

A black and white portrait of Rana Mitter, a man with dark hair, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored collared shirt. The background is a plain, light color.

# The Interview

# Rana

# Mitter

Rana Mitter is Professor of the History and Politics of Modern China, at the University of Oxford. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2015.

## On understanding China— past, present and future

### **You were born in Cambridge, where your parents were academics. Was it always destined that you would end up in the academic world yourself?**

When I was born my father was a research fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge, and in fact my mother was finishing off a PhD at Cambridge at the same time. For quite some time, the one thing I was determined not to do was become an academic. The fact that I have perhaps shows that destiny is not always something you can shrug off. Certainly, having two very inspiring academic exemplars in the family must have had some effect, even if the initial reaction was to run fast in the other direction.

The conversations that I had with my parents ranged very widely. My mother was an economist, my father is an art historian, so we were not stuck in one groove when talking about things, and there was a lot of interplay between different subjects. That did push me towards studying something that was outside my own experience, rather than something that was already familiar.

### **In 1988, was Chinese the obvious subject to study at university?**

For those of us who grew up in Britain, in the late 1980s China was a very remote place, much more so than it has become in subsequent years. Deciding to study China appealed to my desire to do something that was very unfamiliar.

I remember as a sixth former visiting Cambridge, where I would do my undergraduate degree, and speaking to someone who I would come to know very well – Glen Dudbridge FBA – who sadly passed away in 2017.<sup>2</sup> He did an extremely effective job of talking to a group of callow sixth formers who thought they might want to study what was at that time quite an unusual subject, and persuading them that it was a worthwhile thing to do. In fact, I had thought that I might mix studying Chinese with a European language. He said, ‘No, you have to go the whole way. China is not something you can do half-heartedly. You have to dive in fully.’ That was an intriguing challenge.

### **So your initial interest was in studying the language?**

The language was one of the primary incentives, largely because I did not know anything about it. It did not look anything like any other language I had studied. And I had heard about the rather mysterious idea that Chinese words had tones, and that the tone in which you speak them can vary the meaning. All of these things were so different.

Since then, the language has been a gateway to a whole variety of more detailed understandings, such as history, society, culture and politics. However, the language did come first.

### **You definitely moved into Chinese history for your doctorate, which was on ‘The Japanese occupation of Manchuria, 1931 to 1933’. Why did you pick that subject?**

It was a classic PhD – supervised by Hans van de Ven FBA – in that it looked at a really quite small period of time and tried to drill down into it in immense detail.

It was about a part of Chinese history that was not talked about much in China, let alone in the West. If this period in the early 1930s in Manchuria is known at all, it is in the context of the disintegration of the League of Nations: people have some idea that Manchuria was invaded by the Japanese in 1931, and the British and the US governments didn’t respond very much.

I wanted to explore in more detail the question of what the people who lived in Manchuria thought about it, and how they reacted to being invaded. There was a nationalist mythology in China that people bravely resisted the invaders, but were crushed. Having read about the way in which France was supposed to have reacted when it was invaded by Germany in 1940, and how people actually did react on the ground – which was often much more nuanced, everything between resistance and collaboration – I was fascinated to find out whether this might be the case in that part of China as well.

The projects I have done have all looked at some thread in modern Chinese history that has been under-studied or underplayed in the dominant narrative, and tried to pick away at that. The stories you have to dig out from under a carapace of historical dust and rubble often tend to be much more interesting than some of the subjects that have perhaps been gone over again and again.

<sup>1</sup> Wilt L. Idema, ‘Glen Dudbridge, 2 July 1938 – 5 February 2017’, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XVII, 1–18. Dudbridge was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1984.

**The British Academy helped you to do research in China in 1997, and in China and Taiwan in 2000. What was the value of those visits?**

I remain immensely grateful to the British Academy. Through its exchange schemes with partners in both mainland China and Taiwan, it provided the chance for me – and many other junior scholars – to go out to the region. And it provided an introduction to the major academies both in Beijing and Taipei, giving an entry point to visiting libraries and archives.

The late 1990s and early 2000s was a period in which archives in China were relatively open. If you had the right ID you could go in, search the catalogues, order things up, photocopy. So you had more opportunity to see what was available on some often quite dusty shelves, and to make your own discoveries.

Sadly that is something that has become harder rather than easier in the years since then. As I supervise a new generation of doctoral students in Chinese politics and Chinese history, I do feel that they are lacking some of the opportunities that our generation was given 20 years ago.

**You have continued to pursue that interest in the war against the Japanese in China.**

The Second World War in China is still a relatively untouched field compared to the European and Pacific theatres of war. Hans van de Ven has been a pioneer in demonstrating that China's contribution to the war was much more significant than many people had previously proposed.

In 2000 I published my study of Manchuria in the early 1930s, which was a prelude to the war. Then in 2013, I published the book *China's War with Japan, 1937-45: The Struggle for Survival*. It concentrated on political and social history, and was as interested in the fate of the nameless refugees on the ground as in the major leaders of the time – Mao and Chiang Kai-shek.

**A lot of your recent work has been on how China is now revisiting its own narrative.**

China's enthusiasm to shape its own historical narrative to serve the present has always been there, ever since the days of Chairman Mao. However, we are now at a moment of particular purpose in the current government's attempt to do this. You can see this both in a proactive way, and also a negative way.

The proactive sense is that there is a much wider project to define what Chinese nationhood is. Xi

Jinping, the President of China, has called it 'the great rejuvenation' or 'renaissance' of the Chinese people. It is made very clear that understanding the longer historical trajectory of China – which would include everything from the philosophy of Confucius to remembering more recent wars and conflicts that have shaped China – creates a narrative where China comes from a relatively backward past to, he would argue, a technologically enabled future, which is controlled by the Communist Party.

However, there are also many signs of fear and apprehension about aspects of history that spoil this narrative. China has recently issued an edict against 'historical nihilism'. Anything that runs up against the historical myths that have been created, or against the idea of the inevitable victory of the Chinese Communist Party – perhaps speaking about the victory of the communists over the nationalists in the Civil War of the 1940s in the wrong tones, or speaking ill of the pantheon of dead communist heroes – any of these might trigger a charge of historical nihilism. The explicit use of the word 'historical' clearly shows that the Communist Party regards cleaving to the correct historical narrative as an integral part of who they are today and what they want China to be.

**You have been particularly interested in China's narrative of its own role in the Second World War, and the way it is now exploiting that politically.**

In all sorts of aspects of Chinese life – whether in museums, television programmes, or indeed video games – you can find references to the Second World War. In Britain, we sometimes think we are overly obsessed with the Second World War – think of those recent films on Dunkirk and Winston Churchill. However, the Chinese are not far behind us. Movies about the Second World War come out on a regular basis: there is a new one starring no less than Bruce Willis, with the bombing of the wartime capital of Chongqing being recreated on screen.

What China contributed to the Second World War does deserve to be better known. Statistics are still not as accurate as we might wish, but we have good reason to believe that 10 million or more Chinese soldiers and civilians died during the years of the war, which lasted from 1937 to 1945, having started two years earlier than in Europe. Some 80–100 million Chinese became refugees in their own country. And the painstakingly built infrastructure of China – railways, roads and factories, essentially all still in development – was smashed into pieces in those eight years of all-out war.

On the flipside, we should remember that more than half a million Japanese troops were held down by

Chinese troops in the early years of the war, meaning that some meaningful opposition to Japan in Asia was continued. If China had given up the ghost in 1938, as was entirely possible, then the whole history of the Second World War might well have been very different.

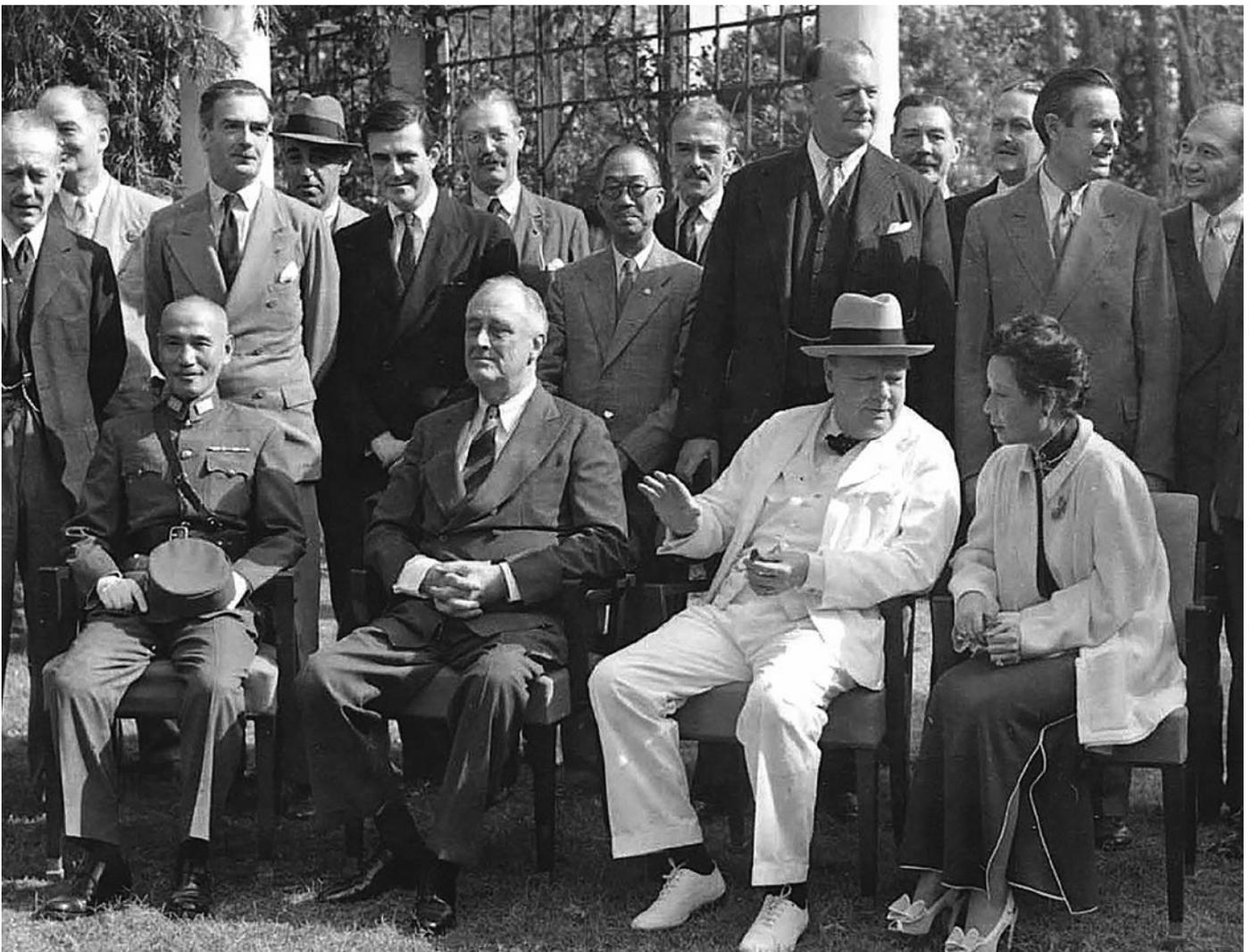
These facts are still not well enough known in the West. In the last decade or so, the Chinese have come to recognise that Western lack of understanding, and have become increasingly displeased, feeling that the Chinese contribution to a genuine global victory has not been sufficiently acknowledged.

And it has also been noticeable in the last 10–15 years that the Chinese government has been using the history of the Second World War to make particular geopolitical points in the present day.

To give one example, in 1943 Churchill, Roosevelt and Chiang Kai-shek met in Cairo to plan the war in Asia. It was the only major conference at which the Chinese leader Chiang was a player. In strategic terms, Cairo was not overwhelmingly significant, but symbolically

having a non-western leader sitting with Churchill and Roosevelt was of great importance. At the end of the conference, a communiqué made various statements about the restitution of land seized by the Japanese. Seventy years later, in 2013, the Chinese government started to push very hard with news reports about how the legacy of the Cairo conference had not been implemented, because of various pieces of territory – including the disputed islands known to the Chinese as the Diaoyu and to the Japanese as the Senkaku, which sit almost equidistant between China and Japan in the East China Sea – still deserved to go back to China. And as proof they cited the communiqué at the end of the 1943 Cairo conference – which had many western diplomats and historians scrambling to re-read it.

I'm addressing some of these issues in the book I'm currently writing, about the memory and legacy of the Second World War in China.



Chiang Kai-shek, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Madame Chiang, at the November 1943 conference in Cairo. Seventy years later, the Chinese government would cite this conference's communiqué in its claim that certain territorial issues had still not been resolved after the Second World War.

**As well as studying these very specific subjects, you have published *Modern China: A Very Short Introduction*, which is a different sort of task. It came out in 2008. Were you doing it for the Beijing Olympics?**

Oxford University Press approached me to write a book in its *Very Short Introduction* series. The challenge is that you have to cover your subject in an informed and academic way, but accessible to a general reader, and in no more than 35,000 words. It is famously said that it is much harder to write a short book than it is a long one, particularly one with no footnotes.

I didn't actually have the Beijing Olympics in mind, but I did have a sense that this was a good moment. The 2000s was when we in the West first began to realise that the China story, economically and geopolitically, was going to make a big difference. Those who kept an eye on the newspapers, even if they were not China specialists, obviously knew that it was a big and important place. However, the aftermath of Tiananmen Square in 1989 had turned a lot of people off China, because of the violence shown by the Chinese state.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics was symbolic not only of the wider change that China was making in global society and the economy, but also of its intention to become a major, more confident power that was going to play a wider role in the world.

**You produced a second edition of *Modern China* in 2016. Why was that the moment for a new edition?**

In terms of China's role in the world, it really was high time for a revision. The event that was just coming up when the first edition was published in 2008, but whose full implications had not become clear, was the global financial crisis. In retrospect, we can see that China took a very different path from many of the Western economies. Rather than going for austerity spending, rather than primarily propping up the financial sector, China created its own credit boom. It realised it was going to move away from being a major exporter on the scale it had been in the 1990s. Instead, it recreated itself as a place that stimulated its domestic economy.

The financial crisis was part of the motivation for creating the China that many people who have visited in the last decade have seen: the huge skyscrapers, the high-speed rail systems, the metros and subways in every city, the airports. It was an opportunity for China to create the 21st-century infrastructure that it wanted to have anyway. The difficulty it has now, of course, is that these are not infinitely extendible projects; there is a limit to the number of airports, railways and high-speed links you need.

However, the importance of those eight years, between the first and second editions of *Modern China*, was really about that moment when China moved from being a major world economy to being one of the three most important economic actors in the world, along with the United States and the European Union.



Chinese President Xi Jinping speaks at the podium during the unveiling of the Communist Party's new Politburo Standing Committee at the Great Hall of the People on 25 October 2017 in Beijing. Photo: Lintao Zhang / Getty Images

### **How much has already changed since the second edition of *Modern China* in 2016?**

The change in Chinese government since Xi Jinping became President in 2012 has been remarkable, both in its speed, and in its penetration of society. The second edition was published at the end of Xi Jinping's first term. Since that was written he has ended the constitutionally mandated convention that Chinese presidents would only have two terms, 10 years in total. A third edition would have to cover this return to a more personalised system of rule, where what matters is the ability of a paramount, charismatic, but also highly authoritarian leader to lay down the law as to how the country is going to operate.

Some of the consequences of that will need longer to play themselves out. Does this mean, as there have been some signs emerging in the last months from the Chinese internet, that there is maybe a nervousness amongst his rivals? People who think that the leader will be out in 10 years can plan for the phase afterwards. If the leader may be there for a long time, two decades or more, people will think rather differently. If they have ambitions of their own, how can those be expressed?

And if China's economy does not continue to grow at a steady rate, and provide the kind of economic underpinning that pays for things like welfare benefits, the infrastructure I have talked about, and the higher education and research and development that China is very much pushing into its next phase of development – if those things start to crumble or weaken – then people might look again at the system of governance that China has.

### **So what do you think is likely to happen in China?**

At the moment, China is in a very potentially productive, but also quite fraught, situation. It has avoided some of the economic traps that have happened in the West, but it has that credit boom running. It needs to restructure its economy in some quite serious ways. And of course it is choosing to celebrate the fact that it has an authoritarian system of government, which does not have the sort of give-and-take that a democratic system would do.

If Xi Jinping can solidify his rule and stabilise the economy for the next few years, he probably has a quite effective chance of demonstrating that an authoritarian society can also provide the sort of consumer benefits that have previously been thought of mainly as the product of a social democratic and liberal society.

The current trade war between China and the US is a threat to those plans, and it remains to be seen whether China's huge domestic market is sufficiently large to overcome the effects of tariffs, or the potential anti-China effects of the new US-Canada-Mexico trade agreement currently going through the US Congress.

If Xi Jinping fails, that means that the second biggest economy in the world, which the rest of us depend on in terms of it being built into the global financial and economic system, could end up affecting our prosperity in the West as well. So the stakes are very high – for China, and for the wider world too.

At the moment, my sense is that the economic problems of China are real and big, but manageable. Of course, what we all know is that predicting what will happen to *any* economy is one of the hardest things to do, even if you have a great deal of historical precedent to fall back on. In the end, this will be one of the great narratives of the next decade to come, the ending of which we genuinely cannot see at this point.

### **Also looking ahead, we are in an interesting position in terms of possible future relations between the UK and China.**

At the moment, part of the conversation in the UK about China is a product of a wider conversation about one of the great unknowables – the effect of Brexit. In that context, the way in which the global system of geopolitics, trade and security interacts amongst its constituent parts has become much more urgent for this country.

For a long time the relationships were quite clearly drawn. The United Kingdom was firmly inside the European Union, which was itself part of a wider trading and security network, which included NATO and the Asia-Pacific American alliances. Sitting up against that was the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but also a rapidly growing China.

We now find ourselves in a very different set of relationships, and the UK will have to make choices about its strategic partnerships. If, as some have advocated, Brexit means doing more effective trade deals with China, the UK may not find the price entirely comfortable – such as increasing the number of visas provided to Chinese students or businesspeople, or allowing China to invest more fully into various parts of the UK economy, potentially including security-sensitive areas. Any Chinese investor would be interested in areas such as national infrastructure and aerospace. The UK government has made it clear that there are security considerations that will need to be taken account of. But it will no longer be possible to use the overarching policy and clout of the European Union to mediate such issues.

The United States provides the flipside. For a very long time, it has been assumed – very naturally – that the US will remain a reliable security and economic partner for the United Kingdom. At least as it stands now, there is no automatic assumption that President Trump is going to stick to the multilateral trade deals, and the defence relationships that have been part of Western alliances during and since the Cold War.

There therefore needs to be a set of conversations about how the relationship with China, and the

relationships with the United States and other actors, all interact with each other. Such conversations have only just begun. The overwhelming nature of the 'exit' phase of Brexit has been so dominant that there have been almost no carefully thought-through proposals about what is supposed to happen in the phase afterwards. We need a more proactive nurturing of such long-term forward-looking conversations than has happened so far since 2016. And in this, an institution like the British Academy could have a lot to contribute, helping to provide an understanding of different contexts from across the social science and humanities sides of its Fellowship.

**As someone with a historical perspective, you are obviously now in a position to engage in current policy issues. How much do you find yourself in demand for your opinion on China in the world today?**

I have been pleasantly surprised by how much people seem to be interested in Chinese history, as a way of trying to understand China's role in the world. I am lucky to have had for the last few years a regular column in the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong; and in a world of internet-based media, being published in Hong Kong does not mean that you cannot have your work spread elsewhere. The discipline of putting forward an argued view in 800 words rather than 8,000 is often a good way to try and make various points.

One of the more whimsical pieces I did was on whether the historical model for current Chinese President Xi Jinping was not Chairman Mao or the Kangxi Emperor, but in fact Charles de Gaulle – another figure who had a certain idea of his own country and a very strong personal sense of where he wanted to lead it.

It has also been both very interesting and a great privilege to run Oxford University's China Centre, which opened its doors in 2014, and to be its Director. We have a fantastic building, built with the help of kind donors to the University, where we can host a variety of conversations about why China matters to us all. We have had great forums on issues such as China's dominance in the South China Sea, China's growing role as it puts forward its 'one belt, one road' economic policies in the Asia-Pacific and Eurasian regions, and of course the future relationship between China and Brexit Britain.

**You obviously think it is important that academics should be communicators. And you yourself have done a lot of things on the radio.**

Specialist research is the vital underpinning to any kind of communication, and that research is often not accessible to everyone, having its own specialist

language and needs. I think we sometimes underplay that these days. But a tremendous amount of what academics do, particularly humanists and social scientists, can and should be communicated widely.

In 2011, I had the good fortune to combine my own academic interests with a wider communication role when I had the opportunity to interview Henry Kissinger for BBC Radio about his recent book, *On China*. I was able to ask him questions that perhaps were not the ones a political journalist would have asked. And it enabled me to find out a bit more about how one of the principal players viewed the opening up of the relationship between the United States and China in the early 1970s – in retrospect, an immensely important geopolitical moment.

And earlier in 2018, I did a series for Radio 4 called *Chinese Characters*, which went out as a lunchtime programme over a couple of months, and is still available on the internet. It was enjoyable to take some academically derived and specialist knowledge about China, from its more ancient past (which is not my research specialism, and I ended up learning a lot more about) to the present day, and using that to say something to a wider audience about why Chinese history might matter to them.

**You also host the *Free Thinking* programme on Radio 3. How did you get into that?**

It has been an exciting experience over the last decade having a role as a communicator of ideas through BBC Radio 3's *Free Thinking* programme – which some readers may remember in its older days under the title *Night Waves*. It is now even more popular as a podcast than as a broadcast programme, and has a very wide international audience. I have had messages from listeners everywhere, including a Buddhist group in New Zealand and the British ambassador in Pyongyang.

For some years I had provided 'talking head' contributions about China-related matters to a variety of news and cultural programmes on the BBC. About 11 or 12 years ago, the then-editor of the programme asked if I would like to have a go at presenting the programme rather than simply speaking as a guest. From that I gained more experience in talking about a variety of topics, ranging far from my own specialisation. It gives me an opportunity to read and learn about things I might not otherwise know, but also – and this has been part of the great pleasure – an ability to engage with academic colleagues in areas that are not my own, and get them to explain to a wider audience why their research – in history, philosophy, social science, or whatever it might be – really does matter for our wider understanding. Over this time, the world of academic life and the world of broadcast media and podcasts have come much closer together.

Of particular significance has been the New Generation Thinkers scheme, run by Radio 3 and the

Arts and Humanities Research Council, which has become a well-established part of universities' calendars. Out of many hundreds of entrants each year, 10 younger academics – PhD students or early career researchers – are chosen, and given a year's worth of exposure and experience to put their work in front of an audience on Radio 3 and beyond.

It has been a really enjoyable part of my *Free Thinking* experience to work with those New Generation Thinkers as they try to explain sometimes quite obscure academic ideas. It is great to see that there is a younger generation which, frankly, is far more confident than my generation was 20 years ago – feeling that what they have to say is important, and actively and enthusiastically seeking to talk about it.

That is a very fruitful combination – of the rich academic life that exists in the UK, and the rich experimental media ecology that the BBC can nurture. Very few other countries would have those two elements to come together in such a productive manner. We could certainly do more to celebrate that.

But I do go back to my earlier point, that there is still a great deal to be said for the hard-core of what academics such as historians do – reading large numbers of relatively obscure documents, often in odd languages, or looking at books that have not been checked out of a particular library for perhaps a good number of decades. That will always remain the central core of what academics do.

**You were elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2015. And you are a member of the Academy's International Engagement Committee. How important is the role that the Academy plays in supporting international research?**

There are two roles, both of which are important, and which need to be nurtured separately, but in combination with each other.

The first role is about enabling researchers based here in the UK to undertake research overseas. Regardless of your own views on Britain's exit from the EU, the fact is that we are going to have to have a lot of renewed conversations with many parts of the world, which will still include the rest of the EU, but will also include parts with which we have not been so engaged, including in Asia. Many of those conversations will of course be about business and commerce. But many will also need to be about research and shared ideas, not least because a great deal of innovation in areas like economics and government is now beginning to emerge from the Asia-Pacific region. That is why the British Academy/ Leverhulme Small Research Grants scheme is so vitally important for enabling UK-based researchers to go to such places.

Linked to that is the other important role of bringing the academic community from the outside world to the

UK. The Academy has long been active in this, and has added new schemes in the last few years. To take the example that I obviously know well, there is tremendous enthusiasm in China at the highest levels of academic life to spend time in the UK. In terms of attracting attention in the right sorts of places, Britain is widely perceived to perform very well in the sphere of education and academia. Having mechanisms by which people from other academic environments can spend time here is a tremendously important investment.

But there is value on top of that. There are countries – and China is one of them – where there are still significant restrictions in terms of what humanists and social scientists can research and talk about. China is much more open than it was in the days of Chairman Mao. But there are certain subjects that are difficult to research in China because of political restrictions. For that reason, enabling Chinese academics to come to the UK, and be exposed to an environment where the discussion of all topics is entirely open and driven solely by research interests, is really important academic engagement – of great benefit for both sides.

Rana Mitter was interviewed  
by James Rivington.

**Books by Rana Mitter**

*The Manchurian Myth: Nationalism, resistance and collaboration in modern China* (2000).  
*A Bitter Revolution: China's struggle with the modern world* (2004, paperback 2005).  
*Modern China: A Very Short Introduction* (2008, second edition 2016).  
*China's War with Japan, 1937-45: The Struggle for Survival* (2013).  
In preparation: *Memory, Morality and China's Second World War* (planned for 2020).

