

A Social Scientist's Sojourn in Beijing: Retrospective Reflections

Professor J.E.S. Hayward FBA, *Chairman of the Academy's China Panel, reflects on a stimulating conference held in November 2000 under the aegis of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.*

China has a special place in the British Academy's many and varied activities, not just because of the country's intrinsic intellectual importance but because relations with its Academy of Social Sciences are, unusually, managed by a joint Academy–ESRC Panel. So, when the Academy was invited to send a representative to a Beijing conference in November 2000 on the *Prospect of the Social Sciences and Humanities in the 21st Century*, it was decided that the Chairman of the China Panel should attend, *faute de mieux*. The price was to write a paper, of which more anon.

Twenty-three foreign participants represented national academies and international academic institutions, and about the same number of participants from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) were active, particularly in the role of discussants and chairing sessions, while the foreign participants presented papers. The conference organisation was extremely efficient and the welcome warm.

With a theme as broad as the one selected, speakers predictably chose to interpret it in the light of their own particular intellectual, disciplinary preoccupations. The President of CASS, Professor Li Tieying (who visited the UK as the Academy's guest in April 1999) opened the proceedings with a paper entitled 'Hand in hand in cooperation for creating the brave new world'. To a British listener the phrase 'brave new world' had unfortunate Huxleyite associations, and we are accustomed to co-operation being accompanied by some arm twisting. However, the spirit of harmony was not disturbed by the President of the International Social Science Council's description of its activities, while the President of ALLEA (All European Academies) talked about the relevance of social and behavioural sciences to public policy.

There followed papers on the social sciences and humanities in a number of countries, conveying their specific research agendas and concerns. An issue that surfaced periodically was the increasing role of English as a global language of communication and cultural uniformity, and it took a perilous form when the French paper was

distributed in that language (rather than Chinese or English, the stipulated languages of the conference), and orally presented in Chinese, resulting in certain difficulties for the interpreter.

Linguistic preoccupations were the focus of the Director of the CASS Centre for Documentation's paper on 'Languages in Competition in the Cyber-Age'. Hang Changzhu anticipated that half the 6,000 languages currently in existence would have disappeared by the end of the 21st century, and noted that nearly 500 languages had fewer than 100 speakers, 1,500 had fewer than 1,000 speakers and over 3,000 fewer than 10,000 speakers. Although English was second to Mandarin Chinese in terms of the number of its speakers, it was a world language not confined largely to one country or community. It dominated the Internet, accounting for over 90% of the information, with French at 5% and Chinese at less than 1%. Of all the information in the world's electronic retrieval systems, 80% was stored in English. It was pointed out, however, that the English language in its globalised form was neither native nor foreign, functioning only as an information system, severed from its cultural context.

Among other interesting papers, Shaul Shaked of the Israel Academy focused on the implications of new technology for scholarship, laying a timely emphasis on the need to avoid the illusion of scientific objectivity, based on an indiscriminate accumulation of information, and reasserting the necessity of intuitive, subjective appreciation and interpretation for true scholarship.

In a thoughtful paper on information technology and the future of social science, Craig Calhoun, President of the American Social Science Research Council, argued for the profound influence of intellectual diasporas on contemporary social science, and went on to discuss the combined impact of globalisation and information technology on new forms of cultural creation and dissemination. He also posed the further question: as universities became more driven by market considerations, what would this do to the production and reproduction of social science and

the humanities, whose research might not be closely related to the profitable production of goods and services. None of the likely answers to these questions bode well for the 21st century.

My own contribution, 'Tomorrow, Change and Inertia', emphasised institutionally induced inertia and resistance to change. Because, in government, as in most other established institutions, the organisational equivalent of biological death was missing, the result was that the organisation triumphed over its function. Extrapolation from past tendencies as a basis of forecasting the future was likely to lead to futurological false prophecy. The cliché 'knowledge is power' was less true than that knowledge was subordinate to power and so found difficulty in speaking truth to it. An allusion to this remark by the Vice-President of CASS in the closing ceremony suggested that its relevance was recognised as not being confined to the Western world.

After the academic part of the conference proceedings was concluded, we met the President of the National People's Congress, Li Peng, in the Great Hall of the People in the Chinese Parliament. This was filmed and shown on television, persuading some participants that it

indicated the high standing of our disciplines in China with the powers that be.

If I may end on a personal note, this was my first visit to China for fifty-five years. I was born in Shanghai, and from 1943 to 1945 I was a civilian internee during the Japanese occupation. Beijing is of course not Shanghai, but I was able to get a glimpse of how a great city in China was changing. The enormous tower blocks that have been built since the opening up of China to the world market economy, as well as to house some of the millions of rural migrants, are a marked contrast with the traditional China that still survives extensively in the heart of the nation's capital. It will be for the humanities and social sciences inside China to understand, and if possible shape, some of these changes, while holding firm to what is best of the past legacies of a great civilisation. Those of us outside China will observe developments attentively and contribute where we can to their taking promising scholarly directions.

Professor Hayward is Research Professor of Politics at the University of Hull. He has been Chairman of the Academy's China Panel since 1998.