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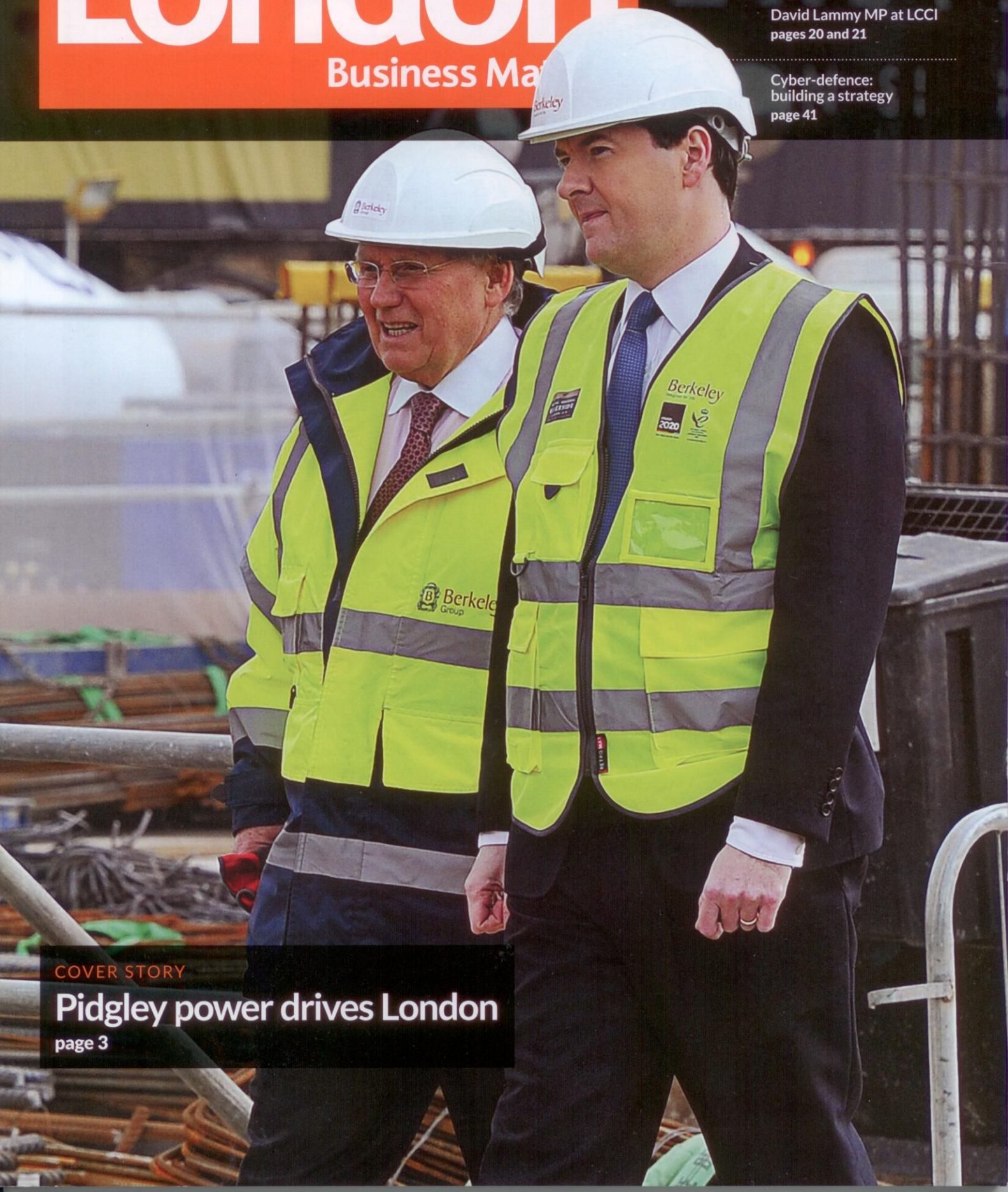
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Yintong at the Chopsticks Club



I have been an enthusiastic member of the Chopsticks Club,

for many years. The club is a unique UK network for China-related professionals which promotes understanding of the world's largest economy and I recently met its two directors, H-J Colston and Theresa Booth.

I learned that the club was founded in 1993, by Colston's fellow classmate ('tongxue') in Chinese Studies, Rupert Hoogewerf, now known in China as the 'godfather' of China's Rich List. The Chopsticks Club has a calendar of events and initiatives throughout the year, primarily in London. "Through reputation and word of mouth, we have grown to over 4,000 professionals in our network, many of whom are based in China. Over the last 20 years, we have held 350 speaker and high profile networking events and entertained nearly 13,000 individuals," Colston told me.



H-J Colston (left) and Theresa Booth

The club's members are equally divided between native Chinese speakers and those from the UK & Europe, enabling cross-cultural friendships to be made, so critical for doing business with the Chinese. Events often have a business focus but on one occasion the casting agency for the Skyfall Bond movie visited to find extras from among the membership.

Club events exude welcome and every effort is made to introduce

new Members. Along with the free exchange of opinions, there is the opportunity to explore business ideas and establish long term, trustworthy business contacts. As a graduate in Chinese studies from Durham University, H-J Colston spent four and a half years in China in the early 90s. During this time, apart from studying, she also held a job with the household brand Chubb. "As the only female 'foreigner' working on the mainland in one of the firm's joint ventures," she told me, "I experienced first-hand what can happen when cultures clash and how important it is to be well prepared. It was a different era."

Theresa Booth first visited and travelled around China in 1983. She then lived there between 1992-1997, first teaching in Hubei Province before setting up a sandwich deli in Beijing. She has a legal background, having previously practised as a corporate lawyer, so I asked her why she had set up a completely unrelated business. "I really wanted to understand from a grass roots perspective how business was done in China. The experience afforded me some very useful techniques on how to survive in business in China and make a profit. As all my employees only spoke Mandarin, my Mandarin was forced to improve."

Changes

In its twenty year involvement with China, the Chopsticks Club network has seen great changes in its membership profile. How has it adapted?

"We have had to evolve to accommodate members' needs. For example, as over 95 per cent of our membership speak Mandarin, either as a native speaker or learner, we have matched their skills to company

language needs, says Booth. This led to the club's pioneering China Skills Recruitment Fairs in 2011 and 2013. "The plan for 2014 is to develop sector-specific events, such as finance and law, to meet the growing needs of organisations." They have also noted an increase in Chinese companies coming to Europe, resulting in a growing demand for their specialist cross-cultural training programmes.

I had noticed that the Chopsticks Club is increasingly organising high profile business events, notably attracting senior government ministers and the Chinese Ambassador. I wondered if these types of activities would become the new focus of the Club. Colston explains: "We are expanding the number of business events which service the needs of the larger part of our professional membership. For example, our recent 'Next Stop London for Chinese High Net Worth Individuals?' conference was aimed at promoting London as an investment and luxury destination for appropriate Chinese consumers. We collaborated with Rupert Hoogewerf and others to add value to businesses wishing to engage with this specific consumer group. There is a lot of work still to be done in building better understanding and opportunities with the Chinese Chopsticks is well-placed to deliver valuable events like this for companies wishing to engage with the Chinese."

I asked them about future plans. "We aim to be the natural choice of networking group for anyone operating in the UK-China space. To achieve this, we will develop services to meet the different needs of its members. We aim to run events outside London and in China." They admit achieving these goals will be challenging but, as Booth said: "when this is your passion it's far less daunting."

www.Chopsticksclub.com

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