

*Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies*, Vol. 7 July 2017

ISSN 2048-0601

© British Association for Chinese Studies

### **Conferencing, Networking, Publishing**

*Tao Tao Liu*

*President of BACS 1990-1993*

I ran the BACS conference in 1993 and 2012; the former as President, and the latter under the presidency of Michel Hockx. The difference between the two conferences is striking enough to indicate the changes that had taken place since the early start of the Association in 1976—when the first lot of academics from different universities were invited to go on a tour of China—to what the Association now is.

Both the conferences in 1993 and 2012 took place at Oxford in September, when we had the run of the place during the vacation for normal students. We used the same facilities on both occasions: most of the meetings took place at the Oriental Institute, where the room was kindly offered free of charge, whilst people who wanted to stay nights did so at Wadham College. There the resemblance ends; from using a single room in 1993, which took about thirty-five people, we used three rooms in 2012, since apart from the room that we had used in 1993, there were also two other rooms, each with a capacity of about twenty-five. Meetings took place simultaneously; there were also plenary sessions in a large lecture hall in Wadham. The attendance for 1993 was about forty people in all, whilst for 2012, we had several hundreds.

In 1993 we had a theme: “Unity and Diversity: Local Cultures and Identities in China”, which subsequently was published with the same title as a book by the Hong Kong Press. David Faure and I were the main instigators. David invited Helen Siu and Myron Cohen since China was developing as an academic subject across the board, not only in straightforward sinology, but in anthropology as

well. We had a keynote speaker in Helen Siu, who spoke about Hong Kong identity.

There were plenty of entertaining events, such as special visits to the Pitt Rivers Museum, with Helene La Rue, ethnomusicologist at the Museum, giving us a talk entitled “Spring Festival amongst the Miao in Guizhou”, illustrated by slides and music. Even the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford held an exhibition of contemporary Chinese paintings. The meeting room, Lecture Room 1, was pleasantly crowded. Most people knew each other; there were also a few visitors from abroad. Altogether, the conference had a comfortable atmosphere that all of us enjoyed.

2012 was quite different. Although we had put out a call for papers to be submitted, nothing happened immediately, and it was really only in the last few days before the deadline that we got a large number of offers. Then, for a small committee of organizers consisting of the President, myself and Joanne Finley from Newcastle University, it was a matter of going through the abstracts sent in to whittle them down to a feasible number, and place them into appropriate slots. Since it took place immediately before the conference in Europe which some attended as well, we did not feel that we should extend the days. Getting the papers down to an appropriate number was a task which took up much time and much emailing. We dispensed with the idea of a theme following previous conferences which had garnered a large number of papers with no clear theme, but represented the work that had been done by our members. In the end we spread over three rooms at the Oriental Institute devoted to different topics, from ancient to present-day China and many other subjects. The papers took place contemporaneously in order for all the papers which qualified to be squeezed in. Some rooms were very crowded indeed.

Overall, there was much more administration than in the earlier conference. Apart from the sterling work of officers on the committee, I had to “borrow” several research students who were around Oxford at the time to help with various tasks, such as getting the abstracts distributed and registering participants. The conference was filled to the brim with papers, but we were able to invite keynote speakers for whom we had to borrow a larger room in

Wadham: Jin Jiang (East China Normal University) and Henrietta Harrison (Oxford).

In the fifteen years or so between the conferences, many more people have become involved in the study of China, with its rise as an economic power in the world. China has become major news in the papers and television channels, and the teaching of Chinese, in particular in schools which had a very small number in the past, has become a major preoccupation.

Academic conferences have become much more commonplace, where people bring out potential papers ready for publication. In the beginning, when papers on China stood little chance of being admitted to other conferences, we had to establish venues where the subject would be taken seriously, which partly accounts for the growth of the BACS conferences. Many more journals are now in existence that deal with the subject of China. Publishing became more a feature of academic life than it had been, where many felt that the number of papers they had contributed to or published was a factor in finding jobs.

Apart from the growth in the study of China, BACS is now better known for its awareness of current government trends, taking part and speaking up in meetings of major funding bodies in this country, generally running things and helping to bolster the role of China in academic circles and keeping the study of China as a serious discipline. Our website gives more information in general, and we have our bulletin, which we have kept up since we started. We deal with the prioritising of applicants, for instance, for the Huayu Enhancement Scholarships, which enable British nationals to study in Taiwan, and which we administer on behalf of Taiwan—incidentally it caused BACS to be black-listed on the web in China for a time. Moreover, the publication of *JBACS* on the web has further enhanced its standing. We have always welcomed the inclusion of anyone working on Chinese studies, regardless of their affiliations, and I hope that we will carry on with this practice.

Yet in spite of the expansion, BACS still gives many people the chance to be in touch with academics from other universities which are now doing Chinese—

we had started off with only six universities—and it still remains the “trade association” of those who live in Britain.