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The UKNCC Guest Contributor Programme offers contrasting 'short, sharp reads' for those seeking a fuller exploration of key questions. This March 2022 issue explores the question:

"How can 50 years of UK-China ambassadorial relations inform our thinking about the future?"

Authors, alphabetically by surname:

- *Prof. Kerry Brown, Director of the Lau China Institute, King's College London*
- *Madame Fu Ying, Former Ambassador to the UK, Vice Foreign Minister of China*
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How can 50 years of UK-China ambassadorial relations inform our thinking about the future?

Prof. Kerry Brown
Director of the Lau China Institute
King's College London
March 2022

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The UK and the People's Republic of China have enjoyed ambassadorial level links for half a century now. This might tempt people to draw parallels with the rapprochement between the US and China which also occurred in early 1972, the anniversary of which has also been marked this year. The position of the UK however was very different to that of America's. It recognised Mao's new regime in Beijing as soon as it could, in January 1950. There was a very specific reason for this – the continuing administration of Hong Kong as part of the British Empire. This came to an end in 1997. But that issue alone gave reason for the two countries to need to have dialogue with each other, even if only at Chargé d'Affaires level.

It was at that level that a legation existed in Beijing through the 1950's and into the 1960's. Even in the coldest years of the Cold War, when the US and China were not in direct diplomatic contact, but threatening each other almost daily, British diplomats (who in the early 1950's, included future Foreign Secretary



Douglas Hurd) lived and worked in China. Even after their legation was dramatically sacked by radical Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution in 1967, a diplomatic presence was maintained. In this context, what happened in 1972 was an intensification of engagement, rather than the creation of it anew.

Because of Hong Kong, the bilateral relationship has had a unique structure. For the first 25 years from 1972, it was overwhelmingly preoccupied first with agreeing on what kind of framework might work to restore Chinese sovereignty to the city when the original treaties ceding parts of it to

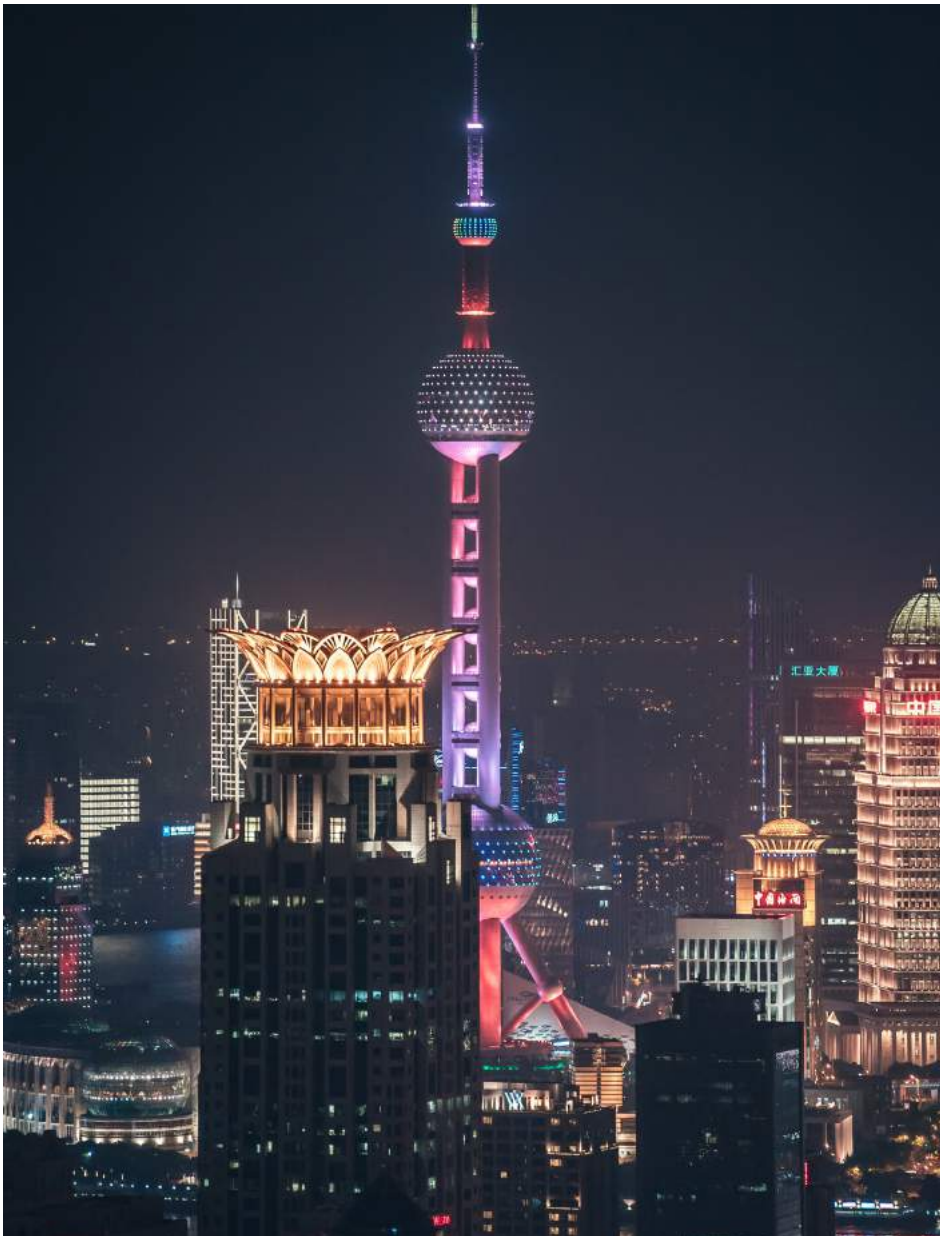
Britain came to an end – and then, from the moment this happened in 1997, trying to force a new relationship based more on investment, trade, and engagement. The negotiations over Hong Kong were torturous, and at times showed deep levels of antipathy from both sides towards each other. One thing they did do, however, was to place the Chinese and the British in a direct relationship and force them to learn about each other in ways more intense than for other European or North American countries.

In a strange way, therefore, after the

1997 handover, the level of intensity relaxed just as it was increasing for the US as it deepened links with China. Sino-British relations were to some extent normalised. They reverted to the usual priorities of trying to pursue each country's respective economic priorities and finding common ground, while managing their clear differences. In the Blair and Brown era, policy towards China, at least as far as it concerned trade, investment, and human rights issues, was often managed via the European Union after its formation in 1993. With China's entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001, this streamlining process continued. The UK was simply now one among many other countries seeking to get more market access into China and receiving more Chinese manufactured goods in an era when the country's economy was booming.

That China managed to quadruple the size of its economy between 2001 and 2011 also led to a process of reversing asymmetry. Britain, once richer and geopolitically more powerful, found in a relatively short period of time that it had been overtaken by Beijing, which rose to have the world's second largest economy by 2010, second only to that of the US. The British mindset that may have prevailed in 1972 of being a more advanced, wealthier and more global power compared to Maoist China was no longer tenable.

That phenomenon alone should underline one key lesson that the last half century has taught about China – not just for the UK but for anyone else: that is never to make quick, over-confident assumptions about where things might be heading. In 1972, if someone had said that by 2022 the UK could have 145,000 students from the People's Republic, most would have regarded the idea as madness.





And yet today, overwhelmingly, students from China are the largest international cohort at British universities. This was something that only really started in the early 2000's. It was also wholly unplanned, at least by the respective governments, but was rather the decision of hundreds of thousands of families and individuals.

Nor would anyone have given much credence back then to the notion that China might one day become a potentially huge source of investment, and, in some areas, a key creator of technology. In these, and other areas, China has contested the attitudes once held towards it.

Perhaps one of the greatest failures of the UK since 1972 has been to fail to invest properly in knowledge and understanding of China. In 1972, through the then Prime Minister Edward Heath's personal interest, and through a small group of engaged and active British people, organisations like the Great Britain China Centre were established to forge closer links with Chinese partners. Over the decades, these links have increased. But to this day, engagement with China has continued to remain the preserve of elites, either in business, politics, or education. It is private schools that mostly teach Mandarin Chinese,

though more state schools are starting to become involved. The number of universities that offer courses in Chinese language, history, or politics, are limited. Beyond the stalwarts of UK China business, like Jardines, Swires, or HSBC, even in the post-Brexit era of Global Britain the majority of companies would not look to China as a feasible place to do business.

It was probably a historic mistake not to do more about these knowledge deficiencies about China in the years from the 1990's, when it became more likely the country was about to emerge into greater significance after a tough recent history. These days there is talk about more capacity-building. However, with an eye to how little really happened here in the last five decades there might be more action and less talk about doing things without really trying to implement them.

Newly exposed to a China which is in many ways far more influential and dominant than was ever expected, the UK might also learn from its history of interaction with this place to shed some its complacency. Even today, a strangely condescending air

pervades some of the discourse used about the country, as though it were a needy plaintiff, or a power that could be talked down to and told to change like a naughty child. MPs airily speak of 'working with China but telling it when we are not happy' as though this were a one-way street, and China was not now perfectly capable of giving a sharp, powerful riposte back.

We need to learn from the past, but not duplicate it. The China today is simply not the China of 1972 – nor even, for that matter, of 2002. Its transformation has been vast. Reflecting on the last half century, the UK would do well to radically rethink its attitude and its approach to China in a world where there is a good chance, sometime in the next decade, that it will be the dominant economy, but one clearly with very different values to the UK and its closest allies. Britain in its soft power efforts prides itself on its creativity. Here too, there is the urgent need to be creative, and to frame the Sino-UK relationship in a radically different way - one where the UK has to encounter and tolerate very different values, and where it has to accept that, unlike in 1972 where China saw it as a more powerful entity, today the situation has been reversed.

About the Author

Kerry Brown is Professor of Chinese Studies and Director of the Lau China Institute at King's College London. He is an Associate Fellow at Chatham House.

His latest book, 'Xi: A Study of Power' (Ikon Books) is out in May 2022.



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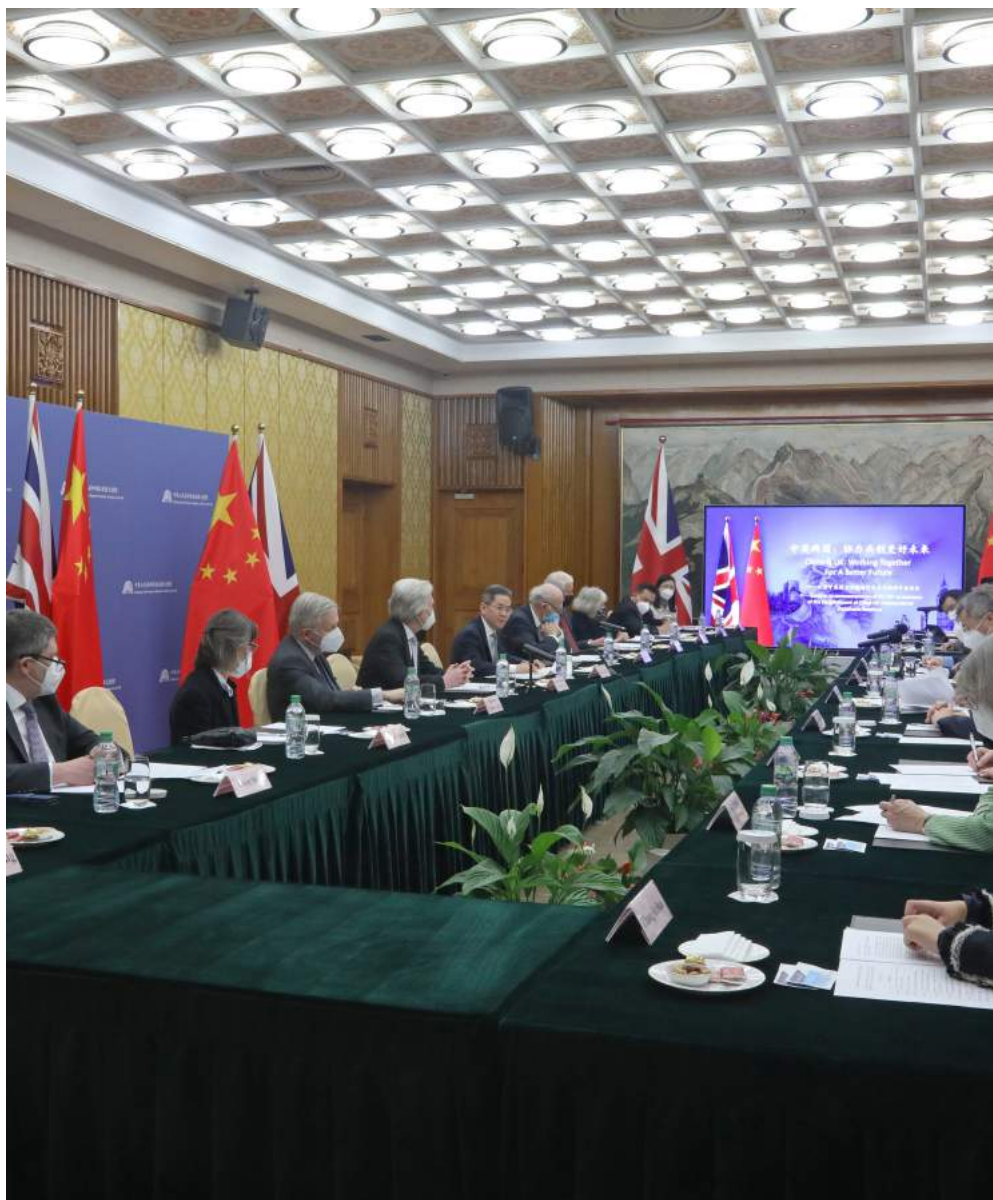
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The 13th of March marked the 50th anniversary of ambassadorial diplomatic relations between China and the UK. As the tenth Chinese Ambassador to the UK, I wish to share some personal perspectives on the relationship.

The UK recognized the People's Republic of China in 1950 – one year after its founding, way ahead of most other Western countries. In 1972, when the international landscape was undergoing dramatic changes, China and the UK established full diplomatic ties which opened the path for closer cooperation in economics, trade, culture and many other fields. The successful handover of Hong Kong in 1997 paved the way for smooth progress of the relationship in the years to come.

I served as the Chinese Ambassador in London between 2007 and 2010 and witnessed how the relationship advanced rapidly. Though there were some tough moments for me addressing difficulties and frictions in the relationship, I generally had a good



impression of the country and pleasant experience during my three years tenure in the UK. Before leaving, at my farewell reception at the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park Hotel in January 2010, I was already missing Britain.

In the years since, I have followed our relationship closely and I was always delighted to see new progress and achievement in exchanges and cooperation. However, I have also noticed some setbacks along the journey. Beijing would not accept some of London's criticisms and concerns over alleged human rights issues which it saw as unfair. And normal progress of bilateral ties was inevitably affected when the differences became the focus in the relationship.

A closer look at the specific issues reveals that they are basically about China's domestic politics and policies rather than anything impairing the interests of the British people. The divergent opinions reflected, to some extent, the divergent values and worldviews of the Chinese and the British people which were rooted in their different history and political culture. Differences need to be dealt with through communication and exchange rather than being allowed to undermine the foundation and bonds of the bilateral ties. It took both sides generations of strong and steady efforts to bring the China-UK relationship where it is today.

In 1972, bilateral trade barely reached USD 300 million. While in 2021, it topped USD 110 billion, making China the UK's largest trading partner in Asia. The cumulative two-way investment reached almost USD 50 billion; over 500 Chinese businesses have created more than 80,000 jobs in the UK. London is now the world's biggest offshore RMB clearing center. The success of our financial cooperation, such as the Shanghai-London Stock Connect and the currency swap program, speaks for itself.

New energy cooperation provides another new growth driver for China-UK relations. Green cooperation is flourishing in battery capacity, offshore wind power, electric vehicles and so on. Most recently, China's nuclear reactor design Hualong One (HPR 1000) passed the UK's generic design assessment (GDA). The project, once built, will provide access to more reliable and clean energy for British communities.

People-to-people exchange and educational cooperation is another pillar in China-UK relations. I myself was a beneficiary. In 1985, I went to study in the UK on a Commonwealth Scholarship that I shared with another student. I arrived with several dozens other Chinese students. Most of us chose disciplines on practical knowledge and skills. Some studied strawberry cultivation or livestock farming. Others learned computer science or mechanical engineering.

Many of them joined China's reform and opening-up endeavour after they finished their studies in the UK. Till this day, whenever I visit the fruit section in Chinese supermarkets, the delicious-looking strawberries remind me of my fellow students and our days in the UK.





In 2020, the UK overtook the United States to become the top destination for overseas Chinese students. A whopping 42% of the students who went abroad chose to study in the UK. Despite the impact of COVID-19 on the flow of overseas students, 130,000 UK student visas were issued to Chinese students in 2021, which amounted to one third of the total number of international students in the UK. We can expect even more robust China-UK people-to-people exchanges when COVID-19 eases.

This brings me back to examine the difficulties in our relationship. It is only natural that countries perceive some issues differently. What matters is how to view and address them in an appropriate way. Countries can discuss or debate their differences, but not take them as a reason to interfere in other countries' internal affairs. Western countries have a habit of telling others what to do. One of the causes for such behavior, in addition to a sense of self-righteousness, is a fundamental lack of awareness of the new reality brought by modern-day economic globalization and the inability to adjust their way of thinking and conduct accordingly, yet it matters that these countries undertake such adjustments so that the world keeps moving forward.

Following the end of the Cold War, the United States began trying to globalize the US-dominated West-centric order from the bipolar era, which differs from the UN-centered international order despite their overlap. This US-led order has succeeded in generating economic globalization, moving capital and linking markets, production and other economic activities across the world – beyond the boundaries of the Western bloc. But it remains a highly exclusive process otherwise – dismissing non-Western values and political systems and putting first the security interests of the United States and its allies. Economic globalization has changed the world in profound ways, making possible the rise of China and other developing countries. In the meantime, the United States, which continues to claim predominance, has made a series of blunders such as the international financial crisis of 2007 and failures in Afghanistan and Iraq. These were signs that the US-led order had begun to lose appeal – a cause for growing anxiety in Washington over the US stature in the world.

In 2010, China became the world's second largest economy. Its 2021 GDP accounted for over 18% of the

global total, up from 2.9% in 1972. China's progress fuelled US fears about losing supremacy. The US response, instead of a healthy competition in the 21st century globalized world, is to crackdown and hold back China's growth, targeting China not only in trade and technology areas, but also highlighting political and ideological differences. Those differences had been there since half a century ago and did not hinder the progress of the western countries relations with China. Now, when we face more common challenges and have wider consensus for global cooperation, why have the old differences reemerged and become intolerable? The answer, as I tend to believe, lies in a combination of factors.

Firstly, the inability of the US-led order to adapt to new realities. Secondly, a lack of understanding and accommodation among the Western countries towards China and other emerging countries whose histories, cultures and levels of development are different from the West.

Thirdly, I would admit, the lagging consciousness and lack of sophistication when it comes to communicating to the world who we Chinese are, what we want and why we do things the way we do.

At the very moment, Europe and the Asia-Pacific are witnessing serious conflicts caused by a clash of interests. The old order and way of thinking are being challenged by the changing circumstances and rising tensions around the world. The relationship between China and the UK must adapt and adjust to make sure that it will not be trapped by the conflict of interests or a clash of philosophies and must be able to identify new opportunities for growth and cooperation.

To this end, we need to learn from history and free ourselves from the old mindset. We need to respect and accommodate each other, address issues through dialogue and consultation, and expand cooperation no matter what may stand in the way. As Chinese President Xi Jinping underscored during his phone conversation with Prime Minister Boris Johnson last October, "to develop a sound China-UK relationship, trusting each other is the basis, getting perceptions right is the premise and properly managing differences is the key."

A History of Europe, authored by Professor J.M. Roberts of Oxford University in 1996, is one of the few books on the subject that treats Russia as part of Europe. The book analyses why Eastern and Western Europe grew apart and the possibility and prospect of reintegration. However, 30 years after the end of Cold War, Europe has sadly been hit again by military conflict, which is causing huge humanitarian consequences on the continent. The whole world is watching anxiously where this conflict may lead and calling eagerly for peace and proper solution.

Among the many causes of the crisis, there is also the traditional geopolitical mindsets of the parties involved, being determined to push their security borders as further away as possible and to expand their own values-based alliances at the expense of others. It is this type of tension that has repeatedly cost Europe the chance to come to unity. Failure to find a proper way out could drag the whole world back into the abyss of isolation and confrontation.

The early years of the 21st century saw a period of relative calm and cooperation among major countries. Economic globalization thrived, bringing valuable growth opportunities that benefited China, the UK and many other countries. Today, economic globalization is not only challenged by protectionism and isolationism, but also threatened by the possibility of being reversed due to vicious competition between major countries and regional conflict. The world is once again facing the choice between peace and war and between integration and split. The UK, as an established industrial country constantly alert to shifting trends in the world, must also be thinking whether history and disaster are bound to repeat themselves and whether they can be averted. The UK's vision for Global Britain conveys its desire to participate more actively in global affairs and play a role compatible with its international stature. I wonder how the UK would be managing its relations with China from such a global perspective?

China has come a long way in its development. This is an important aspect of the changing dynamics in our world.

When I was Ambassador to the UK, I was often asked two questions: "What does China want from the world?" and "What can China offer to the world?" Now that I think about it, people in the UK apparently saw the shift in China's world stature coming even before we Chinese did. My answers to those questions at that time were, "China wants to see enduring peace and stability in the world and China will offer to the world its peaceful development."

It has been over ten years since, and the answers remain the same. Today's China is focused on national rejuvenation and common prosperity for its people. To achieve sustained development, China needs a world of lasting peace and, to that end, hopes to see a more inclusive and fair global system, adapted and reformed for the well-being of all in the world.

China and the UK are both permanent members of the UN Security Council. Both support and champion economic globalization.

Both want their voices to be heard and interests ensured. As China-UK relations enter the next 50 years, we need to create positive dynamics between the two sides at the global level because how we perceive each other and define our relations will also play a part in shaping global trends. We have a shared responsibility and obligation to resist the forces that try to send the world backward.

We live in a century of major challenges, which can only be met through the joint effort of China, the UK and the rest of the global community, for what is at stake is the common welfare of humanity (cont..)

China and the UK must work together on a full range of issues such as global financial stability, climate change, clean energy, nuclear non-proliferation, food security, counterterrorism and cybersecurity.

I have no doubt that cooperation at the global level will in turn inspire efforts on the bilateral front.

Both sides will stand to benefit.



Fu Ying on her farewell reception at the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park Hotel, January 2010

About the Author



Fu started her career with China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in 1978 and had long experience in Asian and European affairs. She served as Director General of Asian Department of MFA in 2000. She then was appointed Ambassador to Australia (2004-2007), and Ambassador to the United Kingdom (2007-2009). She served as Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs for European Affairs and then for Asian Affairs (2009-2013). Fu was elected deputy to China's 12th (2013) and then 13th (2018) National People's Congress (NPC). She was the Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee and spokesperson of the 12th NPC (2013-2018). She is now a Vice-Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of China's 13th NPC (2018-2023). Fu Ying was the founding chairperson of the Center for International Security and Strategy, Tsinghua University (CISS) and China Forum, CISS. She was appointed an adjunct professor at Tsinghua University 2018 to 2021.

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On 13 March 1972, the United Kingdom and the People's Republic of China agreed to upgrade their bilateral relationship to full ambassadorial ties. This was made possible by the Nixon visit to China a month previously. But the change in UK-China ties in spring 1972 was not as dramatic as that in relations between the US and the PRC. Unlike Washington, London had recognised the PRC early on, in January 1950, and Chargés d'Affaires were exchanged four years later.

Nonetheless, March 1972 marked the beginning of a significant new chapter in bilateral ties between Britain and China.

The central issue at the time was Taiwan, which had been a point of contention between London and Beijing over the previous two decades. The outcome of normalisation negotiations saw the UK 'acknowledge' Beijing's position, stating that 'the Taiwan question is China's internal affair to be settled by the Chinese people themselves', and committing not to promote the view



that Taiwan's status was 'undetermined.'

Attention then shifted. Hong Kong moved centre-stage from the late 1970s to the successful handover of sovereignty in 1997, only to return as a bone of Sino-British contention over recent years as the city's politics spilled onto the streets and became caught up in the growing strategic rivalry between the US and China.

Full normalisation in 1972 also allowed an intensification of bilateral exchanges across the board, in particular in the economic and social spheres once China embarked on 'reform and opening up' under Deng Xiaoping from December 1978. In economic terms, the relationship has been transformed. Pre-pandemic, China accounted for around 7% of the UK's international trade, compared to an insignificant amount in 1972. British investment in China is substantial, more so than Chinese investment in the UK.

The latter is growing and many Chinese investors remain engaged, but face a tighter policy environment following the UK's change of policy on Huawei and political unease over Chinese investment in nuclear energy.

In 1986, British film company Recorded Picture participated in the first major Western film shot in China on location, about the history of Pu Yi - 'The Last Emperor' by Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci. It was the first Western film production to gain a rare full access to the Forbidden City.

The film later went on to win many international awards. This collaboration remains a hidden public knowledge in UK-China collaboration in culture.

In terms of social and cultural ties, the number of Chinese students studying in the UK looks set to hit record numbers this year, in spite

of Covid-19 and the worsening bilateral relationship. Research and innovation ties have deepened. For the UK, these should be a great soft power success; that they have become a source of paranoia about over-dependence and infiltration says much about British politics and elite insecurities.

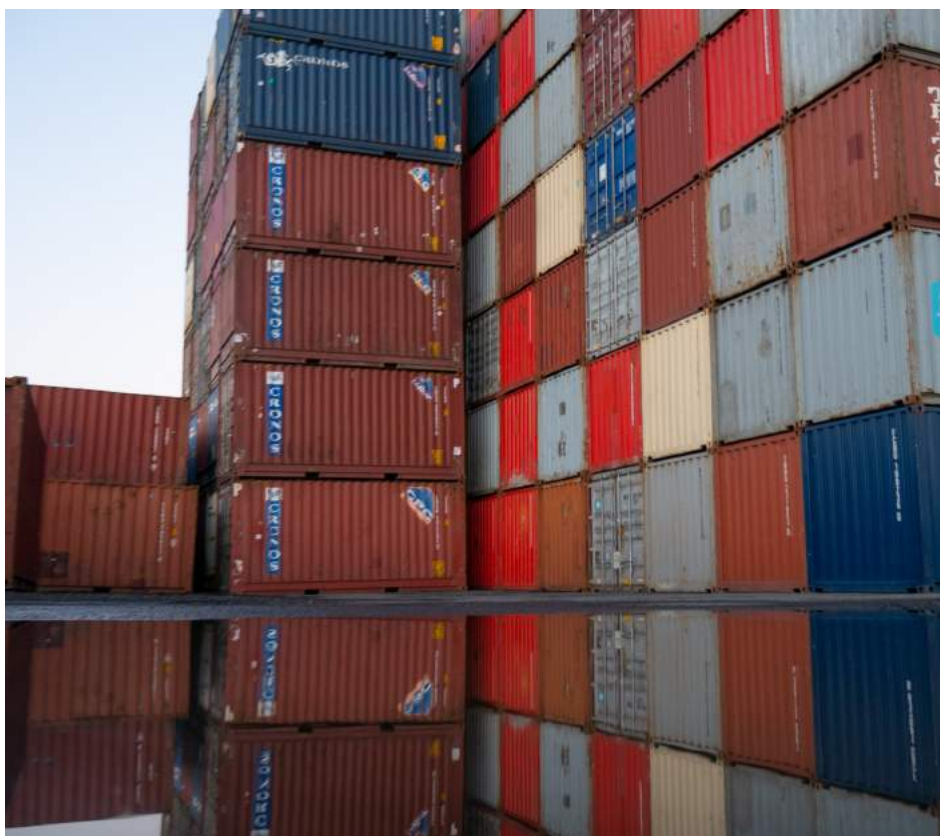
Indeed, over the last couple of years, the China mood in the UK has changed, leaving the 'Golden Era' rhetoric of autumn 2015 far behind. In policy-making circles, this swing of the pendulum became more apparent through 2018 and 2019. In terms of wider public perceptions, reporting and discussion of Covid-19 led to deteriorated perceptions of China in 2020.

In a recent paper published in the *Asia Europe Journal*, we examined these worsening British views of China across public opinion, parliament and the media.

Data from the Sinophone Borderlands survey collected in autumn 2020 showed 62% of respondents reporting 'negative' or 'very negative' sentiment towards China, with 68% saying that their 'general view' of China had worsened over the previous three years.

When asked what first came to mind when respondents thought about China, an even higher proportion (over 80%) came up with negative phrases. Top of the list by a long way was Covid-19 (not surprising given the timing), followed by references to communism, human rights, China's 'authoritarian' political system, and issues such as pollution and corruption.

The relatively small number of positive associations related to China's culture and history, and some to technological progress.





Of the sample of 1,500 respondents, 101 (6.8%) said they had visited China. Asked for their main sources of information about China, respondents most frequently cited the media, followed by politicians, and then social media. This suggests that the coverage of China in the British media and in Parliament has an important role to play in shaping British public opinion towards China, as well as setting the context for policy making.

My ongoing research into coverage of China in the British media shows that negative framing of developments dominates reporting. This can be seen from the in-depth analysis of elite papers such as the Financial Times (covered in our 2020 paper), as well as The Guardian and Daily Telegraph, newspapers from different ends of the political spectrum.

Preliminary findings suggest that political stories dominate British media coverage of China, and that where more positive coverage appears, it is more likely to be in stories about culture and society, though these feature much less frequently.

The picture becomes even more bleak when looking at parliamentary debates.

Our analysis of all the China-related debates in 2020 showed a relentlessly negative portrayal of developments in China. The choice of topics was much narrower than in the media, too, with many debates on Hong Kong, Xinjiang and human rights, and much less on the economy or society. There was little diversity of views, with the same points often made over and over again.

Why is this the case? Even the fiercest critics of China probably realise that in aggregate, media and parliamentary coverage does not give a fair, representative or accurate picture of what China is like. But that is not necessarily the goal of either the media or Parliament, which are driven by commercial and political considerations rather than the more mundane work of helping their audiences understand reality better. This trend has been fed by the lobby groups which have become more vocal in influencing perceptions of China in the UK.

None of this provides a good foundation for relations between the UK and China over the coming years.

Maybe not everyone wants a constructive relationship. But engagement in economic, social and cultural spheres can deliver practical benefits to both British and Chinese peoples.

And cooperation with China is needed to address global challenges, from climate change to development.

This can only be sustainable on the basis of a well-informed and objective understanding of what China is like, one which - to be sure - includes both positive and negative. At the moment, the UK's China debate does not offer that; fifty years after the exchange of ambassadors, it needs a substantial corrective.

About the Authors



Dr Tim Summers is a (non-resident) associate fellow on the Asia-Pacific programme at Chatham House and an assistant Professor at the Centre for China Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK).

Tim is the author of three books, China's Hong Kong: the Politics of a Global City (second edition, 2021), China's Regions in an Era of Globalization (2018) and Yunnan – A Chinese Bridgehead to Asia (2013), and journal articles on subjects including the belt and road initiative (BRI), China's maritime disputes, China and global governance, and Hong Kong.



Dr Hiu Man Chan is the founder and director of UK-China Film Collab. She is also a lecturer in Creative & Cultural Industries at De Montfort University.

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