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# Journal OF THE Royal Asiatic Society China

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EDITOR  
Melinda Liu

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## CONTRIBUTIONS

The editor of the Journal invites submission of original unpublished scholarly articles, essays and reviews on the religion and philosophy, art and architecture, archaeology, anthropology, environment and current affairs of China and Greater Asia. Books sent for review will be donated to the Royal Asiatic Society China Library. Contributors will receive copies of the Journal.

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<https://ras-china.org/>



# Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China

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Front Cover Image: A snow leopard in Sanjiangyuan National Park,  
photographed by a camera activated by motion-detection.

Courtesy of Terry Townshend

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Separate paragraphs

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Each year, the editorial team of the Royal Asiatic Society China Journal has to choose a story lineup. Do readers want to hear fresh new voices? How deeply do they long to read the latest offerings from familiar favourites? We try to strike a balance. In 2024, it was easy to showcase some of our crowd-pleasing regular contributors. This edition kicks off with a piece by award-winning author Paul French, who focused on the ‘foreign colony’ residing in the city formerly known as Mukden—today’s Shenyang—during the period of the Japanese occupation. With his distinctive eye for detail, French introduces us to the bygone Mukden Club in this northeast China enclave, which remains little known compared to the more famous expat hubs of Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin.

French, who is a familiar face in RAS communities across the globe, had a busy year. He published his acclaimed book *Her Lotus Year: China, the Roaring Twenties, and the Making of Wallis Simpson* and launched a road show which brought him to events, talks and literary festivals in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Macao. Don’t miss Sinologist and journal contributor Frances Wood’s lively take on *Lotus Year* among our book reviews. She also divulges a little-known personal family story about the woman who became the Duchess of Windsor.

Among the articles in ‘Fresh Perspectives,’ contributor Sven Serrano enhances our understanding of American Nobel Prize winner Pearl Buck, by analysing the ideological issues which divided Western missionaries in China in her time. Edith Terry dives into the world of Qing Dynasty coins, introducing the late Dr. Werner Burger’s vast collection of imperial Chinese cash. This staggering number of coins allowed Burger to learn many fascinating details about their physical production—and to promote a personal theory, positing that imperial mismanagement of China’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century monetary system was crucial to the Chinese currency’s devaluation. It played a significant role, he believed, in triggering dynastic collapse.

First-time contributor Michelle Wang unveils a new angle on Sino-U.S. diplomacy—focused on the development and

management of national parks in each country over a period of more than 40 years. Wang explored this channel for bilateral exchange with deep research; she once worked for the US National Parks Service. Initially I was impressed by Wang's elegant writing when I read her thesis on the same topic for the Schwarzman College at Tsinghua University; she graduated as a Schwarzman Scholar in 2024. To my eye, her journal article is an example of the innovative thinking among our younger generation of contributors. What's more, it gave me the perfect excuse to publish a startling close-up photograph of a young male snow leopard. The image was provided courtesy of conservation legal expert Terry Townshend, who had set up a camera activated by motion detection in the high mountains of Sanjiangyuan National Park in China, one of China's foremost national parks.

One name which is both familiar to many and yet also new to the ranks of our contributors is David Rennie, known for his work as bureau chief and columnist for the *Economist* magazine (we're especially grateful that Rennie made the time to write his article even as he was moving from China to London, where he has become the founding columnist for the magazine's *The Telegram*, a column on world affairs). Rennie reflects on the question famously raised by the late Joseph Needham: why did China's spirit of innovation peter out over the centuries, leaving the nation economically moribund just as many other nations underwent an industrial transformation? The question warrants a new hearing today, in the age of leapfrogging tech, when China is at the forefront of some of the world's most advanced technologies, after decades of extraordinary growth. The story of these growth decades are told in part by John Darwin Van Fleet, whose article provides a conceptual framework for understanding how China became the world's factory.

Cultural heritage preservation expert Matthew Hu Xinyu leads us on a grassroots exploration of the *literati* and intellectual movements which populated Beijing's historical district known as Shatan—or Shatan'r as its known to Beijing insiders (whose distinctive dialect is famous for incorporating an "r" sound to many words).

Violante Di Canossa, who heads the Research and Policy Team of the UNDP in China, reminds us of the mounting

challenges facing our natural world in her thoughtful review of *Ocean Currents are Still Protecting Us*, by Qu Geping, Mans Lonnroth and Li Laiai. Meanwhile another new contributor, Andrew Hillier, reviews Robin Masefield's book *The World Administered by Irishmen: the Life and Times of Robert Hart and Contemporary Irish in East Asia*. Julie Chun reflects on the legacy of the Royal Asiatic Society presence in China in her review of the Rockbund Art Museum's exhibition on the RAS, located in the building which had been the early North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, then in Shanghai.

Last but not least, for the 'Passages' section Duncan Hewitt has written a moving obituary to mark the death of writer Lynn Pan, who was a loyal member of RAS China and a frequent attendee at its events. Hewitt observed that her books, such as *In Search of Old Shanghai* (1982) and *Old Shanghai: Gangsters in Paradise* (1984) to *Shanghai Style* (2008) and *When True Love Came to China* (2015), 'brought the city's political, intellectual and cultural history alive in a way few others have done, her rich knowledge combined with a flair for anecdote and a beautiful and vivid turn of phrase.'

Huge thanks go to editors Tracey Willard, Kate Munro, Warren Singh Bartlett and others for helping bring the journal to fruition. Special thanks to the journal's two advisors—Head of RAS China Council James Miller and Council member Robert Martin—for their counsel and enthusiasm, as well as to the team at Earnshaw Books and to publisher Graham Earnshaw for their contributions. We also give particular thanks to Duke Kunshan for its generous financial support of the RAS China 2024 journal.

Are we getting the balance right? We'd love to hear your feedback; please email [raschina@ras-china.org](mailto:raschina@ras-china.org) to offer an opinion—or possibly to offer a contribution to the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China. Whether you're a fresh voice or a familiar face, if you have a compelling story to tell, we'd love to hear about it!

Melinda Liu  
Editor

# RAS CHINA COUNCIL 2023-2024

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Katherine Song (Film Club)

Robert Martin (Stories of Things)

James Miller (Philosophy Club)

Daniela Nuzzaci (General Program)

Clarisse Le Guernic (Beyond City)

## **NON-COUNCIL POSITIONS**

### **RAS Food Focus**

Lilly Chow

### **Administration Manager**

Kelsi Su

### **Fiction Book Club**

Dagmar Borchard

### **Library Volunteers**

Kyle Bisman, Julie Chun, Liang Ping,  
Diane Long, Robert Martin, Coquina Restrepo,  
Compton Tothill, Zhang Dasheng, Summer Xia

### **Duke Kunshan University Student Research Assistants**

William Tran  
Elliot Aung

## RAS CHINA ANNUAL REPORT 2023-2024

I was deeply honoured to be elected as the new Vice-President and Council Chair for the Royal Asiatic Society, China at the AGM in November 2023, and have been supported by the continuity and cohesion of the council members. RAS China also welcomed a new Honorary President, Matt Burney CMG, His Majesty's consul general in Shanghai. Mr. Burney has always been a strong supporter of the Royal Asiatic Society, China and welcomed members to his official residence for our Spring social. We were feted with wonderful sparkling wine from England and enjoyed the warm sunshine on his balcony overlooking the Huangpu river.

It's not unfair to note that 2024 has continued to be a challenging period for the RAS China in terms of membership. The end of COVID restrictions has meant that many of our existing members have been taking the opportunity to spend more time outside of China visiting family and friends in their home countries. At the same time, geopolitical uncertainties continue to impact the arrival of new expatriates coming to live and work in Shanghai.

Despite these challenges, RAS China put on a full slate of over thirty lectures and activities in 2024, and has played an important role in enhancing the life of the English-speaking community in Shanghai and increasing knowledge of China's history and culture. At the same time, we have also launched a one-year pilot program with my academic institution, Duke Kunshan University, to support our library and to encourage faculty and students to attend and speak at RAS events. I am confident that in 2025 we will see the fruits of this project and this will certainly bring benefits to both institutions.

My own focus group on East Asian philosophies and religions held a discussion on Confucianism in February, a workshop on strategies for interpreting the *Daodejing* in May, and in autumn invited a professor of Indian Buddhist philosophy, Oren Hanner, to give a lecture on the philosophy of Vasubandhu, one of the founders of the Yogacara school of Buddhist thought. The events were well attended and provoked stimulating discussion.

Our Book Club continued to meet at Garden Books, and introduced readers to a range of modern and contemporary literature from classics such as Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy*, to the work of important

contemporary novelists such as Tash Aw and Amitav Ghosh. We also celebrated the launch of local author Juli Min's debut novel, *Shanghaianders*. Ms. Min was formerly editor of *The Shanghai Literary Review*, and it was an honor to meet her in person and celebrate her book launch in the city where her novel is set. I also want to express our appreciation to Professor Emeritus Bruce Reynolds, a RAS member, for stepping up to moderate a discussion with author Adam Brookes about his latest book, *Fragile Cargo*. We feel grateful that Mr. Brookes gave his precious early morning time in Washington, D.C., to speak with us online. Adam was an eloquent and dynamic speaker, and Bruce was remarkably well-prepared and charismatic. We also want to thank our long-time partner, Garden Books, for providing the venue and the excellent technical support.

Our Art Focus Convener, Julie Chun, continues to curate thoughtful annual series on topics of art in China. Her 2023-2024 series "New Perspective of Art in Shanghai", critically assessed the pluralist aspects of local encounter and reception of art from abroad and within China. Beginning with a discourse on renewed directions in art and design at the Yuz Museum to an introduction of global sound art at the West Bund Pompidou Museum, a deep-dive into art's relationship with money at Shanghai galleries to deconstructing the 14<sup>th</sup> Shanghai Biennale "Cosmos Cinema." Our members were able to gain contemporaneous insights into the complex workings of visual art within the cross-currents of internationalism/localism. We especially thank Julie for serving as the RAS lead and liaison for the historical exhibition *Archives Palimpsest: Restaging the R.A.S. Library (1900-1930)* at the Rockbund Art Museum (RAM), which is now housed in the original RAS building. In addition to securing rare archival books and journals for the exhibition and managing the loan agreement, she still found time to convene an invaluable Art Focus session at RAM and pen a discerning review, which can be found in this journal.

Over the past year, Stories of Things helmed by Robert Martin, highlighted a roster of eleven presenters with their 'things' and related 'stories'. The speakers were mostly from our own RAS family, demonstrating the impressive depth of knowledge and passion among our members and friends. We would like to thank Melinda Liu, Alan Babington-Smith, Zhang Dasheng, Kylie Bisman, Maxence Lucas, Kolleen Guy, Gian Luca Scarpa, Karolina Pawlik, Yolanda Vom Hagen

and Autumn Cui for sharing their objects and illuminating narratives. A special thank you again to Consul General Burney for not only presenting the Consulate's official guestbook from the early decades after China's reopening, but for also generously hosting Stories of Things twice at his stunning residence. All of the objects presented over the past year reflect a wide and diversified range of experience: from the above-mentioned guestbook with its royal entries, to a household expense book from a frugal Shanghai family at the end of the Cultural Revolution; from a traditional and once ubiquitous black Chinese bicycle to a 1940 lapel pin of the China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC); from a fresh leaf from Asia's oldest imported plane tree, to an acupuncturist's model ear; from a leather travel bag from the 1960s to a bottle of Yunnan red wine created from seedlings brought from Europe by Catholic priests in the 1860's. And finally, from a calligraphy-inscribed, Ming eramic brushpot to none other than a highly cherished piece of Tibetan yak dung!

The Film Club continues to draw enthusiastic audiences and new members. Through the skillful curation by Katherine Song, it has screened films with a wide range of themes and topics. *The Velvet Queen* is a French documentary that explores the quest for the elusive snow leopard in the Tibetan Plateau, a rare nature feature offering a calming and meditative experience. *Back to Back, Face to Face*, a 1994 film made by fifth-generation helmers Huang Jianxin and Yang Yazhou, represents Chinese comedy-drama at its zenith. *The Crossing*, China's Millennial generation director Bai Xue's debut feature delves into an underworld of parallel trading along the Shenzhen-Hong Kong border and the struggle of dual identity in a new generation of border crossers. *The White Countess*, a James Ivory and Ismail Merchant production in 2005, depicts the life of the Russian Diaspora in Shanghai during the late 1930s, set against the backdrop of the impending Japanese invasion. We also organised a special group visit to the 26th Shanghai International Film Festival in June watching an Australian film *Limbo*. The RAS thanks Radisson Collection Xingguo Hotel for its gracious support by providing an elegant venue for our film screenings. Under the leadership of Mr. Howard Bennett, the Radisson staff exhibited impeccable professionalism and delivered generous hospitality to the RAS team and members.

RAS also aims to build relationships and to enhance the social fabric of our community in Shanghai. In 2024 we launched a new

focus group on food, under the leadership of Lily Chow. This led to some memorable dinners at local Chinese restaurants, with explanations of the cultural and historical meaning of the dishes. Our Beyond the City focus group helped us to walk off the calories we had gained from the dinners (!), by introducing our community to historical walks throughout the city, covering the Suzhou creek and Shanghai's historic temples, among other places.

While food provides an excellent entry into Chinese culture, so also does its body cultivation arts. Members and friends of RAS were introduced to different aspects of Traditional Chinese Medicine, as well as *qigong* and *bagua* movement practices in a series of popular events organized by Daniela Nuzzaci for our General Programs in the Spring.

Last, and certainly not least, I would like to record the Society's deep appreciation for the work of our librarian, Sven Serrano, and his team of volunteers who keep the reading room open for regular members of the society, as well as providing access to visiting scholars who wish to consult our archives.

*James Miller, PhD  
Vice-President  
Royal Asiatic Society, China*

## **RAS China Memberships and Donations 2023-2024**

### **Honorary Memberships**

Honorary Members	7
Fellows of RAS China	2
Complimentary Institutional memberships	1

### **Paid Memberships**

#### **Membership Type**

Individual Members	82
Joint/Family Members	17
Young Professional Members	6
Overseas—Individual Members	1
Lifetime Members	6
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>122</b>

### **RAS China Events, 26 Nov 2023 – 26 Nov 2024**

Art Focus (Julie Chun)	11
Asian Philosophies and Religions (James Miller)	3
Beyond City (Various)	2
Book Club (Various)	5
Film Club (Katherine Song)	5
Food Focus (Lily Chow)	3
General Programs (Various)	4
History Club (James Miller)	1
Special Events (Spring Social, Journal Launch, and AGM)	3
Stories of Things (Robert Martin)	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>41</b>

# SECTION 1

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**Fresh Perspectives**



# MUKDEN'S FOREIGN COLONY IN THE DAYS OF MANCHUKUO

BY PAUL FRENCH

## ABSTRACT

*The foreign colony of inter-war Mukden (Shenyang) is rather forgotten. It was a small, tight-knit foreign community ranging from businessmen and their families to diplomats and missionaries along with ancillary staff and the occasional sojourner. This incestuous and febrile atmosphere among the small foreign community only intensified with the Japanese takeover of Manchuria and the creation of Manchukuo.*

*This article attempts to recreate a snapshot of that foreign world of Mukden in the first years of Japanese occupation—particularly the Mukden Club, the major gathering spot for the city's foreign colony. That world is best described by a number of its denizens and occasional sojourners including Monroe Hall, an American diplomat stationed in the city; Phylis Harrop, a British woman who worked as a secretary in the city; and Harold Acton who sojourned there for some time in the 1930s.*

*Though obviously far smaller than the foreign colonies of Shanghai, Tientsin (Tianjin) or Peking, Mukden's close community was interesting for the views it recorded of life in first warlord China, then Manchukuo, and the declining Sino-Japanese relationship just prior to total war.*

## The Foreign Colony of Mukden

The English aesthete, translator, scholar, and writer Harold Acton (1904-1994) lived in Peking between 1932 and 1939. During his time in the city, living in a beautifully decorated *hutong* courtyard house, Acton studied the Chinese language, traditional drama, and poetry. He translated a number of poems and plays (some of the latter in collaboration with L.C. Arlington) as well as Feng Menglong's seventeenth century short stories, published as *Four Cautionary Tales* (on collaboration with Lee Yi-Hsieh and an introduction by Arthur Waley).<sup>1</sup> He was also extremely social, entertaining guests ranging from the actress Anna May Wong to fellow Peking aesthetes Desmond Parsons and Laurence Sickman, and writing a comic-novel of Peking expatriate manners, *Peonies and Ponies*.<sup>2</sup>

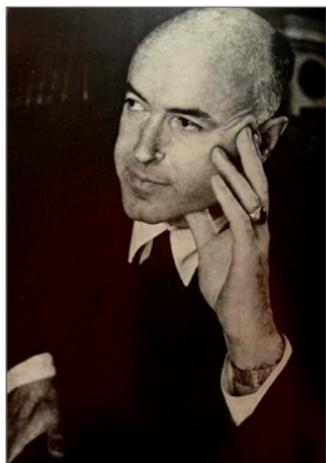


Figure 1: Harold Acton

His descriptions of the city at the time are a fascinating glimpse at Mukden in the first year of Japanese rule.<sup>4</sup>

Arriving in the city Acton was well aware that it was only several years after the assassination of the warlord Chang Tso-lin (Zhang Zuolin, 1875-1928)—the ‘Old Marshal’—who had been the major power broker in Mukden and across Manchuria. His successor, Chang Hsueh-liang (Zhang Xueliang, 1901-2001)—the ‘Young Marshal’—was seen by Acton as ‘a weak voluptuary, entirely immersed in opium and concubines...’<sup>5</sup> Acton had arrived in a Japanese-controlled Manchuria, in the process of being officially renamed Manchukuo. The Japanese were declaring on billboards that Mukden would

Though most closely associated with Peking, Acton did travel around China spending time exploring Tienstin (Tianjin), Nanking (Nanjing), Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Macao. He was not particularly impressed by any of these locations disliking Shanghai’s humidity and finding Macao’s cuisine ‘rich and oily’ for instance.<sup>3</sup> Soon after arriving in China in 1932 Acton visited Mukden at a time when Japan’s recent occupation of Manchuria was being solidified and established. His



Figure 2: The grand Yamato Hotel in 1930

become ‘the Geneva of the East’, both an aspiration and a dig at the ineffectual Geneva-based League of Nations who had done little to prevent Japan’s land grab in northern China.<sup>6</sup>

Acton first attempted to stay at the Yamato Hotel, the local branch of the Japanese-run chain (owned and operated by the South Manchurian Railway) that had branches in Dairen (Dalian), Harbin, Xining (Changchun) and elsewhere in Manchuria. Though originally opened on the site in 1910, the hotel had been newly rebuilt in 1929. However, it was full, and he was able only to sit for a while in the lounge:

[...] great palm trees spreading over huddled chairs, all occupied by middle-aged men in frock coats[...] Small Japanese officers fussed about, and military cars kept rolling up to vomit another batch of them.<sup>7</sup>

Acton had a letter of introduction to Monroe Hall, an American diplomat who had recently been posted to Mukden from the American Consulate in Kobe.<sup>8</sup> Hall lived in a ‘fenced-in modern villa’, which at the time were being built in Mukden’s suburbs to attract both Japanese and foreign businessmen to the city.<sup>9</sup> Though western in design and stuccoed, Hall’s villa had a military guard to deter bandits and kidnappers, both still a rampant scourge in Manchuria. Acton thought the air redolent of a ‘derelict railway siding’ and noted that most of the villas around Hall’s were owned by various warlord generals. He stayed with Hall anyway.

Eventually Acton found his way, as virtually all visiting foreigners did in Mukden between the wars, to the Mukden Club.

### **Cocktails at the Mukden Club**

Phyllis Harrop had left her native Manchester for China in 1929. She arrived in Shanghai where she worked for the telephone company before becoming Sir Victor Sassoon’s secretary working from an office in the Cathay Hotel. Separated from her German husband, Phyllis spent some time in Peking and Dairen before taking a job with the Chi Tung Tobacco Company, a subsidiary of British-American Tobacco, in Mukden. She arrived in the city in May 1935 and would stay for eighteen months.<sup>10</sup>

Restarting her life after a failed marriage in Shanghai, Harrop did



**Figure 3:** The Mukden Club in the winter of 1935

not initially find much appealing about Mukden—dirty due to dust storms from the Gobi, too hot in summer, bitter cold in the winter. Given that Harrop describes her Yamato Hotel bedroom as six feet by nine feet, devoid of any furniture except a bed, chair and small writing desk, no clothes hangers, and the staff rude, Harold Acton was perhaps fortunate in being turned away and finding accommodation with Monroe Hall. The Mukden Club became Harrop's home-from-home, close to her office. She transferred her luggage to a small, clean and comfortable (and cheap) Chinese hotel adjacent to the club.

Both Acton and Harrop found the Mukden Club a little denuded of foreigners. Numbers were certainly down from the time, just before the Japanese invasion, when the newly formed local Rotary Club could boast of over fifty members.<sup>11</sup> Whether the Mukden Club excluded Chinese members is not entirely clear. Around 1921 the son of the ruling war lord Chang Tso-lin, Chang Hsueh-liang, then 18-years-old, had been a member and enjoyed the tennis courts, apparently also participating in a hand of poker now and then.<sup>12</sup> But he was perhaps a special case. An anonymous American journalist visited in 1926 and wrote that 'the club has an air of easy informality which some others [foreign clubs in China] lack and because of the lack of other places it is the daily clearing house of social intercourse.'<sup>13</sup>

Things changed when the Japanese moved to occupy Manchuria. In September 1931 the US Vice Consul at Mukden, William Lynch, reported that skirmishing came to the doors of the Mukden Club.

A Chinese chauffeur was killed opposite the Mukden Club at about two a.m. The owner of the car died in the morning from wounds received. Stray bullets entered the Mukden Club and in addition damaged the motor cars of several Americans in the Club compound. No foreigners were hurt.<sup>14</sup>

It was possible the Japanese were aiming to unsettle the foreign press corps then in Mukden for the fighting. A group of western reporters, including Hallett Abend of the *New York Times*, had made the Club their temporary base.<sup>15</sup>

Since their occupation the Japanese had ousted some of the western oil companies that had been based in the city and by 1935 only a greatly reduced branch office of Standard Oil remained. It was a similar situation with the foreign banks. Only the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank remained with a functioning branch in the city. Given this deficit some older Russian émigrés in the city had been admitted to membership to boost the numbers. A few British businessmen, the consul, and their families remained, as well as Monroe Hall and the American diplomatic presence. There was also the staff of the Mukden Medical College founded by Scottish medical-missionaries in 1911.

Harrop also noted some French businesspeople she had known previously in Shanghai. Other nationalities making up the numbers included Danes, Italians, and Dutch. Many had somewhat odd jobs, Acton recalled—a director of the Manchurian postal service, ‘something or other’ with the South Manchurian Railway.<sup>16</sup> Also present, but somewhat wary of the foreign colony and the Mukden Club were a group of Germans, technicians largely employed by the Japanese in the new iron foundries and ammonia plants being constructed on the city’s outskirts. Still, both Acton and Harrop recalled it was a small and tight-knit community: ‘It did not take long to know who everybody was...’<sup>17</sup>

The Club itself was well-furnished though had perhaps seen better days with a membership of several hundred. Yet it still retained squash courts, tennis and badminton courts, an open-air swimming pool, a bowling alley, a ladies bar, and a separate bar for men only. At the rear of the club was an open compound for exercising ponies. Relatively close by was a golf course.

Acton claimed all the foreign colony gathered for nightly cocktails



**Figure 4 and 5:** Club summer facilities in the 1930s—the open air pool and tennis courts

‘in a spacious saloon with a Russian orchestra playing Glinka’s *Life for the Czar*. The waitresses were Russian, very pink and blonde.’<sup>18</sup> The music was appreciated by the Russian émigrés who, Acton noted, seemed rather stuck in a pre-Bolshevik past: ‘They were overdressed for the occasion, in long gloves and Parisian hats; they smoked cigarettes through long holders and were exaggerated in their postures: they belonged to 1913.’<sup>19</sup>

As the Japanese were increasingly making life difficult for foreigners in Mukden—Acton and Harrop both report rudeness from officials, policemen, soldiers, and hotel staff—the foreign population continued to dwindle. The Japanese occupiers assumed every foreigner was a spy and no foreigners, except some diplomats and very senior remaining directors of foreign concerns, were permitted to have a telephone line

installed. Phyllis Harrop's colleague at Chi Tung Tobacco, Francis Marshall, an advertising executive, had his apartment ransacked: so convinced were the Japanese that he was a spy.

## **Out and About**

Acton saw the city as divided into its modern, foreign area (as he saw it) around the Yamato, by the Mukden Club and out to the new villas of the suburbs where Monroe Hall lived, while a "Chinese city" still existed. It was composed of 'long, straight and unevenly paved streets' lined with curio stores (which Harrop maintained had little of interest that hadn't been looted by the Japanese army when they occupied the city), lacquer signboards for various trades, and massed ranks of rickshaw pullers competing for fares.<sup>20</sup> The Japanese military presence in the Chinese district was heavy and beggars (Chinese and Russian) legion.

The centre of the Chinese city was the Mukden Palace, the replica Forbidden City built in the 1600s. It was open to the public in 1932. Harrop recalled that its walls were crumbling, nobody was taking care of it or maintaining the place. Acton found this decrepitude charming.

The only other activity was the cinema. Mukden had several, all under Japanese ownership though occasionally a British or American film would be screened, leading to a full house and the migration of almost the entire membership of the Mukden Club to the theatre. Whatever the movie, the preceding newsreels would be Japanese and highly militaristic in tone.

In the years after the departures of both Acton and Harrop, the foreign community continued to diminish in Mukden. The foreign consulates were reduced to operating on skeleton staff. By the end of 1936 the Mukden Club could only claim only 50 paid up members but its numbers were significantly boosted by visitors to Manchuria and foreigners living in various other, less well socially-served Manchurian towns and cities—'its card room looks like a monument to solitaire', wrote the visiting American reporter Jack Foster.<sup>21</sup> After Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war between Japan and the Allies the Club was converted into an Internment Camp for those allied nationals left in the city. The 45 internees were eventually liberated in September 1945 and included 35 Belgian and Dutch missionaries along with a few British, Dutch, American and Canadian citizens.<sup>22</sup>

In 1949 the veteran American correspondent in China, Clyde Farnsworth, visited Mukden and spent time with Angus Ward, the last American consul-general in the city. Ward was locked inside his consulate, his radio confiscated, and his consular staff placed under arrest by communist soldiers. Farnsworth wandered over to the Mukden Club hoping for a drink. He found its outside walls daubed in red paint—GET THE AMERICAN IMPERIALISTS OUT OF CHINA!<sup>23</sup>

The Mukden Club was closed. It never reopened.

*Paul French* was born in London and lived and worked in Shanghai for many years. His book *Midnight in Peking* was a *New York Times* bestseller and a *BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week*. Both *Midnight in Peking* and his book *City of Devils: A Shanghai Noir* are in development for film. In November 2024 he published *Her Lotus Year: China, the Roaring Twenties and the Making of Wallis Simpson*.



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# MONEY MATTERS: DR WERNER BURGER AND QING COINS

BY EDITH TERRY

## ABSTRACT

*Even before the antique coin collection of the late Werner Burger was put up for sale at auction by his widow, it was known to be special. The numismatic archive comprised of seven tons of Qing dynasty coins. And it provided support for Burger's theory that the imperial monetary system—and not the opium trade as many believed—was the Qing Dynasty's Achilles solely heel in the 19th century.*

Dr. Werner Burger died on 15 November 2021 at the age of 85. He spent most of his life in Hong Kong, after two years in Shanghai at the height of the Cultural Revolution. His was the rare life dominated by a single obsession—to develop a complete set of the coinage used by China's last dynasty, the Qing empire, which ruled from 1644 to 1911. He came closer than any living being to accomplishing that task, with a collection of over 100,000 coins.

'I am the greatest numismatic collector in the world', Burger said in an interview a few years before his death. His 100,000 coins were distilled from two million coins that came to him through a Hong Kong friend, an importer of scrap metal from Indonesia, plus his own relentless search to fill gaps. The two million coins weighed 7 tons and came in 70 bags weighing 100 kg each. The selected 100,000 encompass 14 reigns from 90 mints located across the empire, from Taiwan in the east to Xinjiang in the west.

Most of the coins were cast in brass, an alloy of copper and zinc. But they also include rare iron, zinc and leaded copper; cast when there



**Figure 1:** Werner Burger in Xinjiang in the 1980s

were shortages of the metals used to alloy brass during emergencies and in remote locations. Outside this ‘core’ collection, there were also ‘peripheral’ collections of coins that had uses outside the monetary system, and bits and pieces that reflected the casting process, like ‘coin trees’ plucked from moulds still attached to the channels through which brass had cooled and hardened.

Along the way he became the first, and until recently the only, PhD in Chinese numismatics, the study of coins. After his death, his widow, Lucy Burger, spent two years winnowing the collection down to 21,457 pieces with the help of the second PhD in Chinese numismatics, Tong Yu, a graduate of Hebei Normal University, and Alex Chengyu Fang, a professor of linguistics and translation at City University of Hong Kong. These have been digitised in a database project that includes valuations based on recent market transactions and is divided into 21,202 ‘basic’ items valued at less than 50,000 yuan (US\$7,088.48) per coin, and 255 ‘precious’ items valued at over 50,000 yuan each.

The coins and database are seeking a home, preferably a university library or museum in Hong Kong—at a price—along with Dr. Burger’s enormous archival collection. Three auctions by Spink & Sons, the major numismatic auction house, have sold ‘peripheral’ coins from the collection, including 1,043 coin charms, a collection that was unknown even to those close to him.

These coins, manufactured both for burial as imitations of the real thing and as lucky charms, have a history dating back to at least the Han dynasty. Dr. Fang’s catalogue for Spink—the third in the series of auction catalogues for the Lucy and Werner Burger ‘peripheral’ collections—sets a new standard for collectors of these aesthetically pleasing good luck items.<sup>1</sup>

Otherwise, to get a closer look at Dr. Burger’s achievement, you’ll need a sturdy table to hold the 8.2 kilogram, two-volume *Ch’ing Cash* published by Hong Kong University Press in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Priced at HK\$6,000 (US\$770.31), it works out at HK\$1 (13 cents in US dollars) per coin for the 6,000 coins it illustrates with rubbings in 53 large fold-out charts. His earlier book, *Ch’ing Cash until 1735*, was auctioned by Spink in the first of its Burger auctions for HK\$1,900 (US\$243.93).<sup>3</sup>

#### A PASSION FOR NUMISMATICS

Born in Munich, Germany in 1936, Burger became fascinated by the Chinese language as a teenager when a teacher took him to an

exhibition of Chinese paintings and was unable to explain the meaning of the calligraphy on the works of art.<sup>4</sup> He was one of eight students of Chinese at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU). When he graduated in 1962 at the age of 26, his professor suggested that he go to work as a translator. He thought this was ridiculous, because without direct experience, translation was a theoretical exercise.

~~It~~ was the height of the Cold War, and just getting a visa to China was nearly impossible. Only one Chinese embassy in Europe, based in neutral Switzerland, was able to give them out. It was six months before he was able to get on a train for Beijing, via Czechoslovakia and Russia. When he arrived in Beijing, he was told his work permit had been shifted to Shanghai. There he went to work, teaching German and studying Chinese on the side. His teacher was criticised for teaching a foreigner and, in 1965, the school where he was teaching was shut down and Burger was invited to become a sheep farmer in Suzhou.

That was when he bought a ticket to Hong Kong, where he found work teaching German at the Goethe-Institut and writing for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. By the time he met Tsai Yui-mei (蔡逸美) at a dinner party in 1975, he was well along the way in his exploration of Qing coins and was soon to publish his first book on the subject. The original was his doctoral dissertation at LMU, submitted in 1974 under the supervision of historian Professor Herbert Franke, head of the Sinology Department. Tsai, who goes by the name Lucy, was the elegant daughter of a Tokyo-based diamond dealer and became a willing partner in her future husband's coin obsession.

During his two years in Shanghai, Burger spent most of his time in the nearly deserted Shanghai Public Library, studying history, and gradually becoming interested in numismatics, an established field in Europe and North America since the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century with separate categories for Greek, Roman and European numismatics. 'I was the first and only PhD in Chinese numismatics', Burger said to the author in 2017. 'My professors said, "Go talk to the economists". The economists said, "Go talk to the Sinologists."'

Numismatics as a field of inquiry began much earlier in China than in Europe, with a lost work, *Qian Zhi* (錢志) or *Quan Zhi* (泉志) by Liu Qian (劉潛 484-550), according to the introduction to Burger's first book, *Ch'ing Cash until 1735*. The first European treatise on Chinese money was in *Description Géographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique et Physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise*,

the French classic on China by Jean Baptiste du Halde. The chapter on money *De la Monnoye qui en difference tems a eu cours à la Chine* was just a few pages and a table.<sup>5</sup> After the 19<sup>th</sup> century, few other books were written on Chinese coinage until Burger's two canonical works and David Hartill's *Qing Cash*, published by the Royal Numismatic Society in 2003.<sup>6</sup>

How Burger's obsession began is murky, even in his own telling, but that it was sustained for nearly 60 years is beyond doubt. In *Ch'ing Cash until 1735* (the reigns of Qing dynastic founder Nurhaci and successors Abahai, Shunzhi, Kangxi, and Yongzheng) Burger pays tribute to his friend the scrap dealer, Lau Chi Man or (Liu Zhiwen 劉志文 in pinyin) who gave him a free hand choosing the pieces he wanted. That was a lot. Writing in 1976, Burger says,

During the last years I have sorted out a total of 70 sacks of 100 kg each, which makes approximately 7 tons. If one calculates 1 cash as weighing 1 mace, then that adds up to approximately 2 million cash. In Indonesia cash circulated as small change until the 1940s, and they had been coming to the 南洋 Nan-Yang since the Sung and Ming dynasties in payment of spices, fine woods, etc. Cash were taken there on a regular basis but since there were hardly any Chinese with numismatic interests who would have selected the rare ones, they gave a clearer picture of what was actually produced than the cash still available in China.<sup>7</sup>

In *Ch'ing Cash to 1735*, Burger selected out the 'rare emperors' using a Japanese coding system ranking the rarity from 1 to 10, in use for 100 years in Japan. Japan had issued coins since 1626, spawning a lively interest in both Chinese and Japanese numismatics among scholars. Japanese scholars had deciphered the different styles of writing that enabled the dating of their coins, which were identified by a single reign title, Kanei, over 240 years. He leaned extensively on Japanese sources for his first book.

The use of different writing from one year to the next was also a characteristic of Chinese coins. These used a more complex system than the relatively simple Japanese approach, with master coins differentiated by both reign and year, distributed to individual mints across the country. In addition to writing style, different marks were

included on the master coins, much as banknotes today have security features and embossing to deter counterfeits.

The emperor would approve the originals, crafted in ivory, before production of ‘master’ and ‘mother’ cash—approved versions and moulds. Both the use of marks and the production process made it possible to authenticate coins and distinguish them from forgeries, which were abundant. Part of Burger’s inspiration was to use his coin stash to best the leading contemporary Japanese expert on Qing coins, Hanawa Shirō (埴史朗) in his 1973 book *Shincho senpu* (清朝錢譜).<sup>8</sup> What Hanawa lacked, Burger had plenty of—the actual coins—to be able to sort out unwanted and accidental casting errors.

Having ‘completed’ his PhD, and published his dissertation, Burger was still not satisfied. He wanted to extend his research to the whole span of the Qing dynasty, not just the first five reigns. Moreover, while the early Qing rulers had operated a relatively short list of mints, starting with the long reign of Qianlong, the empire had set up multiple mints in each province. Surely, Burger thought, there must be records?

### A HIDDEN TROVE

Alfred Kaiming Chiu, head librarian at the Harvard Yenching Institute until his retirement in 1964, gave him a clue. The First Historical Archives in Beijing (中国第一历史档案馆), home to historical documents managed by the National Archives Administration of China, should have mint reports, according to Chiu. Werner and Lucy began visiting the archives, only to be turned away for 16 years. Lucy brought gifts. Burger merely fumed. But in 1996, when the archives building was being renovated, workmen discovered a room whose entrance had been sealed with concrete in 1919.

The contents of the secret room turned out to be 30 million documents, including 2,838 scrolls from the Grand Secretariat of Monetary Matters. Tang Yinian, (唐益年), the archivist who had turned him away for so many years, by this time had become a friend. Tang created a micro-film of the documents that ran to 43,742 pages, and allowed Burger to make his own copy, which he had bound in 60 volumes. He was also able to acquire mint records from Xinjiang and Tibet, which had been under military rule and left out of the Grand Secretariat records.

It took him two years to sort through the mint reports, and another

six years of research to understand the contents. He was able to match his coin collection with the mint records. 'If an official document states that a mint cast coins for 60 years, it is generally quite simple to find 60 different types of coin,' Burger wrote in the preface to *Ch'ing Cash*.<sup>9</sup> 'The difficult task comes in knowing how to arrange them by years. By comparing coins from other mints, I believe my arrangement is highly accurate.' The mint reports solved another problem that had been nagging Burger, the Yunnan mints. Yunnan had nine mints and during the 60 years of Qianlong's reign, there were potentially 540 identical, yet slightly different coins. 'As the minting of coins was a state monopoly, its practice was a state secret,' Burger wrote, also in the preface to *Ch'ing Cash*,

The sole purpose of minting the coins with different styles of writing each year, including those with additional dots and half-moons, was to keep tabs on the mint masters in order to make certain that they weren't casting inferior and underweight cash—so-called mint forgeries. The mint masters were not informed about how to differentiate between the years, and a number of dishonest mint masters were caught by the authorities. The official documents I had gained access to were created by provincial governors for the Grand Secretariat; therefore, details about the mint marks were deliberately excluded.<sup>10</sup>

But the most valuable information from the mint reports were the mint statistics, which gave the precise number of strings of coins cast by a particular mint in a given year.

With thousands of coins to sort through, I found that even after 250 years, the number of remaining coins proportionally reflects the production figures with surprising accuracy,' he continued.

'I then went a step further and added up all the cast coins in each year.'

This was Burger's eureka moment. As a rough calculation of money supply, with a plus or minus five percent degree of accuracy, it was a first for any Asian economy. Then Burger took it yet another step,

dividing his numbers on total coins in circulation by population data, to arrive at figures for the number of coins per person, a proxy Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita. Suddenly he had the key to not just the economy, but the politics of late Qing and its “100 years of humiliation”.

#### WHO WAS TO BLAME

Generally, Britain, in particular, and western powers in general are blamed for China’s 100 years of humiliation, to the 1949 founding of the People’s Republic of China. On the monetary front, the outflow of silver to pay for opium was seen as the cause of drastic devaluation of the currency against the price of silver. ‘Silver is expensive, cash is cheap’ (銀貴錢賤) became a slogan during the Daoguang reign (1782-1850). It became ‘an excuse for war’, said Burger. It also became a new and compelling explanation for the downfall of the Qing empire in 1911, in Burger’s view. ‘One of the most important events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Opium War, may appear to have nothing to do with the subject of a book on Ch’ing cash coins’, he wrote in his preface to *Ch’ing Cash*. ‘But everything is interconnected, 175 years ago as well as today’.

Burger gave the most detailed public account of his hypothesis about the Qing devaluations in a talk to the Foreign Correspondents Club of Hong Kong on 17 May 2016.<sup>11</sup>

‘What were the real reasons that a proud and prosperous 18<sup>th</sup> century China turned into a run-down 19<sup>th</sup> century failed state?’, Burger asked. Then he went on to state, with an obvious dose of hyperbole, his personal theory that imperialism, colonialism, western exploitation, opium and the drain of silver had nothing to do with it’.

Instead, Burger proposed his alternative hypothesis: that the root cause was monetary mismanagement, based on his vast empirical research. The Qing monetary system was bimetallic, with unminted silver representing value and minted brass coins, or ‘cash’ serving as currency—the word cash comes from pidgin, a hybrid dialect used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century China trade, and derives from the Sanskrit word for copper, or *karsa*; brass is the result when copper is alloyed with zinc. The basic units were from 1 to 50 tael of silver and round, square-holed brass coins, with the official rate set at 1,000 coins to one tael of silver, equivalent to 37.7 grams.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of Qianlong (1735-1796) the

currency was slightly overvalued, and castings were 16 to 18 coins per year for every Chinese. That was the secret of Qianlong's success in the war that brought China the two new territories of Xinjiang and Tibet, Burger surmised in an interview with the author. A soldier's pay was 1.5 to 2 taels equivalent per month, but he was paid in cash according to the official rate. Effectively he got a 10 to 15% bonus every month to send home to his family.

In the 1780s, debased cash flooded into China from Vietnam, whose rulers had leased mines to the local Chinese, who they commissioned to cast coins for the state. 'What they cast in addition was of no concern to the Vietnamese', Burger said. 'They cast mountains of small coins with a variety of Chinese reign titles. Then they went shopping with them in Canton. They bought porcelain, soy sauce, vinegar, and other items they could sell at a good profit back home'.

The exchange rate for these forged coins, made mainly of zinc, rose to 1,200 coins per silver tael (in other words, a coin that was previously valued at 0.001 of a silver tael would be worth only 0.0008 of a tael). This meant that that same soldier would get less for his pay calculated in silver terms. The Qianlong emperor responded immediately, ordering every yamen or government office to buy the forgeries at scrap metal prices, collecting so much that provinces could use the scrap to melt into authorised coins for years to come. The exchange rate dropped back to 900 cash per tael.

By 1820, the exchange rate of cash against silver was back to 1,200, but both the Jiaqing emperor (1796-1820) and the Daoguang emperor (1820-1850) were too weak to follow in their father's and grandfather's footsteps. By the 1830s the exchange rate was over 1,500 coins per silver tael and as high as 2,500. Opium came into the picture when Napoleon's invasion of Spain cut off the supply of silver to Britain and it began paying for tea in opium from their plantations in India. When China began paying for its growing opium imports in silver, leading to an outflow replacing the massive inflow of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it became a trigger for the confrontations that led to the First Opium War (1839-1842), China's defeat and the surrender of Hong Kong in the Treaty of Nanjing.

Even if the forged coins still represented a minor share of the official coinage, the lack of action was in part because of official corruption. Nearly every official benefited. Taxes had to be paid in silver, and officials received silver to pay soldiers and other government

employees. ‘Their salary was in [terms of] silver but they received only cash at the official rate of 1,000 to one’, Burger said. ‘The officials had now to change half of the received silver into cash coins and could pocket the rest’.

Thus, the regular rebellions of 19<sup>th</sup> century China, climaxing in the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), occurred at a time when soldiers were reluctant to fight due to the massive depreciation of their pay, and mints refused to cast coins at any exchange rate over 2,000 coins per tael because they had to pay for the raw materials of copper and zinc in silver. Burger’s trove of mint reports showed that in 1863 only one new coin was cast per person per year. By 1874, the amount of coins per person coming out of the mints had sunk to one-third of a coin per person. ‘Under these conditions, all attempts of economic reform and progress were bound to fail’ he concluded. ‘China had no chance to catch up with the rest of the world and so lost a whole century through corruption and greedy officials’.

#### CONTESTED LEGACY?

The last five years of Burger’s life were afflicted by a degenerative nerve condition, Charcot Foot, that kept him in a wheelchair, though he was no less exuberant for his pain. He wanted to be remembered for his challenge to clichés about external causes of Qing decline and, despite his disability, was enthusiastic about sharing the conclusions of his research. His wife, Lucy, and her collaborators want him to be remembered for a staggering contribution to scholarship by finding a generous donor to buy the core collection and library as a university endowment.

Burger’s theories remain controversial in China, within the rarefied circle of experts in numismatics. However his persistence in building his collection has astonished observers. And if nothing else, it revealed a wealth of detail on the coinage system throughout the Qing period. His investigations helped uncover how carved ivory models were shown to the emperor before coins were struck, how hand-made master coins were used to cast the working moulds.

Qing cash is not pretty. There are coins in the collection that were used as ballast for ships plying the trade from Indonesia to Hong Kong and beyond among the two million coins Burger sifted in his Chai Wan warehouse. But each coin has been documented. After Burger, nobody can ever quite look at Chinese cash coins in the same way again. It is

no longer a matter of conjecture. Can you see the dots and dashes that mean the coin is real, and not counterfeit? What is its provenance and history? Now, there is certainty. That is Burger's doing.

**Edith Terry** (*edith.terry@gmail.com*) is a writer and journalist and has lived in Hong Kong since 2000. A specialist in the political economy of East Asia, she was opinion editor for the South China Morning Post, Tokyo bureau chief and East Asian economics correspondent for the Toronto Globe and Mail Newspaper, Canada correspondent for Business Week, and has written books including *How Asia Got Rich* (Routledge 2002). She lived and worked in Beijing in the late 1970s and early 1980s for the National Council for US-China Trade and Altman, Inc., an import-export representative. She writes mainly on business and the arts, and is working on a book about the cultural and intellectual history of China's fascination with jade.



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# PEARL S. BUCK AND THE FUNDAMENTALIST–MODERNIST MISSIONARY CONTROVERSY IN CHINA

BY SVEN A. SERRANO

## ABSTRACT

*In the 1920s, a young woman who had been raised by missionaries would write an article for the pre-eminent Christian newspaper in Shanghai, questioning the relevance of missionaries in modern China. Informed by her personal experience of growing up in the Chinese countryside, she criticised the arrogance of missionaries who dismissed Chinese culture and beliefs. As well as contributing to a warm debate challenging the traditional views of missionaries in China, this article helped articulate her thoughts about Chinese life in subsequent literary endeavours. Her body of work, mainly about China, would enable her to become the first American woman awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.*

## FERTILE SOIL—THE GROWTH OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS IN MODERN CHINA

With the bloody victory of the Seven Nation Army over the Boxer and Qing forces in 1900, the Christian Church in China had all restrictions lifted on their proselytising campaigns. For the long-constrained missionaries in China, the defeat of the last anti-foreign uprising was a watershed moment.

As Kenneth Scott Latourette observed, the guarantees of protection by the Qing and later Republican government ‘allowed missionaries to expand their activities with unprecedented freedom and support leading to a rapid increase in missionary work in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.’<sup>1</sup>

By the mid-1920s, as mission activity in the interior was expanding with the construction of new missions, schools, and clinics, China itself was going through seismic historic change. In six short years from 1911-1916, the country went from being governed by the imperial Qing Dynasty to a Republic, then to a total breakdown of authority, as warlord generals assumed control of fragmented provinces. In this new environment, the various churches tried to adapt and re-invent their approach to bringing the gospel to China.<sup>2</sup>

In Shanghai, where order prevailed under the guard of foreign gunboats, the Christian printing presses worked non-stop. The *Chinese Recorder* (*jiā wù zá zhì*)<sup>3</sup> was published in the treaty port city by the Presbyterian Mission Board. This non-denominational paper was the leading publication for the English language missionary community since its inception in 1868. Edited by Reverend Frank Rawlinson from 1914, a champion of liberal theology and a supporter of the post-Qing nationalism of Sun Yat-sen (who was himself a Christian),<sup>4</sup> the *Recorder* had become a sounding board for more liberal approaches to the Christian project in the country.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1:** Pearl S. Buck, the daughter of missionaries, would become the first American woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.<sup>6</sup>

Attitudes among the veteran missionaries at this moment were changing. Some were looking for ways in which they could gain acceptance from the Chinese, as many of these still viewed them as aggressive foreign agents intent on eclipsing traditional Chinese philosophies with their own single faith.<sup>7</sup> Many, like the *Recorder* editor Rev. Rawlinson, came to believe that by separating themselves from the imperialist causes of the West, from their soldiers and gunboats, they could promote a fairer, more open version of Christianity that could become genuinely Chinese.<sup>8</sup>

Traditional views, however, prevailed among most of the church community in China and their members were resistant to the new mood of revolutionary change.<sup>9</sup>

It is in the pages of the *Chinese Recorder* we find a 1927 article by an American author destined for fame with her soon-to-be-published breakthrough novel, *The Good Earth*, one Pearl Sydenstricker Buck.

### PEARL BUCK'S DEEP CHINESE ROOTS

The Presbyterian Church (of England and America), of which Pearl and her parents Absalom and Carie Sydenstricker were active agents, began its mission to China in 1868.<sup>10</sup> The primary goal was to spread

Christianity among the Chinese population, aiming for conversions and the establishment of a self-sustaining Chinese Christian community. Their missionaries upheld the universal applicability and necessity of the Christian gospel, but many carried with them a belief in the superiority of Western culture and saw their work as a civilising mission, bringing not just religion but also Western education, medicine, and social norms.<sup>11</sup> Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, all without a single Supreme Being, were seen as ‘not serious or true religions’ and should be replaced by the Western God and the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Pearl Buck saw this hellfire and brimstone approach in her own home, practiced by father Absalom Sydenstricker, who boiled down his appeal in Chinese to a simple exhortation: ‘God—his son—believe—not perish—everlasting life [上帝—他的儿子—相信—不会灭亡—永生 (*Shàng dì tā de ér zǐ xiāng xìn bú huì miè wáng yǒng shēng*)]!’<sup>13</sup> Despite her father’s embrace of the traditional stance of Western superiority, she was able to experience an unusually integrated local childhood. Brought to China as infant of four months, she had grown up playing only with Chinese children, learning local dialects and then classic literary Chinese (*Wen-li*) from a Confucian tutor, Mr. Kung.<sup>14</sup> Her youth and upbringing gave her understanding of China a depth that no other Westerner alive had at that time.

But she was also the daughter of missionaries. As a young girl Pearl silently observed her father’s preaching sometimes with awe, noting once that she thought she saw light coming out of his body.<sup>15</sup> Like many of the missionaries operating in the immediate post-Boxer rebellion period, Absalom saw the victory of Western armies as a divine intervention which would now allow the Christians the chance to sweep away what they perceived as centuries of idol, even devil worship, the incorrect Chinese concepts of Truth and Morals, and free the country from physical and moral degradation.<sup>16</sup>

Often at odds with the rest of his mission, he was frequently isolated in meetings, demanding his way or none, and he had incurred the anger of his church leadership for diverting funds for his own vernacular translation of the Bible into Chinese.<sup>17</sup>

Eventually however, Absalom would pull back from his absolute approach and consider, in his later years, the need for a Church based on education, local autonomy, and increasing participation by the Chinese in its administration.<sup>18</sup>

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Buck would herself become a missionary in 1914.

#### THE GROUND-SHAKING 1927 ARTICLE

In the mid 1920s, Buck was teaching English Literature at the University of Nanjing and married to an agricultural missionary, John Lossing Buck<sup>19</sup>. She had completed university studies in the USA by this time, and was in the process of finding herself as a writer of both non-fiction and fiction. Her conversations with townswomen and neighbours in the small town of Suzhou, Anhui (not to be confused with the larger city of the same name in Jiangsu), where she lived with her husband, were forming the basis of *The Good Earth*. In addition to her emerging fiction were pointed analyses of the current volatile situation in China, which would be articulated in an article published in the February 1927 edition of the *Chinese Recorder* entitled 'Is There a Place for the Foreign Missionary?'.<sup>20</sup>

By the 1920s the Presbyterians in China were choosing sides in what was known as the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. Since 1910 conservative fundamentalists held that five doctrines: inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, the belief his birth was atonement from sin and that his body was resurrected, plus the historical reality of Christ's miracles were "necessary and essential" to the Christian faith.<sup>21</sup>

Modernists had begun to view (and to question) all five doctrines through the lens of 'Higher Criticism,' where the origins of ancient texts are investigated in order to understand 'the word behind the text,' a view which had originated with the first writer to apply it to the Bible, the Dutch Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677).<sup>22</sup>

One of the outcomes of the dispute among Presbyterians (which was picked up by missions of other denominations) was that the liberal opponents to fundamentalism were (while trying to remain sincere evangelical Christians) struggling to reconcile the new 20<sup>th</sup> century discoveries in history, science, and religion with the Christian faith. This trend now included, among a growing section of the missionary community, a new openness and willingness to respect and understand Chinese culture, society, and philosophy for what it was, and not something to be denied, overthrown, and replaced by Western Christianity and Western culture. Pearl Buck by this time was one such individual, promoting a changed view by the mission community towards traditional Chinese society, one that could embrace for the

first time respect, understanding, and equality.

This period of theological contention between modernists, who were open to new scientific and cultural ideas, and fundamentalists, who adhered strictly to traditional doctrines, influenced the approaches of missionaries abroad.

According to Bradley J. Longfield, Dean and Professor of Church History at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, the debate over modernism and fundamentalism within the Presbyterian Church fostered a broader intellectual and cultural engagement among modernist missionaries. This group, who were open to new scientific and cultural ideas flourishing in the 1920s, began to incorporate a greater appreciation for and understanding of Chinese culture and traditional philosophy in their missionary efforts. The modernists' emphasis on adapting Christian teachings to align with contemporary scientific and cultural insights led to a more empathetic and culturally sensitive approach in their missions work in China.<sup>23</sup>

The *Chinese Recorder* editor, Rev Rawlinson, was an exponent of the modernist camp. He had come to China in 1902 as a Southern Baptist missionary, teaching English and studying Chinese language and tradition. He initially took the mainstream missionary view that China 'had no true religion'<sup>24</sup> and that this void, of course, had to be filled by the Western supreme deity. In 1912 his academic training helped him get a post on the editorial board of the *Chinese Recorder*, published monthly in Shanghai by the Presbyterian Mission Press. Non-denominational, the journal had become the publication of record for the English language missionary community. In 1914 he replaced the retiring editor, and would keep that post until his death in 1937.

By the early 1920s he was writing books and lecturing on Chinese culture to neophyte missionaries. His views on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism were now much more open and he was clearly influenced by both Modernism and the Social Gospel, specifically the writings of Josiah Strong, as his editorials from 1919 on reveal.<sup>25</sup> The movement stressed the application of Christian love and compassion to social issues, encouraging acts of charity and kindness as a reflection of faith. It was also critical of the excesses of unrestrained capitalism, casting a magnifying glass on Western economic exploitation of the Chinese. The arrival of Modernism and the Social Gospel slowly split the missionary community, as conservative bristled at the

new critiques and responded with angry letters to Rawlinson at the Recorder, accusing him and it of weakening their work in China.

In one Recorder editorial he urged recognition of the positives in Chinese religious traditions: 'Truth is just as true in China as elsewhere.'<sup>26</sup> But he was careful to maintain a neutral stance on how the Church should approach Chinese culture with the goal of using it to advance Christianity. For example, he told missionaries to note that in Chinese psychology there was no original sin nor any concept of a Last Judgement. It would be better to encourage a new society 'gradually and progressively permeated with Christian principles and life.'<sup>27</sup> This philosophical stance had no doubt inspired Pearl Buck's confidence in submitting her excoriating article to the *China Recorder*.

In her February 1927 piece, Buck begins her inquiry by observing that missionaries in China have always attached two types of glamour to themselves and their task: One, 'the glamor of the devout, which has wrapped him in a halo of sacrificial heroism, mingled with the romance of the story teller,' and two, 'the glamor of the intense dislike with which he has been viewed by those [Chinese] who have hated him.'<sup>28</sup> This glamorous halo was, in Buck's opinion, unmerited, as was the hatred.

The Missionary has suffered for never being taken for what he was, a plain person, of somewhat average intelligence but still obsessed by prejudices and devotions, individualistic and narrow in his theological sympathies, with an incredible sense of duty—in short, distressingly human.<sup>29</sup>

She went on to highlight that the foreign missionary only sees what he allows himself to see 'the hovel, the unclad children, and the bound feet' while missing the sunshine, laughter, and happiness that is also present in Chinese daily life. These foreigners bring, Buck observes,

[...] certain grim ideals from over the sea, ideals of immaculate hygiene and eight hours minimum labor, and many other things which they think make up Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

The differences between East and West she thinks, are bridgeable, but only if the missionary is open minded and abandons pre-set conceptions of what China is and what can be changed by their work here.

Buck suggests that the new limelight the missionary finds himself in (in the mid-1920s) has led many to ask themselves: was it all for nothing?

[He has] given his life for these people who are now fostering the anti-Christian movement, while sponsoring Churches back in America and Europe are telling him that he must build up self-sufficient churches, led by the native Chinese themselves. He must ask himself if he has the right to press upon another the forms of his own civilization, whether those forms be religious or not.<sup>31</sup>

Was it all a mistake, Buck asks—‘has the thing which he has lived been really a subtle form of imperialism?’ This, she emphasises, is what confronts the man with the cross now, ‘the possible immorality of the missionary idea.’<sup>32</sup>

As Buck was writing her powerful indictment of the Church in China in a missionary journal of record, rather than a secular or nationalist publication, a reaffirmation comes at the end of her piece. She believes that more than ever, there is a place for a new type of foreign missionary, an individual above average:

the very best; [...] with the highest trained intelligence, the keenest sympathies, the most delicate perceptions, [and] with the most profound moral and spiritual convictions.<sup>33</sup>

This new missionary must be non-racist, not holding any national superiority over their Chinese hosts, and have a fresh version of what humanity needs at this point in history. Buck notes that she has met men and women who

have had that greatest of experiences and understanding so complete of another race consciousness that essential humanity everywhere is all that any longer remains.<sup>34</sup>

She was of course, using herself as the model, having grown up as a child in China, speaking and playing with other children in the streets, and later as an adult spending time talking intimately with Chinese women as equals in her town, picking up the stories she would later

recount in *The Good Earth*.

National superiority had to go, because Buck insisted it was based on nothing more than the luck of the West in its recent development and rise. When the foreign missionaries remove the material benefits of their civilisation from their world view, 'we have no superior qualities except those we have acquired from a benevolent religion which came from out of the East.'<sup>35</sup>

Finally, there is a statement straight from the Social Gospel, affirming the necessity of applying Christian love and compassion to the pressing social issues confronting missionaries in China, encouraging acts of charity, kindness, and understanding as a reflection of their faith. This fresh vision of humanity must be based on

all what Christ has taught [...] Spirit and Life. His teachings release one to the highest spiritual freedom and freedom is the only source of peace.<sup>36</sup>

The missionary of the future, Buck writes 'must be one, above all others to see that in the weak nation, the weak individual is the one to get fair play from the stronger.'<sup>37</sup> In the final lines of the article Buck proclaims that if there is a missionary who dares to be a genuine Christian in the profoundest sense, there is a place for them in China now because, quite simply, 'the world has need of him.'

Less than a month after the publication of the piece in the *Recorder*, Buck and her children would be swept up in the maelstrom of the Chinese Revolution and nearly lose their lives to the violence. The National Revolutionary Army (NRA)'s Northern Expedition, led by Chiang Kai-Shek but assisted by future communist leaders of the People's Republic, captured Nanjing on March 24, 1927. The NRA took the city from the defeated and demoralised forces of a northern warlord, who looted and attacked residents as they fled north.<sup>38</sup>

In the two days that followed the arrival of the NRA, order broke down and a wave of anti-foreign feeling sparked off violence and looting in the city. Local residents, most probably egged on by red officers, attacked foreign businesses and individual homes, including that of the Bucks. Six foreign residents were killed and others assaulted and injured, some even stripped of their clothing and chased down the streets.<sup>39</sup>

While the foreign taipans and their staff barricaded themselves

in their compounds on 'Socony Hill' (named for the oil company, Standard Oil company of New York), Buck and her two daughters were hidden by their servants in an outbuilding under mattresses. Locals ransacked their home, destroying in the process the completed draft of Buck's first attempt at a novel. Order was only restored when British gunboats arrived, followed by American, Italian, Dutch, French and Japanese warships.<sup>40</sup> Marines relieved the besieged concession men and women, who, in some cases had to shimmy down ropes from the city walls.<sup>41</sup> The NRA commander and Chiang himself ordered an end to the attacks on the foreigners and restored order in Nanjing on March 26, 1927. Buck and her family made their way to safety with no possessions and only their clothes on their backs. They then took a boat to Japan to recuperate from their ordeal.<sup>42</sup>

#### A LITERARY CAREER BLOSSOMS

The themes Buck explored in her 1927 essay in the *Recorder* would continue in her thoughts and writing in the next few years. After the publication and world-wide acclaim for *The Good Earth* she found herself in the Hotel Astor in New York, speaking before an audience of 2000 at a fund-raising event sponsored by the Presbyterian Church on November 2, 1932.<sup>43</sup> This speech, later revised and published in the mass-circulation *Harpers Magazine*<sup>44</sup>, would mark her final break with the centuries-old missionary project in China so long promoted by her fire and brimstone father. Buck had been told her report on her activities of four decades was to be a private session with the Church leaders, who were concerned about her statements on missionary work coming in the wake of the critical acclaim for *The Good Earth*, now an international best seller. What the mission elders and the audience heard, in the words of one of her biographers, was 'a comprehensive indictment of the mission enterprise in theory and practice by an authoritative and devastatingly articulate witness.'<sup>45</sup>

The speech, and the later printed version, took the ideas articulated in the 1927 *Recorder* article, which had foundation in her earlier thoughts, letters, and writings, and seemed to attack the intolerance of an entire generation of missionaries. 'It is too much to expect of the Chinese in general to get our viewpoint. But we ought to be able to get theirs.' She advised the Church disciples to abandon any idea of 'a single, fixed, unalterable truth' and approach the Chinese instead with complete equality.<sup>46</sup>

We simply cannot express the Gospel with any force if we have hidden within us a sense of racial superiority...we are no better than anyone else, any of us.<sup>47</sup>

What was most offensive to Buck was the Church's complete dismissal of Chinese philosophy and culture which made the missionary position 'fundamentally intolerable and immoral.' She questioned whether anyone has the right to impress upon another the forms of its own civilisation, whether these forms are religious or not.<sup>48</sup> She believed that the missionaries carried with them the arrogance and the attitude of 'one who confers a favor[...]. Even though we have spilled our blood and have broken our hearts, it has been a favor.' The Chinese had never expressed the gratitude the missionaries demanded in return and, consequently the overall impact of Christianity in China was historically negligible, with only three million protestants and one million catholic of dubious adherence counted by the mid-1920s. To sum up, Buck wrote: 'I can never have done with my apologies to the Chinese people that in the name of a gentle Christ we have sent such people to them.'<sup>49</sup>

Buck's speech was met initially with silence and then by applause, but not from the blind-sided Church elders who sat stone-faced and fuming during her remarks. Dr. Cleland Boyd McAfee said it 'gave us cold chills as she went along.'<sup>50</sup> In the weeks that followed, a storm of criticism erupted from the Presbyterian and mission faithful, accusing Buck of everything from greed, obscenity, and atheism to heresy, with some demanding she be tried internally by the Mission Board. The Board was split on this question, with Dr. McAfee defending Buck to his best ability against the worst charges and counselling compromise. But Buck was done with all that and a few weeks later on April 28, 1933 she wrote a letter of resignation from the entire mission movement.<sup>51</sup>

Pearl S. Buck's resignation letter to the Presbyterian Mission Board in 1932 outlined her growing disillusionment with the mission work and the role of foreign missionaries in China. In it, she criticised the narrow and often insensitive approach of many missionaries towards Chinese culture and society. Buck argued that the traditional missionary approach was not only ineffective but also disrespectful to the people they aimed to serve.

In her resignation, Buck emphasised that she could no longer align herself with a mission strategy that she felt was inherently flawed and



**Figure 2 & 3:** Buck's bestselling book was made into an award-winning film in 1937. Due to prejudices and the anti-miscegenation rules of the times, non-Chinese actors played the main characters.<sup>52</sup>

outdated. She pointed out that the air of cultural superiority often displayed by missionaries was harmful and counterproductive. Her stance highlighted her belief in the importance of mutual respect and understanding between cultures, which was a recurring theme in her literary work as well. It probably also produced a sigh of relief from the Presbyterian elders, who no longer had to consider hearings or a in-church trial to decide her status inside the mission movement.

Pearl Buck became a prolific writer, producing over the next forty years eighty books, of which 65 became best-sellers. In addition she would pen numerous articles, speeches, and scripts, becoming a high-profile spokeswoman for women's and childrens' rights, speaking up for minority groups and disabled people, as well as for the Chinese.<sup>53</sup> *The Good Earth* becoming a bestseller in the United States, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1932 and was quickly translated into thirty foreign languages.<sup>54</sup> It was made into a Hollywood film in 1937. Buck had hoped the the film would be cast with all Chinese or Chinese-American actors, but the producers believed American audiences were not ready for this kind of film. In addition, due to the Hays Code miscegenation rules, prominent Chinese American actress Anna May Wong was passed over for the leading female role (the male lead, Wang, was played by an American of European descent). Instead, the role of O-lan was played by Luise Rainier, another European, who won the 1937 Academy Award for Best Actress for her portrayal.<sup>55</sup>

In 1938 Buck won the Nobel Prize for literature. In addition to *The*

*Good Earth* trilogy and biographies of her mother and father (*Exile* and *Fighting Angel*), she had achieved recognition for novels, short stories, translations and articles.<sup>56</sup> Although unable to return to China after 1934 due to the unfolding political upheavals of the period, she became the popular authority on all things China, corresponding and meeting with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to promote the KMT cause.<sup>57</sup>

#### A SHIFT OF SEASON

The eruption of a full-scale conflict between Japan and China, was the beginning of the end of Western Christian missions in China. The Japanese Imperial Army disrupted all their work and after Dec 8, 1941, any missionaries remaining were interned for the duration of the war.<sup>58</sup> After the Allied victory in 1945, efforts to reestablish operations were short lived as the Red Army under Mao Ze Dong won control of the mainland, and re-ordered society in China. By 1951 all mission stations, schools, and hospitals were closed and placed under state control.<sup>59</sup>

Pearl Buck was never to return to China, despite repeated efforts to get back to the beloved country of her childhood. She wrote to anyone who might have influence in the matter, including Richard Nixon. In 1972, she received a letter from an official of the Chinese government denying her request for a visit to China, condemning her works for containing an attitude of distortion towards the people of new China. She was heartbroken by the rejection.<sup>60</sup>

Despite being denounced as an “American cultural imperialist”<sup>61</sup>, Buck’s writing about China allowed millions of Westerners to gain a more authentic understanding of China and Chinese people, and helped overcome earlier negative stereotypes.<sup>62</sup>

Pearl Buck’s break with the mission movement of her parents was a also major event, in a process ‘by which millions of Americans came to doubt the morality of exporting Christianity to a non-Christian nation.’<sup>63</sup> She articulated what many missionaries, of both the traditionalist and modernist positions, had been arguing in meetings and in the pages of journals like Rawlinson’s *Chinese Recorder*.

Had the Nationalists and not the Communists controlled China after 1949, what would have been the trajectory of the Christian church? It is quite possible that, in cooperation with a Nationalist administration, mission work may have continued. Would the



**Figure 4:** Pearl Buck's former residence in Nanjing has become a museum<sup>64</sup>

missionaries in that alternative universe met the soaring heights Buck imagined for them? Highly trained, intelligent individuals, with 'the keenest sympathies, the most delicate perceptions, with the most profound moral and spiritual convictions'?

While such speculation is pointless, the ideas expressed in her 1927 article may be applicable to other environments, at other times. In China, Pearl Buck's reputation has been restored in recent years. Her former residence at Nanjing University has been preserved as the Pearl S. Buck Memorial House, and her former residence in Zhenjiang and her family's summer home in Kuling now bear historical markers.<sup>65</sup>

***Sven Arne Serrano** (svenaarne.serrano@gmail.com) is a long-time resident of Shanghai, a historian and archivist who has served the Royal Asiatic Society as both a Council Member and as the Librarian for the RAS Reading Room. He taught at Japanese universities in Osaka from 1989-2008 before moving to China and taking a post as a history teacher at Shanghai High School International Division (SHSID) from 2009. That campus is the site of the former Japanese internment camp for Allied civilians, Longhua Civilian Assembly Center. Sven continues to provide both information and the occasional tour of this historic place. He can be found behind the goal at Pudong Football Stadium with the ultra supporters of the CSL side Shanghai Port FC at most home fixtures.*



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# DIPLOMACY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINA'S NATIONAL PARKS

BY MICHELLE SUN WANG

## ABSTRACT

*The little-known history of US-China National Park cooperation spans 40 plus years, starting from the reform and opening up era to today's current state of escalating geopolitical tensions. US and Chinese actors on all levels, from the highest forms of federal government to villagers on the Tibetan plateau, have participated and even benefited from this specific US-China National Park cooperative relationship. It is a relationship full of reciprocity, shared learning, and dedicated individuals that have been essential in keeping this connection alive till today.*

## INTRODUCTION

One of the least known yet most enduring cooperative relationships between the US and the Chinese governments is between the US and China's national park agencies. Surviving government shutdowns, ministry reshuffling and the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperation on the issue of national parks has endured for more than 40 years.

Since its inception, the state of US-China National Park cooperation has been inexorably intertwined with the geopolitics of the times. When Deng Xiaoping announced in December 1978 the PRC's seminal economic reforms and open-door policy, he opened an impossible-to-close door for the world to learn about China and for China to learn about the world.<sup>1</sup> On 31 January 1979, US President Jimmy Carter and PRC head of state, Deng Xiaoping, signed a series of science & technology and cultural agreements that enabled peaceful cooperation between the US and PRC to occur, effective immediately.<sup>2,3</sup> These agreements laid the legal foundation for the beginnings of formal cooperation on science and technology matters as well as the first people and cultural exchanges.

Cooperation on national parks was, and is still, under the Science and Technology Agreement umbrella since ecologic conservation is considered a science-based issue. Combined, these two agreements opened tremendous opportunities for academics, government officials

and private individuals from each country to both learn of and learn from one another.

National parks and archaeological matters were considered by senior diplomats at the State Department to be ideal subjects for the first round of exchanges given the non-political character of parks and evident interest from each country's relevant agencies.<sup>4</sup> As the Cultural Agreement Between the United States and China of 1979 explicitly stated, these exchanges were to be based on the 'principles of equality, reciprocity and mutual benefit'.<sup>3</sup> Forty plus years later, many of the individuals that participated in these exchanges would agree that both sides benefited.

The Science and Technology Agreement would go on to be continuously renewed until February 2024, when it lapsed due to increasing geopolitical tensions unrelated to the issue of national parks.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the Cultural Agreement was renewed sporadically multiple times between 1984, 1985, 2010, 2012, 2012, 2014 and 2014, 2018 through implementing accords. These implementing accords included clauses specifically about national parks, as shown in Article VII of the 2014, 2018 accord which said:

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**Figure 1:** A snow leopard in Sanjiangyuan, one of China's national parks.  
Courtesy of Terry Townshend

The Parties will encourage cooperation between relevant organisations in the areas of park, urban and landscape planning, environmental protection, and the conservation of natural and cultural resources. Specific projects may be decided through separate agreements signed by relevant organisations of each country.<sup>6</sup>

While national park work today at the State Department is completed under the Science and Technology Agreement umbrella, in the early 1980s the Cultural Agreement was the fundamental basis for the first national park related work, enabling the first visits of Chinese academics to the US and exchanges between the two countries' park related governmental agencies.

#### **A HISTORY OF COOPERATION**

The concept of establishing protected areas in China is neither new nor novel and can be traced as far back as the Qing Dynasty when laws were established to protect forests and a central agency was put in charge of its management.<sup>7</sup> In the first two decades of the PRC, hundreds of historical and cultural sites as well as the first few nature reserves in the country were designated and established as part of the first iteration of a cultural and natural resource management system in the country.<sup>8</sup> In the 1980s, the central government committed tremendous resources to initiatives that would lead to the establishment of the contemporary national nature reserve management system as well as cultural and historic site management system.<sup>9</sup> However, these sites did not resemble 'national parks' aligned with the United Nations' International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) definition<sup>10</sup> nor those found in the US at the time, such as in Yellowstone. Within the Chinese government and Chinese academic circles, traction for the idea of establishing a national park in the IUCN style was only just beginning in the 1980s, while Yellowstone at the time had passed its hundred year anniversary.

Yellowstone National Park, established in 1872 in the US, is often cited as the first and most famous national park in the world. Upon the passage of the 1872 Yellowstone National Park Protection Act, the United States Congress designated Yellowstone 'as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people' and established provisions for the preservation of its natural resources and

the exclusion of people on its land.<sup>11</sup>

It is no accident that the vision for the Chinese national park system today is similar to that of the US national park system. Throughout the planning and development of China's national park system, Chinese academics and government officials have studied the US system from afar and up-close. Even as whole PRC ministries were replaced and reorganised, since the 1980s Chinese park staff have participated in a robust series of official exchanges, study trips and collaborations with their US counterparts in and outside of government. This relationship, unlike many other seminal agreements between the US and China, continues today.

The 1980s were a boon for US-China national park collaboration as Chinese individuals and organisations were seeking to reconceptualise protected areas in China. Being the first and most famous park system in the world, as well as having a dedicated international programs office, it was no wonder that the US national park system and its officials had considerable influence on the development of the Chinese national park system.

The National Parks Service Office of International Affairs (OIA), established as far back as 1961, coordinates all the international engagement of the National Parks Service (NPS). When it was first established, it was on the forefront of the US's efforts towards international conservation, allowing the NPS to be 'involved in park creation, development, and management in nearly every country in the world'.<sup>12</sup> But, beyond its philanthropic efforts in the world, advocates argue that the NPS's work can be seen as a form of soft power and diplomacy in controversial times.<sup>13</sup> As the former Director of the NPS and signer of the first agreement between the PRC park ministry and the NPS in 1998, Robert Stanton,<sup>14</sup> said:

I just think there are so many other benefits to our international diplomacy objectives of exporting our expertise, our experiences in managing the resources that could be a benefit to a developing country or to an industrialised country. It's a way to express goodwill and to impart something of great benefit.

About 15 years after Stanton signed the first agreement, in 2013, at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee, the

establishment of the country's centrally planned national park system was proposed.<sup>15</sup> In 2014, the National Development and Reform Commission proposed a three-phase plan to establish China's first national park system. From 2014 to 2017, 10 protected areas were designated and operated as pilot national parks<sup>16</sup> during Phase I. These sites included Sanjiangyuan, Northeast Tiger and Leopard, Giant Panda, Wuyishan, Great Wall, Shangri-La Pudaocao National Parks amongst others. On 12 October 2021, Xi Jinping announced at the 15th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the establishment of the PRC's first five national parks and with it, the official birth of the Chinese national park system.<sup>17</sup> In a plan announced jointly by the National Forest and Grasslands Administration, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Natural Resources, and the Ministry of Ecology and the Environment in December of 2022, the PRC envisages a total of 49 national parks encompassing 1.1 million square kilometres in 28 provincial-level regions to be established by 2035.<sup>18</sup> When fully established, this will surpass the area of the US national park system threefold.

#### THE FIRST EXCHANGES (1979-1982)

In 1979, shortly after the Cultural Agreement was signed, the Chinese academic and later Deputy Director of the Beijing Botanic Garden, Yun Dejun, travelled to the United States. He visited the already established Everglades and Redwoods National Parks, as well as the future site of The Joshua Tree National Park. From these experiences, he wrote the first publicly available academic article on US national parks called 美国国家公园和自然保护区见闻 俞德浚 or *Insights into US National Parks and Nature Reserves*.<sup>19</sup> Little documentation remains about the logistics of this trip i.e. who invited and hosted him, but his article recounting his travels remains. He wrote:

[US] Nature reserves [and parks] are an emerging scientific sector and are valued by many countries in the world. It is not only an important scientific resource, but also can be used as a tool to develop tourism. Our country [China] is very rich in animal and plant resources... However, many places [and people] still have little regard for this work. Due to insufficient attention, some precious resources have continued to be seriously damaged. It is urgent to

vigorously strengthen the work of our nature reserves.

Early academics like Yun with experiences in the US were among the first individuals in China to suggest that China could benefit from a national park system akin to the US model. Yun's visit was to be the first of many visits by Chinese academics thanks to the Cultural Agreement.

In 1981, the first of a landmark set of government-to-government exchanges on the basis of national parks was organised. In September, Liu Shanghua, an official in the Ministry of Construction, and six other PRC officials and academics travelled across the US on a three-week tour of national parks and protected areas led by members of the NPS. Remarkably, this was one of the first ever government-to-government exchanges between the US and the PRC. Liu recalls that the trip was actually initiated by an invitation from the US State Department who purportedly requested a program outline from the NPS to send to the PRC. When received by the corresponding PRC officials, this was enthusiastically accepted.

The Department of Urban Construction within the Ministry of Urban and Rural Construction which later became the Bureau of National Urban Construction (城乡建设部城市建设司 / 国家城市建设总局) was, at the time, charged with managing the PRC's protected areas and it corresponded with the NPS to organise this first trip. The NPS hosted and accompanied the PRC delegation during the entire three weeks, taking them to three national parks: Yosemite, Mesa Verde and Grand Canyon, as well as various historical sites in Boston, Santa Fe and Washington DC.

Members of the trip included PRC officials, like leader of the delegation and the Bureau's Deputy Director, Qin Zhongfan, and notable academics like Professor Sun Xiaoxiang, a pioneering landscape architect and designer of the China National Botanic Garden in Beijing.<sup>20</sup> Liu himself was a mid-level official, and a talented writer and illustrator, ultimately publishing a book about the US national park system. His book, published in 1989, was a reflection of the first-hand experiences he had and the materials given to him by the NPS staff that accompanied him. Liu drew little scenes from his travels including a particularly inspiring view of the mountain, El Capitan, in Yosemite that he still remembers today.<sup>21</sup>

The PRC delegation was accompanied by two NPS staff members

who took them all around the country, as far west as Yosemite and as far east as Boston. The NPS staff would drive the delegation to various parks and introduce them to the local park managers and rangers. They would learn about US protected areas and extensive details on every US National Park that would proceed to inspire Chinese engagement for countless years to come. More than anything, it was the wildness of the parks and the centralised system the US had created to protect them that left a deep impression on Liu and the delegation. On his time in Yosemite, in an article<sup>22</sup> written in the People's Daily, the CPC's official daily newspaper, Liu wrote about his experience looking outward at Yosemite Valley for the first time:

I put down my luggage, opened the back door and sat on the grass outside the window on the chair. I looked up and saw two wild deer ten metres away. He was eating grass leisurely, and from time to time he would prick up his ears and look at me. The wild scenery of the mountains and forests made the fatigue of my journey disappear immediately... At this moment, a little bird with emerald blue feathers is also calling. Singing, it flew down to the grass, as if it wanted to move forward to welcome the distant world of visitors.

Other members of the delegation also wrote reports on their travels including Sun Xiaoxiang<sup>23</sup> who captured, in an article for Journal of



Figure 2: A discussion session at the Imperial Palace, Beijing



## NPS opens relationship with China and India



(From left) Liu Shanglin, Landscape Architect, Bureau of Urban Construction (BUC); Mrs. Zhang Yanhui, Landscape Architect, Zhejiang Province; Sun Xiaoxiang, Professor, Beijing Institute of Forestry; Gf Wenger, NPS; Qin Zhongfang, Deputy Director, BUC; Bob Hessler, Superintendent; Mrs. Gu Cheng, Interpreter; Li Zaog, Historical Architect, Jiansu Province; Zheng Xiaocai, Historical Architect, BUC.

Affairs; Jerry Rogers, associate director, Natural Register Programs; David Wright, chief, Office of Park Planning and Environmental Quality; James Coleman, Regional Director, Mid-Atlantic Region; and Bennie Keel, Departmental consulting archeologist. Representatives of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation rounded out the group.

The itinerary included intensive orientation/discussion sessions and field inspections in Beijing, the ancient capital city of Xian, Guilin, Yang-su, Hangzhou, Shaosin, and Shang-hai. The itinerary highlighted national priority zones (of outstanding significance for their natural or scenic qualities), the equivalent of wild and scenic rivers, urban parks and gardens, historic sites, and preservation and archeological programs. A final protocol meeting in Shang-hai identified priority areas for

**Figure 3:** The National Park Service Newsletter reports on the US delegation's visit to China

Beijing Forestry College, the delegation's learnings of the US National Park system. Included in his takeaways were observations of NPS inner workings as well as the planning and development of individual American NPs. In general, the tone of the article is one of study and not of comparison with the Chinese protected area management system.

After the successful visit to the US, planning immediately began for the US delegation's visit to China. In September 1982, eight Americans led by Associate Director of Natural Resources Management for the NPS, Ross Holland, made the trip to Beijing. The delegation included high-level NPS figures including David Wright, Chief of the Office of Park, Planning and Environmental Quality. Wright said during his visit to China, 'When I studied landscape architecture in school, I mainly studied the works of French and Italian architects. It's a true pity that I didn't study China's great works'.<sup>24</sup>

Like before, the hosting country (this time the PRC) took the visiting delegation (the US) to see the country's diversity of protected areas. Over the course of three weeks, they visited Beijing, Xi'an, Guilin, Yangshuo, Hangzhou, Suzhou and Shanghai stopping at famous landmarks such as the Terracotta Army and the Badaling Great Wall of China. The hosts organised discussions, lectures and immersive experiences at each sight showing the US delegation an

extensive overview of China's protected areas.

Liu and a few of his fellow 1981 delegation members acted as hosts during this visit. However, instead of representing the Department of Urban Construction, they now represented the Ministry of Urban and Rural Construction and Environmental Protection per a reorganisation of federal agencies responsible for the protection of natural areas in the PRC.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of bureaucratic change, the impact Liu and the other PRC officials made on the delegation members was significant. As the writers of the Cultural Agreement had hoped, the 1981-1982 exchanges resulted in increased understanding and reciprocity for all those involved as echoed by Holland, the leader of the 1982 US delegation, who said 'the evidence of our common purposes and interest is apparent in the already ongoing follow-up activities.'<sup>26</sup>

#### THE LATER WAVES OF EXCHANGES (1983-1996)

Individual academic exchanges and private individual visits would continue after the first exchanges. However, no other government-to-government exchanges would occur between 1983 to 1994. Chinese academics would publish articles on their independent travels to US National Parks during this time, such as a nature imagery filled reminiscence of a Glacier National Park tour in 1985<sup>27</sup> or an awe-inspiring retelling of someone's first view of Grand Canyon National Park in 1994.<sup>28</sup> While there were individuals engaging on their own accord, the lack of government-to-government exchanges is confounding considering the success of the 1981-1982 exchanges and the explicit inclusion of parks exchanges in the 1984-1985 implementing accords of the Cultural Agreement that said:

Both sides will encourage continued exchange of personnel and professional cooperation between the National Park Service of the United States and the Bureau of Landscape Architecture under the Ministry of Urban and Rural Construction and Environmental Protection of China. Both sides agree that specific exchange projects will be decided through separate discussions between the two above-mentioned organisations.<sup>29</sup>

Wang Zaosheng, an individual credited with the revival of US-China park relations in the 1990s, attributes multiple reasons for the stymied

visits.<sup>30</sup> From his perspective, there were three particular reasons for this pause. These were the lack of funds in the PRC coffers to pay for further exchanges; a perceived lack of relevance for the Ministry; and the consequences of internal incidents for US-China relations. The implementing accords, signed in 1984,<sup>31</sup> said that in any exchange the sending country must pay its own travel fees to and from the host country while the host country must provide all the accommodation fees. Thus, both visiting and hosting posed a financial burden for the burgeoning department of Landscape Architecture that had been subsumed by the new Scenic and Historic Area Management Office (SHAMO) within the Ministry of Urban and Rural Construction and Environmental Protection, which by 1988 would become the new Ministry of Construction (MOC). Additionally, since the majority of the new department's duties were unrelated to the management of the PRC's natural spaces - by Wang's estimate only 5% of the work they did was at all related - there was not substantial motivation for higher-level officials to dedicate the little funds they did have to these exchanges. Finally, the impact of incidents in the spring of 1989 on all forms of US-China cooperation cannot be understated, even affecting seemingly apolitical issues like national parks work. These caused the US to impose diplomatic and economic sanctions on the PRC, fully stopping any collaboration between even previously friendly federal agencies for the foreseeable future.<sup>32</sup>

What restarted the exchanges however was not a formal declaration by any government, but the confluence of an unlikely connection made by an American conservationist and a gradual opening up of each country to the other. In 1994, Marc Brody, founder of one of the first US environmental organisations operating in China, then called the US-China Environment Fund (UCEF), reached out to the Scenic and Historic Area Management Office (SHAMO 中国建设部风景名胜区管理办公室) of the MOC. Wang Zaosheng, then an assistant to Liu Shanghua, deputy director at SHAMO which was responsible for overseeing national protected areas within China, responded. On 31 January 1994, Brody, representing the UCEF signed a letter of intent with Liu that stated that the two organisations would establish 'friendly and cooperative relations' as well as task UCEF with facilitating friendly relations between SHAMO and the NPS.<sup>33</sup>

After the signing of this letter, Brody invited Wang and other officials to travel to Washington DC to meet with national park related

officials. However, during the time of this trip, there was a government shutdown which prevented the NPS from hosting the PRC delegation thus forcing the NPS to ask the leading national parks related NGO, the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), to host the visitors.<sup>34</sup> The NPCA president at the time, veteran American conservationist and former Deputy Director in the Department of Interior (the larger department that oversees the NPS), Paul Pritchard welcomed Wang and his co-workers.

This initial connection between Wang and Pritchard is what set off the next wave of PRC officials travelling to the US on behalf of national parks. While it was not exactly the same type of government-to-government exchanges as in 1981 (given that the NPCA was an NGO working closely with NPS officials but not NPS themselves), the ensuing exchanges involved many PRC officials and many NPS staff. To this day, both Wang and Pritchard, many years retired, speak fondly of each other and the cooperation they facilitated in spite of the ongoing geopolitical tensions: 'We couldn't do anything without Paul. He helped us do everything [national parks and beyond] and connected us for life.'<sup>35</sup> 'Wang really was the guy that started it all. He was the ambassador of goodwill and just a wonderful person.'<sup>36</sup>

From 1995-2000, there were a succession of yearly visits involving veteran NPS staff, PRC officials and academics as well as the new addition of NGO staff facilitators. Pritchard and the NPCA brought many delegations of conservationists and NPS officials to China as well as hosted many delegations in lieu of the NPS, facilitating the logistics. Wang himself visited almost every year during this period, bringing with him delegations of eager-to-learn officials from the PRC. On one of these visits, he made a random contact with a NPS staff member that would end up becoming a long-lasting facilitator in the 2000s era of US-China national park relations.

Wang described a moment during these early exchanges in an NPS Facilities Headquarters near Washington DC where he and the delegation were visiting at the time. As they were sitting around, a man who appeared to be Chinese walked past wearing an NPS uniform. The delegation stopped him and asked him who he was. The man told them that his name was Carl Wang, that he was a Taiwanese-American man who spoke fluent Mandarin and was working at the NPS as an environmental engineer. From this chance first meeting, Carl would go on to be an instrumental translator and facilitator of the NPS through to

his retirement in the late 2010s. In 2006, Carl even co-authored a seminal article<sup>37</sup> with Su Yang of the PRC's State Council on the necessity of a national park system to manage the many unprotected natural areas in China. No other NPS affiliated individuals have ever had that honour of being on a byline with someone of that stature in China.

Aside from Carl, other individuals that would stay involved in the US-China National Park relationship also started their engagement during this wave of exchanges. In May of 1996, former Director of the NPS, Jon Jarvis, then superintendent of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, visited Beijing, Huangshan and the South China Karst amongst other protected areas as part of an exchange organised by Wang and Pritchard. Jarvis travelled with 6-8 individuals, all of whom except for the one other NPS staff member (Chip Jenkins, now the superintendent of Grand Teton National Park) were non-NPS and loosely affiliated with the NPCA. The bulk of the delegation were, as Jarvis remembers, 'rich, out of shape Americans with lots of demands and expectations' whom Jarvis and Jenkins did not have much in common with.<sup>38</sup> The visit was typical of exchanges at this time where the delegation visited the park, sat for a meal with the local officials, then moved to a conference room to discuss with the local officials whatever they observed. Jarvis remembers that the trail design, architecture, and signage in these areas were especially well done, but what was lacking was the interpretation and regulation of people's activities in conserved areas. He recalls specifically a moment where he and the delegation were led on a tour through a dark, unlit cave. Jarvis, who happened to be carrying a flashlight shone his light inside and saw mountains of garbage piled high to the ceiling of the cave. In shock, he told the tour leaders that this was not at all how one goes about managing a natural resource. As NPS staff, Jarvis and Jenkins felt responsible for providing honest critique and expertise, however they had no formal obligation to keep in contact with their hosts. This format of engagement in which NPS expertise was sought but not necessarily appropriately responded to repeated itself often throughout the next era of exchanges and agreements.

#### **MOUs AND NPS AFFILIATED EXCHANGES (1998–2012)**

On 8 May 1998, after several rounds of the second wave of exchanges, the NPS and MOC signed their first Memorandum of Understanding, a symbolic agreement that documented each party's expectations

and interests in further collaboration. This was a first of its kind agreement between the NPS and a parks management related PRC Ministry as it was directly signed by the heads of both agencies and explicitly wrote out terms by which a formal cooperation could be had between the two countries. Specifically, the MOU had as its objective, ‘the creation of a framework for cooperation and exchanges between the Parties concerning the conservation of national park systems and the preservation of natural and cultural resources under their jurisdiction.’<sup>39</sup> The Director of the NPS at the time, Robert Stanton, travelled to Beijing to sign the MOU with Li Dongxu 李东序, a high-level official in the MOC. The English text of the MOU shows that the agreement is between the NPS and the MOC’s National Park Agency, however the National Park Agency that is named here is not necessarily a new office but another name for the preexisting Division of Urban Construction (城市建设司风景名胜处). As with the Cultural Agreement, importantly, it is stated in Article 5, Cooperation under this Memorandum will be subject to the availability of funds and personnel of each Party and will be conducted in accordance with the laws and regulations of each country. The nature and extent of funding of each activity will be agreed upon by the Parties before its commencement.

The funding, or lack thereof, in this agreement has affected all interactions between the two parties since. The lack of robust funding mechanisms established in this initial MOU has hampered the quality and quantity of cooperation since its inception. The legacy of this MOU however, can also be considered quite positive overall as the terms have been extended by subsequent MOUs in 2002 and 2006.

Since the 1998 MOU was signed, regular exchanges between the NPS and relevant PRC agencies have occurred with the NPS OIA coordinating US based logistics and the evolving MOC coordinating the PRC’s logistics. The most notable exchange was of Li Rusheng 李如生, Wang Zaosheng’s successor at the MOC SHAMO (建设部城市建设司风景名胜处处长), who was sent to the US in 2002 for approximately a year to closely study the NPS’s inner workings.<sup>40</sup> Li worked primarily at the NPS’s South East Regional Office in Atlanta researching the office’s copious park planning documents. When he returned, Li wrote a book entitled 美国国家公园管理体制 or the *U.S. National Park Management System* which marked the most comprehensive and detailed work of research by a staff member from

this bilateral cooperation.<sup>41</sup> Compared to Liu's book published in 1989, Li's book significantly expands the Chinese canon on the inner workings of the US National Park management system, with chapters dedicated to explaining how the US NPS approaches everything from natural resource management to park facilities maintenance to concessionaire management. Later in his career, Liu Rusheng would go on to become the Chief Engineer at MOHURD (住房和城乡建设部总工程师), a position of considerable influence.

On 13 May 2006, another MOU was signed between the US and China park management agencies renewing the terms of the previous MOU for another five years. The English text of the 2006 MOU shows that the agreement is again between the NPS and the MOC's 'National Park Agency', effectively the same Division of Urban Construction as before (城市建设司风景名胜处). This agreement would go on to be symbolically effective beyond the lifetime of the MOC as the State Council would go on to replace the MOC for the newly established Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MOHURD) in 2008).<sup>42</sup> MOHURD absorbed the responsibilities of the Office of Scenic and Natural Areas and reorganised them into the new Division of Urban Construction which would bear the mantle of coordination with the NPS.

Again, despite considerable Ministry reshuffling, exchanges continued. By 2012, MOHURD had even published a summary report of the PRC's national park work entitled '中国风景名胜区事业发展公报'.<sup>43</sup> This report states that by 2012, a total of 2,061 technical personnel had been sent to study abroad and 133,801 foreign national park personnel were received for visits and exchanges. This latter number, extreme as it is, is cited again in personal communications with a State Council level researcher on the subject. While the report did not specify exactly how many of the technicians travelled to the US, nor did it specify how many of the foreign park personnel were American, it is reasonable to guess that a large percentage of people and places involved in these exchanges were American given the extensive history of US-China cooperation pre-2012.

The same 2012 report states that 27 Chinese protected areas have 'sister park' (姊妹公园) agreements with foreign parks, that is cooperative partnerships between national parks or other equivalent protected areas from one country to another. The terms of cooperation are fuzzy, with sister park agreements like MOUs having

little legislative or financial weight behind them. The NPS proposes that these partnerships can 'increase information sharing and direct part-to-park contacts' and are 'driven largely by the interests of the parks themselves'.<sup>44</sup> Sister park agreements are decided on a park-to-park basis, often with individual parks seeking a connection with another park similar to its own operating conditions for the purposes of learning, promotion, and sometimes even diplomacy. Since 1997 there have been a number of sister park relationships established between Chinese protected areas and US protected areas. Interestingly, the beginning of US-China sister park relationships does not start with world-famous sites like Huangshan or Zhangjiajie but with three pairs of modest marine reserves. These were established on a basis of scientific cooperation, but the first sister park relationship between an NPS managed area and MOC managed area, was established on the basis of tourism and park management cooperation. The majority of the US areas being current national parks and the majority of the Chinese areas being a mix of scenic areas, natural reserves, and increasingly, soon to be designated national parks.

On 13 May 2006, the same day as the 2006 MOU renewal ceremony, the signing of the sister-park agreement between Yosemite National Park and Huangshan Scenic Area took place.<sup>45</sup> Cheng Yingfeng 程迎峰, former Deputy Director of the Huangshan Scenic Area Management Committee (黄山风景区管委会), and former Yosemite National Park superintendent, Michael Tollefson, were the signatories. At the ceremony, officials made congratulatory remarks on the common vision and shared issues in natural and cultural resource management both areas were experiencing.<sup>46</sup> The expected outcomes of this agreement were thus, the start of information sharing exchanges, and notably, the internationalisation of Huangshan for global tourists.

Similarly, at the signing of a sister park agreement between Crater Lake National Park in Oregon and Wuyishan National Park in Fujian province, in addition to the normal NPS and PRC park officials, representatives of Oregon state agencies promoting tourism were also present. Beyond the normal speeches extolling friendship and learning, officials spoke to the explicit economic benefits of this cooperation. Teresa O'Neil, an Oregon state tourism agency official said:

This agreement is not only historic, but it's also incredibly important for Oregon's economy. China is a lucrative market for tourism in Oregon. In 2014 it became the state's No. 1 overseas travel market and continues to grow exponentially. This agreement highlights the 2016 Centennial celebration of the National Park System by showcasing Crater Lake to potential Chinese travellers during the China-USA Year of Tourism.<sup>47</sup>

#### **NGOs IN YUNNAN AND BEYOND (1997 ONWARDS)**

Besides NPS-PRC Ministry level cooperation, US NGOs were also contributing directly to Chinese national park building, primarily in the province of Yunnan. While the NPS and MOC were signing MOUs and exchanging bureaucratic delegations across the world, Yunnan was operating on its own timeline, separate from the MOC's plans. As early as 1997, the US founded and internationally operating NGO, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), established its first Chinese office in Yunnan. From then on, the first Director of TNC's burgeoning China program, Rose Niu, and her coworkers at TNC were closely involved with the Yunnan provincial government's efforts to build the country's first national park from idea inception to establishment of the first pilot park.<sup>48</sup>

It was on a TNC mediated trip to the US for Yunnan officials that the original idea for Yunnan to create a national park in the style of the US model arose. From then on, TNC would bring Yunnan park officials and staff to the US regularly as well as host US officials that would travel to Yunnan. Chinese academics such as Professor Yang Rui, now director of the Tsinghua National Parks Institute, were included in such trips and would go on to apply their learnings to the greater China park building efforts. While these exchanges were not entirely separate from the NPS OIA connections, they were operating somewhat autonomously as the trips were largely funded and facilitated by TNC. Niu herself would go on to stay involved in exchanges like these beyond Yunnan, now acting as a key facilitator in today's US-China national park cooperation.

#### **THE PRESENT (2013 ONWARDS)**

2013 marked the first announcement by the central government that the establishment of a National Park system was to be carried out.<sup>49</sup>

In terms of Chinese park development, the time from 2013 to the present is marked by the rapid execution of the Chinese National Park system, the establishment of the first pilot parks, the changeover from MOHURD to the National Forest and Grasslands Administration (NFGA) as well as the establishment of the first five national parks. As far as the US-China NP cooperation went, formal exchanges between park staff facilitated by the NPS OIA and international NGOs like the Paulson Institute continued. NPS staff, current and retired, were involved in this effort, travelling to China as well as hosting delegations in the US. However, exchanges stopped, as did everything, during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

Parks cooperation, which has always been primarily an in-person activity did not adapt well to travel restrictions. Zero trips occurred during 2020 and 2021.<sup>50</sup> The pandemic strained US-China cooperation across the board with national park cooperation being no exception. Today, engagement is rebounding, though now in the midst of heightened geopolitical tensions between the US and China. The political constraints on PRC officials travelling outside their country has especially affected the quantity and location of visits to the US as regulations require the trips to be less than a week including travel.<sup>51</sup> US parks that used to be the site of many visits such as Yellowstone or Denali have become neglected in favour of more accessible parks like Yosemite which is only a two hour drive away from San Francisco, which has a direct flight from Beijing. Despite evolving limitations, Chinese academics and park staff still seek the expertise and experience of US park staff and parks though, increasingly, this relationship is shifting. On 16 November 2023, after the pandemic induced lull in cooperation, the NFGA and the NPS held their first ever official video conference on US-China cooperation in the field of national parks.<sup>52</sup> High level park officials attended the conference with the Chinese side explaining their park building efforts and the US side emphasising their experience in volunteer programs and concessionaire management. Both sides expressed their commitment to restoring local-level cooperation through sister parks as well as promoting more bilateral exchanges and specific training opportunities for Chinese officials in the US.

This conference coincided with other bilateral discussions occurring during President Xi's visit to the US to meet President Biden. As it was in the past, national parks cooperation remains a part of greater diplomatic efforts between the US and China, perhaps in the

intervening time becoming even more important as other bilateral ties have deteriorated. Current and retired US park officials, international and domestic NGOs, as well as academics on both sides are navigating this transition into the next phase of cooperation.

#### **CONCLUSION: THE TRAIL FROM PAST TO PRESENT**

In the study of US-China relations today, optimism for peaceful cooperation in researchers is rare to find. However, through research into the history of US-China national parks cooperation, this author has grown to believe that optimism is warranted, given the peaceful and productive nature of this relationship. This cooperation survived government shutdowns, geopolitical flashpoints, changing Ministries, a pandemic and more. This history shows that Chinese and American government agencies and, more importantly, individuals can and have worked together, overcoming obstacles to build something beautiful without the motivation of monetary or military gain.

To use a hiking metaphor, for the past forty plus years Chinese park officials have been hiking a trail to national park development constructed and led by the American NPS. In the US-China national parks engagement to date, the relationship has not been one of ‘mutual benefit’, as envisioned in the Cultural Agreement, but more of one-sided guidance. While that is not to discount the intangible impact of working with a park system unlike their own, a comparison of the two systems shows that the Chinese system has been influenced tremendously by this cooperation whereas the US system has not yet shown any signs of being influenced. Given that the US system predates the Chinese system by 100 plus years, it is perhaps no wonder that the direction of influence has been this way. However, as the rapid development of the Chinese national park system is set to surpass the size and scope of the US system and its supporting academic ecosystem in the present era, this relationship may soon change. China is building a trail to its own version of what national parks should be. The soft power that the US has wielded for so long may no longer be effective, but what US-China national park cooperation will look like in the future and who will be there to mediate at that point is an open question.

Though the future era of US-China national parks cooperation is uncertain, the necessity of this cooperation cannot be understated. However, in a decade, who will be the ones to continue this cooperation? On the Chinese side, the next generation can be found

studying US national parks and, increasingly, their own national parks in the proliferating national parks research institutes across China. However, on the American side, it is unclear how many, if any, young Americans are engaged with Chinese park collaborators or how many Americans even know about the Chinese national park system. As China develops beyond the bounds of the US model of national parks, such as the innovative community financing already implemented in local communities in Sanjiangyuan National Park, US park staff should start studying China for solutions to their own management issues. The era in which the US is the guide to China's development is quickly ending and the US should incentivise its younger generations to engage with this cooperation.

Wang Zaosheng compared the goodwill between the American and Chinese individuals involved in this cooperation with a small stream. Small streams turn into wide rivers over time. If more people understand that this cooperation has existed and will continue to exist, then perhaps one small stream of goodwill can turn into a raging river of equality, reciprocity and mutual benefit, just as the Cultural Agreement foretold.

*Michelle Sun Wang is a Schwarzman Scholar and former Yellowstone park ranger. She is interested in how conservation, and the concept of national parks in particular, can be a form of diplomacy in US-China relations. Michelle is currently based in Beijing and is working at an international education company bringing school children on trips all around China. In her off time, Michelle enjoys getting outside, stumbling on rocks and flailing around in rivers.*

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# SECTION 2

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## The World Of Ideas



# JOSEPH NEEDHAM'S QUESTION, REVISITED: LESSONS FROM HISTORY FOR CHINA'S TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

BY DAVID RENNIE

## ABSTRACT

*For most of modern history, China was centuries ahead of the west in innovation. China invented the compass, gunpowder and printing—three technologies that in the judgement of Francis Bacon, the 17th century British philosopher and statesman, ‘altered the face and state of the world’. China invented the first stirrups, transforming warfare on horseback. It created the crossbow, and discovered vaccination against smallpox. Then something happened. Modern, theoretical science, the so-called ‘scientific revolution’, was born in 15th century Europe, not in China. A similar puzzle surrounds the applied and mechanical sciences. While Europe was still in the dark ages, China had invented cast iron and spinning wheels, water mills, canal locks and grand irrigation projects: the building blocks for an industrial revolution. But then China’s progress stalled and the industrial revolution took place elsewhere, notably in Britain.*

*In the 1940s a brilliant, eccentric British scholar and admirer of China, Joseph Needham of Cambridge University, set out to understand what he called the ‘grand question’: namely, why was China so far ahead of the west, and why did it fall behind? His inquiry is known to this day as ‘the Needham question’. Its answers and lessons for the future continue to engage and fascinate scholars.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1998, when I arrived in China for my first posting as a foreign correspondent, the Western world was confident that modernity—advanced, progressive, confident modernity—was the preserve of free societies, enjoying uncensored speech and an open competition of ideas. To many in the west, back then, to reject liberal democracy was not just deplorable, it was a mistake—an innovation crushing error. Today there is no such certainty. The west finds itself in competition with societies, including China, where I have spent 10 of the past 32

years, that reject the liberal consensus, and yet are now at the forefront of some advanced technologies, and are home to many world-class scientists.

China's next 10 to 20 years will be a historic test: <sup>colon</sup> can strict political control and state planning co-exist with innovation? History is a guide in these debates. One historian of science who devoted his life to these questions was Joseph Needham. Needham spent his life demonstrating that pre-modern China, despite strict, indeed tyrannical rule, led the mediaeval world in innovation. He studied, too, the historical puzzle that followed; why did China, still under strict imperial rule, stagnate and fall behind the West after the 16th century?

### JOSEPH NEEDHAM: A CURIOUS SCIENTIST

On a cold, clear day in February 1943, hours after arriving in China for the first time, Joseph Needham watched an old man grafting plum trees in the gardens of Britain's consulate in Kunming. It was wartime. Though this southwestern city was calm, Japanese forces occupied much of the country. Needham had flown into Kunming via the 'Hump', a perilous air bridge over the Himalayas, to lead a British government mission to support Free China's embattled scientists and universities. He was 42, a biochemist at Cambridge University and a fellow of Gonville and Caius College. He had recently been elected to the Royal Society, Britain's foremost scientific academy.

British politicians and newspapers knew Needham as a prominent campaigner for left-wing causes. After Japan's full-scale invasion in 1937, Needham had urged Britain to help China. This campaign was in part personal. He had learned Mandarin with a Chinese student at Cambridge, Lǚ Gùizhēn, who became his academic collaborator, muse and, later, his wife.

In that moment though, all Needham's attention was focused on the consulate gardener. Grafting wood from one fruit tree onto a bough of another is a venerable technique, used to propagate varieties that do not grow from seed. The gardener's methods were unlike any that Needham had seen in England, his biographer, Simon Winchester, records.<sup>1</sup> Needham wrote himself a note to compare ancient Chinese and European texts on botany, to see which contained the earliest references to grafting. Relating that scene in Kunming, Winchester calls that note a first written fragment of the work that would dominate the rest of Needham's life, his encyclopaedic: *Science and*

*Civilisation in China*.<sup>2</sup> In time, he filled 17 volumes with histories of Chinese religion, clockmaking, silk weaving, astronomy, shipbuilding, farming and more.

Some distinctive traits explain both that pencil note and the volumes that followed. Needham was exceptionally curious, as intrigued by philosophy and architecture as he was by physics or maths. Fluent in a half-dozen languages, he translated poetry, loved folk music and could drive a steam train. He was physically fearless. While in China he commandeered a military ambulance from the British Embassy motor pool and headed for the Gobi desert. His expeditions covered 30,000 miles in all, on occasion narrowly escaping advancing Japanese troops. He had a daunting capacity for work. His wife Dorothy, also a biochemist and fellow of the Royal Society, described Needham lying awake at night mentally visualising page proofs of his books, jotting corrections down in a real-life notebook by his bed. If still unable to sleep he would start translating the same pages into French, and make notes on his translations, too.

Needham was predisposed to believe that China was the birthplace of countless scientific advances, but had been denied due credit by ignorant Western scholars. An Anglican lay reader, Needham had strong views about fairness. Long after watching plum trees grafted in Kunming, Needham would recall a 19th century American missionary's claim that 'Botany, in the scientific sense of the word, is wholly unknown to the Chinese'. Such a statement, Needham said 'could only have been made by one of a generation totally ignorant of the history and prehistory of science'.

As Winchester relates, Needham spent his first days in China interviewing local scientists about antimalarial drugs and having a long scholar's gown made. While at the tailor's he made notes about the abacus used to calculate his bill, and resolved to research its history. He went on to find an account of a Chinese abacus written 1,000 years before the oldest known Western calculating engine.

Over time, Needham and his researchers at Cambridge would show that China invented the compass, gunpowder and printing—three technologies that in the judgement of Francis Bacon, the 17th century British philosopher and statesman, had 'altered the face and state of the world'. Needham's volumes credit China with hundreds of innovations: the crossbow, wheelbarrows, blast furnaces, segmental-arch bridges and vaccination against smallpox. Needham found that

China invented the first stirrups, transforming warfare on horseback. This recovered history was an important corrective. It is worth reflecting on the state of China's scientific reputation in 1943, as Needham stood in that consulate orchard.

### THE OTHERLAND

Long before foreigners routinely travelled to China, outsiders held strong opinions about 'China', an otherland that is as much an idea as a place on the map. *The Chan's Great Continent*, by Jonathan Spence<sup>37</sup>, describes how some of the great Enlightenment philosophers used China as a symbol without setting foot there. Leibniz praised China as a land of order, Confucian morality and religious toleration—but mostly as a way to rebuke Christian monarchs stirring up sectarian hatreds in Europe. To strengthen his case for dividing power between separate branches of government, Montesquieu damned China as a despotism whose peoples 'can be made to do nothing without beatings'.

A handful of Westerners, Jesuit missionaries, traders, diplomats and explorers, did reach China from the 16th century onwards. Some wrote admiringly of Chinese ingenuity and industriousness. An eighteenth century British traveller, a choleric captain of the Royal Navy named George Anson, was more typical. Commodore Anson arrived in the southern port of Canton (modern-day Guangzhou) towing a Spanish treasure galleon and seeking repairs for his warship. As local mandarins stalled his demands, he developed firm views about China. He declared its people 'second-rate' imitators of other countries' inventions. The Chinese language did not impress Anson. He asserted that Chinese characters were too numerous 'for human memory to manage'. As a result, Anson confidently, and erroneously, declared, such knowledge as China does possess 'cannot be retained in books, but must be delivered from age to age by oral tradition'. Anson's account of China<sup>4</sup> sold widely across Europe.

Hegel's 'Philosophy of History'<sup>38</sup> based on lectures given from 1822 to 1830, expresses no sympathy for China. Hegel acknowledges that early Jesuit missionaries to China described an empire advanced in ethics, astronomy and the arts of war. Hegel is unconvinced. Echoing Anson, he declares Chinese characters an impediment to learning. Hegel writes that 'the Chinese are far behind in Mathematics, Physics, and Astronomy... The telescopes which the Chinese have received as

presents from the Europeans, are set up for ornament; but they have not an idea how to make further use of them.

By the 20th century, China was a byword in the west for backwardness. Some saw evidence for European theories of Social Darwinism—a version of the principle of ‘the survival of the fittest’, blended with noxious beliefs about stronger and weaker races. In 1900, the year of Joseph Needham’s birth, western newspapers filled with reports of a xenophobic uprising by the ‘Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists’, or the Boxers. With the tacit support of reactionaries at the Qing imperial court, Boxers and Chinese troops besieged foreign diplomatic missions in the capital, Beijing, for 55 days. The uprising was crushed by foreign troops, who set about looting Beijing by way of revenge. Along with many Chinese treasures, German troops took Jesuit-made astronomical instruments from Beijing’s ancient observatory at Jianguomen, and shipped them to the Kaiser’s garden in Potsdam.

Back in the west, newspaper readers consumed accounts of Boxers murdering Christian converts as well as foreign missionaries, their wives and children. A few western diplomats and journalists in Beijing offered a counterpoint. Terrible massacres had taken place but, they wrote, the arrogance and insensitivity of many missionaries and, indeed, foreign powers, had made a catastrophe almost inevitable. Within China, a rising generation of nationalists blamed their country’s weakness on Qing dynasty rulers, and on the conservative, Confucian scholar-officials who served them. Unhappily for them, the humiliations did not end with the overthrow of China’s last emperor in 1911.

The young Republic of China entered World War One late, joining America, Britain, France and Japan on the allied side. At the Versailles Peace Conference that followed Germany’s defeat, Chinese delegates tried to secure the return of German colonial possessions in eastern China. They were too late. Before the conference even started, the great powers had done a deal to hand those German possessions to Japan. In a painful symbol of China’s marginalisation, one of its few tangible rewards in Versailles involved those Jesuit astronomical instruments taken to the Kaiser’s garden. Article 131 of the Treaty of Versailles orders that the instruments be shipped from Potsdam to Beijing, at Germany’s expense.

On 4th May 1919, thousands of Chinese students marched to the

Gate of Heavenly Peace in Beijing, the Tiananmen. Denouncing both foreign imperialism and their own government's incompetence, the students called for two saviours to rescue their country: 'Mr. Science' and 'Mr. Democracy'. Salvation did not arrive. Modern universities opened, and welcomed a stream of foreign intellectuals, but politics descended into corruption and violence. When Japan launched its all-out invasion in 1937, China's weak central government shared power with feuding regional warlords.

When Needham arrived in Kunming in 1943, then, China's reputation as a place of learning was weighed down by deep, racially-tinged contempt. Even as he began his mission to help China's universities, Needham decided to set the record straight. The otherness of China, that shocked so many Westerners, inspired him. 'Chinese culture', he once wrote, 'is really the only other great body of thought of equal complexity and depth to our own... Chinese civilisation has the overpowering beauty of the wholly other, and only the wholly other can inspire the deepest love and the profoundest desire to learn.'

To Hegel or Commodore Anson it was a form of self-sabotage for China to shun an alphabet. Truth be told, even devoted foreign students of Chinese have been known to weary of memorising characters. Not Needham. He described studying Chinese as 'a liberation, like going for a swim on a hot day, for it got you entirely out of the prison of alphabetical words, and into the glittering crystalline world of ideographic characters.' As a bonus, the written language could be mined for historical clues. By way of evidence that oranges were first cultivated in China, on the eastern and southern slopes of the Himalayan massif, Needham noted how many varieties of sweet or sour oranges boast their own distinct names, recorded in texts dating back to 800 BC. Moreover, these different sorts of orange have short, single character names—jú, gān, chéng and zhǐ. This, he wrote, is 'always a sign of ancientness in the nomenclature'.

For all his enthusiasm, the book that Needham had in mind would not only praise China. As a scholar, he could not deny that after China's early lead, something went wrong. Modern theoretical science, the so-called 'scientific revolution', was born in 15th century Europe, not in China. A similar puzzle surrounded the applied and mechanical sciences. While Europe was still in the Dark Ages, China had invented cast iron and spinning wheels, water mills, canal locks and grand irrigation projects: the building blocks for an industrial revolution.

But then China's progress stalled and the industrial revolution took place elsewhere, notably in Britain.

In 1948, Needham sent a book proposal to the Cambridge University Press. He assured the press that his argument could be contained in one volume: a pledge he would go on to break spectacularly. More usefully, he set out what he called 'the Problem', now better known to historians of science as the 'Needham Question'. Needham wrote, 'What exactly did the Chinese contribute in the various historical periods to the development of Science, Scientific Thought, and Technology? Why did their science always remain empirical, and restricted to theories of primitive or mediaeval type?'

Needham spent the rest of his life wrestling with his question. He began with some definitions, explaining what it means to say that 'modern science developed only in Western Europe at the time of Galileo in the late Renaissance'. He lists some important components of modern scientific thought. These include: 'The application of mathematical hypotheses to Nature, the full understanding and use of the experimental method...'. Then he set out the differences between modern and pre-modern science. The 'intrinsic and essential vagueness' of mediaeval hypotheses always made them 'incapable of proof or disproof', he wrote. That world of vagueness was the one inhabited by Leonardo da Vinci, for all his inventive genius, he went on. Galileo broke through those constraints, achieving modern clarity and rigour. To Needham: 'Chinese science and technology remained until late times essentially Vincian'. In contrast, 'the Galilean breakthrough occurred only in the West'.

#### THE NEEDHAM QUESTION

Needham is warmly remembered in China, where he is known as Lǐ Yuēsè. In recent years that has not stopped some in China from charging Needham with chauvinism. He has powerful defenders though. In October 2022 the China News Service published an interview with Liú Dùn, professor of the history of science at Tsinghua University in Beijing.<sup>6</sup> The interviewer notes that, to some Chinese academics, the 'Needham Dilemma' assumes the superiority of Western civilisation. Professor Liú is having none of it. 'This is a specious criticism' he replies. 'Needham never spoke of the superiority of Western civilisation'. As for terms like advanced and backwards, Liú avers, in science these are 'objective facts'. Liú has one more piece of

advice. The Needham question is not a mathematical problem with a neat solution, he tells his interviewer. It is a discipline: a call to unending reflection.

When assessing factors that shaped Chinese science, Needham favoured a long list. He discarded some theories without hesitation. He had no time for Anson, Hegel or others who question whether a language can support advanced learning if it does not use an alphabet. Needham pointed to present-day China, where modern science is studied and written up in characters, without difficulty. Nor did he accept that religious faith, in and of itself, is a barrier to science. Maurice Goldsmith, a writer commissioned to write a life of Needham by UNESCO, the UN agency, told his subject that he found his deeply held religious beliefs hard to square with his scientific work. Needham replied: that is your problem, not mine.<sup>7</sup>

That said, Needham saw advantages and drawbacks to specific systems of belief. He was hostile to Confucianism, with its emphasis on order, ritual and deference to patriarchal authority figures. Needham thought Confucianism fatally incurious about natural phenomena and hostile to science. He was gentler on Daoism, China's dreamy, contemplative home-grown religion, on occasion calling himself as much a Daoist as an Anglican.

He was ambivalent about some other common answers to his question. David Landes, in his *Wealth and Poverty of Nations*,<sup>8</sup> speaks for many historians when he writes that China's early ingenuity would have probably brought China 'to the threshold of modern industry, had it not been for stifling state control'. Faced with arguments about a suffocating state, Needham could sound oddly indecisive. In part, perhaps, that was because he was a rare western supporter of the Communist Party and of the central planning it imposed after taking power in 1949. Needham had seen the corruption and poverty of pre-revolutionary China for himself, and remained a devoted foreign friend, invited to meet Chairman Máo Zédōng and Zhōu Ēnlái, Mao's urbane prime minister.

In part, Needham sounded indecisive because he had found examples of long-ago artisans helped by state patronage. To tame frequent, terrible floods, pre-modern China built impressive dams, canals and irrigation systems, and a centralised bureaucracy to manage them. Needham wrote that the best artisans and engineers were often to be found in imperial workshops and arsenals, making advances in

everything from metallurgy to ship-building and porcelain-making.

Nonetheless, Needham came to believe that, on balance, Chinese science was harmed by the overweening power of scholar-officials chosen for their ability to memorise Confucian texts and regurgitate approved slogans. He describes how an artisan of 'outstanding ingenuity', a third-century inventor of a puppet theatre operated by water-power, was denied advancement because he could not debate with 'scholars nursed in classical literary texts'. He lamented that the imperial civil service, 'creamed off the best brains of the nation for more than 2,000 years'. A reverence for officials went hand in hand with a disdain for commerce. 'In every age, the sole ambition of the sons of even wealthy merchants was to get into the official bureaucracy', he writes. In contrast, he argues that, in the Europe of the Renaissance, powerful, self-confident merchants were indispensable patrons of the scientific revolution.

H. Floris Cohen, a historian of science, offers a summary of Needham's thesis.<sup>9</sup> In his words, Needham held that 'modern science came into being owing to the breakdown, around 1600, of an originally very wide social gap between university men skilled in formal argument', among them Galileo and Bacon, 'and those superior artisans' such as Leonardo 'whose work in practical arithmetic, practical mining, practical navigation, and so on, actually embodied, though it did not formally express, ...basic scientific laws'. Cohen objects that Needham's thesis exaggerates the importance of European merchants as patrons of science, and notes that Needham himself admitted to doubts about his own conclusion.

In Needham's defence, he gave weight to several possible theories. He was interested in the notion that China was held back by its vast size and early political unification under a single emperor. That theory draws a contrast with Europe, where a plethora of rival states and monarchs created a competitive market for new technologies and ideas.

Geography intrigued Needham, too. Noting that China has a relatively short coastline, he wondered whether it had fewer incentives for maritime exploration than Europe, with its many coastal nations. If that was a drawback, it was made far worse when Ming dynasty rulers banned overseas expeditions. By 1500, building a sea-going junk with more than two masts was an offence punishable by death. An edict of 1551 declared that sailing overseas in multi-masted ships, even for trade, was equivalent to communicating with foreigners, a grave

crime. Needham knew whom he blamed: short-sighted officials with what he called the ‘agoraphobic mentality’ of men bound to agrarian interests and a doctrine of self-reliance. ‘The Confucian bureaucracy, with its country landlord basis, was always liable to look askance at any intercourse with foreign countries’, he wrote.

These countries were of no interest in themselves and could offer nothing but unnecessary luxuries. But according to the classical Confucian pattern of scholarly austerity... unnecessary luxuries were deeply wrong. And since all real needs of food and clothing, including the magnificent products of Chinese craftsmanship, were available in abundance at home, what good could it possibly do to spend money on... things with dubious properties abroad?

A recent book by Yasheng Huang, an economics professor at MIT,<sup>10</sup> makes a simple but useful point. Many popular solutions to Needham’s question suffer from an obvious flaw. They emphasise factors that were present during the centuries when China was far ahead of Europe, scientifically, but that were also still present when China fell behind. In Huang’s words, a more productive framing of the Needham Question is: ‘Why was China inventive at certain times, but uninventive at others?’. To Huang, that should push scholars to look for conditions that altered at around the same time that Chinese innovation slowed i.e the length of China’s coastline may matter less than the decision to ban overseas voyages.

One of the most cited explanations for Chinese stagnation does involve a change over time. Proposed by Mark Elvin,<sup>11</sup> an environmental historian, it describes China falling into a high-level equilibrium trap in the 14th century. To simplify Elvin’s thesis, rural families had many children to satisfy a cultural need for sons and male heirs. In time, this led to an over supply of labour. With workers so cheap, Elvin argues, demand for labour-saving innovations declined, and China slipped into a sort of tolerable stagnation, in which change seemed both unnecessary and unaffordable.

Elvin has his critics, who accuse him of relying on bad data. Justin Lín Yīfū is a professor at Peking University, a former chief economist at the World Bank. In a paper on the Needham Question,<sup>12</sup> Lín insists that China’s population was actually falling over the period examined

by Elvin. He also challenges the idea of a rural labour surplus, noting that throughout Chinese history, many farmers grew two crops a year on their land, leading to regular labour shortages. Instead, Lín echoes Needham in blaming the imperial civil service for monopolising human capital. He describes how China's most ambitious young men devoted their lives to passing the kējǔ, an examination system that from the seventh century onwards tested would-be officials on their knowledge of the Confucian classics. The texts that had to be memorised contain a total of 430,000 characters, and cramming for the exams took years.

The exams had their merits. At a time when Europeans were recommended for public office by well-connected relations or patrons, the kējǔ offered diligent commoners a path to advancement (women could not take the exams). But to many modern historians, the kējǔ exams' focus on rote-learned texts was on balance harmful. It was certainly handy for autocratic rulers, writes Yasheng Huang of MIT.<sup>13</sup> Years of swotting left China's educated young men 'no time for rebellious ideas or deeds', he argues. Revealingly, there is no consensus about when the kējǔ's ill-effects became apparent.

After drawing up his own chronology of thousands of inventions, Huang declares that Chinese innovation slowed as soon as the kējǔ was established, in around 600 AD. In contrast, Needham places China's slowdown somewhere around the 15th century. To Needham, the kējǔ became a handicap because its curriculum narrowed. Over the centuries, examiners ditched such subjects as astronomy and mathematics in favour of an exclusive focus on Confucianism. Justin Lín Yìfū agrees that the kējǔ was a barrier to modernisation. He does not agree that autocratic rule is invariably bad for innovation. All might have been well, Lin writes, had officials organised civil service examinations with a more modern curriculum. Lín's version of history suits today's Communist Party. The kējǔ was scrapped in 1905. But modern-day Chinese officials proudly assert that the exams' legacy lives on today, in civil-service tests that select officials to govern the People's Republic, the guokāo.

Debates about Chinese history are also arguments about politics. Over the past quarter-century, some scholars seem impatient with arguments about political institutions and decisions. To Kenneth Pomeranz and the 'California school' of history,<sup>14</sup> if the Industrial Revolution began in Britain, rather than in China, the causes are

mostly physical: 19th century Britain had the advantage of lots of cheap coal. It also now owned colonies which could supply it with commodities, from cotton to timber or wool, off-setting the limited landmass of the British isles.

Debin Ma of Oxford University disagrees.<sup>15</sup> He calls institutions crucial to understanding why China not only failed to develop modern science in the 15th century but was left behind for a second time in the 19th century, as Britain and other newly industrial nations grew rich. Ma describes Qing-dynasty China as a 'Patronage Economy' in which a lack of legal property rights 'obliged private owners to seek protective alliances with incumbent officials and local power holders'. Those croneyish networks 'obstructed innovation and also encouraged widespread corruption'.

#### CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

I first came to China in 1995. In the years since, there has been a striking change in official attitudes to the Qing Dynasty. I remember visiting temples and museums which denounced imperial rulers for weakening China and leaving it at the mercy of foreign enemies. Now the strongest Qing emperors, rulers who expanded the borders of the empire to take in vast new territories, are praised as hard working statesmen. Today, the emphasis is on promoting 'cultural confidence' and the continuity of Chinese civilisation over thousands of years.

At the same time, the official party line has moved the date at which Chinese innovation slowed, to somewhere at the very end of the Qing dynasty, in the 19th century. A good place to spot this change is the Imperial Examination Museum of China in the eastern city of Nanjing. On that site in imperial times, as many as 20,000 candidates took civil-service exams in tiny, brick-walled cells. As often in the New Era, the museum downplays criticism of the imperial past. Instead, its displays show long-ago emperors wisely selecting officials according to merit.

The Nanjing museum presents long-ago Confucian officials as upright and learned. In the museum's telling, China declined as a scientific power in the mid-19th century; fully four centuries after the date that Needham chose. That stagnation is blamed on an exam curriculum that had not been properly updated. Signs in the museum declare that the kējū exams reached a peak of sophistication in the 18th century. But in the final years of the Qing, they explain,

the exams failed to promote practical skills that the country needed. An animated film shows British soldiers shooting at poorly armed imperial troops during the Opium War. Next, the film shows Chinese scholars practising calligraphy, while tweed clad European scientists busy themselves in a Victorian laboratory.

In the museum's last hall, a sign urges visitors to reflect on 1,300 years of imperial examinations with pride. It calls selective civil-service tests China's gift to the world and an invention on a par with the compass and gunpowder.

#### THE GRAND QUESTION AND INNOVATION IN TODAY'S CHINA

Were Needham working today, how would he view science and innovation in China? On the one hand, he certainly believed that scientifically incurious bureaucrats can stifle science. On the other, his instinct was always to defend China and the Communist Party. His writings about Chinese science under Mao are a tangle of contradictions. In 1978, two years after the death of Chairman Mao, Needham visited China and wrote up his findings for the journal *Nature*. His articles make for disappointing reading today. They show Needham celebrating new freedoms enjoyed by Chinese scientists. But he refused to blame Mao for the horrors that scientists endured, notably during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976.

Chinese scientists were sent to shovel manure on collective farms, or work in factories. University entrance exams were cancelled and places offered to workers, peasants and soldiers with the right revolutionary credentials. An estimated 17 million city youths were sent down to the countryside to be re-educated by peasants. It took the party until 1981 to pass a formal resolution condemning these horrors.

Back in 1978, the party line still heaped all blame on the Gang of Four, a group of radicals in Mao's inner circle chosen to take all responsibility for Mao era crimes. In his report for *Nature*,<sup>16</sup> Needham dutifully follows the same line. Though he accurately describes the miseries endured by scientists, he absolves Mao, charging the Gang of Four with 'a veritable heresy of Maoist ideology'. Worse, Needham rationalises the sending of millions to the countryside. In his words, 'xià fàng' (rustication), the sending of students, intellectuals and administrators to do manual work in a farm or factory for a while, has long been a very important concept in Chinese society. 'Of course', he assured his readers, 'there is no reason to be against the idea of one or

two years' national service in industry or agriculture before entry to the universities, nor need one look unfavourably upon the periodical return of office workers and intellectuals to practical activities of various kinds'. He chides the Gang of Four only for taking the practice too far, and for sending scholars to the countryside as punishment.

Read between the lines, and Needham is offering some critiques of Maoism. In praising reforms being enacted by such leaders as Dèng Xiǎopíng, he cites approvingly, new plans for collaboration between Chinese and foreign scientists. He praises Dèng's promise to let scientists and students concentrate on their work, reversing what Needham calls the previous 'altogether excessive emphasis on political discussion'.

If Needham were writing in 2024, following the party line would surely test him again. For reforms that delighted Needham in 1978 are under new pressure. Required hours of ideological study have increased for university instructors and students. Though foreign academic exchanges continue, Chinese scholars face tighter political restrictions on outbound travel. Scrutiny of foreign lecturers in China has increased. State planning is regaining its central role in the economy. Official discussions of science emphasise party leadership, national security and self-reliance, so that China is not dependent on foreign countries for 'choke-hold' technologies. Above all, the party is betting that China can lead and harness the advanced technologies that will shape the 21st century: new quality productive forces.

What would Needham have made of this bet on innovation and seizing the next industrial revolution? He would not have sided with western critics that see Communist Party leadership as incompatible with technological advances. He would not have endorsed the claim, made by Joe Biden when he visited China as vice-president in 2013, that 'Innovation can only occur when you breathe free'—in effect, a claim that liberal democracies enjoy an innovation premium. After all, Needham devoted his life to showing that autocratic rule did not prevent pre-modern Chinese artisans, tinkerers and inventors from making tremendous advances in the applied and mechanical sciences, 1000 years earlier than their peers in Europe.

And yet, were he writing now, Needham would see China making a turn inwards. And he was very clear about the value of international scientific collaboration. Today China's quantum computing field is led by scientists who spent years in America and Europe. Number-

crunching by Yasheng Huang<sup>17</sup> shows that a full 80 percent of Chinese papers in *Nature* and affiliated journals, a gold standard in scientific publishing, are co-authored with foreign researchers. In America, however, researchers are increasingly wary of working with Chinese colleagues, for fear of being accused of sharing advanced know-how with a hostile state. In 2020 the number of science papers jointly produced by Chinese and American researchers began to fall, and is still dropping.

He would have seen a China of misaligned incentives, in which the state expects ever more from private businesses, pushing them to innovate in the national interest, but seems to trust them ever less. Though ironically, as AJ Cortese<sup>18</sup> wrote last year for MacroPolo, a think tank, sometimes it is the Chinese state that is pushing for breakthroughs in frontier technologies, while the private sector often excels at absorbing the innovations of others, before tweaking and scaling them to win market share.

This, then, would have been a complicated moment for Needham. Confucianism is back. Under Mao, Communist Party zealots destroyed shrines to Confucius and burned his books. Since the 1990s, however, the party has rehabilitated Confucianism and restored its temples. Theirs is a narrow reading of Confucian ethics. Confucius taught that intellectuals have a moral duty to criticise rulers who abuse their power. This party-approved version of neo-Confucianism emphasises order and submission to authority.

The party line now promotes a history of modernisation that emphasises Chinese cultural exceptionalism. A new paper on Chinese modernisation describes China falling behind during the 19th century Industrial Revolution, but argues that western nations can take no pride in that version of modernisation. Published by the Institute of Party History and Literature of the Central Committee,<sup>19</sup> the paper describes something close to a clash of civilisations. It argues that:

After the mid-17th century, bourgeois revolutions erupted in a series of Western countries, which soon entered the Industrial Revolution. Driven by new models of production, they quickly grew in strength. The bourgeoisie of these countries, through blood and fire, started its early accumulation of capital and colonial plundering.

At that point China gradually fell behind, it laments.

The paper correctly rebukes Western powers for opening Chinese markets and seizing Chinese territory by force. It distorts history, however, when it dismisses the Chinese reformers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who set out to modernise their country with knowledge and science from the west. It goes on to argue that China was only saved once the Communist Party took power and applied Chinese traditional values and Marxism to the task and, I quote, ‘made a historic transition from being dragged into western modernization to leading the new wave of global modernization’. There is so much that is wrong with this account of China’s modern rise, starting with the role played by the outside world in the 20th century, including in the post-Mao reform era. But Joseph Needham’s work guides us to another important objection.

#### CONCLUSION

China did not only fall behind at the time of the Industrial Revolution. It had already lost its wide lead in science and innovation hundreds of years earlier, around the 15th and 16th centuries. Joseph Needham taught the west and the outside world to acknowledge and respect the many achievements of Chinese science. In doing so, he corrected a great injustice done to China’s historical reputation, rooted in western ignorance and chauvinism. But then he had the honesty to ask why that lead was lost.

Time and again Needham came back to problems of rigidity, and the power wielded by conservative officials who smothered creative interactions between inventors, visionaries and merchants. He saw the costs of turning away from the world. Given today’s debates about innovation and openness, self-reliance and national security, one might expect the Needham Question to haunt Chinese leaders. Instead, some powerful figures in today’s China seem determined not to reckon with history, but to defy, or even rewrite it.

*David Rennie* joined *The Economist* in 2007 as European Union correspondent and Charlemagne columnist, based in Brussels. From July 2010 to July 2012 he was British political editor and author of the Bagehot column, based in London. In the summer of 2012 he moved to Washington DC. He was Lexington columnist 2012-17, and Washington bureau chief 2013-2018. From May 2018 to September 2024 he was Beijing bureau

chief, launching the *Chaguan* column on China in September 2018. He returned to London as *Geopolitics* editor and launched *The Telegram*, a column on geopolitics, in October 2024. He is the co-host, with Alice Su, of the *Drum Tower* podcast, launched in late 2022. He won the 2010 UACES/Thomson Reuters 'Reporting Europe' award. The Asia Society awarded the 2023 Osborn Elliott Prize for Excellence in Journalism on Asia to David Rennie and Sue-Lin Wong for their coverage of China.



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# THE FIVE CS—HOW CHINA BECAME THE WORLD'S FACTORY

BY JOHN DARWIN VAN FLEET

## ABSTRACT

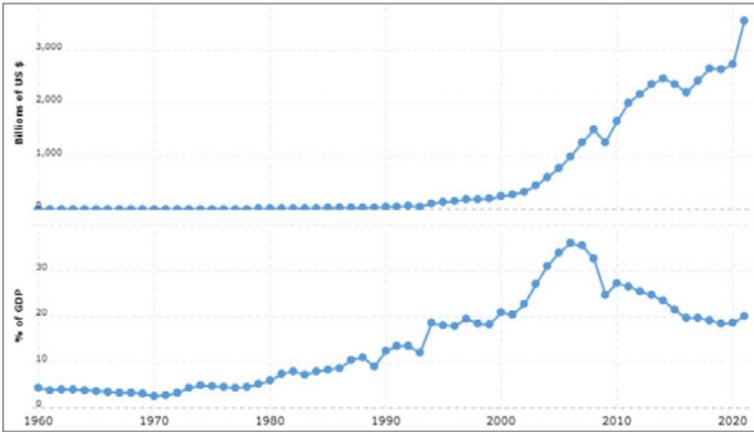
*Is there anyone who hasn't heard China described as 'The World's Factory'? The phrase seems a commonplace for media, for business and national policy discussions, everywhere in the world. Yet a bit more than four decades ago, mainland China was an economic basket case, just starting to recover from the Cultural Revolution and previous policy disasters.*

*How did China transform from a caterpillar of poverty to The World's Factory butterfly? Along the way the Chinese people achieved the most spectacular economic growth of any economy in history, and enjoyed a consequent reduction in poverty that has been equally a first-time-in-history phenomenon. Five tectonic forces, from disparate parts of the globe, came together in the 1980s to propel the transformation. This paper investigates those five forces—China of course, the first and primary C, but also Consumers, Computers, Containers and Carbon—and reviews how the combination led to China's First Time in History ascent to already the largest economy on the planet, measured in purchasing power parity GDP.*

## THE WORLD'S FACTORY DEFINED

China's rise to the role of the world's factory began in the 1980s, gained pace in the 1990s and further accelerated from the time of the country's accession to the World Trade Organization in autumn of 2001. Figure 1 shows the steady increase in Chinese exports over recent decades.

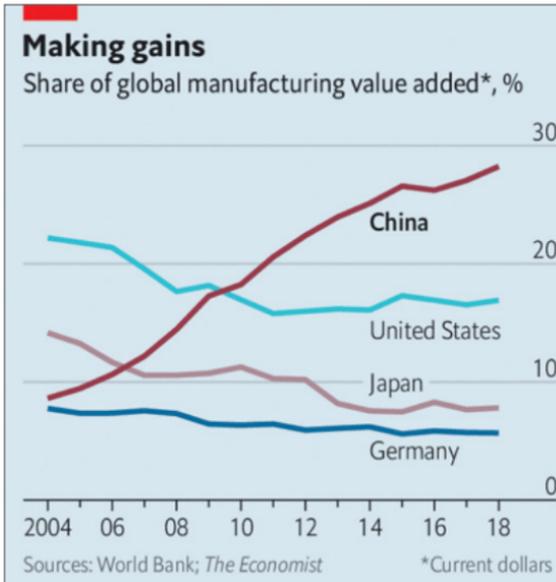
The lower line in the graph in Figure 1 reveals that manufacturing for export declined dramatically as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) from the time of the Great Financial Crisis, which began in mid 2008. But the monetary value of China's exports didn't decline. The upper line in the graph shows a relatively steady increase—China's overall economy was growing even faster than manufacturing's contribution.



**Figure 1:** China Exports, 1960 - 2022<sup>1</sup>

As the sharp spike in the upper line, from 2020 to 2021, suggests, China’s exports increased further during the global pandemic. According to an Economist article in September 2021, source of the Figure 2 graph below, China in 2021 was ‘home to 28% of the world’s manufacturing—nearly as much as America, Japan and Germany combined—and, despite all the dislocations from the coronavirus crisis, still going strong’.<sup>2</sup>

Economists have long debated whether China’s becoming the



**Figure 2:** Share of Global Manufacturing Value Added (%)

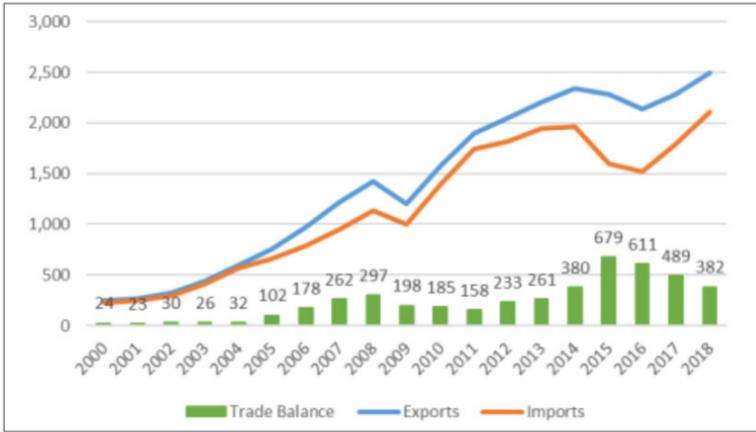


Figure 3: China's Merchandise Trade, 2000—2018<sup>3</sup>

world's factory has been a net good for the world, but the phenomenon did contribute to global economic growth, not just that of China. China's rise in imports over the past 20 years has nearly kept pace with rise in exports, as the graph in Figure 3 shows.

The benefit to Chinese people has been incontrovertible. China's manufacturing sector wages have risen more than 20-fold during the past few decades, putting Chinese labor costs well above those of the still-developing economies like Mexico and Vietnam, as Figure 4 shows. And this unprecedented rise gives the lie to the assertion that China is still 'stealing' jobs from developed economies because of lower Chinese wages. Rather, China retains the crown of the world's factory because of what economists call 'total factor productivity'—for more

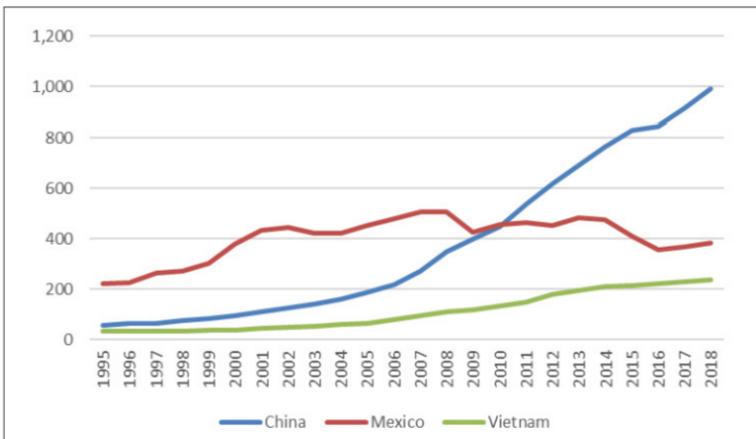


Figure 4: Average Monthly Wages, 1995—2018<sup>4</sup>

than a decade now, manufacturing in China has been economically compelling because the entire supply chain offers world-leading efficiency and productivity.

China's rise in manufacturing has driven an unprecedented rise in the living standards of hundreds of millions of people and become a primary contributor to the largest reduction of poverty in world history. Even the likes of the American Enterprise Institute recognize the achievement.

'... the 80% reduction in poverty between 1970 and 2006 has to be the greatest reduction in world poverty in such a short time span in the history of the world, and the 97% reduction in East Asia has to be the most significant improvement in regional standard of living in history as well.'<sup>5</sup>

Such an enormous shift in the global manufacturing landscape, and the tectonic transformation China has undergone as a result, deserves some illumination—the concept of the Five Cs—Consumers, Computers, Containers, Carbon and, of course, China—aims to provide it.

#### CONSUMERS—THE SECOND C

Beginning in 1978, China started on a path to recovery after its lost decades of mass starvation (1959—1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966—1976). Elsewhere, in the developed economies, another type of recovery was about to begin. Economic historians refer to the period from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s as the 'Great Inflation' era.

The Great Inflation was the defining macroeconomic event of the second half of the twentieth century. Over the nearly two decades it lasted, the global monetary system established during World War II was abandoned, there were four economic recessions, two severe energy shortages, and the unprecedented peacetime implementation of wage and price controls [in the United States].<sup>6</sup>

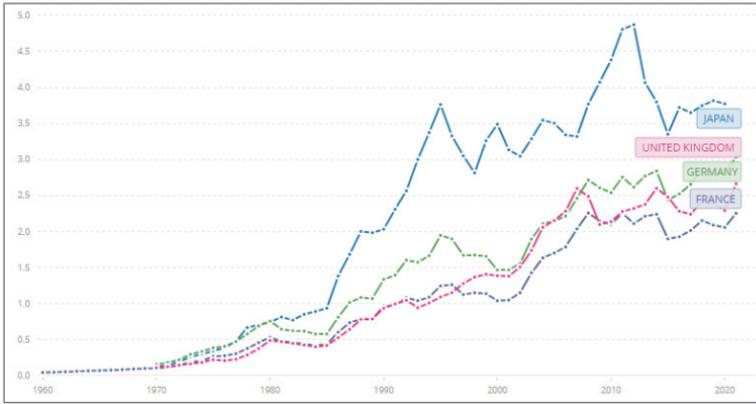
But as somewhat miserable as the 1970s were in the United States, the 1980s became quite a different story. Personal consumption as a share



**Figure 5: Personal Consumption as a Percentage of GDP, 1950—2010 (USA)<sup>7</sup>** of GDP had remained essentially flat for three decades, but began a steady rise in the early 1980s, a rise that continued through the Great Financial Crisis, as Figure 5 shows.

To understand personal consumption globally in the 1980s, starting from the United States makes sense. The country generated more than a third of global GDP from 1960 through the early 1970s, and roughly 30%, with fluctuations, through the end of the century, so consumer behavior there during the period is primary.<sup>8</sup> But France, Germany and the United Kingdom also saw substantial consumption rises during the period, while consumption in Japan more than quadrupled in monetary terms from 1980 through the end of the decade, reflecting the bubble economy of the era.

At the same time that China was arising from a self-imposed economic nightmare, at a time when China’s latent economic strengths were about to manifest themselves, the consumers of the developed world were embarking on a spending spree. But three more



**Figure 6: Consumption by country, constant US dollars, 1960 - 2020<sup>9</sup>**

Cs await—a total of five vectors that propelled China to the status of ‘the world’s factory’.

**COMPUTERS—THE THIRD C**

All those increasingly acquisitive consumers in the 1980s of course appreciated what Walmart famously claimed in their motto, ‘everyday low prices’. The decade witnessed the utter transformation of retail practice, largely because of the advent of the computer. Walmart bought its first inventory management computer system in 1975, and retail would never be the same. Computerized inventory made retailing vastly more efficient and allowed retailers to transition from the business of selling product to the business of moving product cost-effectively. In his 1997 book, *Managing in a Time of Great Change*, world-famous business guru Peter Drucker describes the transition.

‘Wal-Mart’s success, for example, rests in large measure on its redefining retailing as the moving of merchandise, rather than its sale. This led to the integration of the entire process—all the way from the manufacturer’s machine to the selling floor on the basis of “real-time” information about customer purchases.’<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 7: Walmart’s Tech Timeline<sup>11</sup>**

1975:	IBM370/135 computer system to maintain inventory control for all merchandise and to prepare income statements for each store.
1977:	Companywide computer network and deploys a system for ordering merchandise from suppliers.
1979:	Builds computer center, installs first terminal in a store: an IBM 3774.
1983:	Begins to use bar codes for scanning POS data.
1984:	Texlon handheld terminals for staff reordering merchandise.
1987:	Largest private satellite communication system in the United States.
1990:	Data warehouse prototype to store historical sales data.

1982(昭和57)年10月

## POS（販売時点情報管理）システム開始



いつもお客様の求める品揃えをするために、POS(販売時点情報管理)システムとバーコードを活用し、個々の商品の販売データを検証し、日々の品揃えに活用する「単品管理」を確立。

**Figure 8:** Seven-Eleven Japan's World-first POS System, October 1982.

The image title reads, 'POS (point of sale information management) system launched'.<sup>12</sup>

Across the Atlantic, the European retail leaders like Schwarz and Aldi in Germany, Carrefour in France and Tesco in the UK were also innovating with computer technology. Lesser-known to the Anglophone world, but a true pioneer, Seven-Eleven Japan introduced POS systems a year before Walmart did. By 1990, SEJ's parent, the Ito-Yokado Group, had become so efficient at inventory management that they stopped returning unsold merchandise to suppliers—because the volume of such merchandise had plummeted due to computer-driven advances in ordering and inventory control. The Group's mantra, *tanpin kanri* (単品管理), 'item-by-item control', is not only the Group's religion and a common phrase in Japan, it has become famous worldwide—Harvard published a case in 2005 titled *Tanpin Kanri: Retail Practice at Seven-Eleven Japan*.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time that developed-economy consumers were starting to spend more, retailers in those economies were using nascent computer technology to provide goods more cost-effectively, bringing more products to those consumers at incrementally lower prices, because the retailers' operations were steadily more cost effective. But China remained thousands of miles and leagues of ocean away (except from Japan—no surprise that Japanese manufacturers were the pioneers, along with their Taiwanese cousins, in developing mainland Chinese manufacturing for export). Making China a feasible location for sourcing products to meet growing consumer demand in North America and Europe would require an, er, sea change in the logistics of ocean-bound freight. Enter the next C, containers.

## CONTAINERS—THE FOURTH C

Mark Levinson, author of *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger*, asks a question in his book tour: ‘In the 1950s, when US manufacturing was growing very rapidly, who remembers what was America’s leading import? Coffee beans, in burlap bags.’<sup>14</sup> He seeks to emphasize that, before the advent of the shipping container, shipping was slow, cumbersome and expensive.

Outside of the logistics industries, relatively few people know the name Malcolm McLean, but he’s iconic within those industries, as the person who invented container shipping. In 1956, McLean bet big—borrowing US\$42 million (about \$470 million in 2022 dollars)—to launch his first container ship, the *Ideal X*. *They Made America*, a program broadcast by the U.S. Public Broadcasting System in 2004, relates that,

As McLean’s first container ship left Newark harbor, a man asked Freddy Fields, a top official of the International Longshoremen’s Association, “What do you think of that new ship?” Fields replied, “I’d like to sink that sonofabitch.” Longshoremen strikes ensued, but the cost of shipping dropped by a factor of a hundred.<sup>15</sup>

The publication *Marine Insight* states that ‘where the cost of loading a ship manually was USD 5.86 per ton in 1956, the usage of containers reduced it to an almost trifling 16 cents per ton’.<sup>16</sup>

Union resistance to container shipping continued through the 1960s and 1970s, but the cost savings proved irresistible. Moreover, from the mid-1960s, the rapid escalation of the U.S. war in Vietnam made imperative the economical delivery of the enormous variety (and weight!) of supplies required to prosecute the war.

By 1980, global container throughput had reached about 40 million twenty-foot-equivalent units (TEUs), a TEU being roughly the size of a single container. By 1990, that number had doubled. By 2000, 220 million TEUs were crisscrossing the oceans annually, and the 2010 figure was double that of 2000. Sometime in this decade, we’ll see a doubling of the 2010 figure.

With such remarkable growth in container shipping, it’s intuitive that such shipping would also claim a larger and larger share of total

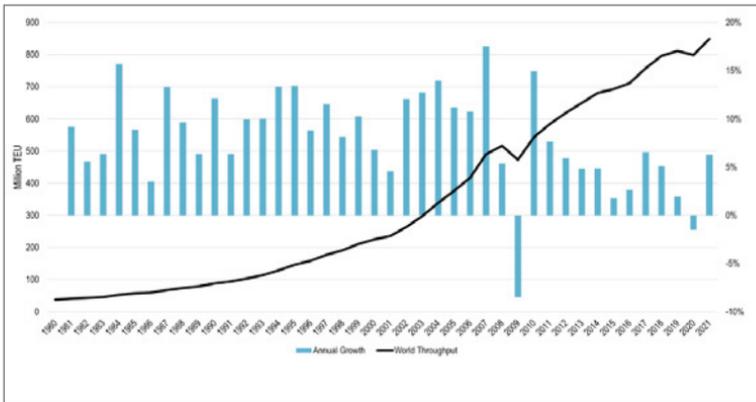
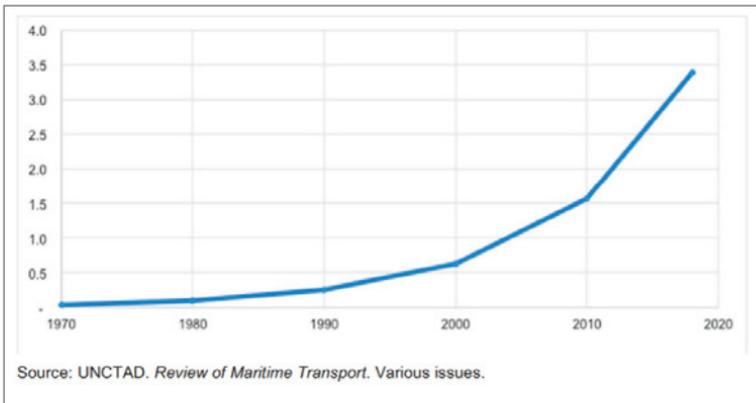


Figure 9: World Container Throughput, 1980—2021<sup>17</sup>



Source: UNCTAD. *Review of Maritime Transport. Various issues.*

Figure 10: Ratio of container to general cargo fleet (tonnage), 1970–2018<sup>18</sup>

2000		2017	
Port	000 TEU	Port	000 TEU
Hong Kong	18,100	Shanghai	40,230
Singapore	17,040	Singapore	33,670
Busan	7,540	Shenzhen	25,210
Kaohsiung	7,426	Ningbo-Zhoushan	24,610
Shanghai	5,613	Busan	21,400
Rotterdam	6,275	Hong Kong	20,760
Los Angeles	4,879	Guangzhou (Nansha)	20,370
Shenzhen	3,994	Qingdao	18,260
Hamburg	4,248	Dubai	15,440
Long Beach	4,600	Tianjin	15,210
Top 10	79,715	Top 10	235,160

Figure 11: Top 20 container ports, 2000 and 2017<sup>19</sup>

shipping weight.

And most importantly for the purpose of this paper, China captured the lion's share of the growth.

In 2000, Hong Kong led the league table among ports handling containers, while only two mainland ports, Shanghai and Shenzhen, ranked in the top 10. By 2017, Chinese ports held seven of the ten top spots. Container shipping had not only transformed the world, but it had transformed China. The Princeton University Press website promoting Levinson's book describes the matter succinctly.

By making shipping so cheap that industry could locate factories far from its customers, the container paved the way for Asia to become the world's workshop and brought consumers a previously unimaginable variety of low-cost products from around the globe.<sup>20</sup>



**Figure 12:** The Horizon Enterprise, built in the early 1980s. Gross tonnage of about 28,000 tonnes, and a capacity of 2,325 TEUs.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 13:** One of the MSC fleet, the MSC Loreto, along with the MSC Irina the largest container ships in the world in 2023, with a gross tonnage ten times the Horizon Enterprise and a capacity of 24,346 TEUs.<sup>22</sup> A side note: the MSC ships were built in China's Yangzijiang facility, and China's shipbuilders lead the world in production.

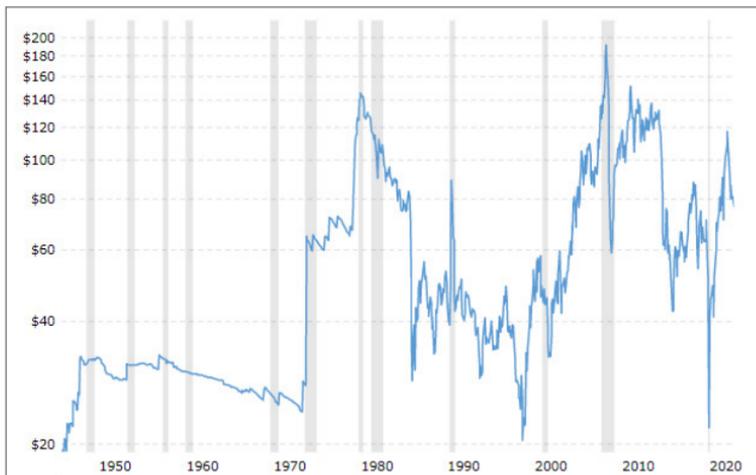
The word ‘Asia’ here could easily be replaced with ‘China’. Moreover, computerized management of port operations, ship manifests and the like enabled the full impact of the efficiency of the container, and both combined to bring those far-away ‘consumers a previously unimaginable varieties of low-cost products’. And a fifth C was about to make the economics even more compelling.

### *Carbon—the Fifth C*

Container ships run on diesel fuel—a lot of it. MoreThanShipping states that at least half of a container ship’s total operating cost is fuel, and that a single trans-Pacific round trip for a large modern ship, say from Shanghai to Los Angeles and back, a journey that requires about two weeks each way, burns more than US\$3 million in fuel alone.<sup>23</sup>

The price of crude oil, the basis for diesel among other fuels, shot up during the two oil shocks of the 1970s. But starting in 1980, the direction reversed, and by 1997 (inflation adjusted) crude prices were lower than they’d been since the 1950s.

The result of this precipitous decline in the price of this form of (hydro)carbon? At exactly the time when developed-economy consumers were consuming more, and when computers were making both retailing and containerized shipping much more economically efficient, the cost of transporting containers filled with manufactured goods from China to the developed-economy consumers dropped by



**Figure 14:** West Texas Intermediate (WTI or NYMEX) crude oil prices per barrel, 1946—2020.<sup>24</sup>

a large fraction.

The graph in Figure 14 shows that, during the 2000s, the price of crude shot up again, but by that time the economics of manufacturing in China were sufficiently established to render this price rise relatively immaterial, as the graphs in Figure 1 and Figure 2, at the beginning of this article, prove. China, itself the first C, was on an inexorable path to becoming the world's factory.

### ***Back to the First C—China***

China's own promising demographic profile in 1978 became a launching pad for the country's rocket-ship rise to the top of the league table of the world economies. At that time, the beginning of the era of 'reform and opening', China had the world's largest qualified workforce-in-waiting. 'Qualified' means relatively well educated and relatively healthy.

While Chinese people's literacy and life expectancy in 1949, the end of the Chinese civil war, were among the lowest in the world, those figures rose dramatically in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. China's life expectancy, in the low 40s in 1949 and therefore on par with India and Indonesia, while far below Brazil's 51, climbed more in both actual and percentage terms from 1950 to 1980. China's figure at the end of that period had risen to about 66, overtaking Brazil's 62 and well above India and Indonesia, at 55 and 57, respectively.

Literacy in China hovered around 20% at the beginning of those three decades, but had risen to about 60% by 1980, surpassing India, matching Indonesia and closing on Brazil, the other large developing economies of the era. Female literacy tells most of the story—at the beginning of the period, female literacy in China was in the single digits, but by 1980 China was approaching gender parity in literacy. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen asserts that life expectancy and literacy largely explain China leaving India, which still suffers from a gender gap in literacy, far behind in per capita wealth.<sup>25</sup> In 2008, Leslie Chang published *Factory Girls*, a masterful account of the lives of China's migrant workers, by then in the hundreds of millions, with roughly half of them female, hence Chang's title.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, China had its own baby boom in the early 1960s, so that by 1980, China had nearly one billion people, and nearly half of them were between the ages of ten and 30—hundreds of millions of young people just waiting for the confluence of the other four Cs to bring

them economic opportunities never before imagined in China.<sup>27</sup>

In *The Rise of China's Industrial Policy, 1978 to 2020*,<sup>28</sup> Barry Naughton identifies seven 'enlivenings' that Chinese people, from small-scale entrepreneurs to national government leaders, created in the 30 years from 1978. They were:

- Gradual dismantling/abandonment of the rigorous, collectivist control that farmers had suffered under for a few decades. To cite a single case, the now-famous village of Xiaogang, in Anhui Province, initiated a quiet rebellion against these controls in November 1978, and by privatizing some of their output raised production by a factor of five in the following year.
- Liberalization of the rural non-agricultural economy. Entrepreneurial farmers, freed from collectivist control, were able to use household surplus labor to create economic advantage. As a result, 'A new explosion of labor-intensive manufacturers emerged from the countryside.'<sup>29</sup> In 1987, Deng Xiaoping said, 'What took us by complete surprise was the development of TVEs. All sorts of small enterprises boomed in the countryside, as if a strong army appeared suddenly from nowhere.'<sup>30</sup> See below for a review of the Town and Village Enterprises.
- A soon-following relaxation of constraints on the farmers' urban cousins. Naughton says, Cities were enlivened first by an explosion of small-scale private businesses that transformed services, retail, restaurants, and then small-scale industry. When the dams were torn down, there was an enormous reservoir of pent-up labor and entrepreneurship ready to step in and make China's small-scale sector an important contributor to growth and prosperity.<sup>31</sup>
- The wholesale dismantling of much of the state-owned enterprise (SOE) sector, starting in the mid 1990s and made possible in part by the explosive growth of private enterprise in the urban areas (enlivening two above). Naughton points out that the effect on tens of millions of SOE employees was dire—for years to follow—but that the benefit of an economy freed from the dead weight of unproductive SOEs more than compensated.
- The largest migration in human history, which Naughton identifies as his fifth wave, and the greatest of them all. As the barriers to intra-province migration were relaxed, from the early

1990s and continuing for about 20 years, more than 250 million rural Chinese migrated to more urbanized area, where factory jobs beckoned. ‘These workers, literate, ambitious, equipped with cell phones and the will to build a new, modern China, were the key driver of growth acceleration in the twenty first century’.<sup>32</sup>

- The greatest wealth transfer in history? Some economists suggest so. Through the early 1990s, people’s homes belonged to their work units. The only way to allow the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to go bankrupt/otherwise recede without rendering all the employees homeless as well as jobless was to privatize housing, an initiative led by then Premier Zhu Rongji (who also drove the restructuring of the SOE sector). People owning their own residences led directly to an enormous rise in household wealth, and a key pillar of China’s economic growth in the years to follow—a robust, even bubbly, real estate market.
- Accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), in 2001. Naughton states that membership in WTO provided the final impetus propelling China to become the world’s factory—between 2001 and 2007, China’s exports grew about 30% per year, as the Figure 1 graph illuminates.

Noted MIT scholar Huang Yasheng says that, rather than the more-famous Special Economic Zones (SEZs), the rural-based TVEs were the primary drivers of economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s. ‘The value-added produced by these rural businesses increased from 6 percent of GDP in 1978 to 26 percent of GDP in 1996’.<sup>33</sup> An impressive percentage of China’s manufacturing giants, and millions of smaller-scale manufacturers, and tens of millions of the entrepreneurs who have developed these businesses, got their start in TVEs.

#### THE EFFECT OF THE FIVE Cs TODAY

Measured by nominal GDP, China has been the second largest economy in the world for a dozen years now, producing about US\$18 trillion of goods and services in 2023. The United States produced about US\$27 trillion, while former No. 2 Japan and No. 3 Germany produced just above \$4 trillion.<sup>34</sup> Yet just over four decades ago, China had only one quarter Japan’s GDP, and one ninth that of the United States.<sup>35</sup> The quote at the beginning of this paper from the American

Enterprise Institute, about China's having achieved the greatest economic advance in history and the greatest reduction in poverty ever witnessed by humanity, is just a sample of legion such assertions.

We may attribute these two related, first-time-in-history phenomena in China—economic advance and poverty reduction—to mothers in station wagons shopping at Walmarts and similar, to silicon chips, to large-sized boxes, to some black stuff pumped out of the ground in the Middle East and elsewhere—but mostly to a billion people striving for better lives, and having the opportunity to do so.

*John Darwin Van Fleet* ([jvf\\_road@hotmail.com](mailto:jvf_road@hotmail.com)) lived in Japan for the 1990s and has been resident in China since then. He currently serves as Director, Corporate Globalisation, and adjunct faculty, Antai College of Economics & Management, Shanghai Jiao Tong University. A contributor to the *Asian Review of Books*, *Caixin*, *Nikkei Asia* and *The China Project*, *Van Fleet's* first book, *Tales of Old Tokyo*, was published in 2015. His ongoing research project, *First Time in History*, is a multimedia endeavor (print, podcast, website) being published in components, like *this one!*



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# THE INTELLECTUALS OF BEIJING'S SHATAN DISTRICT

BY MATTHEW HU XINYU

## *ABSTRACT*

Shatan is the name of a district in old downtown Beijing, although perhaps it carries little significance for most residents of the capital today. During the early Republican period however, many Chinese intellectuals regarded the area as a kind of cultural Mecca. The purpose of this article is to re-examine the important historical, cultural and political events that took place in the district, to offer a new perspective on decoding modern Chinese history, as well as on the most recent developments in the Middle Kingdom.

In true Erhua (儿化) style, the Beijing dialect in which a pronounced 'r' retroflexion is added to the end of some words, Shatan is more commonly pronounced Shatan'r, and that is how I will refer to the area from here on.

Today, Shatan'r is most closely associated with the Red Mansion (红楼), a building that has now been restored. But historically, the district covered a much larger area, and actually it encompasses a large part of the old Peking University campus.



Figure 1: Courtyard at 28 Zhonglao Hutong before restoration

## DIGGING INTO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

I'd thought about this project for a long time, but it remained abstract until an oral history research project brought me to Zhonglao Hutong in 2008.

At the time, I was in my third year as a professional heritage preservationist. I soon discovered that oral history was a very effective way of supporting the cultural or historical significance of many hutong courtyard houses that I was unable to otherwise argue from the perspective of their architectural or artistic value.

Inspired by some early successes, my group and I kicked off an oral history project aiming to collect more stories from hutong residents. After posting an online announcement, we received a number of calls, one of which invited us to visit the Sun family at their historic family residence, 28 Zhonglao Hutong.

Number 28 was an ordinary courtyard house in many ways, but the Sun family had been cautious about doing any restoration or renovation work since regaining full ownership in 2004. Thus, the layout and main structure of the courtyard remained faithful to the way the property had looked in 1930's, captured in rare aerial shots from the period.

The main reason the family reached out to us was because they had been in touch with an old woman who had lived in their courtyard in the 1930's, who had told them of her experience in 1935 of the famous December 9<sup>th</sup> Movement, the mass student protest that demanded the government actively resist Japanese aggression.



**Figure 2:** Former resident at 28 Zhonglao Hutong, Qiu Ying

Her name was Qiu Ying (裘英), and her father had been a professor at China University at the time. In 1935, Madame Qiu was a student at the university, and she had joined one of the progressive underground student organizations organized by the Chinese Communist Party.

At the time, China was in turmoil. The Japanese Imperial Army had occupied Manchuria in 1931, and in 1935, it turned its attentions south. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of November, 1935, Yin Rugeng (殷汝耕), a Kuomintang

commissar known then as Yin Ju-keng, broke with the Nationalists and founded an independent government centred around Tongxian County (today's Tongzhou District), with the support of Japanese forces. The creation of the East Hebei Autonomous Government, as the breakaway region was called, is regarded as a major step in the Imperial Army's plans to expand their invasion of China.

This infuriated the Chinese, many of whom still regard Yin Rugeng as a traitor to this day, but the Nationalist government was already busy fighting the Red Army in the south and the northwest and was reluctant to protest too strongly and risk opening a new front with the Japanese.

Student leaders wanted to organise a demonstration but had nowhere safe to make plans. That is how 28 Zhonglao entered the picture. The courtyard home was an ideal choice because it was close to Peking University and some of the other schools in Shatan'r, and was also relatively hidden, and so not under surveillance by the Juntong (军统), the secret police operating under Nationalist control.

The meeting was a success and the demonstration had an enormous impact on the country, as it not only brought some 10,000 students into the streets that day, but also inspired similar demonstrations in 20 other cities across China over the course of the following months. It also proved to be a good recruitment tool for the Chinese Communist Party, as more than 20 of its student leaders later went on to become generals, mayors, governors, and ministers in the People's Republic after 1949.

#### **THE IMPERIAL UNIVERSITY OF PEKING**

The interview with Qiu Ying was a mindblowing experience, and opened my eyes to the importance of a simple hutong neighbourhood normally overshadowed by the attractions next door, like the Palace Museum and Jingshan Park.

At the core of this story lay Peking University, which originally occupied several locations in Shatan'r before relocating to Yanjing in the 1950's. It is not difficult to find traces of the university, which is still one of the top universities in China today, but it took me a long time to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

It all began to take shape when the Qing fleet, "considered the most powerful in Asia",<sup>1</sup> was blown to pieces by the Japanese fleet, the second strongest in Asia, in the Yellow Sea in the summer of 1894. It



**Figure 3:** The mathematics department of the National Peking University.

was a massive shock to many Chinese officials since China had always viewed the Japanese as their 小弟, or younger brother, historically.

As part of an effort to stave off collapse, the Manchu Imperial Court under the Guangxu Emperor (1875-1908) launched the Wuxu Reform (戊戌变法) in 1898. The government was tasked with modifying the approach to national development from passively importing advanced Western weapons and machinery, to rebuilding the Chinese educational system, which had remained largely unchanged for centuries, with the founding the same year of China's first national university, the Imperial University of Peking or the Jingshi Daxuetang (京师大学堂).

en dash

The founding of the university might have ended in failure, as many of the young emperor's reforms would, but it did not. However, the changes ushered in by the Reform annoyed the Empress Dowager Cixi, the real power behind the throne and China's *de facto* ruler, and she responded by placing the emperor under house arrest. In retrospect, this was China's last chance to take control of its own development without bloodshed, and it ended after just 103 days.

The university survived because several Western faculty members had already been hired, and there were fears that firing them might drag China into yet more unwanted diplomatic disputes.

William Martin (丁韪良) is perhaps the best known. A Presbyterian missionary who arrived in China in the 1850's, Ding Weiliang, as he was known in Chinese, not only knew the Chinese classics, but had

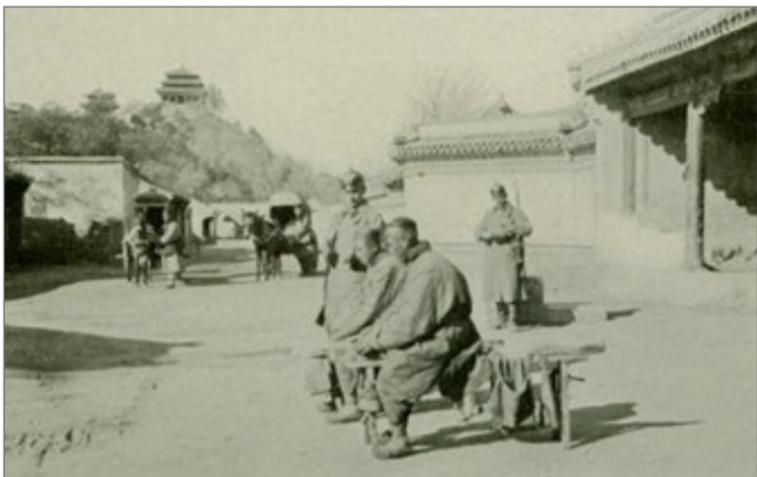
previously served as president of the Jingshi Tongwenguan, the School of Combined Learning, the first Qing government school for foreign languages, where he had been active in educational reform.

Together with his Chinese counterpart, Education Minister Sun Jia'nai (孙家鼐), Martin would run the university as president until 1902, when he was demoted to a lower position before eventually being removed from the school.

And so, this first and most important experiment in modern education in China got off to a very rocky start. Only two years after the university was founded, the anti-colonialist Boxer Rebellion interrupted the already slow and difficult process of reform. When the Eight-Nation Alliance (Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Russia, the United States, Italy and Austro-Hungary) retaliated, attacking and occupying Beijing for a year and a half, the Empress Dowager and the emperor fled Beijing, and only returned in 1902, when the dust had settled. What happened to the university's first and second year students is uncertain, as little archive material survives, but their studies would certainly have faced severe disruption.

What we do know is that German soldiers took control of the campus and were stationed there until their retreat in 1902. The historical archive photo below shows two of them on guard in front of the university's main entrance, with a knife sharpener behind, who was keeping their bayonets keen.

On a map dated 1908, the Imperial University of Peking is clearly



**Figure 4:** German soldiers were stationed on the university campus until 1902

marked as being located just east of Jingshan Park, although there was obviously a wall separating the two.

This university was not the Peking University that we think of today, as most of its professors were drawn from the well-entrenched bureaucratic tradition of Confucian ideals which was first elaborated during the Sui Dynasty (561-618), and many of its students were descendants of either bureaucratic or aristocratic families.

When the Guangxi Emperor abolished the Imperial Examination system, or Keju (科举), in 1905, it had lasted for over 1300 years, and many people saw the university “merely as” its replacement, and competed fiercely to get their child admission. But the new system only seemed to nurture a corrupt culture, with many students focusing on opium and prostitutes rather than on their studies.

#### PEKING UNIVERSITY

When in 1912, the Xin Hai Revolution overthrew the Qing Dynasty ending centuries of imperial rule, and China turned a new page, declaring itself Asia’s first republic, the university became known as the National University of Peking (国立北京大学) and later more simply as Peking University.

The new university needed a new president, and the post was given to the renowned scholar and translator, Yan Fu (严复, 1854-1921). In many ways, he was the ideal candidate for the job, one of the first generation of Chinese able to navigate and bridge Chinese and Western civilizations.

At the age of thirteen, Yan Fu had been admitted to the Fujian Arsenal Academy (福州船政学堂) where he gained an initial



Figures 5-6: Cai Yuanpei (left) was a pivotal figure in Peking University’s development; a 1918 photo (right) shows him in the front row, fourth from the right

understanding of Western science. In 1877, he was sent by the government to study at the Royal Naval College in London, where he began to realize the importance of introducing Western thought to China. Upon his return, in addition to a full-time job teaching at the naval academies in Fuzhou and Tianjin, Yan Fu translated a number of important Western texts, including Thomas Huxley's 1893 book *Evolution and Ethics* (《进化论和伦理学》, 即严复翻译的《天演论》), which was greeted with great acclaim by Chinese literati, significantly enhancing his own stature.

Yan Fu's time at Peking University was brief, and lasted less than a year. Even within that year, he spent more time traveling than at his job at the Shatan'r campus.

The real force that turned Peking University into the institution it has become today was Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培, 1868-1940), the philosopher and politician who was an influential figure in modern Chinese education, and whose impressive career paralleled every turn of modern Chinese history.

At the age of twenty six, Cai successfully passed the Imperial Examination, and was made a *Hanlin* (翰林) at the Imperial Academy. In 1904, he founded one of the most important political parties, the Restoration Society or the *Guang Fu Hui* (光复会), which later joined forces with Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Chinese Revolutionary Alliance or *Tong Meng Hui* (中国同盟会) in launching the Xin Hai Revolution against the Manchu Imperial Court he had previously served. Then in 1907, Cai left China for Germany to study philosophy and art history at Leipzig University, joining the first wave of Chinese scholars who left the country to expand their expertise at foreign universities.

When he was nominated president of Peking University in 1917, Cai demonstrated his idiosyncratic social ethos by bowing to the staff as he entered the campus, something none of his predecessors would ever have considered. He set up the university's first aesthetic discipline, and also piloted higher education for women.

Most importantly, he introduced standards for selecting professors. After several strenuous rounds of head-hunting, he hired not only some of the first communists like Li Dazhao (李大钊), who would help found the CCP, but also soft democrats like essayist and writer Dr. Hu Shih (胡适), who later became China's Republican-era ambassador to the United States, and senior conservatives like author and polyglot, Gu Hongming (辜鸿铭) and author and historian, Liu

Shipei (刘师培).

The story of how Cai recruited Chen Duxiu (陈独秀), who with Li co-founded the CCP, is another classic example of Cai's unorthodox approach to life.

When Cai invited Chen to become Dean of Liberal Arts, he was working in Shanghai. Learning that Chen was on a brief trip to Beijing, Cai visited him at his home, but when he arrived, he discovered that Chen was still asleep. Chen's servant knew who this important visitor was, and hurried off to wake up his master, up but Cai stopped him. Instead, he waited patiently for a couple of hours outside Chen's bedroom. When he woke up, Chen was so touched by this act that he agreed to take the job without hesitation.

Chen was also head of a magazine called *La Jeunesse* (《新青年》杂志). Aimed at young, educated Chinese, *La Jeunesse* was instrumental in promoting the New Culture Movement (新文化运动), which was critical of classical Chinese ideas and promoted democracy and science, as well as socialist and communist ideas. It was especially popular at Peking University and in fact, many of its editors and contributors were from there, amongst them Hu Shih, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, a leading figure of modern Chinese literature, and his younger brother, essayist and translator, Zhou Zuoren.

When the Chinese Communist Party was founded in Shanghai in July 1921, Chen was elected General Secretary and later, *La Jeunesse* became the Party's official magazine.

Under Cai's leadership, Peking University began to attract more and more ambitious young Chinese to Beijing, and many of them settled down in the Shatan'r area, looking for opportunities to study or work at the university. One of them was a young man from Hunan Province called Mao Zedong (毛泽东).

Mao arrived in Beijing in the autumn of 1918, first settling at the residence of Professor Yang Changji (杨昌济), his future father-in-law, in the Dou Fuchi Hutong north of the Bell Tower. He then moved to the Ji'ansuo Zuoxiang Hutong, to what is known as Courtyard No. 8 nowadays. It was also Shatan'r, but much closer to Peking University, where Yang had found Mao a job as a library assistant.

Mao's main purpose in gaining access to the university was to look for opportunities to study abroad, mainly in France, for his townsmen, but he spent a lot of time attending lectures, salons, debates and book clubs, where he was exposed to the ideas of the time.



**Figures 7-8:** Mao Zedong (right) lived at No. 8 Ji'ansuo Zuoxiang near the old Peking University campus when he worked in its library

Already a communist but still sympathetic to Sun Yat-sen's Nationalists, Mao decided that he should stay in China and work towards revolution rather than study abroad, and returned to Hunan in early 1919 to work with farmers and introduce Communist ideals. While there, he also helped organise a general strike in the province.

For the next few years, China's future leader split his time between a number of places, but in early 1927, he was back in Hunan to finish a survey of villages, which led him to conclude that land use and agricultural issues were the greatest challenges facing his generation. Later that year, as commander-in-chief of the newly created Red Army, and having broken with the Nationalists, he helped lead the Autumn Harvest Uprising against Kuomintang forces in Changsha. Now firmly on the path to revolution, Mao's experience at Peking University played a pivotal role in his life.

Not long after he left Beijing in early 1919, the historic May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement kicked-off with a massive student demonstration. It was in reaction to the discovery that the Treaty of Versailles had handed Germany's former colonies in Shandong province to the Japanese. While anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist in orientation, the movement also targeted the Chinese government, which as they saw it, had failed to stand up for itself and the country.

Certainly, China would have expected more from Versailles. In 1917, it had joined the Triple Entente Powers, Britain, France and Russia, by sending 140,000 labourers to work abroad. Having sided with the victorious Allies, China naturally expected that the German colonies would be returned to them. Instead, they were given to



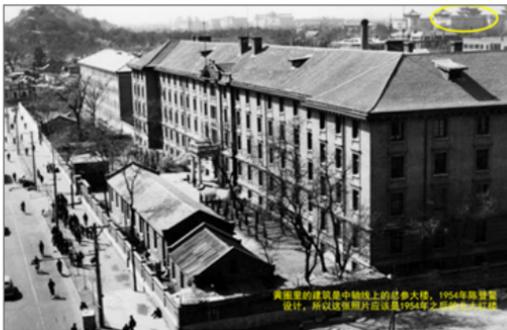
Figures 9: The May 4th Movement in 1919 triggered student demonstrations and raised the profile of Peking University

Japan. It was Cai Yuanpei who first got news from friends at the Peace Conference, and intentionally leaked the news to student leaders, kicking off the most important Chinese student movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement is perhaps the most important event in the history of Peking University, and it also shaped the development of modern China. It made Peking University China's most prominent university, not only for its academic performance, but also for its sense of social responsibility.

In commemoration, the street in front of the university campus was renamed, changing from Hanhuayuan Street (汉花园) to Wusi Dajie (May 4<sup>th</sup> Street). The campus is now gone, but the name remains.

The following decade was period of relatively steady development for the university, both under Cai and later, under his successors, who mostly followed in his footsteps. By 1928, Peking University had developed into a comprehensive institution of higher learning and



Figures 10: The School of Liberal Arts (Red Mansion) in 1954

included a School of Liberal Arts, a School of Science and a School of Law.

As the university expanded, many notable scholars were attracted to Shatan'r as they took on teaching or research roles. One of them was Professor Li Siguang (李四光, 1889-1971) an ethnic Mongol and founder of geomechanics in China, who had returned from the UK's University of Birmingham, to teach geology. In 1920, he became Dean of the Geology Department, the first in the country. Li understood the importance of founding one of the earliest geological disciplines in China, and was hands-on concerning almost every aspect of work in the department. He was also responsible for the creation of a garden on the School of Science campus, which he designed and planted with his students.

To accommodate the university's massive expansion plans, a number of talented architects were brought in. Liang Sicheng, the "Father of modern Chinese architecture" and his wife Lin Huiyin, the first woman architect in modern China, gave up teaching jobs at the Architectural Department at Northeast University in Shenyang, and returned to Beijing in 1930 to start work with the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture (中国营造学社), which had been founded by Zhu Qiqian, a champion of traditional Chinese architecture.

In their spare time, the pair took on occasional architectural commissions and in July 1935, Liang and Lin completed a project in Shatan'r for Peking University's new Geology Department. As China's first modern generation of architects, and architectural educators, it was one of their few completed projects, as they devoted most of their time to the research of ancient architecture.

Liang Sicheng had also taken on another project in 1935, more or less at the same time as the new university building, for a female dormitory building located at the north end of what is today's Shatan Beijie Street.

The first impression of the building was unusual particularly at the time, and it is difficult to connect



**Figures 11:** The sundial in this photo stands in front of the Sackler Museum at Peking University today



**Figure 12:** A building designed by Liang and Lin after completion in 1935 it with one of Liang’s devising, but as Peking University was on a very tight on budget, the architect took a purely functional approach to its design that helped save a lot of money.

Walk around the building today, and you will find not only an official heritage sign but also a foundation stone, laid by late President of the Peking University, Prof. Jiang Menglin (蒋梦麟) in 1935.

One other reminder of the building’s past is a slogan saying ‘Democracy Square’<sup>22</sup> painted by Peking University students in 1948 when the People’s Liberation Army was surrounding the city then known as Beiping. They were likely underground members of the Communist Party, who painted the slogan as a daring sign of their confidence in victory.

In 1948, the President of Peking University was Dr Hu Shih, whose previous position had been as Chinese Ambassador to the US during



**Figures 13-14:** A “heritage sign” (left) and foundation stone (right) on a former dormitory building



**Figures 15:** In 1948 Dr Hu Shih, then President of Peking University, hosted a visiting academic delegation from India

World War II. Before he left for Taiwan with the retreating Nationalist forces, he still was active in organizing various academic events and conferences and can be seen in the photo above receiving an Indian academic delegation at Jiemin Hall (子民堂), which was named after Cai Yuanpei, whose literary name was Jiemin.

#### **OTHER INSTITUTIONS AROUND SHATAN’R**

The literati of the early Republican period faced a much more challenging world than our own today, and many dedicated themselves to saving China from colonization. Many of them believed that education was the best way of saving Chinese civilisation, and they worked towards this by starting schools and founding newspapers and magazines.

Among them was the Sino-French University, which was co-founded by social elites who had studied together in France in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The heart of the group was Li Shizeng (李石曾), the son of a late Qing dynasty senior minister, and who was co-founder of the Chinese Anarchist movement with Wu Zihui and Zhang Renjie.

The university was begun as the counterpart of the Sino-French University in Lyon, and helped Chinese students study abroad, in the hope that the understanding and knowledge they brought back would help turn it into a strong country once again.

Many of the graduates of the university went on to become pillars

of Chinese society in the coming decades, and they have all left their footprints on the streets and hutongs of Shatan'r.

Among the publications born in the area during this period was Literature Quarterly, a short-lived magazine founded in a small courtyard in Shatan'r by three young friends who went on to become cultural giants: Zheng Zhenduo (郑振铎), who later headed the Institute of Archaeology, Ba Jin (巴金), author of The Family (家) and perhaps the most famous Chinese writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Xiao Qian (萧乾), a famous writer, journalist and translator.

#### END OF AN ERA

The glory of Shatan'r began to fade in 1952, when Peking University moved to its current location on the campus of what had been Yenching University. Its formerly peaceful and tranquil hutong courtyard houses and campuses were gradually replaced with residential buildings, offices and even factories.

A century has passed since the golden age of Shatan'r, a place where you were likely to bump into Lu Xun in his rickshaw on his way back to his home in Xisi, or Hu Shih walking with friends from the New Culture Movement, arguing over the best grammar for a new style of written language, or Liang and Lin fresh from the construction site, dusting the dirt off their clothes.

There is still much to learn, but with luck, there is enough in this article that will awake in you the desire to take a walk in this place called Shatan'r, at some point in the near future.

*Matthew Hu Xinyu was born and raised in Beijing. His work over the past 17 years has been largely related to the preservation of built heritage as well as intangible heritage in China. He currently is serving as China Representative of the Prince's Foundation School of Traditional Arts, trustee of the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Centre (CHP) and Co-Founder of the Courtyard Institute. He was deeply involved in the renovation of the Shijia Hutong Museum.*



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# SECTION 3

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## Reviews And Passages



# HER LOTUS YEAR: CHINA, THE ROARING TWENTIES AND THE MAKING OF WALLIS SIMPSON

BY PAUL FRENCH

NEW YORK, ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, 2024

REVIEWED BY FRANCES WOOD

Warlords and banditry notwithstanding, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century China seemed to offer an escape. Escape from creditors, in the case of Sir Edward Trelawny Backhouse and less illustrious figures in Shanghai, and escape from their more puritanical backgrounds for Robert Byron, Osbert Sitwell, Harold Acton and many others. In 1924, escaping from her drunken and violent husband, the Commander of a gunboat in the USS Navy's South China Patrol, Wallis Spencer, as she then was, made her way from Hong Kong to Shanghai and, eventually, Peking, where she stayed for a year. It is very clear from her ghost-written memoir, *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (1956), that her year in China was very happy and very significant. She writes of her 'lotus year', as Paul French notes, invoking the peaceful and pleasant existence of Tennyson's *Lotos-Eaters* who were so happy they forgot to go home. For Wallis, it was 'without doubt the most delightful, the most carefree, the most lyrical interval of my youth - the nearest thing to a lotus-eater's dream that a young woman brought up the "right" way could expect to know.'

Though the significance to her of this year in China is apparent in her memoir, such was the drama of her later life and place in the abdication of King Edward VIII that it has been overlooked in the dozens of books on her life. Where China appears at all in these volumes, it is as the source of sexual innuendo, apparently described in a 'China Dossier' said to have been compiled by the British authorities - the 'government' and the Intelligence Services - to disgrace Mrs Simpson. Like all his predecessors, Paul French has looked for the dossier and if anyone could find it, it would be him, for his earlier *Midnight in Peking* (2011) made much use of a bundle of documents that he discovered in the British National Archives which had been misfiled and lost for decades. He concludes that the dossier never existed,

‘nobody ever actually read a physical copy or held an actual document in their hands. In fact nobody has ever seen the purported document.’ Despite this unhelpful discovery, or lack of discovery, no writer on Wallis Simpson can resist exploration. In his *Behind Closed Doors: the tragic untold story of Wallis Simpson* (2011), Hugo Vickers states that never ‘has any evidence been produced to suggest the existence of the so-called China Dossier’ but he cannot resist the temptation to quote Michel Bloch on the Duchess of Windsor ‘bewitching the Duke with some kind of sexual sorcery’ and a conversation with Lady Gladwyn, ‘She told me, “The Duke had sexual problems...” I commented, “She was meant to have learned special ways in China.” “There was nothing Chinese about it”, said Lady Gladwyn.’

Having dealt with the dossier, Paul French describes Wallis Simpson’s life in China, dispelling many of the unfounded and malicious rumours that, in effect, constitute the non-existent document. The sexual innuendo is characteristic of the Yellow Peril/Fu Manchu school of writing about China and is satirised in J.G.Farrell’s *The Singapore Grip* (1978) where new-comer Matthew Webb is puzzled by the significance of the overheard phrase. Was the Singapore Grip some kind of suitcase? An Oriental version of influenza? A sort of masonic handshake used by members of a secret society?

When it comes to Wallis Simpson, various other malicious rumours persisted. Did she have an affair, culminating in an abortion, with Count Ciano, Mussolini’s son-in-law? French investigates a possible affair with an Italian naval officer in Peking but demolishes the Ciano affair, and the consequent allegation that Wallis was sympathetic to Italian fascism at the time, as Ciano arrived in China a year after Wallis left. Whilst successfully dismissing malicious gossip, most of the book is devoted to exploring what Wallis Simpson actually did in China. Using her own words but including a wide variety of other sources, French shows that Wallis, rather than developing obscure pelvic muscles, spent much of her time shopping and developing a distinctive style that owed a lot to China and lasted a lifetime. She developed a passion for jade and apparently became quite expert at finding treasures in flea-markets and little shops, sometimes selling on her finds in the grand tradition of the Camel Bell. Later photographs of her houses reveal tables covered with small jades, many with tiny hardwood stands, for her jades travelled with her, as did her habit of dressing her dark hair which she was said by both Cecil Beaton



**Figure 1:** Wallis and her lover Alberto da Zara at the Paomachang horse races outside Peking

and her hairdresser to have learnt in China. Cecil Beaton said it was so shiny that flies would slip off it. Paul French writes of Man Ray's 1936 photographs of Wallis, in a Chinese-inspired dress, sitting beside a Buddha, showing how her style, developed in China in 1924-5, continued to impress.

One of the great pleasures of the book is French's personal exploration of the places where she stayed, most notably Shijia hutong in Peking, rented by her friends Herman and Kitty Rogers. Much of the hutong is still quite well-preserved and much of its recent

history quite well-known. 24 Shijia hutong was the childhood home of Ling Shuhua and there are countless descriptions of hutong life in the 1920s and 30s that French has drawn on. He makes much use of Ellen La Motte's *Peking Dust* (1919) which, though she visited slightly earlier than Wallis, is very much the account of a lively and strong-minded young woman, equally keen on shopping in temple fairs and the thieves market, and being blinded by dust at the Paomachang race-course. He also uses the novels of Ann Bridge, pen-name of Mary O'Malley, the wife of a British diplomat who had arrived in China in 1925, and Harold Acton, as well as a wealth of lesser-known memoirs to describe Peking in the 1920s, the vanished world of tree-lined hutongs with rickshaws, house boys, water-sellers and peddlers and the inevitable flocks of pigeons with tiny bamboo whistles attached to their tail-feathers humming overhead, creating an atmosphere as credible and tangible as Ann Bridge at her best.

Though the book will give great pleasure to anyone interested in China and expatriate life there in the 1920s, it also has a contribution to make to the demolition of myths about Wallis Simpson. To demonstrate that, contrary to undying gossip, she spent her time in China shopping and learning about jade and Chinese style is a useful corrective. One fascinating aspect of French's book is his description of how, despite pirates and increasing anti-foreign feeling, she managed to make her way up the China coast, often with high-level escorts. The rest of her story is still coloured by prejudice and she remains something of an enigma.

During his research, Paul alerted me to family involvement through my great-uncle Arnold. There are several illustrations on the internet of a half-length oil portrait of a cheerful-looking young-ish lady with dark hair (not terribly shiny, a safe surface for flies) wearing a green dress, the painting is signed 'Arnold Mason' and dated 1936. Beside his signature are the letters WS and this is assumed to be a portrait of Wallis Simpson.

Great-uncle Arnold (1885-1963) was a Royal Academician and successful portrait painter although his career coincided with that of Augustus John who bagged most of the celebrities, leaving great-uncle Arnold to paint practically every mayor, judge and council leader in the UK. I have my doubts about the attribution. 1936 was the most crucial year in Wallis Simpson's life with the King's abdication in December; would she have had the time or the inclination to be



**Figure 2:** WS by Arnold Mason RA

Painted? Would she have dressed so simply and casually for a portrait? In photographs such as those by Man Ray, taken at the same time, she is infinitely more regal and elegant. I also note that it was sold by Christies a few years ago for a mere couple of hundred pounds, a reasonable price for an Arnold Mason and for an unknown 'WS' but not for a Wallis Simpson, whose ashtrays sold in Rome and Geneva for thousands.

*Frances Wood studied Chinese at the universities of Cambridge, Peking and London. She worked in the SOAS library before moving to the British Library as Curator of the Chinese collections. Her books include The Blue Guide to China, Did Marco Polo Go to China?, The Silk Road, and No Dogs and Not Many Chinese: Treaty Port Life in China 1843-1943.*



# OCEAN CURRENTS ARE STILL PROTECTING US—洋流仍在呵护 PART 1

BY QU GEPING, MANS LONNROTH, LI LAILAI

REVIEWED BY VIOLANTE DI CANOSSA

The year 2022 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what has become known as a turning point in international environmental diplomacy, cooperation and action. On 5 June 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) opened in Stockholm, Sweden. On that day, ‘in the century-old hall [of the Royal Opera House] the Swedish King and Prime Minister welcomed the main members of more than 100 national delegations, together with officials of the United Nations’ to speak about the environment.

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of this 1972 United Nations (UN) conference, a book titled *Ocean Currents are Still Protecting Us* 洋流仍在呵护 was authored by Professor Qu Geping, Mr Mans Lonnroth and Dr Li Lilai. The book includes a narration of the conference, detailing the twists and turns from before, during and afterwards, from the personal and privileged point of view of Professor Qu, at the time a young member of the 40-people, Chinese delegation. The second part of the book includes an overview of the evolution of environmental protection in Sweden; to share its successful experience and to answer Professor Qu’s question on how Sweden has been able to achieve both economic development and protection of the environment. In this endeavour, Professor Qu was helped by Dr Li, Vice President of the Stockholm Environment Institute and Mr Lonnroth, who served as State Secretary of the Ministry of the Environment of Sweden in the 70s and was Political Advisor for the Environment to the Swedish Prime Minister.

Personal experience and anecdotes make the first chapter of the book, the only section reviewed here, a fascinating journey back to the late 1960s and early 1970s and the events that promoted the building of a foundation of international cooperation around environmental issues. The written voice of Professor Qu, often described as the ‘father of environmental protection’<sup>1</sup> in China, makes for captivating reading,

recording known and some lesser-known information on the context and actions of critical players. These were men and women who had the foresight, courage and stamina to pursue the elevation of a topic - the environment - to the highest level of international debate. This, as the negative impact of the rapid post-world war industrial development on the environment was becoming increasingly evident but, against many odds, including the historical context of the Cold War and the Cultural Revolution.

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dash

Through the eyes of the author, UNCHE is presented through a description of three 'battlefields'. The first set of struggles took place far from China, in New York and the major European capitals. This was due to the fact that China's status at the UN was restored only in October 1971 - too late to be fully involved and engaged in the preparation work for the conference. Qu runs us through the birth and concretisation of an idea, born from a suggestion in the late 1960s to include the environment in the list of topics to be debated in the UN's international conferences, a topic that could also facilitate the attempt 'to reduce the political confrontation between the East and the West'.

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Professor Qu vividly describes how the actions and beliefs of a few main players, such as Mr Astrom, the Swedish Ambassador to the United Nations, were critical in successfully circumnavigating multiple obstacles to win the consensus of the UN member states. First of all, political consensus needed to be strengthened in Sweden. Second, the Cold War was dominating the public domain and debate, relegating many other issues and matters to a low position in the list of priorities. Sweden, leveraging its long standing neutral and impartial position and highlighting the scientific nature of the matter at hand, was able to secure both the United States and the Soviet Union's approval for the conference, 'such agreement [had] never happened before in the Cold War'. Unexpectedly, the greatest resistance came from players closer to home, particularly from France and Britain and what declassified documents recorded being the 'Brussels Group'. The latter worked against the conference with a few specific aims: for participating countries to avoid assuming clear and binding responsibilities, to discourage any possible interference from environmental laws on trade, as well as requests for financial support for new environmentally focused organisations.

Attention to the nexus between environment and people - intrinsic

in the title of the conference - was pivotal for the buy-in of developing countries, grappling with a different set of challenges, including poverty, hunger and severe under-development. Famous to today are the words of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in her conference speech: 'Are not poverty and need the greatest polluters?' no period

And what about the role of China? As the Cold War factions were risking derailing the project, critical was the realisation that China's participation, as the largest developing country in the world, was key to the success of the conference. At this point, the narration brings us back to China and the role of Premier Zhou Enlai: his concerns about environmental issues and vision of the environment as a cross-sectorial matter that needed to include stakeholders from all segments of society. The official position however gave no role to these matters, focusing instead on the UNCHE as an opportunity to move forward in the 'international class struggle'.

Professor Qu describes the conference itself as a second battlefield. His voice quickly turns to the negotiating rooms in Stockholm, presenting the debates and challenges—particularly those confronting the adoption of *the Declaration*<sup>3</sup>, the first of the five key official items of the conference itself. It is a candid and valuable insider viewpoint that shows and talks to the human-dimension behind the negotiations and official documents that we may now take for granted. It brings forward the complexity of the situation, derived from the significant differences in background and capacity actors had and were equipped with.

Qu's reflections go beyond the relevance of China's active contribution to the *Declaration* and acceptance of other critical documents for the success of the conference. The value of the narration also lies in shedding light on the impact the 12 days in Stockholm, and the work and efforts around them, had on China's future as well as on the development of environmental protection diplomacy.

From China's perspective, the 1972 conference marked the first time the country participated in an international conference, 'changing its attitude from passive to an active participant'. From an international perspective, and according to Mr Lars-Goran Engfeldt<sup>2</sup>, 'China quickly managed to establish itself as an undisputed leader among developing countries'.

On the domestic front, in August 1973 with the support of Premier Zhou Enlai, the First National Conference on Environmental

Protection was held in Beijing by the State Council. Despite pollution still being considered a product and problem of the capitalist system, the conference unveiled facts and data demonstrating scientifically that China was not immune from similar challenges. In the written words of Professor Qu: 'this was the difficult beginning of environment protection in China'. The first Environmental Protection Law was promulgated in 1979, stressing the need to address economic growth and its impact on the environment in parallel.

Internationally, UNCHE is defined by the author as 'the first landmark in the history of world environmental protection'. It did create a solid basis for the work the United Nations and its agencies and member states are continuously and relentlessly pursuing to address inclusive and sustainable development within the boundaries posed by Planet Earth. Starting from Stockholm, the debate evolved. Other landmark moments were the 1992 Earth Summit that gathered in Rio de Janeiro 102 heads of states or governments, including Premier Li Peng, and 183 delegations. The World Summit on Sustainable Development followed in 2002 in Johannesburg. Both further consolidated the understanding around environment protection and sustainable development and sharpened and concretised the vision for its implementation.

Professor Qu Geping's conclusions bring us back to today. He notes that a new journey of ecological and environmental reconstruction has begun, starting from China's vision in this century. His last reflections are more of a call for action: for a step-change in actions, stressing the need for significant behavioural change in the whole of society. 'A massive change is required from a model focused on material production and consumption to a 'grand strategy' involving all aspects of society, politics, culture and the economy'. He also notes that this vision embeds a long and complex process. China is rising to the challenge, stressing the need to move away from a traditional high-intensity production model to 'high-quality' development, a concept now enshrined in top legislation and government documents, including the 14<sup>th</sup> five-year plan and the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.

The world continues towards unabated records from rising temperature, sea levels and glacial melting,<sup>4</sup> the many debates, questions, and challenges touched by Professor Qu Geping in his recount of the facts of fifty years ago are as contemporary and relevant

as ever. The story of a young expert delegate is a timely reminder that exchanges, progress and actions are possible in the oddest of circumstances. It is also a reminder to us, from the young and less young actors of today, that ‘human beings are faced with a choice of how to develop, that is the choice of *their own destiny*’.

*Violante di Canossa studied economics in Italy and holds a Masters in Economics from the London School of Economics (UK). She has been living in China for ten years and now leads the Research and Policy Team at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in China. As a researcher and practitioner of sustainable development, she is deeply interested in environmental issues and in the quest for a new development paradigm that ensures economic, social and environmental sustainability, leaving no one behind.*



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# THE WORLD ADMINISTERED BY IRISHMEN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ROBERT HART AND CONTEMPORARY IRISH IN EAST ASIA

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS & ARCHIVES,  
QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY, BELFAST, 2023

BY ROBIN MASEFIELD

REVIEWED BY ANDREW HILLIER

When examining the role of Irish men and women in Britain's imperial project, little attention has been paid to their presence in treaty port China. If this is partly due to a lack of relevant information, Robin Masefield's, *The World Administered by Irishmen*, provides a timely corrective. Whilst claiming he 'does not feel qualified to write about the role of Irish people in the British Empire more widely', his account provides an excellent starting point for a more in-depth investigation of that role in this context.

The most famous European in nineteenth century China was of course Sir Robert Hart, the Inspector-General (IG) of the Imperial Maritime Customs (IMC), an Ulsterman through and through, albeit the British Government was adamant that the post be held by 'an Englishman'. A Chinese institution, administered by a wholly western Indoor Staff, under Hart, the IMC not only oversaw the collection of export duties but also transformed the country's infrastructure. Forming its subtitle, Hart is understandably the book's starting-point, in terms of both his career and his complex private life, which included fathering three children by his long-standing Chinese mistress, Ayaou, whilst still a young consular official. Paying her off following his appointment as IG, and keen to conceal their Sino-Irish roots, Hart sent the children to England to be educated.

If this story along with Hart's career is now well-known, the value of the early chapters is that they also describe the substantial number of people whom he drew into China, through family and other social networks, and how, through those networks, Ulstermen built up a significant presence in the IMC, the Consular Service and other occupations.

Even without Hart's nepotism, as Masefield shows, Ireland established an important stake in the treaty port world. Its universities had a fast-track into the consular service, which formed the back-bone of, what Robert Bickers has called, 'Britain in China,' a term broad enough to encompass the Irish presence. Three British Ministers to the Peking Court came from Ireland—the outstanding Sinologist, Sir Thomas Wade, the career diplomat, Sir Nicholas O'Connor and Sir John Newell Jordan, who held the post from 1906 until his retirement fourteen years later. Born and brought up in a farming family in Bangor, County Down, Jordan was nonetheless described by Sir Austen Chamberlain, shortly after his death, as 'a great Englishman, who loved China second only to his own country'. To this can be added no less than ten Hong Kong Governors who had Irish roots. Of these, undoubtedly the most flamboyant and controversial was Sir John Pope Hennessy, whose suggestion of giving the Chinese a say in the running of the Crown colony caused outrage and had much to do with his Home-rule sympathies.

However, it is the individuals who served both in China and Japan and are now little-known, who give the book its special interest. Individual chapters with short biographies are devoted to doctors, naturalists, travellers, translators and a catch-all miscellany, including bankers - most famously Sir Thomas Jackson, founder of the Hong Kong Bank, what is now HSBC; engineers and railwaymen—the 'hugely influential' Claude Kinder, who effectively established the country's first railway network, deserves a book to himself; and the publisher, Kelly & Walsh, an amalgam of two Irish booksellers, formed in 1876, which did so much to promote knowledge and understanding of China. Surprisingly, perhaps, there is no separate reference to merchants.

As elsewhere in the empire, family networks played a key role in consolidating and validating Britain's presence, with one chapter, 'A Family Business for Some', specifically focusing on how family influence cemented that presence across and down through generations. The Hughes brothers, from Newry, County Down, for example, served for some fifty years in the consular and customs service respectively, with Patrick Hughes becoming Consul-General in Shanghai. His wife, Maggie, née Callan, also came from Newry, whilst Thomas Hughes's first wife, Julia, née Grimani, came from Londonderry. By his second marriage to Margaret, née Dever, Thomas had three daughters, who

were brought up in the treaty port world, a time captured in a large collection of photographs to be found on the web-site, *Historical Photographs of China*.<sup>1</sup> Although they would not remain in China, the three sisters, themselves half-Irish, will have carried these experiences into their future lives, wherever they were spent.

In one sense, Masefield's book can be seen as a work in progress. For reasons of space, missionaries are currently omitted and there is little reference to military personnel, but the plan is to place a further seventy consular officers, customs men and others on the digital edition which will be accessible on the Queen's University Belfast Special Collections web-site.<sup>2</sup> It would be good if further characters were added in due course. Although, strictly speaking, falling outside the book's time-span which ends with Hart's retirement, one who could certainly make the cut is Stephen Power, a Customs man who hailed from County Clare. He would regale his children 'in loving detail' with stories of life in the West of Ireland, as described by his son Brian in the account of his Tianjin childhood, *The Ford of Heaven* (2005).<sup>3</sup> It would also be instructive to know more about the Irish under-class who served in the treaty port world - seamen, policemen and Outdoor Staff in the IMC, and women in a wide range of menial occupations, all of whom were an equally important part of this presence, and many of whom will have been, like the Powers family, devout Roman Catholics.

As *Historical Photographs of China* has shown, the scope for this sort of scholarly on-line project is far-reaching, allowing information to accumulate as more data comes to light and stimulating discussion through blogs and links. Polemicist and 'expert' on Chinese affairs, John Otway Percy Bland is a prime example. His Irish roots may not be well-known but, as Masefield tells us, he was one of nine children born to Major-General Edward Loftus Bland of Whiteabbey, County Antrim and Emma Frances, née Franks, of Jerpoint, Kilkenny, the daughter of an Irish barrister. Short of money, his father cut short his son's education at Trinity College, Dublin. Happy to take him on in 1883, much to Hart's regret Bland left thirteen years later to pursue other interests in China, initially, free-lance journalism and a position with the British China Corporation to further the country's railway building programme, before becoming a full-time author. In case the Irish connection seems a little tenuous, an excellent on-line history states that the Bland family traces its Irish roots directly back

to the seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup> It goes on to tell us that the same year that John Bland came to China, his elder brother, Robert Norman Bland, who had been able to complete his degree at Trinity College, also came East, arriving in Penang to begin a career in government service lasting twenty-seven years and culminating in his becoming Resident Councillor. As with so many of these Irishmen, the question is what was the lure of the East and what part did their background play in their approach? In John Bland's case, some answers may be found in the voluminous papers held at Toronto University. Brilliant, volatile and extremely out-spoken, he forged a strong friendship with the adventurer/journalist, George Morrison, but also made many enemies, participating with Morrison in what Frank King, the historian of the Hongkong Bank (as it was then called), described as 'an incredible interlude of vilification and conspiracy' against Guy Hillier, the Manager of its Peking Branch, and, incidentally, my forbear.

Bland is probably best known today for his volume, *China under the Empress Dowager*,<sup>5</sup> for which he naively relied on documents provided by its co-author, Sir Edmund Backhouse, which apparently emanated from the Court but turned out to be forgeries, as Hugh Trevor-Roper so brilliantly revealed in *The Hermit of Peking*.<sup>6</sup> While, in that work, he sought to explain Bland's entrenched opposition to Chinese nationalism by reference to his belief in the country's monarchical traditions, it may also have been linked to his Anglo-Irish roots and, in contrast to Pope-Hennessy, his firm resistance to Irish nationalism.

This leads us to ask, how much did those born or brought up in Ireland identify themselves with the country and portray themselves as Irish, how much did that depend on whether they were Roman Catholic or from the Protestant ascendancy and how much can they be seen as agents of British imperialism? Adopting John Mackenzie's 'four nations' approach to British imperial history, these issues have been considered in general terms most recently by Andrew MacKillop in *Human Capital and Empire: Scotland, Ireland, Wales and British Imperialism in Asia, c. 1690-c.1820*<sup>7</sup> and Jane Ohlmeyer in *Making Empire: Ireland, Imperialism and the Modern World*.<sup>8</sup> However, given their time-scales, neither study deals with treaty port China and there is ample scope for building on their analyses.

Without going into the issue in detail, in the final chapter, 'Reflections on Irish Identity', Masfield refers to the St Patrick's Society which, founded in 1874, featured prominently in the lives of consular

and customs officials and was ‘an important networking facility for the Irish’, with ‘differences of creed and party’ being put to one side. How this played out as the Home-rule debate became increasingly fractious is a fascinating question which warrants careful examination, not least because it will shed light on how much these Irish men and women regarded themselves as part of the ‘British’ empire.

It would also be interesting to know how many of them retained their connections with Ireland when they were in China and how many returned at the end of their careers, to generate cultural capital and feed back their experiences into the country. Following independence, for someone like Bland, ‘home’ undoubtedly meant England but, in the earlier years and for those who were Roman Catholic, it may have been a very different story. As we learn more about these people, it should be possible to build up a more detailed picture of the Irish and determine whether the island did no more than provide a useful source of settlers and sojourners or whether it injected a distinctly ‘Irish’ element into what was undoubtedly a four nation presence.

The the digital edition might also might also provide an opportunity to put the current bibliography into a more standard format, arranged in alphabetical order by reference to the author’s surname. This, however, is a minor quibble. Lavishly illustrated, the book is a delight, one into which the reader can dip at random and find entertaining vignettes about many colourful men and women, who, if only as individuals, inflected treaty port life with an Irish flavour.

*Dr Andrew Hillier is a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin and an Honorary Research Associate at the University of Bristol and the author of Mediating Empire: An English Family in China, 1817-1927 and editor of My Dearest Martha: The Life and Letters of Eliza Hillier and articles relating to Britain’s presence in China. He is a regular contributor to Historical Photographs of China. His most recent book, The Alcock Album: Scenes of China Consular Life, 1843-1853, was published in May 2024 by City University Press, Hong Kong.*



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# THE GAINS AND LOSSES OF SELECTIVE MEMORY

A REVIEW OF THE ROCKBUND ART MUSEUM'S THREE-PART EXHIBITION  
AUUUUDITORIUM

SHANGHAI PALIMPSEST: RE-STAGING THE R.A.S. LIBRARY

HU YUN: MOUNT ANALOGUE

22 MARCH-25 AUGUST 2024

REVIEWED BY JULIE CHUN

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The legacy of the Royal Asiatic Society (RAS) China is inextricably tied to the Rockbund Art Museum (RAM) through its shared connection to the architecture and the mission of promoting arts and culture in Shanghai.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, RAM was re-conceived from its former identity as the headquarters of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (NCBRAS) to a new museum for contemporary art. For one of its inaugural exhibitions, *Time Traveler*, 29 September to 9 December 2012, curated by Ella Liao, the then President of RAS China, Peter Hibbard, was invited to contribute an essay to the exhibition catalogue. He wrote *More than a Stuffed Bird Show* ~~—~~ *Showcasing the History of a Cultural Institution* so as to provide a context to bridge the 20<sup>th</sup> century edifice to early 21<sup>st</sup> century society.<sup>2</sup> Although the NCBRAS was established in 1857, the current three-part exhibition is centred on a few selected figures who were prominent members during the 1930s when the building underwent a significant transformation from a dilapidated two-storey structure to the modernist six-storey, art-deco icon that has endured the test of time on Huqiu (Tiger Hill) Road, formerly known as Museum Road.<sup>3</sup>

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From 1933 to 1952, the RAS building housed a lecture hall, a library and a natural history museum that was opened, free of charge, to the public. Maintained by Council members, many of whom volunteered their time, the museum and library became the first western, public institution of its kind in mainland China. In 1952, when the Communist authorities took over, they re-purposed the building to meet their needs as a storage, meeting facility and even sleeping quarters. By 1956, all the NCBRAS books had been transferred to the Shanghai Library, the artefacts and taxidermy specimens redirected



**Figure 1:** Rockbund Art Museum's new eastern side entry from Yuangmingyuan Road to the Shanghai Natural History Museum and ancient antiquities absorbed into the collection of the Shanghai Museum. Eventually, over time, the grand building fell into deep disrepair. In the 1990s, when Shanghai's economy was gaining momentum, the prime area of the former British Concession came to be acquired by the Shanghai Bund de Rockefeller Group Master Development Company, Ltd. In 2007, the company began its efforts at urban renewal and architectural preservation with an aim to establish the first contemporary art museum on the Bund.

In 2009, the building experienced its first major modern upgrade,

helmed by the British firm of Chipperfield Architects, to open as RAM. Over a decade later, in early 2020, a second round of renovations to update the electrical wirings and structural fixtures commenced, but stalled due to the rising concerns of Covid 19 in China. Thus, it wasn't until November 2020 that the museum was reopened. Most recently, the museum undertook yet another series of renovations in 2023 with the creation of a public courtyard square and the relocation of the entrance from the former western side on Huqiu Road to the eastern-facing Yuanmingyuan Road, the hub of social media and fashionable wedding photo backdrops.

Upon entering from the new courtyard entrance, the current triple-part exhibition is ordered thematically and spatially rather than chronologically, thereby meeting the post-modern imperative for contemporary art museums to better engage with the viewing public. After securing a museum ticket on the first floor, one can climb the original staircase with wrought iron railings from 1933 or use the elevator to enter the second-floor gallery that welcomes the audience with two wooden signs emblazoned *AUUUUDITORIUM* above the doors. The space is drenched in lush beige carpet and engulfed in the psychedelic hues of pink and blue swirls of billowing clouds framing a sun-like orb with radiating lines of vibrant colours. Originally, this room had indeed been an auditorium, albeit historical records reveal there were insufficient funds to fill the room with chairs when the building first opened, awaiting a few years for the seats to be installed. Similarly, the space is currently devoid of seats except for four random chairs and a low-lying stage.

This room was originally dedicated as the Dr. Wu Lien-teh Hall, named after the doctor who personally donated over 15% of the construction funds so that the building could be completed in 1933. Prior to his arrival in Shanghai, Dr. Wu Lien-teh (also spelled Wu Liande) had been a successful and inspirational doctor having developed and implemented innovative, modern quarantine methods in Harbin during the Manchurian Plague of 1918. Born on 10 March 1879 in Penang, Malaysia, he had the distinction in 1902 of being the first ethnic Chinese medical student to graduate from Cambridge University in the UK. Through his achievements and acquaintance with China's Councillor of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Wu and his wife Ruth were invited in 1908 to mainland China where he took the position of Vice Director at the Imperial Army College in Tianjin before

receiving his summons from Beijing and being dispatched to Harbin on 24 December 1910. The success of Dr. Wu's precise diagnosis of the nature of the plague, creation of the first disposable surgical face masks, establishment of new standards in hospital hygiene, introduction of mass cremation to contain the spread of the virus and his convening of an international plague conference - the first major scientific conference in China - led to his appointment in 1930 as the first Director of the National Quarantine Services, headquartered in Shanghai. Not long after his arrival, Dr. Wu became active with the NCBRAS, becoming the first Chinese to deliver lectures to the Society and to publish papers in the Society's annual journal.

Currently, bereft of any traces of Dr. Wu Lien-teh, the space of the *AUUUUDITORIUM* was used on the opening night of 22 March 2024 as a platform for the Singaporean-born artist Ming Wong's exuberant performance of electrifying sound art. Throughout the duration of the exhibition, the *AUUUUDITORIM* was used as a creative venue for parties, karaoke singing, workshops, talks and film screenings to bring together the art-seeking community in Shanghai.

The important acknowledgment to Dr. Wu, while lost on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, could be found on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, alongside other pivotal personages of the NCBRAS. In the space once occupied as the library, the second part of the exhibition *Shanghai Palimpsest: Restaging the R.A.S. Library* revives, along with Dr. Wu (1879-1960), memories of Arthur De Carle Sowerby (1885-1954), the Honorary Curator and later Honorary Director of the RAS Museum as well as the President of NCBRAS; the Honorary Librarian, and first female Council member, Florence Ayscough (1875-1942); the Council Member John Calvin Ferguson (1866-1945), who was the first president of the Nanyang Public School that eventually became Jiao Tong University, later taking on the role of an advisor and procurer of Chinese art for US institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; and last, but certainly not least, the Tang family (Tang Wangwang, 1870-1932, Tang Renguan, 1892-1959), who dedicated their lives to taxidermy at the RAS Museum for multiple generations, even taking up residence in the basement of the building.

For the Council, members and friends of the present-day RAS China, established in 2007, the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor exhibition was the main reason for our anticipation of the opening night on 22 March 2024. The volunteers at the current RAS Library, located in Xuhui District,



**Figure 2:** Shanghai Palimpsest: Restaging the R.A.S. Library. Opening night, 22 March 2024. Third floor of the Rockbund Art Museum

had provided research support to Karen Wang, the Researcher and Curatorial Assistant at RAM. Since August of 2023, we had climbed the library ladders, dusted the book and journal covers and located the exact sources she was seeking. We filled the gaps in her knowledge with institutional history and insight. Moreover, we provided additional sources as well as connections to relevant scholars and researchers. Most importantly, the RAS China Council authorised the loan of two rare books and four original *China Journals* in addition to a facsimile of a rare out-of-print book for the exhibition. For those of us present on the opening night, it was with profound pride that we witnessed the biographies, photos and achievements of the historical Council members and Chinese friends of NCBRAS taking centre stage in an exhibition we could only have dreamt about. As a volunteer society, the lack of funds and a museum venue posed challenges in mounting such an exhibition ourselves. While RAM did not request the direct participation of RAS China, we held fast to our commitment as a historical and research society to open our shelves and books to provide institutional support to RAM researchers.

To witness the resurrection of forgotten historical figures, especially Dr. Wu and the Tang family, who were not always accorded the same degree of prominence as foreign members in the past, was a momentous occasion; not only for recent members and friends of RAS China but, more importantly, for the Chinese viewing public,

young and old. The highlights of the selected figures on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor was indeed significant in reclaiming a part of Shanghai's memory that had lain dormant. Yet, on the other hand, there was inevitable loss in the numerous omissions of NCBRAS forebears whose major contributions and achievements to the society-at-large remain buried in the archives. These include the Society's first President Elijah Coleman Bridgman (1801-1861), the first American missionary to China; Eliza Jane Gillet (1805-1871), later marrying Elijah to become a Bridgman herself, who arrived in China to dedicate her life to establishing schools for young girls, including the founding of the Bridgman Academy in Beijing, which was one of the four schools to later merge to become the Harvard-Yenching Institute; Alexander Wylie (1815-1887), the British Sinologist who was a major force in translating western mathematical, scientific and biblical treatises into Mandarin and whose personal collection of books formed the core of the early NCBRAS library. And the list goes on with James Legge, Rutherford Alcock and the lesser-known women, Mrs. S. Couling and Mrs. G.B. Enders, who served as Honorary Librarians prior to Florence Ayscough.

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Under the header 'Complex Geographies', this exhibition was proclaimed as the first in a series of RAM's year-long investigation of the 'colonial legacy of the Royal Asiatic Society'. Yet, even a years' worth of exhibitions could hardly present a comprehensive assessment, let alone an objective critique, of a century's worth of historical appraisal. Like the present society, the members of the NCBRAS included pluralist figures who held disparate and even competing views. A mere perusal of the historical RAS Journals reveals ample evidence of rebuttals to speeches and articles by members who held dissenting views and opinions. Most likely due to time and space limitations, the memories chosen for display by the RAM curators are undeniably selective. Therefore, it is fervently hoped that viewers can find an expanded discourse in the ensuing series. Even in the present exhibition, there was a lacunae with the notable omission of the NCBRAS Council member George Leopold 'Tug' Wilson (1880-1967), the designer and architect of the present museum whose architectural experimentations led to the rise of numerous modernist and art deco buildings in Shanghai. Of course, the intent of colonial critique warranted RAM to take on their own voice, yet in this present age that promotes and fosters dialogue and conversation, the current

exhibition was a missed opportunity for an amplified examination of Shanghai's colonial legacy, one that could have benefited greatly from wide-ranging voices and interpretations.

More so than the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor exhibitions, the solo exhibition by the Shanghai-born artist Hu Yun (born in 1985 and based in Belgrade, Serbia), on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> floor galleries underscores how memory is indeed selective, even veering toward the personal. Bringing together his past and newly created works, the artist's mid-career retrospective stitches and mends the forgotten players and events that had faded from the warp and weft of colonial history. Succinctly, Hu Yun examines the effects of the causes through provocative and poignant artistic metaphors. Beginning with the title *Mount Analogue*, inspired by the adventure novel penned by the French polymath and spiritual writer René Daumal (1908-1944), Hu Yun not only delves into the masculine histories of exploration through routes and paths charted by capitalists, naturalists and missionaries, but also by his grandfather and himself to investigate how knowledge is produced, transmitted and eventually memorialised in a non-linear network of 'expansive knowledge apparatus'.<sup>4</sup>

With striking starkness, the space of Hu Yun's solo exhibition opens up with the subtle use of materiality that prompts us to investigate our understanding of what we know and how we interpret that information. For *Hallow Men* (2024), the immense web of black nylon mesh stretches from the bottom of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor to the ceiling of the 5<sup>th</sup> floor gallery to physically and metaphorically connect the two levels that once housed the first public museum of natural history in Shanghai. The black transparent fabric looms extensively, like the forest of trees which were cut to build the cabinets of curiosity that once held the exotic objects collected and catalogued by the early expat explorers of the NCBRAS.

Intricately integrated in and around the mesh is further material evidence that gently points to overlooked objects of knowledge production, reminding how we can often lapse disused memories into obsolescence. Centering a large painting of the intricately rendered palm leaf as a starting point, Hu Yun draws our attention to the migration of plants that accompanied the human mercantile trade and exploration routes across oceans and deserts. Literally becoming transplants, palm leaves took on new and renewed identities in various localities where they came to rest. According to the artist, 'palm leaves,



Figure 3: Hu Yun, *Hallow Men*, 2024



Figure 4: RAS Natural History Museum, 1933

also known as pattra leaves, played a pivotal role in the engraving of earlier Buddhist sutras'. Nearby, slats made from palmyra tree resembling slips of bamboo annals are strung together and hoisted upwards like a ladder. Similar to Daumal's fictional journey, man's quest for knowledge is also a search for spiritual ascendancy.

Like pilgrims, merchants and explorers also conveyed ideas and objects to far-flung places, which was how Nestorianism found its way

into China during the Tang Dynasty. Coming across a Nestorian stone stele engraved with Chinese characters in Xi'an, Hu Yun took rubbings and had the inscriptions embroidered in black threads on a swath of black silk by a Suzhou embroidery master. Gently levitating above the ominous groves of 'tree trunks', the inscribed text appears as fleeting shadows and can easily be lost to those who fail to gaze up. With this installation, the artist reminds us that fragments of memories are all around us but can only be recalled when re-selected and re-collected through intrinsic perception. And therein lie the gains and losses of the memories we select.

For the RAM exhibition, RAS China gratefully acknowledge the following: Library volunteers Zhang Dasheng, Liang Ping, Robert Martin, and Kylie Bisman for assisting with research materials; Julie Chun (Art Focus Convener) and Sven Serrano (Librarian) for facilitating the exhibition loan agreement and the RAS Council for granting permission. In addition, we thank the RAM curators X Zhu-Nowell, Xu Tiantian, and Karen Wang with special gratitude to the Deputy Director Liu Yingjiu for his long-time support of the RAM and RAS relationship.

***Julie Chun** is an Asian-American art historian, based in Shanghai since 2011. She has taught East Asian Art History in global programs at the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Donghua University and the CIEE at the East China Normal University. Since 2013, she has served as the Art Focus Convener of the Royal Asiatic Society in China ([artgroup@royalasiaticsociety.org.cn](mailto:artgroup@royalasiaticsociety.org.cn)) where she devotes her time to expanding the public's understanding of artistic objects, past and present. As a regular contributor to Yishu Journal of Contemporary Art, her reviews and criticisms have also been published in academic and art journals, both in China and internationally. On Mondays, you can find her volunteering at the RAS China Library.*

*Figures 1-3: photos courtesy of the Rockbund Art Museum  
Figure 4: photo courtesy of the Royal Asiatic Society China*



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## IN MEMORIAM: LYNN PAN 1945-2024

BY DUNCAN HEWITT

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*RAS China mourns and pays tribute to Lynn Pan (潘翎 Pān Líng), the doyenne of writers on Shanghai, an Honorary Fellow of RAS China, and a long-time friend and supporter of this organisation, who has died at the age of 79. Here, Duncan Hewitt chronicles her remarkable life.*

The passing from cancer of Lynn Pan (Pan Ling) in Hong Kong in July 2024 is a ‘stop all the clocks’ moment for anyone with an interest in Shanghai’s history and culture, and for all those who benefitted from her vast knowledge of her native city and her generosity in sharing it—whether in her superbly researched books, her sparkingly witty talks, the walks she led around the town for the RAS and other organisations, or just in casual conversations over a meal or a drink (and, often, her favourite, chocolate cake). To many of those who knew her, Lynn’s erudition, understated elegance, intellectual sharpness, and subtle yet sometimes devilish wit epitomised “Shanghai style”, the subject – and title – of one of her many books.



Figure 1: Lynn Pan at home in Shanghai  
(Courtesy of Robert Martin)

Born in Shanghai in 1945, brought up partly in Malaysia and educated at the universities of London and Cambridge, before going on to work across Europe and Asia, Lynn Pan was thoroughly international, yet proudly and profoundly connected to her original identity – bringing to mind her own description of Shanghai’s most famous novelist, Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing), whom she saw as “emotionally” Shanghainese, and ‘culturally[...] cosmopolitan in a way that only the natives of that city could be - gaining other identities without debasing one’s own.’

The global reach of her interests, and her innate skills as a researcher, are reflected in her early work as a social scientist, her subsequent successful career as a journalist covering Asia, and in her groundbreaking 1990 book on the overseas Chinese diaspora, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, which won the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize. Yet it was her fascination with Shanghai, the city where she was born (and which her grandfather, a prominent construction contractor, helped to build), that underpinned her life: her books, from *In Search of Old Shanghai* (1982) and *Old Shanghai: Gangsters in Paradise* (1984) to *Shanghai Style* (2008) and *When True Love Came to China* (2015), brought the city's political, intellectual and cultural history alive in a way few others have done, her rich knowledge combined with a flair for anecdote and a beautiful and vivid turn of phrase.

That Shanghai was in her blood and would remain deep in her subconscious was perhaps inevitable, given her own family background – her mother's family were bankers from Ningbo, part of an early wave of settlement from that city which played such a part in shaping Shanghai society and culture; her grandfather on her father's side, Pān Shanglin, was born into a poor family on a remote island in the Zhoushan archipelago off the coast of Ningbo, and came to Shanghai as a teenager in search of work. Starting out as a manual labourer on municipal construction projects for the city's sewers and water mains, he soon became a subcontractor with his own teams of workers, and eventually rose to become one of Shanghai's main building contractors - working closely with the Swiss architect René Minutti on projects including the Picardie Apartments (now the Hengshan Picardie Hotel) the Canidrome and the *jai alai* stadium in the former French concession, and the Messageries Maritimes headquarters on the "French Bund". By the time Lynn was born in 1945, the Pan family had moved into a Bauhaus-style modernist house designed by Minutti, next door to his own home, with many servants and several fine cars – her father had impressed her mother while they were both students at Shanghai's famous St. John's University with both his western-style suits and his 1939 Packard.

Yet in a very "old Shanghai" way, there was a dark side to this glamour. In her remarkable memoir *Tracing It Home: Journeys around a Chinese family* (1992), Lynn Pan unsparingly describes her grandfather's opium addiction, and how his affairs with two courtesans, (with one of whom he had a child), were so humiliating

for his wife that she committed suicide, leaving behind three young children. Between them, the courtesans later seem to have done their best to ruin the lives of Lynn's two aunts, one of whom also became addicted to opium.

And as revolution overtook Shanghai in the late 1940s, Lynn's father decided he had no choice but to move to Hong Kong, where he set up an investment business. Soon, however, bankruptcy forced him to move to North Borneo (then a British colony, now the Malaysian state of Sabah), where he set up his own rubber plantation. Finally, by the mid-1950s, he felt sufficiently settled to send for Lynn and her twin sister and brother, who had been separated from both their parents for several years. (They were first reunited with their mother, and spent a brief period with her in Hong Kong, where they attended school, before moving to Borneo).

Thus Lynn left Shanghai, but not without retaining vivid memories of the city's daily life and urban culture – as well as more traumatic ones, also detailed in her memoir, of the aftermath of civil war: of mass executions in a city park, of seeing prostitutes being rounded up for re-education, and of their nanny drawing the curtains of the pedicab when they travelled through the city streets, to prevent the children seeing the bodies of capitalists who had committed suicide by jumping from the top of some of Shanghai's tall modern buildings.

After spending the rest of her childhood in North Borneo, surrounded by a community of fellow exiles from Shanghai, Lynn moved to the UK to study, taking a first degree in psychology at Bedford College, University of London. In the early 1970s, she worked in the field of psychopharmacology and co-authored a book, *The Gentlemen's Club*, which critiqued the international bodies responsible for the control of drugs and alcohol. Moving briefly to Scandinavia, she translated another book on the same topic from Swedish into English,



**Figure 2:** Lynn Pan after taking her final exams at Cambridge in 1977, wearing a black armband to mourn her mother.

(Courtesy of Catharine Wells; with thanks to Craig Clunas)

and, as if to underline her cosmopolitan credentials, spent a year in Helsinki writing a study of the control of alcohol in colonial Africa.

But China was calling her back, and she returned to university to take a degree in Chinese studies at Cambridge University, focusing on classical literature and history; this also gave her the chance to improve her Mandarin. She graduated in 1977, soon after the death of her mother, and quickly returned to Asia, starting work as a journalist at *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. Yet she soon discovered that she would not be able to realise her desire to visit mainland China (something which was just starting to become possible for journalists) on a Malaysian passport, so she gave up her job and returned to the UK to apply for a British passport, teaching for a year at Cambridge while she waited for it to be processed. As she notes in her memoir, at her citizenship interview she made no attempt to conceal her motivation, bluntly telling an official that 'to be British would make it easier for me to visit China [...] I had,' she noted, 'decided that eccentricity went down well with the British.'

Passport eventually granted, she moved back to Hong Kong, and, within weeks, in early 1981, travelled back to Shanghai, her native city, for the first time in more than twenty-five years - checking into the Hengshan Hotel, which, she later discovered, was housed in the former Picardie Apartments built by her grandfather's company. This was to be the beginning of a series of visits to China over the following decade, which, as she put it, 'rejoined me to the flow of past experience': she unearthed aspects of the family history her parents had never told her about, and embarked on a productive period in her writing career.

Within a year she had published the first of her lovingly detailed books on her home town, *In Search of Old Shanghai*, a portrait of the city and its history, rich in the observation and anecdote which came so effortlessly to her. Describing the 'Shanghai way' as 'sophistication with a touch of vulgarity', and noting that 'nothing enthralled the Shanghainese more than modernity', she evoked the political movements and the extremes of life of Shanghai in its 1920s' and 30s' heyday - from the 'terrible conditions' of the city's workers and the anger of protesters against colonial oppression, to the city's racecourse 'with its well trained thoroughbred horses and well dressed thoroughbred socialites.' With unusual detail derived from her wide reading in both Chinese and English (such as the fact that the

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renowned Jewish property tycoon Silas Hardoon employed both ‘the best curry cook in town [...] and an Irish bodyguard’) the book, one of the first of its kind on Shanghai for some decades, became a classic of writing on the city.

Two years later, Lynn followed this with *Old Shanghai: Gangsters in Paradise*, which added depth to the story: in typically original fashion, it depicted modern Shanghai history through the lives of two of its less heralded characters – Du Yuesheng, the ruthless gang boss who helped the Nationalist Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek put down a workers’ uprising in Shanghai in 1927, and later provided men to fight against the Japanese occupying forces; and Wang Jingwei, the Nationalist poet-politician who, after failing to persuade Chiang Kai-shek to seek a peace deal with Japan, became head of a notorious Japanese-installed puppet government, and presided over Shanghai’s brutal “Badlands” era. Combined with the story of Eileen Chang, the prodigious young Shanghainese novelist who was briefly married to an official from the puppet government, the book brings the era to life in a way few conventional histories do, with Lynn’s talent for dramatic imagination of her characters’ feelings and motivations on full display, in what the Times Literary Supplement called a ‘superb and emotionally sure-footed narrative.’

Within another three years, she had published two more books, both inspired by her travels in China: *China’s Sorrow – Journeys around the Yellow River* (1985); and *The New Chinese Revolution* (1987), a colourful account of the social and economic upheavals that convulsed the nation during the first decade of the reform era. The latter stemmed from her journalistic work with the Hong Kong-based *Far Eastern Economic Review*, of which she eventually became books editor.

And in 1990 she published the book which brought her perhaps the most international attention: *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, a seminal study of the Chinese diaspora and its history, role and influence in countries from the US to Europe and Southeast Asia, both encouraged many overseas Chinese to take a greater interest in their history, and also inspired much further scholarship on the subject. It also led to Lynn’s appointment as head of the Chinese Heritage Centre in Singapore, where she edited *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, a massive three-year project for which she coordinated contributions from some fifty authors.

Yet being “overseas” was not, ultimately, what she wanted. The publication in 1992 of her family memoir, *Tracing it Home*, was another indication of her growing interest in her own heritage and her family’s story in Shanghai and beyond. As she noted later in an interview, ‘the more I wrote about it, the more I learned about myself.’ Emphasising the influence of history and family on many people’s lives in China, *Tracing it Home* highlighted not just the stories of her parents and grandparents, but also the moving tale of Hanze, the old family retainer, whose loyalty to the Pan family had contributed to his having to spend more than two decades away from his own family, in Xinjiang, first as punishment for “treason” for his links to Lynn’s grandfather, and later as a worker on construction projects. When Lynn returned to Shanghai in 1981, Hanze immediately sought her out, and in the months and years that followed helped her to rediscover much of her roots and family story.

And so, after completing the encyclopaedia project in the late 1990s, Lynn, now in her 50s, decided to move back to Shanghai. She bought an apartment in the city, and came to play an influential role in the revival of English-language intellectual life in Shanghai over the next two decades. She gave talks on her research, led historical walks around the city for the RAS and other organisations, and generally helped to bring people together and ideas to fruition: the writer Tess Johnston, another great doyenne of research into Shanghai’s history, credits Lynn with introducing her to the photographer Er Dongqiang (Deke Erh), with whom she would go on to publish many books on Shanghai’s architectural heritage. Tina Kanagaratnam and Patrick Cranley, co-founders of the heritage organisation Historic Shanghai, emphasise that Lynn played an important advisory role at the time of the group’s founding in the late 1990s, and ‘was instrumental in shaping the organisation such that our perspective always included Shanghainese and non-Western voices, something that wasn’t a given back then.’

Lynn also continued her own unique work, in 2008 producing *Shanghai Style: Art and Design between the Wars*, a meticulously researched and beautifully illustrated book highlighting the indigenous artists, illustrators, cartoonists, architects and designers who, having absorbed various foreign influences, created the distinctive style of Shanghai in the 1920s and 30s.

She was also a regular participant in the Shanghai Literary Festival,

held annually at M on the Bund for some two decades: its founder, Michelle Garnaut, says that as well as speaking about her own work, Lynn was a constant source of ideas for other events and panels at the festival – some of them quite unexpected: ‘She was the one who first told me about *The Three Body Problem* [by Liu Cixin], long before anybody else had mentioned it,’ she recalls. ‘She’d read it, and said, we could get this writer for the festival.’

And it was during her research for an event at the festival, in which she and the leading academic specialist on modern Chinese literature David Der-wei Wang conducted a virtuoso discussion on the writing and life of Eileen Chang, that Lynn Pan came across one of Chang’s stories with the subtitle ‘set in the time when love came to China.’ It was this which inspired her last book, *When True Love Came to China*, another piece of exhaustive research based on detailed reading of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese literature. It was chosen as a book of the year in *The Guardian* by the writer Pankaj Mishra, who described it as ‘a rich and gripping account of how the first generation of modern Chinese intellectuals and writers discovered the pleasures – and sufferings – of romantic love’ - in a land where, as Lynn highlighted, marriage for love rather than duty or material benefit was a rare concept until the 1920s.

Lynn’s final research project was as original (and wide-ranging) as ever – a detailed analysis of Chinese gardens and the history of native



**Figure 3:** Lynn was a regular speaker at the Shanghai Literary Festival, and is seen here discussing the writer Eileen Chang. (Courtesy of Gretchen Liu)

Chinese flowers and plants, focusing on their significance in Chinese literature and culture, the illustrations used by botanists to name and categorise these plants, and their transplanted to the west – including what she called the ‘game-changing’ introduction of the ‘China rose’ (*Rosa chinensis*) into Britain by the East India Company in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Sadly the pandemic of 2020 disrupted her work on this project, which was to be co-authored with her twin sister May Holdsworth, also a writer. But anyone who heard Lynn’s 2018 talk on the topic to the Shanghai Culture Group, another organisation of which she was an enthusiastic member, was left in no doubt of its fascinating nature, and the breadth of her research.

And indeed, for many scholars and writers on various aspects of Shanghai with whom Lynn so kindly shared her ideas over the years, she was both a source of encouragement, and also something of a walking encyclopaedia, combining a deep understanding of Shanghainese and Chinese history and culture with an international perspective in a way few others could match.

Lynn’s grace, erudition and wit meant she could elevate any discussion. To take part in a historic walk around the city in her company was a delight – her love of people and their stories meant she was always eager to engage in animated conversation with those she met in the street, while she could be relied on to provide a nugget of relevant, often whimsical, historical information at any moment. The fact that the ‘foreign minister’ of the puppet government of the 1940s (a brother-in-law of the wife of its leader Wang Jingwei) had written his doctorate in France on the topic of ‘the vaginal vibrations of the female rabbit’ was something she referred to with glee on a number of such occasions.

Lynn’s zest for life was also reflected in her love of good food, Shanghainese or otherwise, and international travel: she visited Eritrea and Yemen with Michelle Garnaut and Tess Johnston, and regularly attended opera seasons in Europe during the summer. She shared a love of this art form with her sister May, with whom she also spent much time in Hong Kong during and after the pandemic, when she was sadly not able to return to Shanghai.

And even when she was in increasingly poor health, Lynn remained in touch with many of the close friends she had made during her time in Shanghai and before, and told friends and family that she was

content to have lived a 'great life'. She also continued to read and offer advice on work by friends and other writers, much of it focused on Shanghai – a city whose past she had done so much to bring alive for so many.

Perhaps, in future decades, other historians will look back on the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Shanghai, and decide that these were, in retrospect, something of a “golden age” for the city—if so, they will undoubtedly afford Lynn Pan an important place at the intellectual and cultural heart of this era.

***Duncan Hewitt** is a British journalist and writer who was formerly Shanghai correspondent for the BBC and Newsweek. He has written widely on Chinese society, media and culture, as well as on Shanghai history, and is the author of Getting Rich First – Life in a Changing China (Vintage UK, 2008).*

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