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### **It All Started on a Train in China in 1976...**

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A delegation of young British academics in Chinese Studies visited China early in April of that year under the auspices of the British Council. Some of us were not that young, but we all had a youthful enthusiasm for the trip, since access to China over the previous ten years of the Cultural Revolution had generally not been possible. There were fourteen of us, six representing the Chinese Studies departments of the time with the remainder being individual scholars working on China in history and social sciences departments. The leader of the delegation was John Gittings, who had previously been an academic in the Chinese Studies Department of the Central London Polytechnic (Westminster University), but who was by then the China correspondent for the *Guardian* newspaper.

When we assembled at Heathrow, it was the first time a number of us had ever met. We had a wide range of expertise on China between us, from language and literature to history, politics and economics, and we were going to be able to pool our knowledge and skills during the forthcoming visit. The standard of our spoken Chinese varied considerably, but this enabled the not so fluent amongst us to prepare questions for our Chinese hosts while others were battling to interpret the various forms of Chinese we encountered. One enthusiastic historian was observed on the flight to Hong Kong ploughing through a large Chinese-English dictionary in an effort to improve his command of the spoken language. Whether it worked or not, it was evidence of a commitment to the task in hand.

The morning after we reached Hong Kong, all of a sudden, doubts were raised about whether we would be able to go up to Beijing at all. The previous day had been the Qingming Festival and we had read reports of a surge in popular expressions of grief in the capital for Premier Zhou Enlai, who had died earlier in the year. Huge crowds had gathered in Tiananmen Square to witness the tributes to Zhou, which took the form of wreathes and poems placed at the foot of the Monument to the People's Heroes. What we didn't know was that the Square was being forcibly cleared by the authorities and that Deng Xiaoping had been dismissed from office.

Despite all these upheavals the visit went ahead and we arrived early that evening in a very tense Beijing. We were staying in the Peking Hotel and a number of us immediately went out for a walk to find Chang'an Boulevard deserted apart from the presence of plain clothes personnel. The next day, access to Tiananmen Square was prohibited, and it was filled with a large number of street cleaning tankers, which drove up and down spraying the ground with water. An endless procession of demonstrators paraded past Tiananmen itself shouting slogans denouncing Deng Xiaoping.

Although we had a wide range of analytical skills among us, it was impossible to say what exactly was going on, but it did seem that the Gang of Four was reasserting itself. The Chinese officials who travelled with us throughout our visit were in an extremely difficult position, declining diplomatically to offer any explanations of what was going on around us. I remember that we politely listened to a presentation at Beijing University, ignoring a noisy student demonstration that was going on outside the window. Events later in the year with the death of Mao and the fall of the Gang of Four would introduce major developments in China, but the "Tiananmen Incident" we witnessed could be said to be the starting point for these changes.

After three days in the capital we took the train south for a week's tour through Nanjing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. The atmosphere in the southern cities was not as fraught as it had been in Beijing, but there were echoes everywhere of the Tiananmen events. Nonetheless, our stalwart guides conducted us to a range of academic institutions and places of interest. The hospitality was lavish and virtually every evening there was a sumptuous

banquet with copious amounts of alcohol (*maotai*, beer and wine), which was enjoyed in full not only by us but also by our hosts. This high living was in marked contrast to much of the drab world we could see around us. In Nanjing, we were taken to see the bridge over the Yangzi, which had been completed a few years before and in which there was understandably great pride. Two photographs were taken of our group with our hosts and, looking at them now, the striking thing about them is that the bridge behind us was deserted apart from a couple of army trucks and the odd cyclist. China was somewhat different from the place it is today.

It was on the first leg of the journey from Beijing to Nanjing that we began to discuss the proposition of setting up some form of professional association. For a number of years, there had been a European Association of Chinese Studies (originally referred to as the “Junior Sinologues”), and its annual conference was always held in a different country across Europe, including Britain. Its activities tended to focus on Chinese departments, and we felt there was room for a separate British association, which could attract people working on China from across the academic world and beyond. By the end of the trip, our ideas had firmed up and we decided to call a meeting at SOAS in the following summer to discuss the idea. To our surprise, a large number of people turned up. They came from the academic world, both staff and postgraduates, and from diplomatic and business circles. The response was extremely positive, and I seem to remember that there was unanimous support for the proposal to set up an association. Before we knew where we were, we had elected an executive committee that was empowered to explore possibilities.

Over the following months, the committee held regular meetings at SOAS, and we felt our way towards establishing a basic structure covering membership, finance and communications. We needed to set up charitable status and received helpful guidance from the Charity Commission. We also made contact with the Chinese Embassy and the Taiwan Representative Office, and these diplomatic links have been maintained to this day. All this required considerable detailed work (in the days of no electronic mail and no websites), and a great deal of credit should go to our first Secretary, David Chambers, for his methodical and good-humoured approach.

A major task was to make arrangements for the first formal conference of the Association at the end of the following summer. It was held at Oxford University and we had no difficulty in attracting a large number of participants for a full programme of lectures. The only disappointment was that Dr Joseph Needham was unable to accept our invitation to attend, though he did send a letter of support. The occasion was clearly enjoyed by all present and the Association was formally established at the Business Session. The Executive Committee stood down to allow the extended membership as a whole to choose our successors. It is a measure of the enthusiasm for the new Association that two senior academics put their names forward for the position of Chairman and an election had to be held.

Over the years, members of the original 1976 group were active in the Association and five of them served as Presidents. The range of interests of the group across Chinese Studies—modern and classical, sinological and social science, linguistic and literary—have been encompassed by the Association. However, compared with the modest initiatives of those early years, the activities of BACS on behalf of its members have expanded enormously to include liaison with government bodies and funding agencies, the support and promotion of postgraduate studies, and the encouragement of Chinese language studies at all levels, as well as the production of its own publication.

The changes in China we have seen over the last forty years have obviously had an impact on the work of the Association, but one particular thing I noticed at the recent anniversary meeting was the presence of a large number of scholars from China. BACS in its early days had a mainly Western membership, but the arrival of so many Chinese students in the UK in recent decades has clearly expanded and enhanced the quality of the Association. The atmosphere of the anniversary occasion seemed to me to be as positive as that at our first gathering in 1976, and bodes well for the future development of the Association.