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## 'I'LL TELL YOU SOMETHING ABOUT CHINA': THOUGHTS ON THE SPECIALIST STUDY OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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I was a bloody mess. Literally. I had just been involved in an accident on the Chicago lakeshore and was in an ambulance to the hospital. The paramedic at my side was asking me questions, apparently trying to keep me awake. Finding out I worked on international relations, he asked me if I studied anything specific. I mentioned China. The questions stopped as I triggered a ferocious monologue. My slightly hazy recollection is that it began with the phrase, 'I'll tell you something about China...'

These days everyone seems to have an opinion on China. The field of international relations is certainly no outlier in this respect. The amount of work on the rise of China, U.S.-China relations, and China's place in the world has exploded.<sup>i</sup> This is to be expected. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is now the world's second largest economy in nominal GDP terms and also enjoys the dubious honour of having the world's second largest military budget. The number of countries for whom it is the largest trading partner exceeds that of the United States by a significant margin. And it has become a far more active presence internationally, be it in the United Nations, at Davos, or on the open ocean. China is now a hot topic for scholars of great power politics, international order, and the future of the international system more generally. The recent pandemic has only intensified this trend.

In what follows, I discuss the implications of this moment for specialists who study the international relations of the PRC. As I will outline, increasing popular interest and generalist engagement bring both many opportunities and frustrations. More crucially, however, specialist contributions are needed now more than ever to combat both simplistic, 'surface readings' of PRC behaviour as well as those that purport to read into its essence. Such contributions are not just correctives, but provide

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i A Google Scholar search for the terms 'rise of China' + 'international relations' returns over two thousand English language results for 2019 alone. A Google Scholar search for the Chinese equivalent of those terms, '国际关系' + '中国崛起' returns nineteen hundred results for the same year.

the field a larger service, diversifying our understandings of state forms and behaviours without exoticising them.

To begin with, for those international relations scholars who have spent their careers focusing on the PRC, this is a bittersweet moment. On the one hand, increased prominence brings with it increased demand. Indeed, generally speaking, for scholars pursuing their careers in English-language institutions but whose regional focus is not the United States or Europe, it is frequently the case that they find their social capital rising and falling not with the quality of their scholarship but the perceived significance of their object of study.<sup>ii</sup> The said significance of any given state or region (the United States and Europe again excepted) in the English-language field is, in turn, often a reflection of the preoccupations, anxieties, and fads of the North American and European international relations commentariat and elite. Where such attention is on the rise, so too are core job opportunities, possibilities for publication, student interest, and resources. When on the decline, core jobs and course offerings dwindle, and the respective regionally-focused scholars are reduced to trading observations and findings within insulated cliques. One might think increased calls for a more global IR have ameliorated this. The truth remains, however, that when not enjoying a moment of prominence, the detailed debates of regional experts attract about as much interest from IR generalists as would discussions between devoted philatelists concerning the attributes of a particular stamp.

But prominence also attracts interlopers, and those whose focus has long been the PRC now find themselves needing to respond to an ever-growing mass of claims and arguments forwarded by newly-interested generalists and pundits. There has been a massive proliferation of books, articles, and op-eds on the People's Republic of China, many of which seek to adjudicate the questions of whether or not China's rise will be peaceful and what China wants. Not a few are pulpy and breathless, rehearsing well-trodden memes and advancing essentialised claims. Acutely cringe-worthy are those that refer to the PRC as 'the dragon', repeat clichéd tropes about 'five thousand years of history', and make sweeping generalisations beginning with the phrase, 'The Chinese think...'

ii In what follows, I focus on the experiences of scholars of the international relations of the PRC within English-language academic institutions. This author's location — the University of Oxford — finds itself at the intersection of European and North American approaches to international relations, and disciplinary incentives both inside the institution and within the United Kingdom more broadly privilege the ability to show relevance to the broader English-speaking field. Needless to say, the opportunities, obstacles, and changes recent developments have entailed for those who study the international relations of the PRC within the PRC, or, alternately, in countries such as Japan or South Korea, involve a whole different set of dynamics that are topics in their own right.

Certainly, not all such work is so awful, and the dismissive responses of some PRC specialists towards their generalist colleagues may admittedly contain a tad bit of territorial defensiveness and resentment. Studying the international relations of the PRC in depth is not easy. It often requires engaging with mountains of mind-numbing official-speak; navigating the numerous obstacles the PRC erects for access to documents, people, and facts; and living with the constant awareness that when you attempt to stare into the abyss of the party state, it very likely is staring back.<sup>i</sup> For many it also means surmounting the hurdles of language acquisition, and attaining specialist fluency in both Chinese and English is no easy task.<sup>iii</sup> The glib newcomers whose arguments rely on official GDP statistics, secondary English-language articles, and conversations at an invited conference or two in China thus may appear not to have fully paid the price of admission. They have not spent the time pouring over documents and sources, they have not sought to amass and parse partial and fragmented evidence of the actual workings of foreign policy within the PRC, they do not have to worry about risks to themselves or those with whom they interact, they have not even had to deal with the frustrations of being punished by word-limits for using Chinese-language source material (the titles have to be provided in the original and in translation). It jars a bit then, when the new-comers start taking up prime real estate in top journals and basking in citations.

So what are the possible responses? One is simply to continue to cede the territory of the top English-language journals and remain focused on the nuanced questions. This entails writing detailed, close examinations of certain elements, episodes, and developments within PRC foreign policy making and behaviour with the foreknowledge these will likely be confined to more regionally focused journals or specialist publications that generally are lower-ranked in the field. Another is to attempt to reframe one's work to speak to the wider questions as they are being defined in the so-called 'mainstream literature,' and by this I mean the extremely competitive territory of a select number of journals that rank highly in terms of citation counts and esteem within English-language political science departments.<sup>2</sup> To do so, however, one must often sacrifice some of the nuance, attention to specialist debates, and hard-won minutiae that is of little interest to the latter's target reader readership.

Both have their pros and cons, and in some rare cases, there are scholars that manage to bridge the two. But there is a further form

iii As one insightful reviewer noted, this also touches upon issues of 'language and knowledge production in IR' and an entire book could be written on this topic as pertains to the PRC. Importantly, while work written by Chinese scholars in English may be engaged as part of the disciplinary conversation, work published in Chinese is often treated not as scholarship itself but as an object of study for insights into the PRC.

of engagement that is needed. As their subject matter assumes an ever-larger role in an English-language field that has traditionally taken North American and European experiences and contexts as the normalised point of departure for understanding the world, the expertise of those who have spent their careers studying the international relations of the PRC is necessary now more than ever as an antidote to two frequent problems appearing in writings on China: surface reading and essence reading.

First: the problem of surface reading. There are many things which, when taken at face value, may appear to be homologous across contexts. These include the roles of certain actors or institutions, the manner in which decisions are made, the significance of certain policy choices or processes, statistical outputs, and so forth. But appearances can be deceiving. For one, there may be actors, power relations, informal or submerged processes, internal battles and so on that may not be evident at first or even second glance, and yet crucial for understanding what is occurring. This is particularly true for the PRC. There is a complex set of interactions between the party and the state, across domestic political interest groups and constituents, and within intra-party struggles, the details of which are often far from clear at the time. Sometimes these pierce the surface, as was the case with the dramatic fall of Chongqing party boss Bo Xilai in 2013.<sup>3</sup> But even then, the particulars of such incidents remain sketchy and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future; to wit, there still remains disagreement over the details of much better known party struggles almost half a century old, such as the death of alleged coup-plotter Lin Biao.<sup>4</sup>

What is more, the meaning and significance of certain gestures, statements, policies, data and the like may vary widely by context; absent an understanding of this context one may seriously misread what is occurring. There is a clear hierarchy of actors in the PRC system — one not necessarily corresponding to other states — and the authoritativeness of their statements vary widely. The PRC Foreign Minister, for instance, holds a relative low-ranking position in the foreign policy making establishment. And a commentary by Hu Xijin at the *Global Times*, for example, has a much different value from something written by Zhong Sheng at the *People's Daily*, even if both are ostensibly under the supervision of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>iv</sup>

iv Hu Xijin, the editor of the *Global Times*, is a firebrand known as someone who both pushes borders and at times releases insights into the thinking of portions of the CCP elite, but he and his paper are also dismissed by many within China. At times, he has been accused of being overly provocative in an effort to elicit foreign attention and advertising revenue. In contrast, Zhong Sheng is not a person but rather a homophonic pseudonym for the 'voice of the centre', and thus represents more authoritative statements of CCP policy. See: Samuel Wade, "How Seriously Should You Take *Global Times*," *China Digital Times*,

On top of this, the informants, sources, and data one uses may also be seriously biased in ways that are not immediately obvious to those coming from outside that context. The combination of censorship and incentives to misrepresent (such as for cadres to over-report their accomplishments) in the PRC system exacerbate this to an extreme. It has long been the case, for instance, that PRC provincial economic growth data has added up to more than the national total.<sup>v</sup> To be clear, this is more than just an entreaty for nuance. It is rather the observation that contextual variation may be significant and massive and yet obscured by seemingly familiar surface appearances.

Second: the problem of reading into an essence. We need to avoid essentialising or exoticising difference, playing into 'you just cannot understand' self-orientalising exceptionalism, or reifying variation within static and nation-state-shaped bubbles of purported cultural otherness.<sup>vi</sup> Mine is a plea for context not culture. Even the most of alien-seeming manifestations of difference from the perspective of outsiders have their own logics; these logics are intelligible when given context. Power, legitimation, status, bureaucratic or parochial interests, self-justificatory myths, human fallibility and frailty, and historically-ingrained practices — these are factors and dynamics not unique to any polity, and indeed ubiquitous to the phenomena we study in international relations. The PRC and, more specifically, the CCP seek with few exceptions to maintain party discipline and an outward appearance of super-human unity and rationality. But this is not the same as being a unitary actor, and discipline is a never-ending battle.<sup>5</sup> The PRC is a huge state, with all variety of domestic, bureaucratic, regional, and factional pressures, dynamics, and disunities.<sup>vii</sup> With more than a billion

August 3, 2016, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2016/08/seriously-take-global-times/> and Samuel Wade, "Who Does the

Global Times Speak For?" *China Digital Times*, August 11, 2016, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2016/08/global-times-speak/>; on Zhong Sheng and other pseudonyms within the PRC system, see: Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Leadership and Elite Responses to the Us Pacific Pivot," *China Leadership Monitor* 38, no. 5 (2012): 1-2, fn.2-4.

v For an excellent introduction to the problems of data in the PRC, see James Palmer, "Nobody Knows Anything About China," *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2018, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/21/nobody-knows-anything-about-china/>

vi In the context of the PRC, William Callahan refers to such a discourse as 'Sino-speak'. See: William A. Callahan, "Sino-Speak: Chinese Exceptionalism and the Politics of History," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 1 (2012).

vii To cite just one example, see Min Ye's excellent work on the Belt and Road Initiative in China: Min Ye, "Fragmentation and Mobilization: Domestic Politics of the Belt and Road in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 119 (2019).

people how could this not be the case? These phenomena are, of course, shaped by institutional incentives, historical path dependencies, and shifting developments. They all have their own logics, and those logics are comprehensible even if not immediately perceptible or legible. And to be crystal clear, presenting a logic as comprehensible, however, in no way means that it constitutes a morally acceptable rationale. (Unfortunately, failure to recognise this distinction too frequently results in specialists being tarred as apologists.)

Compounding the problem of essentialist readings, the CCP elite sees itself in a constant struggle to perpetuate its predominance, and in doing so has itself embraced a variety of stark, essentialised characterisations of Western versus Chinese cultural difference. Othering conflicting viewpoints as foreign is a crude tactic of delegitimation by no means limited to the PRC, even if the CCP lays it on particularly heavily. In reality, the PRC is host to a myriad variety of different forms of political thought and reasoning, ranging from liberals to nostalgic Maoists.<sup>6</sup> Just because the internal debates, disagreements, and divergences are not always overtly visible, that does not mean they are not occurring, and specialists are often best placed to bring these to light.

To conclude, among area-focused international relations scholars writing for English-language audiences, those who work on the PRC may count themselves lucky as the so-called wider field has taken an interest in their object of study. But they are also finding themselves contending with ever-more 'I'll tell you something about China...' generalist commentary claiming to explain PRC behaviour. In this context, said specialists can (1) offer a means of interpreting and reading that highlights the potential expanse of variation within political organisation and behaviour, meaning-making practices, and perspectives that exists inside the PRC; (2) provide potential explanations that supply a demystifying, de-essentialising intelligibility to the logics in operation within PRC rhetoric and practices; and (3) point out the limits of our ability to make definitive claims based upon available evidence.

The above may not seem at first sight to be contributions to the wider field of general English-language international relations theorising. But they are. Generalists and pundits frequently employ language that reduces the PRC to familiar categories such as 'rising power', 'authoritarian' or 'revisionist' that, while not necessarily inaccurate, can simplify or essentialise in unhelpful ways. If a little knowledge can be dangerous, broad generalisations that stem from it can be even more so. The work of PRC specialists can challenge the field to refine its categories and assumptions to better reflect a more complex picture, while also encouraging greater humility and restraint where that picture remains unclear.

1 Isabella Steger, "A New Study Shows The Growing Perils For Academics Researching China," *Quartz*, 5 September 2018, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://qz.com/1379245/study-of-academic-freedom-in-china-shows-perils-for-researchers/>

2 For the journals, see: Brian J. Phillips, "Ranking IR Journals," January 7, 2014, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://duckofminerva.com/2014/01/ranking-ir-journals.html>

3 For a fascinating rendition of this, see: Carrie Gracie, "Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel," BBC, March 17, 2017, accessed February 10, 2020, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/Murder\\_lucky\\_hotel](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/Murder_lucky_hotel)

4 "45 Years Later, Lin Biao's Mysterious Death Continues to Haunt Party Leadership," *Shanghaiist*, May 5, 2018, accessed February 10, 2020, [https://shanghaiist.com/2016/09/13/lin\\_biao\\_death\\_anniversary](https://shanghaiist.com/2016/09/13/lin_biao_death_anniversary)

5 "China Focus: CPC further enhances Party discipline," *Xinhua*, August 28, 2018, accessed February 10, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/28/c\\_137424747.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/28/c_137424747.htm)

6 See: William A. Callahan, *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future* (Oxford University Press, 2013); David L. Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford University Press Oxford, 2013), 13-44.