are available in or outside Tübingen, it is of great advantage if one already starts early in the master program to think about a suitable topic for a thesis. This does not only provide the M.A. candidate with additional time for reading, but – by examining a specific topic – also helps to deepen his knowledge in the field of reference works and information gathering in a variety of ways. If the topic is found early during the course of study, a short stay in China or in other Western countries can be used for the search for sources and literature, for example. There is also more time to engage in the selection of appropriate methods and theories.

Selected references for the search for literature and information:

- Virtual Library “CrossAsia”: <http://crossasia.org> (access to major Western and East Asian full-text databases)
- Karlsruher virtueller Katalog: <https://kvk.bibliothek.kit.edu/> (enables the combined, simultaneous and therefore time-saving bibliographic search for Western-language monographs in the most important Western national and regional online catalogues)
- Online version of the *Bibliography of Asian Studies*: <http://www.redi-bw.de/start/unitu/BAS-ebSCO>

(allows the bibliographic retrieval of specialized literature, mainly journal articles, in Western languages)

- ChinaKnowledge.de - An Encyclopaedia on Chinese History, Literature and Art:
<http://www.chinaknowledge.de/index.html> (The database created by Dr. Ulrich Theobald provides basic information on history, literature and art in China and is also helpful for bibliographic data on Chinese works and the translation of their titles into a Western language.)

Important Online Catalogues of Libraries include:

- Library catalogue of the State Library in Berlin (Staatsbibliothek Berlin):
<http://ead.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/cat/> (online order possible through “blue interlibrary loan” (“blauer Leihverkehr”))
- National Library of China, Beijing: <http://www.nlc.cn/newen/>
- National Central Library, Taiwan: <http://www.ncl.edu.tw>
- Peking University Library: <http://www.lib.pku.edu.cn/>
- Qinghua University Library, Beijing:
<http://eng.lib.tsinghua.edu.cn>
- Academia Sinica, Taiwan: <http://www.sinica.edu.tw/>

Further **important content-specific link collections**, including to the *Thesaurus linguae sericae* (<http://tls.uni-hd.de/helpSearch/searchProc.lasso>) can be found on the homepage of the Department of Chinese Studies.

Translation projects, which are regularly offered by the Department, provide introductions to **the practice and theory of scholarly translation**.

For **conventions and formal matters** see the “Stylesheet for Scholarly Works in Sinology.”

Prof. Dr. Hans Ulrich Vogel, 29 March 2018