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CHINA IN BRITISH EDUCATION: THE NATZLER REPORT IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE*

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Almost a year ago a young researcher named Michael Natzler, then at the Higher Education Policy Institute, an independent think tank funded by British universities, produced a report entitled "Understanding China: The study of China and Mandarin in UK schools and Universities". Mr. Natzler had already produced an edited volume on British education and China, demonstrating that he came to his task with a pre-existing strong commitment. His finished product shows every evidence of wide consultation and diligent research. In due course I do intend to suggest some possible further refinements of his work, but before doing so I must make clear that I applaud his report wholeheartedly and commend it to your attention, as I do also the webinar organised by the Institute shortly after its publication.[1] But my eye was immediately caught by the list, given in the report's second section, of five British government reports that had been produced at intervals of roughly fifteen years that attempted to set Chinese Studies, and frequently other subjects of global importance, on a firm footing.[2] From my standpoint as a student of East Asian history, this series might be seen as stretching back at least into the 19th century, although the 2022 report was the first by a private enterprise. Perhaps this is a good thing, given that we now live in an era in which government initiative is open to the stigma of being labelled as the work of a nanny state. Such was not always the case: as a colleague in Hong Kong has noted, one acute observer in the early 19th century

*Lecture to the China Forum, Jesus College, Cambridge, 1 March 2023. I am grateful to two anonymous colleagues for suggesting some improvements to this text, but in the interests of succinctness and keeping substantially to what I actually said, I have modified my remarks only very slightly.

remarked quite explicitly of British knowledge of China "We are as babies under nurses".[3]

The British neonate of the Regency period had in fact had a rather long gestation of about two centuries. Continental Europe had invested in the study of China from the late 16th century, with conspicuous advances being made by the Jesuits and other orders operating in China. They published copiously, at first in Latin and other languages but eventually mainly in French, works that described Chinese society in some detail, and in a positive way. The Protestant British naturally tended to assume that they were lying! Although since, throughout this entire period, there were only three or four Britons who could read Chinese, they had no means of knowing so for sure. That many of the Jesuits themselves tended to struggle linguistically is made clear by the recent publication overseas of some of their records, showing how few managed to achieve complete mastery of the three Asian languages they needed for their work.[4] One, the Tungusic language of Manchu, is no longer in use, and is only of major interest to those who want to know how current claims of Chinese sovereignty along most of the nation's borders relate to the, often rather different, conceptions of empire entertained by the rulers of China up to 1911. Here American scholars differ from the current PRC line, to the extent that some of them are banned from visiting China. But that need not concern us, because only one colleague in the UK teaches Manchu, and he is only allowed to do so on an unofficial basis by his institution, since student numbers are rather low.

The Catholic fathers needed Mandarin for their pastoral work, and their knowledge in this area also enabled them to read a certain amount of vernacular fiction and drama, though their converts were informed that dipping into such works was a sin to be confessed.[5] Much of their efforts, however, went into the study of what is called Classical Chinese or, by some, Literary Sinitic: a language that has lasted a very great deal better than Manchu. After 1919 it was gradually abandoned as the main written style and, since then, a lively literature in the modern vernacular has arisen. This means that most students of China find much to occupy their time without trying to master Classical Chinese, a task that long experience has established takes normally seven to ten years for a decent reading knowledge. It is still also written as well as read, especially given its wonderful concision for reference works and scholarship relating to areas where a substantial body of pre-20th century material is in current use, such as Chinese medicine, religious scripture, art historical material, Chinese philosophy, and the great legacy of pre-modern Chinese

poetry. Knowledge in these fields can be financially very advantageous, since Chinese art objects now sell for tens of millions of pounds. A command simply of Mandarin will frequently not allow you to read the inscription even of a mid-20th century object found in one's attic. Beyond a reading ability, though, it is now rather difficult to proceed with Classical Chinese in the United Kingdom. The last colleague I had who could actually write the language retired back to Taiwan some years ago. Her husband told me that he sometimes dreamed he could write that way, but only to his ultimate frustration on waking up.

Classical Chinese remains in current use outside China, too. When I started to study East Asian Buddhism in the 1970s, my textbook was a short work written in crisp Classical Chinese in the 13th century by a Japanese monk. The other day I dug it out and compared it to the slim excerpts of Cicero and Vergil I read in Latin as a teenager. They, as it turned out, had been helpfully packaged with introductions in English and copious glossaries to assist with vocabulary. My Buddhism textbook by contrast had a one page introduction in Japanese, and three pages at the end about the author; the rest was straight Classical Chinese. In Japan, students were expected to cope with such books on the basis of their secondary education in the style. The writing of verse in Classical Chinese was not simply a linguistic exercise but a recognised means of self-expression by Japanese authors who could also write novels in a more Westernised mode, well into the 20th century. Though publishers in some of China's neighbours did translate novels from the colloquial into their own languages, a 2018 monograph by Professor Peter Kornicki demonstrates conclusively the immense influence China had via this older written language prior to 1919.[6]

The British missionaries who started to spread a Protestant gospel in China from 1807 onwards were, before the First Opium War, confined to the British East India Company enclaves at Canton and Macao, plus the overseas Chinese communities of Southeast Asia. They were, furthermore, not aiming to make converts at court like their Jesuit predecessors so they largely dispensed with learning Manchu. Instead, they attempted to master Hokkien, Cantonese, and other regional Chinese languages in use in Southeast Asia. In this, they were unlike the French scholars who were, during the same period, beginning to establish a secular sinology in France.[7] In the 1820s, a missionary pioneer did undertake some private teaching in London, after first delivering some language training in Canton for the East India Company. Missionary interests were largely responsible for the founding of a Professorship of Chinese at University College in 1838, where further missionaries took their first steps in

Chinese.[8] The British government, finding itself in need of interpreters in order to pursue its Opium Wars, initially borrowed them from the missionary or merchant communities, though the sporadic appearance of professorships both at University College and at King's College produced a trickle of recruits destined to use Chinese for diplomatic purposes. Sir Thomas Wade, interpreter and later diplomat in Shanghai and Beijing, (1818–1895) set up further training for them in China. The East India Company had actually declined the chance to help Chinese education in England. Offered the services of a private Chinese tutor to a gentleman to teach at its college in Hertfordshire, it declared that its students were much better employed in learning to grade tea.[9]

This rather ramshackle system of largely private enterprise Chinese studies persisted in Britain throughout the 19th century, and though it did produce at least one noted scholar in the shape of James Legge (1815–1897), the great missionary translator of the Chinese Classics, the global impact of the French university scholars who were building on pre-revolutionary intellectual interest in China was much more immediate. One of their early achievements was rapidly translated into Mongol by a Buryat scholar in Russia, and thence eventually into Tibetan.[10] By the end of the century, when various Western powers were charging through the 'Open Door' leading to conspicuous economic rewards in China, it became clear that despite the apparent strengths of the United Kingdom during its imperial high noon, we were losing out in economic competition.[11] Britain's Associated Chambers of Commerce duly dispatched the gallant and much travelled Admiral the Right Honourable Lord Charles Beresford (1846–1919) to China to find out what the problem was. His report, though largely concerned with economic matters, gives as far as I have been able to discover, the first indications, albeit not strictly governmental, that language learning had something to do with this.

Lord Beresford's report, 1899

Lord Charles could do nothing about the main problem, since it was a product of the British social system. British consuls were recruited straight from the public schools and sent out to Beijing for two years of intensive language work, but they had no knowledge of business, and so could not afford the British merchants in China the intelligent cooperation that their rivals from other nations could expect from their own government representatives. Lord Charles suggested that the young consuls should, after their initial time in Beijing and a short first posting, be sent back to

Britain for further training in law: to train young gentlemen in business was evidently unthinkable at the time. In the view of Lord Charles, the government, hitherto uninvolved is such matters, needed to intervene.[12] But he also noted that the merchants, too, should really learn some Chinese before embarking on their careers, as some of their competitors certainly did.[13] He mentions the Germans and I have recently learned, from a study of poetic links between South China and the overseas Chinese in the late Qing, that Berlin University in 1889 invited one poet from such a cosmopolitan background (Pan Feisheng 潘飛聲) to teach Chinese literature there.[14]

Lord Reay's report, 1909

It is possible that the Beresford report prompted the University of Manchester to hire the ex-consul E. H. Parker (1849–1926) to teach Chinese part-time from 1901, though this post seems to have lapsed after his death.[15] But even two decades after the poet's trip to Germany, the idea of engaging a Chinese scholar to give instruction in England remained, as it had done in the times of the East India Company, quite beyond the pale. "I am afraid that Cambridge University would not rise to that" was the verdict of the professor there in 1909.[16] This observation is contained in the evidence submitted to the *Reay Report*, prepared for the Treasury under the direction of the eleventh Lord Reay, Donald James, (1839–1921). He was the Dutch-born hereditary head of the clan Mackay, and one-time governor of Bombay. It was his report that resulted, in 1916, in the formation of the School of Oriental and African Studies, as it eventually became, so its background and original formation has been carefully studied by Ian Brown in his history of the school.[17] Essentially, in the lead up to the First World War, a group of eminent Orientalists (to use the contemporary term) managed to persuade the government that while Britain was ahead in its production of battleships, it was well behind Germany in producing professors of Asian languages: the *Times* duly condemned this as 'A Chapter of National Inefficiency' on 28 September 1909.[18] But scholars in Chinese studies by no means took the lead in this, or in any other, sense. The inaugural lecture of the last pre-SOAS Professor of Chinese, G. Owen of King's College London, on 4th October 1910, on the early Chinese writing system, does acknowledge the discovery of the so-called 'Oracle Bones', now seen as fundamental to the story, but declares them suspect, confining himself therefore to a fairly banal account of his topic.[19] Meanwhile the French, now availing themselves of a new school for studying East Asia based in Hanoi, were making major advances in a number of China-related fields.

The Marquess of Willingdon's report, 1926

SOAS was, of course, intended to remedy the gross deficiencies in the national academic provision for China and more widely. However, as Ian Brown shows in detail, having arrived at a none too generous estimate of how much it would cost to cover the missing languages and cultures, the government halved that amount, with the consequence that, for most of its existence, the school has been forced to exhaust itself in a constant scrabbling for money, and has rarely, if ever, been able to fulfil its potential role of redeeming the shortcomings of the wider educational scene. Some mitigation of this situation was provided for Chinese studies nationally thanks to a third report, in 1926, composed under the chairmanship of Freeman Freeman-Thomas, Marquess of Willingdon (1886–1941), another former governor of Bombay and eventual Viceroy of India. The report was primarily concerned with the disposition of the Boxer indemnity funds that had been extracted by the foreign powers from the Qing government after the events of 1900. A considerable part of the American funds had been dedicated to the support of Chinese education. After convening a committee for Britain that even included two Chinese scholars who had studied in America under the auspices of that scheme, the bulk of the British portion of the money likewise was assigned to that purpose. £200,000, or over seventeen million pounds in today's money, was retained in London to promote academic relations between Britain and China, and in 1931 a Universities' China Committee in London was formed to disburse grants from this source. While heavy calls have been made on this resource over the years, enough survives to support small grants even to this day – a story that really deserves to be told in detail.[20] Given the perpetually parlous state of finances for Chinese studies in Britain, however, this source has tended only to support existing initiatives – at this stage in London, Oxford and Cambridge – rather than fuel expansion.

Expansion only came with the Second World War and only as an adjunct to the extraordinary scramble that suddenly became necessary to cope with the entry into the conflict of an enemy using an East Asian language. How the minimal language provision in Japanese sustained in SOAS was augmented into a vitally necessary wartime resource for interpreters, codebreakers and others has now been expertly told by Peter Kornicki.[21] But, as he makes clear, this was not a solely British achievement, since some assistance was provided by the United States of America, where Japanese Americans, despite in many cases having seen their families packed off to internment camps, still showed the same exemplary courage in providing linguistic support in combat that their Italian-speaking brothers did as infantry soldiers in Italy. The facilities established for upgrading the existing knowledge of Japanese

were for example deployed in the training of Professor William Beasley (1919–2006).[22] At first, the onset of war appeared to be without consequence for the study of China: the director of SOAS was assured in 1942 that no help was needed at the War Office because "educated Chinese spoke English".[23] Eventually, however, the penny dropped, and Chinese was among the many languages whose acquisition was a concern of the Scarbrough Report of 1947. This was compiled under the direction of yet another former governor of Bombay, Lawrence Roger Lumley (1896–1965), who had become, by the time his work was completed, the eleventh Earl of Scarbrough.

The Earl of Scarbrough's report, 1947

I have described what happened in the wake of the Scarbrough Report as the "flowering of British sinology".[24] Young men, interrupting their education in Classics, Theology, or Geography, were obliged to learn Chinese characters to assist the war effort against Japan. They were thereby forced to encounter a world of East Asian civilisation to which they had earlier been complete strangers. The Earl's scheme then equipped them with studentships that allowed them to come to grips with that world and, thereafter, teaching posts to sustain them in building upon their initial training. In Anglophone writing on China, the contributions of British scholars were completely overwhelmed by the huge amount of research now engendered by the graduate schools of the United States, building again on wartime initiatives consistently fortified, from 1958 onwards, by the provisions of the National Defense Education Act. Even so, the names of Angus Graham, David Hawkes, Michael Loewe, and Denis Twitchett may still be found cited in North American textbooks and, had not the Scarbrough money run out after five years, maybe there would have been more. But run out it did, leaving Britain in an awkward situation.

The recruits of 1947 had arrived at a time when the leaders of the Communist Party of China were seen by most outsiders as no more than obscure agrarian reformers, and the main task seemed to be how to incorporate a former wartime ally with very different cultural traditions into the post-war system then under construction, chiefly by the Americans.[25] The young men of the age tended to be humanists who saw the Chinese heritage within a global perspective, in something of the same way that Joseph Needham was then starting to grapple with how to understand Chinese civilisation within the larger story of the sciences of mankind. After the experience of the 1950–53 Korean War, by contrast, the West came to believe that they were confronted with an utterly alien foe. Military

personnel continued to be trained to deal linguistically with this enemy, but no expertise existed in understanding what China had now become. In the middle of the Cold War something had to be done, and yet another report was commissioned, this time in the absence of any noble lord who had governed parts of India. No doubt because, as with Lord Scarbrough's undertaking, Slavonic Studies were also involved, the government called on Sir William Hayter (1906–1995), a former ambassador to Moscow, to sort things out. Sir William duly produced his Hayter Report in 1961.

Sir William Hayter's report, 1961

The Hayter Report moved to plug the gap in British knowledge by adopting the American 'Area Studies' model, combining intensive but brief language training in modern vernaculars, including Mandarin, with economic and social science teaching, with a tendency for all this work to be carried out at the postgraduate level. The Scarbrough generation was duly appalled at the shallowness of this, and said so, but developments in China, and especially the onset of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 with its apparent wholesale jettisoning of China's earlier culture, seemed to vindicate completely the concentration on contemporary society.[26] Even so, the American system depended on lavish amounts of postgraduate funding, and this was not so easy to come by in 1960s and 1970s Britain. A handful of British graduates in Chinese were able to avail themselves of one private American charity in the early 1960s to study at Harvard; others had to make do as best they could.[27] One way or another a new department of Chinese was consolidated in Durham, in Edinburgh and Leeds and, gradually, British publications on China after 1949 began to appear. (Sir William gave an account of his efforts in the RSAA's Annual Lecture in 1981.)[28]

Sir Peter Parker's report, 1986

Ultimately the Scarbrough and Hayter legacies entailed a considerable forbearance from central university authorities towards what was, to them, a conspicuously profligate subject area and when, at the start of the 1980s, university funding was (to over-simplify considerably) further directed towards a more market-oriented model tied to student numbers, the strain became unbearable. Ian Brown, in his history of SOAS, labels this chapter in the life of the School "the great contraction".[29] Since many of the Scarbrough appointees at the School were now near retirement, they were hustled out of the way with a focus on the financial bottom line and a lack of

consideration that accorded ill with their now eminent status.[30] This bloodbath, however, was spectacular enough for the government's Foreign and Commonwealth Office to notice that much of the expertise upon which it depended with regard to large areas of the globe was starting to evaporate, and so yet another report was commissioned, in 1986, to assess the damage and find ways of rectifying the situation. This time, the task for attempting to retrieve matters was made the responsibility of Sir Peter Parker (1924–2002), one of the recruits to the wartime Japanese programme who had subsequently gone into business, eventually serving as the chairman of British Rail. Sir Peter was privately scathing about the thinking behind his brief from the government, which was simply to assess the 'needs of commerce and diplomacy', but he did what he was asked to do and argued for, and eventually prompted the release of, funding that made good the worst of the damage.[31] I could give some account of one or two initiatives that then became possible, but it would be confined to my own point of view, that of a frog in a well, as the saying goes.

Richard Hodder-Williams' report, 1993

The fourth report in Michael Natzler's list (the seventh by my count), was the Hodder-Williams Report of 1993. Richard Hodder-Williams, an Africanist formerly at the University of Bristol, was acting on behalf of the Economic and Social Research Council, a body of which I am quite ignorant, and his deliberations had little impact on SOAS since, by 1993, that institution was embroiled in responding to a quite different challenge, crystallised in the Raisman Report to the Universities Funding Council, an exercise for which Ian Brown's account has to serve, since it was not published.[32] As Professor Brown notes, Sir Peter had already observed that "It cannot be right that every other decade the country goes into a spasm of concern", but unfortunately the advantageous funding that he had secured aroused perceptions of special privilege in what was by this point a system of higher education under constant stress.[33] Such a situation had to be justified, though justified it was by John Raisman's committee. But the totality of Chinese Studies nationally had to soldier on without the benefit of any further explicit justification at all.

Bahram Bekhradnia's report, 1999

In 1996, however, the holding of a Research Assessment Exercise on behalf of the UK higher education funding councils allowed Bonnie

McDougall, the eminent Australian expert on Chinese literature, who was then Professor of Chinese at Edinburgh, to join me in forming a rough estimate of how much research on China was being conducted in the United Kingdom at that time. Our conclusions were far from encouraging and, at the same time if memory serves, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the security services were also uneasy about the very low numbers of British citizens who were qualified to carry out China-related work for them. The Higher Education Funding Council for England asked their organiser of the Research Assessment Exercise, Bahram Bekhradnia, to investigate the matter.[34] His 1999 report did have an impact, as was acknowledged by a follow-up study undertaken in 2002.[35] Only seven universities were able to benefit from funding, with Newcastle and Sheffield now added to those centres already established in England, but innovations at Bristol and Nottingham were also noted. A number of vice-chancellors seem to have noticed the economic development of China and assumed that there might be something in it for them. The 2002 follow-up report commented that demand for courses on China had subsequently turned out for the most part to be rather lower than hoped, suggesting that there might be trouble ahead, and recommended that provision of education on China in places other than the seven universities selected for support should be surveyed in future. No government body, it seems, has ever chosen to do this, though the Natzler Report is prefaced by nine calls dating from 2017 to 2021 asking for improvements that seem to have fallen on deaf ears.

The contemporary situation

Let me now summarise what we learn of the contemporary situation from the Natzler Report. First, it states that there is a dangerous lack of linguistic competence that may be losing us hundreds of millions of pounds annually in lost exports (p. 19). At the same time, the arrival of several hundreds of thousands of Chinese from Hong Kong threatens the rise of tensions where there is a deficit in cultural knowledge of the newcomers. These are compelling reasons for articulating a national strategy (p. 20). In recent years the number of single subject degrees in Chinese have fallen from thirteen to nine, although forty-four institutions offer some teaching on China (p. 23). The decline is linked to a shortage in demand, partly exacerbated by the disappearance of students from continental Europe as a result of Brexit. Chinese Studies should be reinstated as an area of strategic importance (p 25), but employment prospects for graduates are not good, and funds for studying in China are often inadequate (p. 27).

University Mandarin learning declined after 2016, though this appeared to level off before the COVID-19 pandemic. Most language teaching is undertaken by short contract or hourly paid teachers, except in Confucius Institutes where the teaching is along lines determined by Beijing, not London. In Britain, careers in teaching Mandarin at university level are not encouraged, and this needs to be reversed (p. 30).

The report then turns to an account of the problems of promoting Mandarin within the school curriculum. This too has a history dating back several decades, but it is a history that I have never studied, and feel unqualified to comment on, given that others are much better informed on the topic. As described in the report, Mandarin in schools suffers from several problems, though at least one of these does relate to university-level teaching provision, and so is worth highlighting before we move on. Since there is no point in learning Mandarin unless we know what Chinese people are talking about, an A level has been proposed in Chinese Civilisation, a project that I welcome without reserve. The thought that this might benefit from an engagement with Chinese material culture as preserved in our museums and art galleries (pp. 42–43) I also applaud, especially when the British Museum is about to launch an exhibition of the dynamic artistic culture of 19th century China that entirely belies the notion that Chinese culture at the time of the Opium Wars was in any sense stagnant.[36]

The report then turns to other sources of information on China, and to the problem of changing Chinese attitudes to facilitating research; here the words 'bullying' and 'self-censorship' appear (pp. 47, 48). What if the Chinese government for example blocks access to materials you require halfway through a project, or simply does not grant you any more visas? No answer to this problem is suggested, but one might think that it could be solved by turning to China resources in our own libraries, though there is no mention of libraries or librarians anywhere in the report – unlike in the follow-up to the Bekhradnia Report, in which efforts at that time to solve access to library materials at a national level are decried as something that should properly be left to individual institutions. Of these SOAS has always been seen as playing a national role.

China has been publishing books with print runs in the thousands for almost 12 centuries, so it is perhaps no surprise that the SOAS library in 2010 was able to boast Chinese holdings of "some 200,000 volumes in total".[37] But every year since then China alone has published at least that number of *titles*, not volumes, to say nothing of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and

elsewhere.[38] China ranks second only to the USA, and is provider of about twenty per cent of the world's new books annually. In fact, of the top twenty publishing nations, at least nine are the responsibility (and almost the sole responsibility among UK universities) of the SOAS library. It is fortunate, therefore, that SOAS is still able to support one member of the library staff to deal with these hundreds of thousands of publications, though of course she must cover books about China in European languages also. The situation is ameliorated by subscriptions to electronic databases, but as the American scholar Glenn D. Tiffert has shown, when paying Beijing providers for these, one finds that some of the contents has softly and suddenly vanished away.[39] Like all libraries in the UK, these databases are popular with library authorities since they save space, but of course access to them is not guaranteed if they derive from any source outside the UK.

One solution proposed in the discussion of the Natzler report after publication was to simply Google translate the materials that are for the moment available online since, in science subjects for example, the wide distribution of Chinese research enhances the standing of its authors. In fact, machine-translated scholarship is currently made available for many subjects including my own, and I have looked closely at it. Where, for example, the author is obliged quite periphrastically to allude to taboo topics like the Dalai Lama, the machine just cannot cope with the subtlety, and with any technical language it struggles to maintain intelligibility even at the best of times.[40]

There are ways in which librarians simplify their impossible task of selection: one retired librarian has told me that "I simply watched what the Japanese were buying and followed them". Since Japan has been in direct contact with China for one and a half millennia and has developed considerable expertise in such matters without being in the EU, I would suggest that nurturing links to Chinese Studies in Japan might be prudent, given that there are a handful of British-based China scholars who know Japanese too. Without some help, the Sisyphean business of trying to build up China competence in the UK threatens to become a bibliographical calamity: measured against the great flow of Chinese publications our ignorance is not contracting at all but, rather, expanding alarmingly.

There are other problem areas not immediately apparent in the report. The urgency of the need for the A level in Chinese Civilisation is increased by the need to welcome several hundred thousand new potential citizens from Hong Kong. We have absorbed, though not without difficulty, thousands of culturally different migrants in the recent past, for example from South

Asia. How much more difficult would this have been had not a very small group of very dedicated scholars fought long and hard to get unfamiliar religious traditions such as Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism recognised in university teaching, and eventually schools too? Many Hong Kong Chinese are Christians, and some are Buddhists, so it is fortunate that there are now at last three or four posts dedicated to modern Chinese Buddhism.[41] But other religious traditions are not represented at all, even though a knowledge of them is becoming important, for example in our courts.[42]

But in any case, the one strong belief that unites all inheritors of the Chinese cultural tradition, wherever they may come from across the globe, is that China has had a glorious past, contributing, just for example, the inventions of paper, printing, the compass, and explosives to the story of mankind. Yet the sort of British disdain that became so apparent at the time of the Opium Wars and is now excruciatingly documented by Amy Matthewson in her study of the imagery of *Punch* magazine, *Cartooning China*, is, alas, still with us.[43] We need that A level to raise an awareness of the dignity conferred by history on all Chinese, and an awareness – as in the case of our neighbours the Irish – of the indignity and hurt thrust upon them by the past conduct of the British state, unless we are happy to see British popular attitudes to China continuing to veer unsteadily between paranoia and facetiousness. Michael Natzler is not the first to point this out.[44]

But to achieve any level of re-education is, as he shows, going to be a stretch. For example, the number of curatorial posts devoted to Chinese material culture is only in single digits and the number of departments capable of training more experts can be counted on the fingers of one hand. They may even be diminishing, as support for acquiring Classical Chinese is progressively being withdrawn. Now there are only two institutions – Oxford and Cambridge – that can provide four years of teaching of that language, though Edinburgh teaches in all but the first year. Otherwise, only Durham and SOAS provide more than a single introductory course, as Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle do. A degree in Chinese at Sheffield or Cardiff offers no awareness of this language at all. This of course is a pattern we find typically in North America, where those with interests in areas like Chinese medicine, religion, art, or history can supplement their appropriate language skills in selected institutions at the graduate level. Provided that we can introduce extra teaching and funding at North American levels here there is no need to worry at all.

For the moment, however, things are rather touch and go. I have every confidence in the historians who have volunteered to help set up an A

level in Chinese Civilisation, but between Early China and the Early Modern and Modern periods no one seems to have come forward for this task. It is quite possibly that no one is there, leaving an awkward gap of a millennium or so. That worries me. During the pandemic, for example, I volunteered to help brief some diplomats from another country, and discovered that they assumed that the very tight and now tightening controls over religious life in China reflected a Communist innovation, so I had to explain to them that such controls first emerged during the fifth century because of major historical shifts that took the Chinese tradition off in a direction already dissimilar from that more familiar in Europe. Now there is no one in post in Britain who can offer such perspectives With the general narrowing down of intellectual horizons in China, perhaps there is no one there, either, with history that does not conform to the official line described as 'nihilistic'.[45] Again, I would not despair of Japanese assistance: in 2005 for instance, I found that a very interesting analysis of Silk Road history published in Japan had been originally prepared for a meeting of seventy high school teachers.[46] By contrast, some materials shown to me two years ago by a British educational publisher proved to be so full of clichés that I referred them to a daughter who is a teacher, who commented that they were 'borderline racist'.[47]

Education about China is a challenge for everyone. As I have indicated, France has a good tradition of China studies, though some time ago one veteran there noted that it was "quite marginal in French academic life", narrowly based as it was in state-funded central institutions.[48] Now it has been pointed out that even all those central institutions cannot match the forty-eight posts on China present in Harvard alone, while the wider system is lacking the much broader expertise that France requires.[49] Britain is set up differently: we depend on income from a broad stream of undergraduates, and these have not been sufficient to justify the posts devoted to China. Now that the word is out that the Golden Age of Sino-British relations promised in the last decade is no more, prospects of making money out of China are shrinking, and so most likely will student numbers, thereby making China expertise unsustainable.[50]

I can only suggest two expedients, both somewhat desperate. One is to bite the bullet and pay to create a sort of East Asia equivalent of the Warburg Institute, a small graduate college dedicated to exploring the ramifications of the Chinese tradition.[51] As I have noted, the French have had the benefit of such a school in East Asia for over a century, and so have the Italians since 1984. We could have set up such a school in Hong Kong, but we did not.[52] Obviously its role would be to create a place to stand wherefrom

to exert leverage on the education system as a whole, but I think to do that needs somewhere with more independence and intellectual heft than an enclave in the Institute of Education, something more like the Needham Institute in Cambridge but bigger. I am not optimistic.

Secondly, we could import more students to swell undergraduate numbers. After setting our face against the EU and its Erasmus + Programme we might turn instead to South Asia, and maybe especially India. After all, when Britain stood alone against fascism in 1940, two and a half million South Asians were prepared to join our armed forces, and it would be pleasant to be able to recognise this now through lower overseas fees for Chinese Studies. Anne Cheng of the Collège de France has dedicated her career to creating academic understanding between India and China, one of the most significant international relationships of this century, and from her and from other contacts with Indian academics in the field I feel that they would appreciate some support, since they have a major task ahead of them.[53]

But again, I am pessimistic. Maybe it would help if those concerned about Chinese influence in British life issued every member of the Houses of Parliament with a copy of *The Art of War* (even though that is not the text that gives the best insight into Chinese traditions of diplomatic thought, which is not currently available in full[54]). Even so, "Know your opponent and know yourself, then in one hundred encounters you will have one hundred successes" is not a bad slogan.

Unfortunately, after undertaking this survey on your behalf, I have concluded that Britain does not just have a China problem. It also has a Britain problem, and more research is urgently required to understand that. Two quotations I came across have struck me with peculiar force. One is from a Hong Kong-born American academic, contrasting the last pre-19th century Dutch embassy to China with that of the British in a book review. "The 1795 Dutch mission reminds us that there were other European nations dealing with China for a far longer period than the British. The Portuguese, Dutch, and Russians did not assume innate Chinese arrogance and xenophobia; they did not deal with the Ming and Qing empires as a self-centred realm uninterested in intercourse between states".[55] The other is from the first Chinese scholar who, one hundred years ago, was given a full-time contract to teach the language at what was then the School of Oriental Studies, the man who later became known to hundreds of millions as the author Lao She. "If the English were willing, they could hire rather good professors from France or

Germany for a fairly modest salary. But they refuse to do that. Their professors must be British, regardless of what their scholarship is like".[56]

That policy at least changed. But recently the Dutch Professor of Chinese quit Oxford after Brexit, saying he would not stay where he was not wanted. The Dutch Professor of Chinese in London had already headed west, while his Austrian colleague was obliged to retreat to France, neither of them to be replaced. I admire the willingness of the German professors in Edinburgh and Cardiff to stay, and of course the American, Belgian, Dutch, and Hungarian professors who maintain Chinese Studies in Cambridge University. Their forbearance is heartening. But I hope their trust in this country proves to have been justified.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

NOTES

1. Higher Education Policy Institute webinar on 'Understanding China: The Study of China and Mandarin in UK Schools and Universities', March 31, 2022, https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/03/17/hepi-webinar-on-understanding-china-the-study-of-china-and-mandarin-uk-schools-and-universities-31-march-2022/
2. Michael Natzler, 'Understanding China: The Study of China and Mandarin in UK Schools and Universities', HEPI paper 148, Higher Education Policy Institute, Oxford, UK, March 2022, p. 21.
3. Lawrence Wang-chi Wong, '"We are as Babies Under Nurses". Thomas Manning (1773-1941) and Sino-British Relations in the Early Nineteenth Century'. *Journal of Translation Studies* Vol. 1. Issue 1 (June 2017): 85–136.
4. See Eugenio Menegon, 'Beijing as a Missionary Translation Center in the Eighteenth Century', in T. H. Barrett and Lawrence Wang-chi Wong (Eds.), *Crossing Borders: Sinology in Translation Studies*. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2022, pp. 37–74.
5. See p. 111 of T. H. Barrett, 'Learning and Outcomes in Early Anglophone Sinological Translation', in Barrett and Wong, *Crossing Borders*, pp. 99–143.
6. Peter Francis Kornicki, *Languages, Scripts, and Chinese Texts in East Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
7. The account of developments from this point onwards draws unless otherwise noted on T. H. Barrett, *Singular Listlessness: A Short History of Chinese Books and British Scholars*. London: WellSweep, 1989, though I am now acutely conscious of the shortcomings of that work. The distinctive approach of the early Protestants is now well explained in Christopher A. Daily, *Robert Morrison and the Protestant Plan for China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013.

8. The first missionary was Robert Morrison (1782–1834); on an 1824 London visit his students included the future missionary educator Mary Aldersey (17097–1868): see Society for Promoting Female Education in the East, comp., *History of the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East*. London: Edward Suter, 1847, p. 33. The Protestant missionary encounter with various forms of Chinese and the language training measures they took are surveyed in John T. P. Lai, *Negotiating Religious Gaps: The Enterprise of Translating Christian Tracts by Protestant Missionaries in Nineteenth-century China*. Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2012, pp. 38–47.
9. Barrett, 'Learning and Outcomes', op. cit., p. 118.
10. Matthew W. King, *In the Forest of the Blind: The Eurasian Journey of Faxian's Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.
11. This was the era vividly covered by Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832-1914*. London: Penguin Books, 2012.
12. Lord Charles Beresford, *The Break-up of China*. London and New York: Harper and Brothers, 1899, p. 349: 'there seems no doubt that we have arrived at a time when the British Government will seriously have to consider whether the system of non-intervention hitherto pursued should not be modified'.
13. Ibid., p. 445.
14. See p. 122 of Lam Lap, 'Transcending Regional Boundaries: Poetic Connection between Nanyang and Lingnan'. *Journal of Chinese Studies* Vol. 74 (January 2022): 107–140. Cf. Denis Twitchett, *Land Tenure and the Social Order in T'ang and Sung China*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1962, p. 9, for German advances in language training for business at this time.
15. I may have underestimated Parker: see David Prager Banner, 'The Linguistic Ideas of Edward Harper Parker'. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 119. Issue 1 (1999): 12–34. But P. D. Coates, *The China Consuls*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 299–300, suggests that given his mental state by the time he quit China a little light professorial work was all he was good for.
16. Barrett, *Singular Listlessness*, op. cit., p. 85. The Chinese professor at University College mentioned in Denis Twitchett, *Land Tenure*, p. 7, was according to research by R. G. Tiedemann (1941–2019) a bold impostor, not a scholar.
17. Ian Brown, *The School of Oriental and African Studies: Imperial Training and the Expansion of Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 10–40.
18. Twitchett, *Land Tenure*, op. cit., p. 37, n. 20.
19. G. Owen, *The Evolution of Chinese Writing*. Oxford: Horace Hart, 1910.
20. For a brief account of the origins of this fund, see Robert Bickers, *Britain in China*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, pp. 144–145, but the events described had many ramifications that deserve further comment.
21. Peter Kornicki, *Eavesdropping on the Emperor: Interrogators and Codebreakers in Britain's war with Japan*. London: Hurst, 2021.
22. Bruce Henderson, *Bridge to the Sun: The Secret Role of the Japanese Americans Who Fought in the Pacific in World War II*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2022.
23. C. H. Phillips, *The School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London, 1917-1967: An Introduction*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1967, p. 36.

24. T. H. Barrett, 'The Flowering of British Sinology'. *Journal of Chinese History* (First View, 2022): 1–25.
25. For an American point of view typical of the period, see F. S. C. Northrop (Ed.), *Ideological Differences & World Order: Studies in the Philosophy and Science of the World's Cultures*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1949, especially for China pp. 18–68, 447–455.
26. Twitchett, *Land Tenure*, op. cit., pp. 34–35, gives one reasoned case cautioning against the Hayter scheme; this was preceded by a volley of letters to the *Times* in the wake of the report from January into March expressing similar sentiments, starting with a letter of 18th January with signatories from a number of universities and fields of study, which elicited a response from Sir William on 22nd January, followed by one from East Asianists on 24th January.
27. The Commonwealth Fund, *Directory of Commonwealth Fund Fellows and Harkness Fellows, 1925-1990*. New York: The Commonwealth Fund, n.d., p. 27 (Martin Bernal, who first studied at Berkeley), 111 (Mark Elvin), 137 (John Gittings), and 238 (David McMullen).
28. William Hayter, 'The Future of Asian Studies after the Hayter Report'. *Asian Affairs* Vol. 12. Issue 3 (1981): 245–253.
29. Brown, *School of Oriental and African Studies*, op. cit., pp. 206–244.
30. In some cases rather old grievances lay behind the outbreaks of unpleasantness that resulted: Brown, *School of Oriental and African Studies*, op. cit., p. 213, extracts from the archive a record of the clash between the Director, C. D. Cowan, and Angus Graham, a sinologist's sinologist if ever there was one. To my mind, this was not unconnected with the fact, as the Director once let slip in passing, that as a young colonial administrator in what is now Malaysia, he had attempted to learn Chinese, but had failed. I would agree, however, with Ian Brown that in his role as Director he was outstanding.
31. Brown, *School of Oriental and African Studies*, op. cit., pp. 223–228.
32. Brown, *School of Oriental and African Studies*, op. cit., pp. 249–254. John Michael Raisman, born in Lahore in 1929, had been chairman of Shell UK and while he had personally achieved enough recognition to be awarded a CBE, he was the son of Sir Abraham Jeremy Raisman (1892–1978), who had played an important role in the financial administration of British India.
33. Brown, *School of Oriental and African Studies*, op. cit., p. 250.
34. Mr. Bekhradnia, after stepping down from his duties, was later the founder of the Higher Education Policy Institute and is now an important contributor to Michael Natzler's 2022 publication.
35. Higher Education Funding Council for England, 'An Evaluation of HEFCE's Chinese Studies Initiative: A Report to HEFCE by Universitas', 2002. Available at https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/5873/ (accessed 28 May 2023). I fear that the educational consultants responsible for this study may no longer exist.
36. I understand that this project, the responsibility of Jessica Harrison-Hall and Julia Lovell, will involve a publication also.
37. T. H. Barrett, 'Religion and the First Recorded Print Run: Luoyang, July, 855'. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* Vol. 68. Issue 3 (2005): 455–461;

https://www.soas.ac.uk/library/about/what-makes-soas-library-special/iii-regional-collections.html – China.

38. https://www.statista.com/statistics/279169/number-of-published-book-titles-in-china/; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Books_published_per_country_per_year; the former source gives substantially higher figures but appears to be well grounded.
39. Glenn D. Tiffert, 'Peering Down the Memory Hole: Censorship, Digitization, and the Fragility of Our Knowledge Base'. *American Historical Review* Vol. 124. Issue 2 (2019): 550–568.
40. See the review of Fang Litian, 'Chinese Buddhism and Traditional Culture'. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* Vol. 82 (2019): 570–572.
41. Protestant Christianity has however since before the 20th century tended to inspire Chinese preachers stoutly independent from the main Anglophone churches: see e.g., David Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity: The Brethren in Twentieth-century China*. Leiden: Brill, 2019, for Watchman Nee and Daryl R. Ireland, *John Song: Modern Chinese Christianity and the Making of a New Man*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2020.
42. I have noted one instance of a syncretic Chinese religion and British law at n. 25 in 'Speaking Up for Superstition: A Note on the Ethics of Chinese Popular Belief'. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* Vol. 41. Issue S1 (December 2014; issued 2016): 709–722. There is also a problem with Daoism, since though there is some teaching of early Daoist philosophy and of individual practice, research into its communal practices is the province of a single outstanding expert who is a musician rather than a teacher, and one who moreover concentrates much more on the Daoism of North China than that of the South China and Hong Kong area: see Stephen Jones, *Daoist Priests of the Li Family: Ritual Life in Village China*. St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2017.
43. Amy Matthewson, *Cartooning China: Punch, Power and Politics in the Victorian Era*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2022.
44. See, for example, the conclusion to Matthew Henderson's 2021 policy paper for the Council on Geostrategy, 'How the Chinese Communist Party 'Positions' the United Kingdom'. Council on Geostrategy, London, 2021. https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/research/how-the-chinese-communist-party-positions-the-united-kingdom/.
45. There is a useful contrast between 'Confucius Institute' history and one possible alternative in Bill Hayton, *The Invention of China*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2020, pp. 118–122.
46. This presentation, edited by Moriyasu Takao, I reviewed in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* Vol. 68. Issue 1 (February 2005): 144–145.
47. Useful in dealing with widespread misconceptions is Naomi Standen (Ed.), *Demystifying China: New Understandings of Chinese History*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013.
48. Jean Chesneaux, *China in the Eyes of the French Intellectuals*. Canberra: Australian National University, 1987, p. 11.
49. Christian Henriot, 'L'université française reste hermétique à la Chine'. *Le Monde*, January 28, 2023, currently available at: https://nouveau.europresse.com/PdfLink/MzRyoFX8y4K6DClqO99Qh6Ou9PpIyboSdVd9fouNL70cUPOFycE6F4lnTrRzUGLfl5mXOXRm3a9_nxavcer2-pHJuvNbiBA4bJKzgNQc6Fc1.

50. For one negative journalistic reassessment of the situation, see Ian Williams, *The Fire of the Dragon: China's New Cold War*. Edinburgh: Birlinn Limited, 2022.
51. Note that the Warburg institute is by no means merely confined to a 'Western Civilisation' approach to the traditions it studies, as is immediately apparent from the work of Charles Burnett, which covers not simply the Greek heritage and Arabic but also such topics as Islam in Tibet and Jesuit writings concerning Japan.
52. On our lost opportunity in Hong Kong, see Hugh D. R. Baker, *The Chop Suey Connection: Hong Kong*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1994.
53. For some of Anne Cheng's work on India and China, see Anne Cheng and Sanchit Kumar (Eds.), *India-China: Intersecting Universalities*. Paris: Collège de France, 2020.
54. But see, J.I. Crump, *Legends of the Warring States: Persuasions, Romances, and Stories from Chan-Kuo Ts'e*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.
55. R. Po-chia Hsia, in review of Tonio Andrade, 'The Last Embassy: The Dutch Mission of 1795 and the Forgotten History of Western Encounters with China'. *Journal of Chinese Studies* Vol. 75 (June 2022): 262.
56. Anne Witchard, *Lao She in London*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012, p. 68.