

Meet China's best British friends: the Johnson clan

The PM's father and half-brother Max are vocal backers of Beijing

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Stanley Johnson, left, and son Max with Liu Xiaoming, ambassador to Britain until last month, and his wife Hu Pinghua

Boris Johnson told a Chinese new year event recently that he was “fervently Sinophile”. Yet hawks on his back benches would happily end the “golden era” in relations, citing national security concerns and China’s human rights record.

Advocates of co-operation, then, will be pleased to learn that his father and one of his half-brothers are on their side.

Stanley Johnson, 80, has “what the French would call a *préjugé favorable* towards China” and considers it “vital at this moment that we speak face to face”, especially in the run-up to COP26. “It is such a large country that if China doesn’t meet [net zero by] 2050, it’s hard to see how the world does.”

Max Johnson, 36, the youngest of Stanley's six children, who was born to his second wife, is a businessman who lives in Hong Kong and is keen to promote tech and investment from China as well as green issues. The ambiguity in the relationship, he said, was "causing hesitation, which means people don't necessarily invest". Regarding human rights as "the only issue that matters" was a "militant, unhinged, crackpot view".

The two men are bound by a belief that China is too big to ignore, and have used diplomatic channels to advance co-operation between London and Beijing in recent years. They are taking that message public to counter a growing hawkishness in British public life towards a country they love.

The story of the Johnson family's decades-long affair with the world's most populous nation begins in 1975 when Stanley visited as part of an EU delegation. "Mao was in charge. The Gang of Four was holding sway. I've been going back regularly since then," he said.

Five years later, Stanley wrote a book about China called *The Doomsday Deposit* based on the imagined discovery of a deposit of nuclear fuel in Manchuria. Whoever controlled the reserves would control the world.



Boris Johnson at No 10, taking part in Chinese new year celebrations

STEFAN ROUSSEAU/PA

The writer, environmental activist and former MEP said that his current interest in China was less about global domination than international co-operation, specifically its role in tackling climate change. This year China will host COP15, a

UN biodiversity conference, in the southwestern city of Kunming, with the aim of setting goals of halting or reversing the loss of biodiversity.

He said: “I know there’s problems as far as Uighurs are concerned. It’s right to draw attention to that. Nonetheless, China is the host of Kunming. And Scotland is still part of the UK. So it’s important for the Chinese and Brits [hosting COP26] to talk closely now.” For Stanley the inevitable priority is signing China up to an international net zero goal of 2050, rather than telling it how to behave. “I’m sure you’ll find lots of high-level contacts are taking place. I’d certainly like to see that,” he said.

He has contributed towards such contact: he held extensive talks with Liu Xiaoming, the outgoing Chinese ambassador, to roll the pitch for the conference, and attended a Zoom farewell event for him last month.

He recalled going to meet the “elegant tall gentleman” last February with a friend who used to run the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. The three talked about Chinese mudflats. “We were in these splendid seats talking about the carbon absorption possibilities of mud. We sang the Flanders and Swann song: ‘Mud, mud, glorious mud, nothing quite like it’.”

Max had not been born during Stanley’s first visit to China, although his ties arguably go deeper. An Oxford graduate, like his elder brother, he was the first Briton to take an MBA at Beijing’s Tsinghua University, whose alumni include Xi Jinping.

In Hong Kong, where he once worked for Goldman Sachs, he advises British businesses on investing in the region. He works with the British Council and is about to become an “observer” on the China Britain Business Council, which will bring further contact with diplomats and businessmen from both countries.

Max is clear-eyed about the state of relations. “We’ve gone from what was an extremely rosy outlook to a more ambiguous tone. And the next question is, where is it heading? It’s that ambiguity, I think, which needs to be cleared up.

“We need to have a multifaceted relationship with a country that is based on politics and economics, and also human rights and cultural exchange. But that means not throwing everything out the window, because one of those issues, so to speak, outweighs all the others.”

Max is uncompromising about the Tory-led groups in Westminster such as the China Research Group, led by Tom Tugendhat, and the Interparliamentary Alliance on China, whose British chapter is run by Iain Duncan Smith. “I’m looking to the future — I think on a longer term. Whereas, you know, there’s unhinged, frankly, factions of Westminster [that] think more short term and are perhaps doing all they can to destabilise,” he said.

“How many of those have actually been to China or, you know, spent any time there?”

Asked about human rights abuses, he is candid. “Hong Kong,” he says, “is part of China ... I think that for people has been hard to understand and has provoked a sort of emotional reaction, and may even hark back to a sort of regret that Hong Kong was handed back.”

He adopts a similar tone on the Uighurs. He “can’t say” whether China hawks are right or wrong about what is going on.

Britain might have already suffered because of the cooling of relations with China, including the decision to phase out the use of Huawei kit in Britain’s 5G infrastructure by 2027.

“There’s a trade-off here, and maybe actually having greater access to the internet and faster internet sooner will actually increase literacy rates. The state of education,” he said, flashing a broad smile. “Levelling up!”

The next year holds many key moments for the UK-China relationship. Before the end of the parliamentary session, MPs will again vote on whether to block trade deals with countries deemed guilty of genocide — a measure squarely aimed at China. Then, in November, COP26 takes place in Glasgow, with China’s co-operation required to make any targets meaningful.

The view of Stanley and Max Johnson, then, is clear, and considerably wide of the centre of the gravity among Tory rebels. That is: for all of the tension between Beijing and London, co-operation is a must over the coming years.

As the Johnson in No 10 said last year: “I am a Sinophile and I believe that we must continue to work with this great and rising power — on climate change or trade or whatever it happens to be.”