



INTERVIEW

## Ian Johnson on China Correspondence, from 1984 to Now

*The Pulitzer-winning journalist tells the story of his first trip to China in 1984, and how it changed his views on foreign reporting.*

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SOCIETY

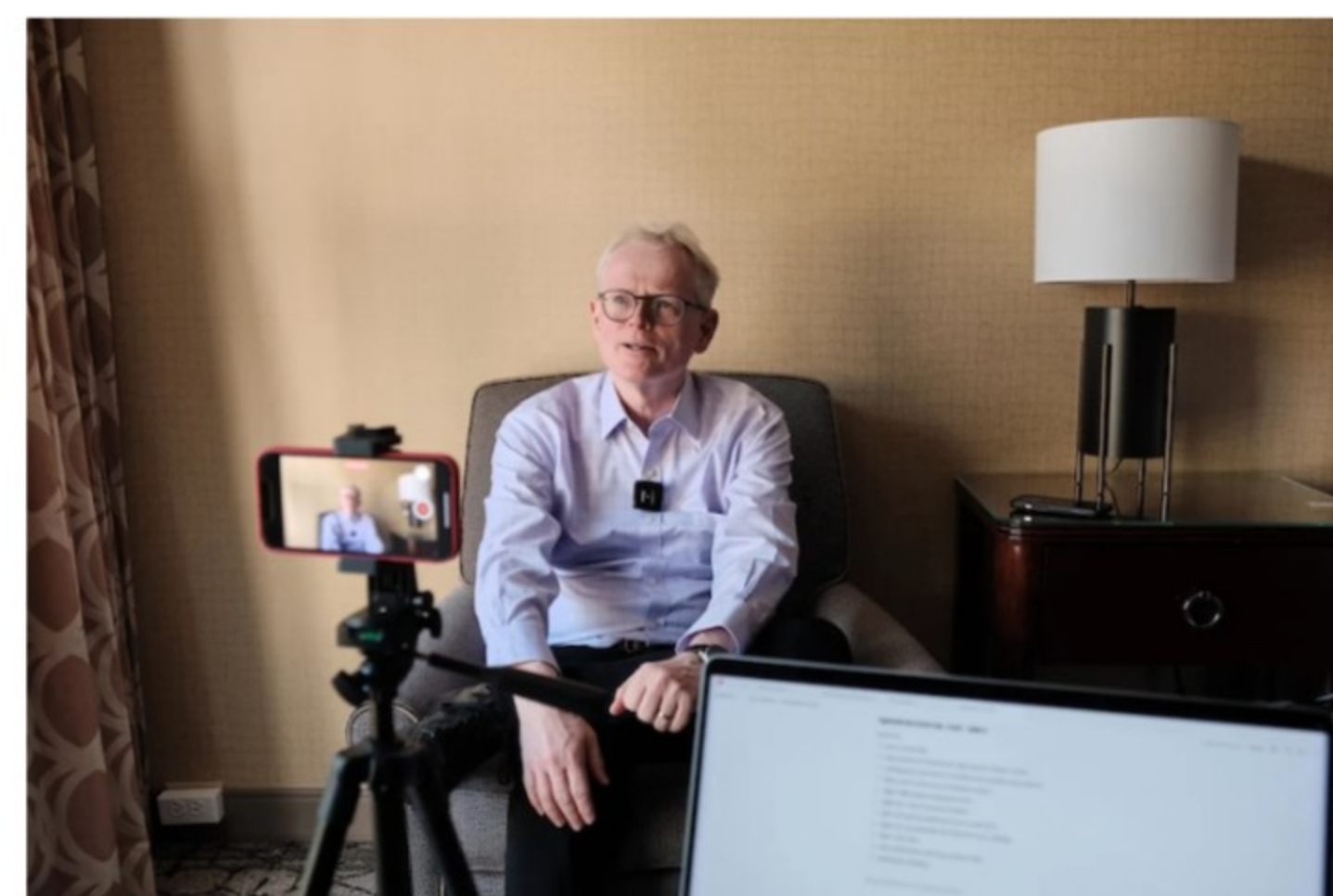


This post is a collaboration with the Substack podcast and newsletter [Peking Hotel](#), hosted by Liu He (何流), which publishes oral histories of China experts and writers. Follow them on your favorite podcast platform for more, or listen to selectively syndicated episodes here at *China Books Review*.



Ian Johnson arrived in Palo Alto last year after attending the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) conference in Seattle, a prestigious annual gathering of China scholars in the U.S. that Johnson has frequented since the 1990s. This time, he spoke on the panel “The Endurance of Counter-histories in Contemporary China,” a topic he explores extensively in his thought-provoking book [Sparks: China’s Underground Historians and their Battle for the Past](#) (Oxford University Press, 2023) which was [excerpted](#) at *China Books Review*.

We met for our interview at the Sheraton Hotel, before he was due to give a talk at the Hoover Institution in Stanford University. When I walked into the Sheraton, its architecture catapulted me back to the lobby of the Jianguo Hotel in eastern Beijing. Later researching this, I learned that the two hotels share the same architect, the renowned Chinese American architect Clement Chen. Where better to interview a seasoned China watcher than in the twin of China’s first foreign joint venture hotel.



Ian Johnson at the Sheraton Hotel, Palo Alto, during the first of seven oral history recording sessions. (Liu He)

Ian Johnson is a Pulitzer-winning journalist who has written for *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Review of Books* during a career spanning three decades.



He has published four books on China, also including [The Souls of China](#) (Vintage, 2017) and [Wild Grass](#) (Vintage, 2004). The below interview is the first excerpt — edited for brevity and clarity — from our full oral history conversations, which amounted to 18 hours across seven sessions. In this episode, Johnson discusses his first trip to China, his shifting interest in Chinese intellectuals, his views on conducting journalism in China, and engaging with grassroots civil society:



## Guest



Ian Johnson is the author of four books about China, including [Wild Grass](#) (2004), [The Souls of China](#) (2017) and [Sparks](#) (2023). A Beijing-based correspondent for *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and other publications for 20 years, he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on China in 2001. Johnson is currently based in Berlin.

“ China is such a big country. Staying in Beijing all the time would be like spending all your time inside the Beltway in Washington if you were a U.S. correspondent. ”

— Ian Johnson

## Transcript

**You first travelled to China as an exchange student at Peking University in the ‘80s. How do you look back on that experience? How did you first encounter China?**

I initially didn't intend to study Chinese. I went to the University of Florida for no particular reason except that my girlfriend was going there. I thought I would probably like to be a journalist and they had a good journalism program. They had a language requirement. I grew up in Montréal and didn't want to learn another European language. Then I saw an ad on an old-fashioned bulletin board saying, “looking for students to fill out a class in Chinese.” I decided to take Chinese as a lark.

In the back of my mind, a couple of things were happening. My father worked for the Hong Kong company Swire and he'd been to Hong Kong a few times. Also, this was in the late 1970s, just after U.S.-China relations had normalised. The first wave of books was coming out by foreign correspondents, like Linda and Jay Mathews' *One Billion*, Fox Butterfield's [Alive in the Bitter Sea](#), and Bernstein's *From the Center of the Earth*. And I have always been interested in other cultures. Plus, I had a fantastic teacher who made Chinese fun.



I knew from my experience growing up in Montréal — at a time of a lot of tension in Québec, in Canada, over language — the importance of language and that you really only learn a language efficiently if you're in the environment. They had an exchange program. I went to Peking University and spent six months there. I realised how terrible my Chinese was at that time. But it was a great experience nonetheless.

**And when you were there, the Cultural Revolution had ended not too long ago.**

Especially when you're a younger person, you think that something that happened five or 10 years ago is ancient history. But in fact, most people in society have experienced that. And in '84, the Cultural Revolution really only just ended eight years ago. I experienced that in many different ways. I was asked to teach English at a school. I went there and I had students write essays. One student wrote a 15-page essay about her experience as a sent-down youth. And — I'm not as smart as somebody like Peter Hessler, who probably could have written a whole book around this — I was like, "Oh my God, this is amazing. It's also sensitive." So I corrected the grammar of the essay and then I sent it back to her. Instead, I should have photocopied it and later written an article.

I was rooming with a person who went on to become a noted Chinese political scientist of China, Chris Reardon, who is now at the University of New Hampshire. Chris was a great roommate. I was with mostly older students who were there through the Committee for Scholarly Communication with China, the CSCPRC. They took me under their wing.

We went travelling and bicycling all around the place because there were just two subway lines in Beijing then, and buses were terrible. We used this guidebook called "Nagel's Encyclopedia-Guide," a small, compact, but thick travel guide. It had been compiled in 1964 primarily by French diplomats, and then it had been reprinted around 1980 when China was opening up again. It was a great guidebook because it showed Beijing before the Cultural Revolution. It mentioned the Five Pagoda Temple, a big platform with five towers on top. When we went there, they were all smashed and destroyed and there were tiles everywhere. Now, if you go there, everything has been cleaned up. You wouldn't know anything had happened.

We also travelled around China. We made trips to Datong, Luoyang, and Xi'an. I went down to Hangzhou and Suzhou. Trains at the time were really slow. But it was a great chance to talk to people and learn more Chinese.

On that trip, I wrote my senior thesis. I ended up doing an interdisciplinary degree in journalism and Asian studies, and I wrote about foreign journalists in China. I interviewed all the journalists who were there. I did it on North American journalists in China after '49. Although American newspapers couldn't be in China, there was the Toronto Globe and Mail, which had a correspondent there through the '50s, '60s, and '70s.

**Did you learn anything that helped you in your later career?**

I talked to them about all of their experiences, limitations and problems. I noticed something that affected my work later: journalists tend to copy each other a lot. There's a lot of "You're doing that. I'll do that too." Back then, in the early '80s, it was hard to travel around China and get interviews. It became much easier later in the 1990s and the 2000s, which were a golden age. But back then, you could only go to Beijing and Tianjin without government permission. Journalists had a hard time getting out and talking to people. If there was a profile in *People's Daily* of a *wanyuanhu*, a successful farmer who had made 10,000 yuan, everybody would interview that person and write the same story.

This became a phenomenon again in the internet age when everybody watched each other on Twitter. Your editors say, "So-and-so had a story about this riot in Xinjiang, you have to write it too." While I had sympathy for the restrictions that they were under, I criticised that in my senior thesis and I vowed if I were ever to go back to China as a correspondent, which was my goal, that I would not do that. I wanted to get out to talk to people and break out of the news cycle, which is really a prison of copying each other.



**One theme throughout your journalism career has been China's underground civil society. How did you develop this interest?**

The underground, or grassroots, is what I think of the most. I wasn't so interested in intellectuals in Beijing and their disputes and discussions. In some ways, that was a pity because I was in China from 1994 to 2001 during my first stint as a correspondent, and I never interviewed Liu Xiaobo. Later, I realised that it was a bit churlish of me not to interview him. I just felt the intellectuals in China didn't have good explanations for society because they didn't interact with society. They played the role of the loyal critics of the government. You can see this in the scar literature written by people who had experienced the Cultural Revolution. They were almost more upset that they had been victimised because they wanted to victimise other people. "I'm the loyal subject, I should talk to the emperor."

**And, "I should be the one in charge. But instead, I got suppressed."**

Yeah. Concern for the country and for the people, so to speak, which is often kind of self-serving bullshit. So I wasn't so interested in them.

Also, China is such a big country. Staying in Beijing all the time would be like spending all your time inside the Beltway in Washington if you were a U.S. correspondent. I thought my role was to get out of Beijing.

I had a rule that I would try to spend one week every month outside of Beijing, which is actually a lot because it meant that you came back, wrote your articles for a week, and then were already planning your next trip. It wasn't so easy in the 1990s; you'd have to plan your trip and get permission. It became easier as China's infrastructure improved. You could fly into Nanjing and use the Shenzhou car rental app. You just *ding, ding, ding*, go get the car, drive off, and do whatever you want.

**How did you go about reporting in China?**

I never wanted to be one of those reporters that worked with a translator. Some people make a whole career out of writing about places where they can't communicate directly. They have to always work with translators. I couldn't imagine doing that. You lose the nuance. It's also terribly inefficient. You have an hour of conversation, but really you only have half an hour because half of it's this translation.

You can't know every language in the world, but I think we should have more professionalisation. I think that model is pretty much dying out anyway — the model of the big expat correspondent who would go from London to Paris, to Moscow, to Beijing, to Tokyo, and then retire. It was really expensive and newspapers just don't have money for that. But it also led to this kind of neo-imperialist view. When I was there in the '90s, there were still many people like that. They weren't bad journalists. They were professionals. But they were not really hanging out with Chinese people.

This is also why in [\*The Souls of China\*](#) I don't have stuff on minority religion. I don't have anything on Tibet or Xinjiang because, for one, I felt that it would be too much. These are really separate cultures. The book was already long enough. But another key reason is I don't speak Tibet or Uyghur. I didn't want to have to work through translators.

**How did you pick your topics?**

I was lucky because early on in the 1990s, I worked for two publications that were the opposite of *The New York Times*. *The New York Times* is the paper of record. If Liu Xiaobo was detained, you've got to write an article about it. If the premier lets out a fart, you've got to write about it. You've got to match the wires. Your editors would always be asking you to do that.

But I first worked for the *Baltimore Sun*, which was a local newspaper with a grand tradition of having had the first foreign correspondent in America. It doesn't have any foreign correspondents now, like all regional newspapers. But back then, it had eight in different bureaus around the world. They told me, "We don't want what's on the wire. We can get the wire. Go travel. Tell us what it's like in China."



I joined *The Wall Street Journal* at the beginning of 1997. They had an explicit policy that they are a “second read” newspaper. The thinking was that everybody has their hometown newspaper, like the *Houston Chronicle* or the *Kansas City Star*, and they would read *The Wall Street Journal* when they get into the office. We didn’t want stuff that’s in those other papers already. Back then, you were encouraged to write these long articles that were well-researched and edited by many people. And they always had to be exclusive. You could have worked on a piece for a month but if *The New York Times* did a half-assed version, they would say, “Sorry, it’s killed.” It was crushing when that happened. But that was a great experience because it really encouraged us to do something different.

Also, looking at China through the economic lens meant that the government did not view us as sensitive. They had this equivalency: *The New York Times* was like *People’s Daily* and the *Washington Post* is like *Guangming Ribao*. And the *Journal* is like *Jingji Rabao*. And who reads *Jingji Rabao*? It’s the economic newspaper.

### **The *Journal* seemed less ideological.**

We’re just writing about the economy, which back then was a good thing. It’s opening up. China wants to be part of the world economy. So we were welcome. And that meant that later, when I was writing on Falun Gong, they didn’t pay any attention. I remember at the height of the Falun Gong protests in downtown Beijing, I was going for a walk with Charles Hutzler, the AP bureau chief at the time. He was with his kids and there were these plainclothes policemen behind us. I’m like, “Oh, I wonder who they’re following.” Charles Hutzler said, “Let’s go check.” So he went this way with his kids and I went that way. They followed him. I thought, “He’s got his kids with him. What can he be doing?” And in fact, I was going to go meet somebody from Falun Gong. He was just taking his kids to the playground. But they were just so fixated. AP is like *Xinhua*, in their equivalency mind.

### **Where did they get the idea that *The New York Times* and *People’s Daily* are equivalent?**

This is what Chinese journalists tell me. And I don’t know if this is exactly true, but they did view the *Journal* as a less sensitive paper. Probably, overall, we weren’t always writing about human rights like *The New York Times*.

This was one of the problems with foreign reporting in China — I wrote [an article about this](#) for *The New York Review of Books*. Journalists are trained to only find the bad. The bridge that collapses is the news. The bridge that doesn’t collapse is not news. But in a developing country like China, the bridges that they’re building is kind of a big story. I remember having that conversation with a member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in ‘94. MOFA used to organise these trips, and we visited Guizhou to look at poverty alleviation. And this guy asked me, “Look at all these bridges that we’ve built here. Why don’t you write about this?” I’m like, “Ha, ha, ha. So silly and naive you are. It’s not a story. Dog bites man. That’s not news.” But later, I realised he had a point. All that infrastructure was what helped lift many people out of poverty. It had a huge impact, but we didn’t really write about that.

So I thought sometimes working as a journalist in a foreign country can be misleading to readers. If you’re working for the Palo Alto Daily and you write about a bridge collapse, the readers know most bridges in Palo Alto have not collapsed and that this is an unusual situation. But if you’re writing about China and it’s a series of catastrophes — this guy got arrested, there was an earthquake — people back in the United States think, “Well, China is really messed up,” right? And they don’t realise that, actually, hundreds of millions of people are lifting themselves out of poverty. The country’s roaring ahead economically. Friends and relatives would come to visit sometimes in China, and they thought it would look like the Soviet Union or North Korea, but it was pretty relaxed. Of course, there were human rights violations — lots of them, like Falun Gong.

Often, as a foreign correspondent, it was a weird feeling that you really need to be more of a sociologist or an anthropologist rather than this hard-nosed, driven journalist. But what did I get a Pulitzer for? I didn’t get a Pulitzer for writing about bridges being built. I got a Pulitzer for writing



about Falun Gong people being beaten to death by police. That's what you get the rewards for. But the reality is that when you're writing about a foreign country, you're also interpreting. You're supposed to be giving a picture of what's going on in the whole country. I think, on some level, that is a contradiction, a problem.

**I'd say, actually, that critical commentaries from foreigners do a service to Chinese audiences since Chinese journalists are constrained in their criticisms of the Chinese government.**

A weird thing about being a foreign correspondent in a place like China is that your work has basically zero impact on China, except maybe in some abstract way. But it's never read by the people. At my first job at a paper in Orlando, I was the only guy who reported on a community in the county. They had a meeting once a month with the county officials that people took really seriously. When the article would come out the next day, people would call me up, saying, "Listen, you got this a little bit wrong. That number is not exactly like that. The tax rate is not 2.3. It's 2.2. But that's pretty good. You'll get it right the next time." You got immediate feedback. You couldn't write any bullshit.

People can go to any foreign country and make up stuff. "Oh, I talked to old Wang Jun, and he told me he hates Xi Jinping." Who's old Wang, right? There's like 10 million Wang Juns in China. I think it doesn't encourage good journalism. I saw a colleague at *The New York Times* who wrote stories based on cut lines photographers write for their photos. And then he wrote the article as if he had seen this himself. But he hadn't. There's nobody to check on you. In a way, there's no feedback mechanism. The foreign ministry will get angry, but it's almost like a badge of honour to get yelled at by the foreign minister. "I must be doing a good job if they're yelling."

So, I don't think it has much impact. Writing on the police beatings of the Falun Gong practitioners might've had some impact on how the police acted later. It's important to write about human rights abuse, don't get me wrong. But I don't think it has a big impact on China.

**How did you avoid the cliches of other journalists but also steer clear of official Chinese propaganda?**

Some correspondents would have a really hard time coming to China because they would be used to being able to wake up in the morning and say, "I'm going to write an article on bridges collapsing in my city", and go and start reporting them. And maybe he'd talk to a bunch of experts and interview the mayor and stuff like that. At the end of the week, they could finish their article and write it, and it'd be over just like that. But especially in China, it's more like making a stew on the burner. I'd have these big themes. I wanted to write about farmers being overtaxed. I knew there was this issue. I would talk to academics and Chinese experts about it, and read scholarly papers. The hardest thing was always finding someone who's willing to talk. You find out it's really a problem in this one place in Shanxi. And there was this lawyer and maybe you can go talk to them and then go out there and make your trip to try to get the colour, the anecdote, the case study that you need to make it work.

In an open society, you can much more easily talk to these people. In China, getting to that place, not getting busted by the local public security bureau, and figuring it out logistically that was always the hardest part. So I'd have a whole bunch of topics I would be working on. I'd have file folders where I would collect information. I never did some of the topics, but others came together.

**Were there things that you wish you had reported on but never got around to?**

I always think back to Liu Xiaobo. I just read Perry Link's biography of Liu Xiaobo and wrote [a review of it](#) for *The New York Review of Books*. I thought it was a really great book, and I regret that I didn't have a chance to meet him and talk to him.

**Did you not have the chance to?**

I could have if I'd made an effort. But I got there in '94, and I was this post-Tiananmen correspondent generation. There were people before me who had seen Tiananmen, like Nick Kristof. I hadn't, and I was not really interested in continually writing about, "Oh, it's the fourth



anniversary of Tiananmen. Some people got detained.” It just seemed to me like this never-ending cycle. And, frankly, I think it’s also the easiest kind of journalism to do. Human Rights Watch or Human Rights in China would send you — back then — a fax with some information on somebody who was detained. You could go interview them. It would be one of these few articles that you could do in one day. You could call somebody in the United States or Hong Kong, get some quotes, and write up the article, and you’d have a feeling of success and get a lot of positive feedback. And it’s good to get that on the record, don’t get me wrong. But it’s the easiest stuff to do because most people want to talk, as long as you can get them on the phone or go visit them if they’re not under house arrest.

It’s the opposite of government stuff. Government officials never want to talk. Actually, the hardest part, if you’re thinking of this stew that you’re trying to make, would be to get the government’s point of view, ironically. You could recreate it by looking at what has been said in the official media. Or you could talk to a think tank that’s affiliated with the ministry in question and get basically an idea of government policy. But to actually be able to sit down with a government official and ask them about rural taxation or something like that is almost impossible.

**I get the sense that you did not really want to talk to the government. Your work is less focused on the Chinese government and getting exclusive access to this person and that person, but more on Chinese society.**

Yeah. But if you’re doing something on, say, why farmers are being overtaxed, you want to somehow get the government’s view of it. You need that to be fair.

**They just didn’t want to talk.**

I remember once in 2010, I did a series of articles for *The New York Times* on urbanisation. They had this policy in southern Shaanxi province to bring people off these mountains where actually, historically, people had not really lived. They’d only moved there when the population boomed in the 19th century. It was sheer and terraced and not very good. There were a lot of mudslides that had killed hundreds of people one year. So the government said, “We’re getting all those people off there.” I heard there was some office in charge of the relocation, and the guy gave me an interview in Xi’an, and it was amazing. You went into the room, and it was like a war room. You had maps of the area on the wall with lights and stuff like that. You felt like you were in the NORAD command post. And this guy had all the facts at his fingertips — where the farmers were going, what kind of jobs they’d have for them, how much is being invested, what roads are being built.

In some ways, it was great PR for the Chinese government. Because in some ways, the officials in China, the civil servants, are quite competent compared to many other countries. Even for some party hack, the mayor or the governor, he knows all this stuff. You ask him about agriculture, and they talk endlessly about facts and figures. They know their brief in a way that most U.S. people don’t. They can do all this infrastructure because they have good people working for them. But you never get to see that. Like the whole high speed rail network — if they had any brains about their PR, they would allow you into the headquarters of the railway ministry to see their maps and plans, a great visual for television. But they’re just too paranoid.

**Did you have any preconceptions before you went to China that perhaps you changed your mind about later?**

I changed my mind over time about the importance of public intellectuals in China. Initially, in the ‘90s, my attitude was, “I don’t want to talk to you guys. It’s a waste of time.” However, in hindsight, one of the best interviews that I did was with Wang Xiaobo, the novelist. I had a long and one of the last interviews with him. I should have done more of that. But it was only when I returned to China after the Olympics that I had the nudge to do so. I was then writing a lot for *The New York Review of Books* and Bob Silvers was like, “Let us know what’s going on with intellectuals.” I ended up doing a [Q&A series](#) with them.

I was interested in people like [Guo Yuhua](#) or [Ran Yunfei](#). The very first Q&A I did was with [Yang Jisheng](#), the unofficial historian of the famine. I talked to [Chen Hongguo](#), the law professor who ran



this public space called I Know I Know Nothing (*Zhi Wu Zhi*). They were all really, really good, interesting people. This ultimately led to the book [Sparks](#), because I began to realise that intellectuals were important. ■

*This interview was also published at [Peking Hotel](#).*

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Liu He (何流) is a visiting scholar at Hoover Institution, Stanford University, where he conducts research on the oral history of China experts in America. He has spent most of his career in Chinese civil society, where he has worked on various rural development and global health projects. He is host of the [Peking Hotel](#) podcast and newsletter.