

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

ISSN 2048-0601

© British Association for Chinese Studies

## **Negotiating Politics and Academia**

*Stephan Feuchtwang*

*President of BACS 1999-2002*

We had the example of the previous tour arranged by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, UK professors of Chinese. They had a very Cold War-era mistrust of their hosts. We, younger and junior sinologists, would be more polite. This was in April 1976, during the last throes of Jiang Qing and her gang; they issued denunciations of Deng Xiaoping and implicitly of Zhou Enlai, who had just died and been passionately mourned by spontaneous crowds. We witnessed the contrasting spectacle of work units trucked in to parade official denunciation in a state of high tension that lasted for our whole three-week tour. We kept up good relations with our hosts and among each other. Towards the end of the tour some of us, on a train journey—others, including me, in other compartments, perhaps not just literally—thought about starting a British Association for Chinese Studies. I joined later and eventually served as President, in 1999-2002, some twenty years after it was founded. I thought it might be interesting to record briefly, from my experience, the Cold War atmosphere out of which we were emerging when BACS was formed.

My experience was that of an anti-war activist at the time of the war in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. After graduating from Oxford with a degree in Chinese in 1961, I had the odd politics of someone who wrote under a pseudonym a (published) article against Jiang Jieshi's military dictatorship, was in favour of the independence of Formosa, as the Taiwanese activists called it, and read the *Communist Manifesto* behind a brown paper bag while travelling on the London Underground. I had been working as an assistant in Collett's Chinese bookshop and art store, opposite the British Museum. We sold imports from the PRC, including Foreign Languages Press publications. Two further years

later, after a master's degree in anthropology, and learning Taiwanese at Cornell in preparation for fieldwork, I took part in marches against the US support of what I understood to be another military dictatorship in Vietnam. But my main interest was in poetry, ritual and religion, and I enjoyed fieldwork in Taiwan in 1966-68 without hindrance or too much concern with, let alone attention to, the military dictatorship or single-party rule, except for local elections. But on my return to a job in the SOAS Anthropology Department I was driven to enquire into the bigger context, into political economy, which included both my circumstances and those that I had entered in Taiwan. In the 1960s, political economy could be a disguise-name for Marxism. Open scholarly interest in, let alone teaching about Marx, capitalism, and imperialism were forbidden by the Cold War conventions of the time, even though there were in fact a few anti-imperialist and communist full-time staff teaching at SOAS. In this curious situation we leftist staff, and a core of students in the Students' Union, formed groups both for the extra-curricular study of Marx and theories of imperialism, and for activities opposing US imperialism, in particular the bombing of Cambodia. Some of us formed the UK Association for Radical East Asian Studies (AREAS) in 1970, which was the more left-wing, sometimes openly socialist, equivalent to the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars in the USA formed two years before. The CCAS was better funded and larger, and soon launched the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, while we published occasional pamphlets, then booklets, on the secret CIA war in Laos (Gestetner-machine-printed and stapled), on Japanese imperialism (which became a Penguin book by Gavan McCormack and Jon Halliday), on Hong Kong by Walter Easey (Spokesman Books), by Feiling Davies on the Cultural Revolution, and more.

By the mid-seventies, I had been kicked out of SOAS, formally for not publishing enough to pass my probation, and the momentum of AREAS had gone. Instead, the study of imperialism became one of the topics of the London China Seminar that I started and kept going with many people's help in SOAS, a kind of avenging presence, for 25 years. I had scorned ambition for a career beyond doing my research and teaching well, in favour of left-wing activism. But I was persuaded to join my professional association, the Association of Social Anthropologists of the British Commonwealth, so that it could help me by setting up a committee under Raymond Firth to investigate the claims SOAS made about me as reasons for not renewing my contract. It reported in 1972-3

that I was an anthropologist of good standing, but this was not enough to change the Director's mind. It did impress me. It warmed my heart that a professional association, even though it was not a union, could do this.

We were not on either side of the Cold War antagonists, Soviet or US, so-called Communist or so-called Free, but wanted a way to think politically and economically from the point of view of the exploited and oppressed, and to be both scholarly and politically engaged on their side. By 1977, when BACS was formed, this was still so. BACS was a professional association. Politically, the best that could be said about it was that it did not represent an establishment, nor was it dependent on funding from any state. In fact, from its subscription coffer, it provided funds for some of the small costs of running the London China Seminar, which after the sessions on imperialism, was not on any political path except that of taking seriously the challenges of studying the People's Republic of China instead of simply avoiding the challenge with distaste, or of studying in order to condemn.

As President, my fellow committee members and I were occupied with what have become perennial BACS preoccupations. Our future, namely the organisation of research students and their own conference, was one. Then there was defence and joint lobbying against the ever-acute threat of cuts and closures of departments that taught exotic languages. And the opposite, helping to expand the teaching of Chinese in schools. All these seemed to be precarious issues at the time, but have since become more secure and regular parts of BACS responsibilities, except for the ever-increasing loss of the teaching of classical Chinese. This is now a crucial last line of defence for BACS to try to hold.

What seemed new then was for BACS to include in its membership, and as part of its mission, research and teaching not just of Chinese language and literature, but also about China in departments and courses on comparative literature, cultural studies, history, geography and the social sciences. I think I was the first social scientist to be President, followed immediately by Harriet, historian cum cultural studies and anthropological fieldworker. Jane, our President now, is one too of course, and all three of us know the value of being able to read classical Chinese, not just the contemporary script and spoken

Chinese, in order to study contemporary China, in which some people of interest to us read and use classical Chinese texts.

Some of the Cold War antagonism to “Communist” China remains in the suspicion and condemnation of everything attributable to the government of the PRC by some historians or social scientists disillusioned with revolution. Most other China experts condemn the use of authoritarian powers to censor and imprison dissident artists, lawyers and protestors while acknowledging, for instance, the reduction of absolute poverty and while also regretting how steep inequalities of income and wealth have become. We adopt a more nuanced approach and informed judgement. In any case, BACS contains all views while supporting none, and should continue the stance that I came to admire, that of professional academic independence from all states, including the PRC.