A Life-Long Inspiration from the ‘Willow Pattern’

Sir Anthony Seldon

Abstract *Story telling lies at the heart of both Chinese and British cultures. Stories impart truths which academic rigorous texts might not achieve. This essay uses the Chinese ‘Willow Pattern story’ that is deeply embedded in British culture as an example of the importance of ‘people to people’ exchange. This is also a study of the value of links between Chinese and British schools. It is impossible to quantify quite how formative exposure to another country early on in someone’s life can be. But it seems that it can only be formative. Four reasons present themselves for prioritising educational links between nations. Where divides exist in the world, be they ideological, religious or ethnic, those on both sides, and especially the young, need all the more urgently, opportunities to meet each other. The deeper the divide between China and Britain becomes in the 2020s, the greater the need for schools to cooperate. The shared history between China and Britain is a second reason. Both China and UK have much to learn from each other, is a third reason. Finally, China is predicted to become the world’s biggest economy within a decade. It is folly not to find ways of trading more with it, and befriending it, for all the difficulties and differences of opinion.*

Keywords Story telling lies at the heart of both Chinese and British cultures • Stories impart truths which academic rigorous texts might not achieve • Chinese ‘Willow Pattern story’ that is deeply embedded in British culture • The importance of ‘people to people’ exchange • The value of links between Chinese and British schools • Four reasons present themselves for prioritising educational links between nations • The shared history between China and Britain • China and UK have much to learn from each other • China is predicted to become the world’s biggest economy

I must have been four or five when I first saw the image. There it was staring at me from out of my reading book, but it was also on my plate at lunch. I recall very clearly—perhaps my first memory—asking my father what it meant. There was

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something here, I could not explain it, but it seemed to be a story that needed decoding for me. How funny, I thought, a *story in time* printed in still blue ink—on a plate.¹

My father explained it to me—you all know the story—though I am not certain I understood it even then. An angry and powerful father had rejected his daughter because she would have fallen in love (he might have skipped over that bit) with one of his servants. A marriage is to take place, but with someone more suitable, and the daughter is not happy: the blossom is to fall. The servant persists in his suit, elopes with the daughter, and they are chased over the bridge by the father, whip in hand—I *definitely* remember that bit—till they boarded a boat and land on a faraway island to live happily, but not for ever after. The angry father has them slain, and they become doves.

I was smitten. This was China, and I was avid to learn more, a strange world apart, and I loved the exotic *difference* to the safe world of the home counties.² Yet, except with snippets, my appetite for China was not fed: I was told, puzzlingly, that, if everyone in China was to walk past me, they would never stop. But there was nothing about the Chinese on the move, nor indeed standing still, in school—no Chinese history, no music nor culture. I had to wait for my appetite to be quenched, quite literally when a restaurant, the Sun Du, was set up in Sevenoaks, my home town. Every Friday lunchtime, I would go there with fellow gap-year assistants from the local bookshop. In one exotic meal, we regularly blew the entire week's allowance of luncheon vouchers.

This was the Cold War and China was the enemy of the west. The United States filled our television and cinema screens, and the Commonwealth and Europe, especially after Britain joined the EEC in 1973, were the limits of the horizon. China was all but invisible. It was strange, then, that my father, a free-market intellectual and writer, was an enthusiast for *mahjong*, the ivory-tiled game with colourful Chinese characters and symbols printed on them. On Sunday evenings, the 144 tiles would burst out all over the dining room table from the faux leather case that contained them. I cannot explain why the game assumed the importance it did in our family, while it did not in others; but I have no doubt that it helped shape my perceptions and thinking about the world.

1 Early Personal Intimations

I had been asked to leave my school for organising a demonstration against the pupil military cadet force organised within the school. Our target of protest was also the war in Vietnam. We noted wryly that, while the former continued to operate, the latter ended shortly after our school demonstration. So, a victory of sorts, we

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¹Since the late eighteenth century Chinese designs in still blue ink colour on plates and dinner services have been highly popular in the UK, where they are designs are described as the 'Willow Pattern'.

²'Home counties' refers to the immediate districts surrounding London.

'revolutionaries' thought. The school authorities took a dim view of our youthful exuberance, and I remember being quizzed by the headmaster about whether we had been inspired to rebel by Chairman Mao's 'Little Red Book'. I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about, but I was certainly now eager to find out all about it.

Arriving in Oxford, where I studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics, there was no Chinese Politics, Philosophy nor Economics. No Chinese anything in fact. When I went on to the London School of Economics for my doctorate, I came across Chinese students wearing grey uniform suits, with inscrutable expressions, walking and talking in groups along the wide corridors. I wanted to engage with them, but I had no idea how to break through the barriers. I wanted to understand more about their culture and influences: I had started meditating daily with an eastern tradition a short while before, which opened my eyes to Confucianism. But I could find no one with whom to discuss it.

I began my career as a schoolmaster in 1983, teaching Politics and History. But of China, there was nothing on the syllabus, with the exception of sideways glances when teaching the Vietnam War. *Empire of the Sun* exploded in our cinemas in 1987, based on JG Ballard's novel of 1984, which opens with an English schoolchild in Shanghai separated from his parents at the start of the Second World War. That same year, Bertolucci's film, *The Last Emperor*, was also released. I sent all the students I taught to see them. This was China seen through the eyes of the west, not the real China, but my deep yearning to know more about the real China was only further stimulated.

Fast forward to 1997. I had become head teacher of a boarding school at Brighton College in Sussex. For the first time, I was responsible for students from China! Mostly, they joined in the sixth form, to study maths, physics, chemistry and economics. They were prodigiously bright and naturally did no harm to our league table position. But what concerned me was that they hardly integrated. They were with us, but not fully with us. They rarely played team sports and the only form of arts they became involved in was music. At breakfast, lunch and dinner, they would sit together in groups at the end of the long tables. I knew I should be doing a better job making them feel welcomed and integrated, but had no idea how to set about it.

2 Building School Bridges, the UK and China

In 2005, I was appointed to take over Wellington College. Having been too inward looking at Brighton, before I joined, I travelled with my wife Joanna to ten countries to understand what leading state and independent schools were doing elsewhere in the world. I did not want to see schools, however successful were their exam results, writhing to the martial music beat of tests and exams. I wanted to see real schools that were thinking for themselves. First country on my wish list was China, where I wrote to heads of schools in Shanghai and Beijing to ask to visit.

The trip felt like a homecoming and stands out as one of the most inspiring of my life. In the lobby at the Peace Hotel in Shanghai, I met Simon Mackinnon,

a future Wellington parent who was a leading figure in the city's Anglo-Chinese community. '*China is the future,*' he told me, and '*you have to reach out to it to understand why.*' I needed little encouragement, but also needed better communication and language skills. At Beijing No. 1 High School, considered one of the most prestigious in the country, I had an underwhelming conversation with the principal. He spoke no English and I spoke no Mandarin. It was a painful hour during which I asked increasingly banal questions and became frustrated at my ineptitude. Lesson number one learned: I have to find a way of communicating better.

I returned to the UK determined to make Wellington College one of the country's leading schools in its outreach to China. As part of that, Wellington branch campuses should be set up in China. Ralph Mainard at Dulwich College, which paved the way in doing just this, was an invaluable guide, as were so many others. After several false starts, the yearned-for email arrived on my Blackberry during a long meeting. "*I have a school in Tianjin and I'm looking for an English partner. Could it be you?*" It most certainly was. That was in 2008, and in 2010, we opened our school in a new residential district in this fascinating coastal city on the Bohai Sea, close to Beijing.

I had visited a number of nondescript international schools around the world, some sponsored by English schools, with no tangible connection nor family resemblance to the mother ship. So, from the outset it was established that the new school buildings should physically resemble Wellington College, which had been founded by Queen Victoria in 1859 as the national memorial to the Duke of Wellington. Key features of that elegant architecture, including brick colour, windows, edifice design and towers, were replicated 7,000 miles away in China. We adopted the names of the houses, and other distinctive characteristics of Wellington, such as our belief in 'eight intelligences'.³ The DNA of Wellington College had to be implanted, if it was to be a true collaboration. Wellington College has now inspired six international and bilingual schools in China, and by 2022 that will be eight, located in Shanghai, Hangzhou and beyond. The whole enterprise would never have happened without immensely supportive governors, including two successive chairs, Sir Anthony Goodenough, a former diplomat who immediately got it, then Sir Mike Rake, at the time president of the CBI, and governors at large, including Peter Frankopan, author of *The Silk Roads*. The parents, who included many who had worked in the Far East, were uniformly supportive. My task would have been much harder had they not been.

Overseas branches were not enough. It was important to encourage *other* schools, as well as universities and Britain's leading cultural bodies, to set up in China. So, we organised three conferences at Wellington, addressed by HRH Prince Andrew, as well as by government ministers and leading figures at the University of Nottingham, the first university to establish a campus in China. The objective was to explain how and why this should be done and to encourage others to follow suit. It was not an easy sell.

Transplanting British school DNA into China was only half the story. It was imperative that China was implanted into the UK, specifically at Wellington College in

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³The eight intelligences at Wellington College are: Moral, Spiritual, Logical, Linguistic, Physical, Cultural, Social and Personal.

Berkshire. Thus, was born the idea of the Mandarin Centre within Wellington College, opened in May 2012 by the Chinese ambassador, H.E. Liu Xiaoming. Chinese to every plank of its red woodwork, the Mandarin Centre has its own bow-shaped bridge over water to access it (the 'Willow Pattern' no doubt a subliminal influence), and its own Chinese garden with *feng shui* flowing water. The classrooms were dedicated to the teaching of Mandarin, which the school threw resources at, inspired by Richard Cairns, the headmaster at my former school, Brighton College, who had announced that every student would learn Mandarin.

Language proficiency was key, and it seemed important to lead from the front. So, I announced—one of my greatest follies—that I would be learning Mandarin alongside a group of my students, that I would sit GCSE with them, and challenge them to beat me. Oh, my goodness, the hubris! By the second lesson it was evident that they had a much greater ability to understand the different sounds and to write the different shapes. As week followed agonising week, my misery grew. I experienced the deep anxiety that struggling students everywhere feel, of inadequacy, distress and personal failure. By the second term, I knew that it was not going to finish happily. I simply did not have the ability. My students were streets ahead of me, and their effervescent willingness to explain the sounds and characters to me was as touching as it was humiliating. The lesson I drew—apart from the obvious one—was that the younger people start learning Mandarin, the easier.

Only now did I meet a real live head of a Chinese school, with whom I could build a close personal relationship. I had forged the creation of a group of heads at some of the most innovative state and independent schools around the world, called the G20 schools (the political leaders' G20 had yet to be formed), and invited Beijing's High School attached to Renmin University (also known as RDFZ) to join. The principal was the formidable Madame Liu Xiaohui. Her English may have been as convincing as my Mandarin, but we spoke through translators and had an instinctive bond that ran deep. The relationship was founded over table tennis. I foolishly responded in the affirmative to a question from the translator about whether I played the game. What I had not expected was to find that Madame Liu and I were going to be playing a match in front of a large group of spectators, and I was being billed as some kind of former champion. My opponent rarely moved her feet during the entire match, which made my total defeat all the more painful. But it was a reminder how sport, like music and dance, can break through all linguistic barriers.

I was reminded of this when I directed a production of *Othello*, which I was touring with Wellington College students in the Far East. We performed in Beijing at Madame Liu's school. The reaction from an audience, full of spontaneous gasps and sighs, was visceral. This had less to do with the quality of the acting, than with the universal truths of Shakespeare, which cross all frontiers and all time. After the production, the students remained in the large lecture hall in their raked seats, asking question after question probing the meaning. As a board director of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), it made me all the more eager to support our work in China, not least with education. In June 2011, when Premier Wen visited Stratford-upon-Avon with Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt (who has a Chinese wife), he said; "*We're working with writers, translators, academics and theatre organisations in*

the UK and China as part of a cultural exchange to share classical Chinese stories written in English with today's audiences". The RSC's first major tour of China came in 2016, with Gregory Doran's superb productions of *Henry IV Part I*, *Part II* and *Henry V*. Translations of Shakespeare's plays into Mandarin, and collaborations with writers, translators and academics in both countries followed. New educational partnerships, including with Dulwich International School in Shanghai, have been forged by the RSC's education department. The British Library is another major British institution reaching out to China, showing the way for other bodies to follow.

3 Why Cooperation Between Schools is Important

The urgency of links between Chinese and British schools became clear as a direct result of all these encounters. We can never know quite how formative exposure to another country early on in someone's life can be. But it seems that it can only be formative. Four reasons in particular present themselves for prioritising educational links between both countries.

Where divides exist in the world, be they ideological, religious or ethnic, those on both sides, and especially the young, need all the more urgently, opportunities to meet each other. By doing so, they will experience commonalities, rather than reasons for suspicion and mistrust. Children on either side of the Catholic and Protestant divide in Northern Ireland, as from black and white families in the southern states of the United States, or from Muslim and Jewish communities in Israel and Palestine, always gain from this. Lifelong friendships and understandings are forged, and the potential for personal respect grows. The deeper the divide between China and Britain becomes in the 2020s, the greater the need for schools to cooperate.

The shared history between China and Britain is a second reason. Relationships, often far from happy, began in the early seventeenth century. Concessions in Tianjin and Shanghai, the cession of Hong Kong, the two Opium Wars and the Boxer Rebellion, defined and shaped the relationship between both countries. Britain, for better or worse, has been a significant feature in Chinese life for centuries, more so than any other western country. Critics of China in Britain rarely seem to reflect how Britain might have felt had China treated it as Britain treated the Chinese in the nineteenth century. The ubiquitous 'Willow Pattern', which began to be used widely in ceramics and art work in Britain from the 1790s, is just one of many indicators of how deep China permeated British consciousness. Both countries are inextricably intertwined, which is a reason for strong educational links to continue and deepen.

Both countries have much to learn from each other, a third reason. One does not have to be a cynic to recognise that the welcoming of western school and university branches in China is partly because the government wants to learn from them. In my experience, such readiness to learn has been far greater in China than in the west, specifically Britain. In 2015, much excitement was generated when the British government brought in mathematics teachers from Shanghai into Britain. The initiative emphasised how much can be learned from mutual exchange, but

also how shallow and transactional the vision of the government on cooperation currently is. In truth, much mutual benefit would come in *every* subject, as well as in extracurricular activity and in education technology if there were to be a much greater exchange. After becoming Vice Chancellor of the University of Buckingham in 2015, we tried to launch the British-Sino Institute in London, to encourage educational and cultural links: it was a difficult time to achieve it, but the quest continues.

Finally, China is predicted to become the world's biggest economy within a decade. It is folly not to find ways of trading more with it, and befriending it, for all the difficulties and differences of opinion. In the future, the more young people in Britain learn Mandarin, and grow in understanding about Chinese culture and customs, given the importance in business relationships of empathy, the more Britain will flourish in its political and trading links with China. The flow is not just one way. Britain might be only the world's fifth biggest economy, and possibly shrinking, but it is still the number one soft power in the world, and its language, its creativity, its universities, cultural bodies and system of government have much to offer China. It has 300 years of contacts and relationships on which to build. China has as much to gain from deepening educational, and broader links with Britain, as vice versa. And China could learn how a pluralist country works in the 21st century. History shows us that, without exception, attempts to hold down a population will never succeed.

4 Models for Future School Cooperation

Since the heyday of UK–China relations of the David Cameron and George Osborne era (2010–2016), the drawbridge has been pulled up on British–Chinese relations. The Theresa May government (2016–2019) arrived in power with a deep suspicion of Beijing. I was one of many whom Chinese Ambassador Liu Xiaoming asked about how to thaw relations, to no avail. Influential elements of the right-wing in particular now see no good in China and want nothing to do with it. The treatment of the democracy movement in Hong Kong, the Uighurs in Northwest China, and China's global ambition are among the reasons given. But their suspicion goes far beyond these very troubling concerns.

Regarding China like Britain did Albania in the Cold War is one option, and this will be where we end up if we continue on the current trajectory. This approach implies zero contact between schools in both countries. This strategy is a counsel of despair: a new Cold War will be the result, from which no one will gain. British universities, which depend heavily on Chinese international students, will lose far more than revenue. Research collaborations, student friendships and academic relationships will all be sacrificed and may not be regained.

Very limited contact is a second option, as occurred in the 1980s and 1990s under Deng Xiaoping. Periodic exchanges of students and staff, maybe, but only at a minimal level.

The third option, and the one I favour, envisages a wide and generous school relationship, the most meaningful that China enjoys with any western country, and

that Britain has with any country overseas. Exchanges between schools and teachers in both countries could be very significant stepped up in, with every British school encouraged to partner digitally with a school in China, and shared activities between them. But, and this is the significant point, there should be protection guaranteed for the safety and integrity of each British and Chinese student and teacher, agreed understandings about intellectual property, and an absence on both sides of any attempt to proselytise.

The final option is to enjoy this very full level of exchange, but without the safeguards. This would be a mistake. China needs to understand, and respect, that exchange with the liberal west means respect for the individual and for property.

5 *Just a Fable?*

Story telling lies at the heart of both Chinese and British cultures. Stories impart truths which the most impeccable and academically rigorous texts might not achieve. Why is it that the Chinese ‘Willow Pattern’ has had such an enduring hold on our imaginations today?

There are many interpretations of the story, but let us consider it from the point of view of the young—they are the servant and his lover. The love of the servant for the daughter of the powerful man, and her for him, is real and deep. The attempt by father to deny them this fails, as the young couple, from totally different backgrounds, abscond, and find much joy in each other’s company, until the powerful father destroys them.

The young in both countries should not have their opportunities to know each other extinguished by those in power in either country. The desire and rights of the young cannot be suppressed forever, and the attempt to do so will ultimately fail because that desire will only rise, dove like, again, until it triumphs.

Sir Anthony Seldon is a leading world authority on contemporary British history and education. He is a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buckingham. He was formerly Master of Wellington College, one of the world’s most famous independent schools. He is author, or editor, of over 40 books on contemporary history, politics and education and is the author on, and honorary historical advisor of, the office of the British Prime Minister at Number 10 Downing Street. He has written books with penetrating insights into the last six past British Prime Ministers. He is governor of several bodies, including the Royal Shakespeare Company, and is Chair of The Comment Awards.

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