

# The power of cultural exchange

By **SIR CIARÁN DEVANE**

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was educated at University College, Dublin, where he gained first-class honours in biochemical engineering. He also holds a Master's degree in International Policy and Practice from George Washington University. He started his career as an engineer before joining Gemini Consulting. After serving as Chief Executive of Macmillan Cancer Support from May 2007 to December 2014, he took up the role of Chief Executive of the British Council in January 2015. He was awarded a knighthood in 2015 for his services to cancer patients.

**M**y predecessor as Chief Executive of the British Council, and avid Sinophile, Sir Martin Davidson, was head of our Beijing office in the early 1980s. At that time – as Martin was fond of recalling – the entire British Council China operation, six people strong, was run out of a bicycle shed in the grounds of the British Embassy.

Things are very different today. On a recent trip to the country, I visited an operation with 750 staff working across five of China's largest cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chongqing and Wuhan.

The British Council uses the cultural resources of the United Kingdom – art, education, culture, language, and our values and ways of living – to positively contribute to over 100 countries we work in worldwide. Every year we reach over 20 million people face to face and through our events, and more than 500 million online and via broadcasts and publications. Nowhere is the idea of connecting people in the belief that mutually beneficial things will happen more important than in our relationship with China.

The British Council has been working in China since 1942, when the renowned scholar of China, Joseph Needham, ran the Sino-British Science Co-operation Office in Chongqing. We were formally established as the Cultural and Education Section of the British Embassy in 1979, and are co-signatories to the 1979 Cultural Exchange Agreement as well as to a number of Memoranda of Understanding between the UK and China on education, culture and sport.

In China we work in several different areas – arts, education, exams, civil society, and language – but mutuality is at the heart of all our programmes and projects. Our arts work connects professionals and audiences in both countries – not only bringing British creative work to the attention of Chinese audiences, and vice versa, but sharing the skills that made that work possible, through training and professional exchange.

In education, we work hard to nurture lifelong links between young people of all ages, and between academics and institutions in both our countries. We also run programmes to encourage more young British people to study in China; and our work contributes to China's ambitions to internationalise its higher education system.

The British Council's examinations work, in language and other assessments, is on a large

scale: every year two million people globally take international exams with us. We deliver a range of highly valued UK qualifications, in which success can open the door to an education in the UK, or provide the key to a professional career. I am particularly pleased that our IELTS preparation course on the FutureLearn platform is one of the world's most popular MOOCs.

Our work with civil society ranges from a major access to justice (legal aid) programme, to work with social entrepreneurs and social policy makers in China. And we are delighted to work with our partners in the General Administration of Sport on various sporting programmes such as Premier Skills.

We do not currently have English language teaching centres in China. But no matter what your age or current standard of English, we offer interactive material online, on mobile devices, in print and on the radio. We also work with partners in Chinese education institutions to raise English standards – something we have been doing for over 35 years. We are also very happy to support the growth of Chinese teaching in schools in the UK, and the significant expansion of the Confucius Centre and Confucius Classroom networks.

Under the *Generation UK China* programme we have also greatly increased the opportunities for young British people to study and complete internships in China, and to build a greater understanding of a nation which plays an increasing role in all our lives. In a similar vein, we are working with our friends in Hanban, China's cultural relations institution, to promote the learning of Chinese in the UK.

During the last year we have led the UK season of the first bilateral UK/China Year of Cultural Exchange, creating opportunities for our partners to showcase the best of culture from both countries. We also played a leading role in the *Third High Level People to People Dialogue* in September 2015, led by Vice Premier Madame Liu Yandong: a celebration of the work we do with UK government partners to build strong links between our two peoples, to the benefit of each.

At the heart of all our activity is the personal connection: it's when people meet people that trust is created and real understanding grows. This is back to our founding ideal. That the interchange of discoveries, of knowledge, of ideas makes the world a better, safer, more prosperous place.

The dramatic expansion of our activity with China is the result of the hard work of many colleagues over many years, of course. Just like everywhere else we work, in China we have made a commitment for the long term – it's how we build the relationships that are central to our work. But the transformation in the size and scope of our operations is also a result of China's economic miracle, and its new appetite for engagement with the rest of the world.

You don't have to visit China to experience its industrial might. From the iPod in your jacket pocket, to the jacket itself, to the smartphone used to buy the jacket – many objects around us have a 'Made in China' stamp. And China's economic miracle takes place within a historical context that puts the British Council's claim to long-term thinking in perspective. It is worth remembering that China has been the world's largest and most advanced economy for most of the last two millennia. The grand sweep of history looks very different if you're standing on Chinese soil.

As does the grand sweep of the future. Whether this will be the 'Chinese Century' or not, China will undoubtedly be a major world player for many decades to come: a geopolitical force to be reckoned with, an economic powerhouse against which every other economy will inevitably be measured, and a cultural benchmark against which to assess our own.

For an organisation like the British Council, which exists to build friendly relations between nations and peoples, this fact presents an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the real power of cultural relations on the very largest scale.

It is a giant opportunity; but if the relationship is to be a properly mutual one, we face an equally giant challenge. It is only necessary to look at one set of statistics to see the scale of that challenge. Almost all Chinese students leaving compulsory education each year (14 million) take an exam in English. At the same time, fewer than 4,000 UK students, far fewer than 1 per cent, take a GCSE equivalent in Chinese. Even taking into account the enormous disparity in our national populations, that is a very unequal statistic.

Our government is currently investing a lot of time and effort in the UK-China relationship. The value placed on those links is demonstrated by the State Visit of President Xi Jinping, as well as Prime Minister David Cameron's and other British ministers' visits to China for the purpose of building trade and diplomatic ties.

On a UK trade mission to China in December 2013, the Prime Minister said he hoped to "plant the seeds of a long-term relationship which will benefit China, Britain and the world for generations to come".

I join him in that wish, and agree with him that such a relationship will come about not simply as a result of trade agreements, but by working together on issues that affect us all – whether that is the impact of climate change, or providing young people with the skills to make their way in the world, or gender equality.

Getting under the skin of China should be an ambition not only for our diplomats, but for any ambitious UK business seeking export growth or inward investment. It should be on the agenda of every young person interested in shaping the future and joining conversations about the world we will be living in, twenty, thirty or fifty years hence. China is important. Smart young people will spot that and react to that.

That is why the British Council's encouragement and support for the learning of Chinese in the UK is so important. It is essential to the wider cultural and economic engagement between our two nations, and a key part of helping to bring what promises to be a 'golden age' of UK-China cultural relations to reality.

The UK and China, for all their obvious differences, have in common the status of great trading nations. Both nations are famously businesslike. And the expression 'we can do business' after all means: we understand each other, we can work with each other in various different spheres because we have established a territory of trust.

In a world which is increasingly unstable and unpredictable, dependable ties between nations are ever more valuable. Our work for the future must be to expand that notion of 'trading trust' to encompass our joint national prosperity and security.

Such a valuable commodity can only be produced intentionally and (literally) inter-nationally. Not 'Made in China', or 'Made in the United Kingdom', but 'Made Together'.

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Character forming:  
British children  
practising traditional  
Chinese calligraphy

