

CHAPTER 12

Catalyzing Exchanges
with an Ill Premier Zhou Enlai

An early (June 1972) entrance to China is achieved through luck and the seizure of an opportunity. A first scientific exchange is stimulated. After a dinner with Premier Zhou Enlai suggests something is amiss, an effort is made to gain entry for a delegation of cancer specialists—badly needed as it turns out—for Premier Zhou himself.

It was not only with regard to executive privilege that Henry Kissinger and a mere mortal like myself were connected, but also with regard to China. I was working on it while he was, and I got there only three months after President Nixon. But China brought along with a sense of high success, a number of heartaches that are only now fading.

B.J. and I had been preparing to go to China before it seemed at all possible. We had decided, after our fifth trip to Moscow in the fall of 1970, that there was little more we could do on the ABM issue in Moscow, official U.S.-Soviet talks having begun. I therefore asked my linguistically agile wife to drop the study of Russian and to try to learn Chinese with a view to the seemingly impossible dream of allowing us to work on issues pertaining to the People's Republic of China (PRC). She began by taking an intensive course in Chinese for an academic year. In the summer of 1971, she was in Middlebury, Vermont, so deeply immersed in a summer Chinese-language program that I could be with her only one day per week. But this turned out to be the right summer to be trying.

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While on a trip to Hanoi in April and early May of 1971, two antiwar activists, Ethan Signer of MIT and the biologist Arthur Galston of Yale, discovered, to their delight, that visas applied for in Ottawa for a visit to Beijing were supplied to them in Hanoi. In May 1971 they were the first American scientists allowed into Beijing in two decades—and they got there two months before the secret visit of Henry Kissinger. When they returned, I realized they were both FAS members!

I called Arthur, congratulated him on his success, and said the job of linking China to America was too big for any one person. Would he chair an FAS committee on U.S.-China relations to try to open the door wider? He would. At the end of May 1971 I sent a letter bearing Arthur's signature to the president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Dr. Guo Mo-Ruo, explaining that FAS was not connected to the U.S. government but rather represented two thousand "progressive, socially concerned scientists" working for world peace.

After B.J.'s summer program was over in Vermont, we went directly north to visit the People's Republic of China embassy in Ottawa, Canada, in hopes of impressing the staff there with our sincerity and B.J.'s Chinese. We urged scientific exchange, the dispatching of a delegation from FAS, and the sending of books from America on science.

This was the same July in which Henry Kissinger made his secret, historic mission to Beijing—a visit that made our dream possible. And, to the amazement of the State Department and many of my colleagues, we received a friendly, encouraging answer from Guo Mo-Ruo on August 3.

At the suggestion of a startled State Department staffer who regarded all this as big news, I wrote to Henry Kissinger.¹⁶² He encouraged our "efforts to improve exchanges," said he would "keep in mind" some of my suggestions on making arms control relevant to China, and said he was "impressed with B.J.'s rapid progress in Chinese language study."¹⁶³

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In late 1971 we wrote again to Guo Mo-Ruo to propose a visit and, in mid-December, received a letter stating that our request was being considered “positively.” Two months later President Nixon embarked on his “week that changed the world”: a visit to Beijing, from February 21 to February 28. After another two months, in mid-April, we wrote a letter making it clear that we were waiting expectantly and were puzzled by the delay.

Within eight days we received a reply saying that we were indeed invited, but that the invitations to us had crossed with our letter. We did not believe this, but considered it a form of exquisite politeness to make us feel welcome. Later, in Beijing, when I met my letter-drafting counterpart, my worst suspicions were confirmed. He asked what the word *positively* really meant. I explained. It became evident that the Chinese had understood it rather more as meaning “sympathetically.”

But on realizing that they had inadvertently raised our hopes, they had felt obliged to follow through. Or perhaps our April letter of impatience gave them an excuse to raise the question with Zhou Enlai, who, it was said, was making all decisions about Americans traveling to China at that time. In any case, this incident shows that nothing succeeds in this complicated, politicized, and bureaucratized world without a large element of luck.

I had formed a delegation composed of our chairman, Marvin L. Goldberger, and his wife, Mildred; the Chinese legal scholar Jerome A. Cohen and his wife, Joan; and my wife and me. We were met in Canton on May 21 by Lee Mingde of the Chinese Scientific and Technical Association of China; after arriving, we saw a woman give birth by acupuncture anesthesia and then proceeded to Beijing on the same day.

I found it weird to be inside this ancient civilization, whose members were visibly distinguishable from oneself; I felt like an intruder in a sea of blue ants. And the Chinese reserve and politeness, which made overt dealings so pleasant and comfortable, could produce a sense of uneasiness. One felt culturally inferior, wonder-

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ing what the Chinese really thought of us barbarians. As one of my friends remarked, one hour after leaving China, (a) you feel hungry, and (b) your head falls off.

From my point of view, the overriding purpose of our visit was to catalyze the initiative of scientific exchange with China. My intense obsession with this was later to cause some interpersonal problems.

I was asked by a Chinese official, quite early, a question that I knew was central to our mission: Was the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) an official organization of the U.S. government or nonofficial? China was preoccupied at that time, and still is today, with keeping Taiwan part of China. It would violate China's "one-China" policy if it were to have exchanges with a governmental organization that had links with Taiwan—as NAS did.

In retrospect, I rate my answer as A-plus, but my acceptance of their eventual response merits only a C. I answered, "I am an expert on this question since I have recently had occasion to check the official government organization manual. It says that the NAS is 'quasi-official.' That means that you can consider the Academy to be 'official' or 'nonofficial'—whichever you prefer. And in either case, I will give you arguments for it."¹⁶⁴ I indicated that FAS was much smaller than NAS and would be suitable only for anchoring exchanges for a suitable transitional period. A week later, this official returned and said, "Thank you for assuring us that the NAS is 'nonofficial.'"

In retrospect, it is perfectly obvious, from that statement, that the Chinese had decided what answer they wanted and were signaling what line we ourselves should take. Harder to accept was the corollary that we should abandon any effort to invite a delegation to America. To do this on the basis of an indirect statement about the nature of NAS was more than could be expected from our (Western) mentalities. Accordingly, we continued to press for scientific exchange in general, and for our receiving a delegation in return. I was maniacally insistent on this. I felt the weight of the entire Chinese scientific community on my back—all of whom, I felt sure, would want this exchange to begin.

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In Beijing, we met with our host, the seventy-two-year-old Zhou Peiyuan, a nuclear scientist trained at Cal Tech who had been forced to flee to Canada to get back to China in 1949. (At that time, the United States was trying to prevent nuclear-trained scientists from getting to China.) He was now functioning as the chairman of a revolutionary committee in charge of Beijing University. The Cultural Revolution, which would not end until four years later, was raging. Many organizations had “toppled” their leaders and were run by revolutionary committees.

In between meetings and trips to explore the city, Goldberger gave a lecture on physics, Cohen gave one on law, and I gave one on arms control—no doubt the first discussion of arms control from a Westerner in twenty-five years in China. That the United States was considering a space-based ABM system seemed to them science fiction—although our Bambi project had envisaged just that. Another proposal, which I had picked up from Morton Halperin before leaving, was a nuclear-free zone involving Korea, Japan, and Manchuria—still an idea worth working for.

If left to me, we would have spent all our time in Beijing struggling, at every opportunity, to discuss scientific exchange. But the “delegation” had many other interests. My efforts to control things by distinguishing between delegation “members” and “spouses” only antagonized Mildred Goldberger and Joan Cohen, who wanted a say in group activities. And this friction made life difficult for my chairman, Marvin Goldberger.

Our Chinese hosts advised me, “We want everyone to be happy,” and they suggested a trip to Shanghai, Xian, and Luoyang—ancient seats of the Chinese capital. I could not refuse, and Joan was ecstatic.

Although we did not know it at the time, Shanghai was the site of the left-wing extremists of the Cultural Revolution, the Gang of Four, and we were treated there with a touch more suspicion than in Beijing. I probably did not help things by asking a guide, “Has Chairman Mao ever made a mistake?”

“That,” the guide responded, “is an abusive question.” Indeed, it was.

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I never ceased to be amazed at the brilliance of the Chinese repartee.

I felt that the Chinese would, someday, be very strong and would, in addition, be providing mankind with most of its great scientists and diplomats. Their future would be bright. They are an enormously talented people. In a toast I said so—I think some of them considered this a "racist" approach—and expressed the hope that America would be their friend.

During these travels we saw factories, universities, hospitals, communes, a May 7 (reeducation) camp, museums, plant nurseries, acrobatics, the Ming Tombs, the Great Wall, the Imperial Palace, and the Summer Palace. After splendid visits to Xian and Luoyang, we traveled to Canton, from which we were to depart the following day. Over lunch, to the amazement of all of us, our guide asked, without any warning or explanation, "Would you like to return to Beijing?"

Mildred announced, "Of course not, we are leaving tomorrow," or something to that effect.

I blurted out, "Cool it, Mildred" and began asking our guides what they meant. I, at least, knew it meant *something*. (I had been called, by others on the delegation, the chief tea-leaf reader; I did feel then, and do now, that I was more attuned than any of the others except Jerome Cohen to the subtleties of Chinese discourse.)

The Chinese guide said little more, though we discussed the issue for an hour. All he permitted himself was to admit, "I have put to you a hard problem"—a remark that confirmed the purposeful nature of the invitation.

Mildred Goldberger—and hence Marvin, too—was not about to return to Beijing on such a vague offer and felt, with plausibility, that it would involve further and more detailed talks in Beijing on the problems of cultural exchange. Joan had commitments that required her to leave. But Jerome Cohen was eager for any additional days in China. Sensing that something was up, I announced that B.J. and I would return for three days. And so, to my horror, the delegation was split—something I had feared would happen. So only three of us returned to Beijing.

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On our arrival, we were told we would dine with the head of the American desk in the Foreign Ministry, Cai Zemin, a high official who eventually became the ambassador to the United States. (I remember our discussing at length why it would be so difficult for China to announce that it would resolve the Taiwan issue only through peaceful means—an issue still very much with us today, a quarter century later.) We were told that the next day we would meet with Vice Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua, which was incredible! In the nearest he ever came to an apology, our guide said, immediately upon our arrival in Beijing, when we learned the news of these two appointments, “I had to follow my instructions to the letter.” Needless to say, had we known, the Goldbergers would have returned with us. In Asia one cannot be too alert, and one needs to have one’s radar turned on full at all times.

Still more was to come. At the end of the meeting with the vice foreign minister, which lasted four hours, we were told that that very evening, on June 16, we would dine with Prime Minister Zhou Enlai.

Our Dinner with Zhou

For the dinner the Foreign Ministry had called back from distant parts of China three other people: Richard Dudman of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (an old friend of my family’s); Harrison Salisbury of *The New York Times*; and John K. Fairbanks, America’s greatest China scholar. Premier Zhou gave a toast to cultural exchange, and there followed a discussion of the diplomatic problems that could slow this process, especially the absence of diplomatic relations and the influence of Chiang Kai-shek’s government in Washington.¹⁶⁵ In particular, long-term visits of Chinese students could be complicated by the presence of Taiwan students at American universities. I proposed some ways of circumventing this problem and said, “There are many ways to skin a cat”—a remark that provoked some problems in translation.^[166]

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First row, left to right: *Premier Zhou, Tang Wensheng (Nancy Tang, the interpreter), the author, and B.J.*; second row: *Foreign Minister Qiao Guanbua; John Fairbanks (America's most distinguished China scholar) and his wife, Wilma; Jerome Alan Cohen; Vice Rector Zhou Peiyuan of Beijing University; and Madame Zhou Peiyuan*

More important, Zhou noted that such problems did not arise for visiting delegations of Chinese scientists who could pass through universities with a connection of one kind or another to Taiwan. According to Harrison Salisbury, this was the first time that policy on exchanges "had been put so specifically at the top" of the Chinese agenda.¹⁶⁷

I had been warned by the Chinese cadres, who by then knew me only too well, that I was not to raise "business" questions at the

dinner (i.e., the issue of scientific exchange). Indeed, they had earlier told me to "relax." (My response, which visibly unnerved them, was that "Chairman Mao would not have given me that advice.") In any case, I was not to be put off. As Premier Zhou escorted me to the exit, I said, "Premier Zhou, our scientists want to come to China. But we demand reciprocity. We want your scientists to come to America."

Asked at what university I worked, I said I worked in Washington but represented scientists at many universities. He responded, "Then you will introduce us to many scientists."

Zhou was, as all reports show, deft and diplomatic to the *n*th degree. He bestowed upon me a treasured gift: a photograph, taken as this exchange took place, memorializing our visit as he looks respectfully at this thirty-six-year-old minor functionary from far-off Washington.

During the discussion before dinner, I had raised the question of exchanges on strategic issues, arms control, and so on. Premier Zhou said that they would be much more interested in exchanges on non-military issues such as medicine. He began gesturing as if with a cigarette and said that his doctor had told him he should stop smoking.

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Something about the way he did this triggered my radar. In fact, Zhou was known for calibrating every gesture. I thought that he, or someone important, was ill and that this was an important signal.

During a subsequent trip to China, in 1986, I read, in a biography of Premier Zhou, that he had, indeed, learned that he had cancer in 1972.¹⁶⁸ The full story came out only in 1994, when Chairman Mao's doctor, Li Zhisui, wrote about Mao and his attitudes toward medicine.

The month before we met, in mid-May, Premier Zhou informed Dr. Li that a Politburo member, Kang Sheng, seemed to have cancer and that Zhou wanted to tell Mao. Dr. Li confirmed the diagnosis of bladder cancer. Dr. Li knew that it was an "unwritten rule that no politburo standing committee member or any member of Mao's staff could undergo major surgery without permission from the Chairman."¹⁶⁹ Mao refused, saying cancer could not be cured and the treatment would only hasten death. "Don't tell the patient, and don't perform surgery. Then the person can live longer and still do some work," he ordered.

Kang's plight induced Zhou to have a physical exam, and his urine revealed cancerous cells. Chairman Mao was at first reluctant to believe the doctors and, when he did, refused to allow the treatment. He ordered the tests on Zhou stopped and said, "Leave the patient alone and let him live out his life happily. If I have cancer, I definitely will not have it treated." He refused tests on himself.¹⁷⁰

Zhou wanted the operation but was not willing to go ahead without Mao's consent. He was still "waiting for Mao approval" for surgery in July 1974, when Mao was diagnosed with the fatal and progressively debilitating Lou Gehrig's disease (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis).¹⁷¹ Zhou suggested asking the Chinese delegation to the UN in New York to gather information about Western treatment for this disease—but was told the United States had no effective treatment either.¹⁷²

Of course, I knew nothing about this when I asked Zhou Peiyuan, after the dinner, whether FAS could send a delegation

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concerned with issues of cancer; I asked him to specify what kind of cancer would be of greatest interest, and he said he would investigate and respond.

He said later that they would be interested in "all kinds of specialists combining theory and practice." Back in the United States, I worked up a delegation of senior specialists—the best in America. Everyone was eager to visit China. I promptly wrote a letter proposing the delegation and sent it off in the mail.

There was no answer. I attributed it to a thoughtless article Jerome Cohen had written on his exit from China, discussing the meeting with Zhou and speculating that Mao had throat cancer. The publicity surrounding this could have turned off Chinese interest. After all, self-reliance and Chinese traditional medicine were two key Maoist themes.

For a long time and still to some extent today I writhed over not having handled this better. In about 1980, when our original guide, Li Mingde, arrived in Washington as a science attaché, he responded to my expressions of regret by saying that the letter had "never arrived." This redoubled my feeling that I ought to have tried harder—sent another letter or dealt through the Chinese mission in New York. (I had visited the mission and talked to Ambassador Huang Hua about it but had not given him another letter.) In any case, I felt less than effective.

But after having read of Mao's aversion to operations for cancer, I am not sure anything would have come of it. Dr. Li says that Zhou had cancer of the bladder, colon, and lung; he added, "Strangely, the cancers were independent of each other, not the result of metastasis."¹⁷³ So perhaps little could have been done for Zhou in any case. He died on January 8, 1976, and Mao followed him, eight months later, on September 9. Mao had never even visited Zhou in the hospital.

Five months after our May-June visit in 1972, the Chinese reciprocating delegation arrived. It had been sent to Sweden, Great Britain, Canada, and the United States and was on the road for three months. On its arrival at Dulles airport, I was overcome with emotion at the thought of what this meant to millions of Chinese sci-

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entists in particular and, in due course, to the Chinese population itself.

The Chinese had decided to have their host be the Committee on Scholarly Communications with the People's Republic of China (CSCPRC), which was a consortium of the National Academy of Sciences, the Social Science Research Council, and the American Council of Learned Societies. The final decisions on this had come, we later heard, in negotiations in Paris between the United States and China. The formula worked out was that CSCPRC would host the delegation "in cooperation with the Federation of American Scientists."¹⁷⁴

It was painful not to be able to be the host of this first delegation, which, until the fall, we thought we were.¹⁷⁵ But CSCPRC were a group that could follow through with subsequent exchanges, as we could not. Officially I was "happy with the way it has worked out."¹⁷⁶

Still the Chinese were very sensitive to our feelings. They thanked both FAS and CSCPRC for inviting them, and they told everyone that they were here at the "joint" invitation of FAS and CSCPRC.¹⁷⁷ And FAS gave the farewell banquet for them in San Francisco on December 18—at the suggestion, I think, of CSCPRC.¹⁷⁸

Our activities in promoting scientific exchange with China dwindled thereafter. Perhaps because he had been cheated of seeing Zhou, or because of his high scientific rank and excellent diplomatic behavior in China, Marvin Goldberger was promptly invited back. But he distanced himself from FAS by not advising headquarters (me) that he was going, and by not reporting to us when he returned.¹⁷⁹

I felt that the small foothold that I had fashioned was eroding. And since the scientific exchange had now begun, there seemed nothing immediate we could do in any case. I quietly dropped out and began work on other things.¹⁸⁰

But remembering Zhou's hope that I would introduce their representatives to many scientists, and having the warmest feelings for him, I bestirred myself to try to introduce Chinese Liaison Office staffers to various Americans in Washington. But I did not return to China for fourteen years.