

“... [Tom Plate] is an atypical American commentator of Asian affairs. He is less wont to judge China and other Asian countries as if they were all falling short of Western standards. He was politically incorrect before political incorrectness became fashionable, and remains so. He is neither a China watcher nor a China scholar, but he has a sense of China. More importantly, he has what is not in common supply — common sense.”

– George Yeo, former foreign minister of Singapore

A central fact of our times is that China (a superpower trying to get its act together) and America (a superpower trying to keep it together) are linked by emotional and historical angst, substantive contemporary tension, and mutual economic and strategic needs. Which is to say: sometimes it seems as if China-US relations are absolutely in a yo-yo state, endless up and down pistons – and nobody knows where and when the yo-yo will stop. Forget what the president of China or the United States think of the relationship, what do we (you and I) think? What should we think? What is our moral obligation to think, even if we’re not so-called “leaders”?

In this compilation of his latest columns, award-winning journalist, bestselling author and university professor Tom Plate tackles these questions with aplomb, reviewing his commentary over the past two years in a searching (and sometimes self-critical) re-evaluation of where he was right and where he went wrong – and how best to move forward in the US-China relationship.

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on
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YO-YO DIPLOMACY

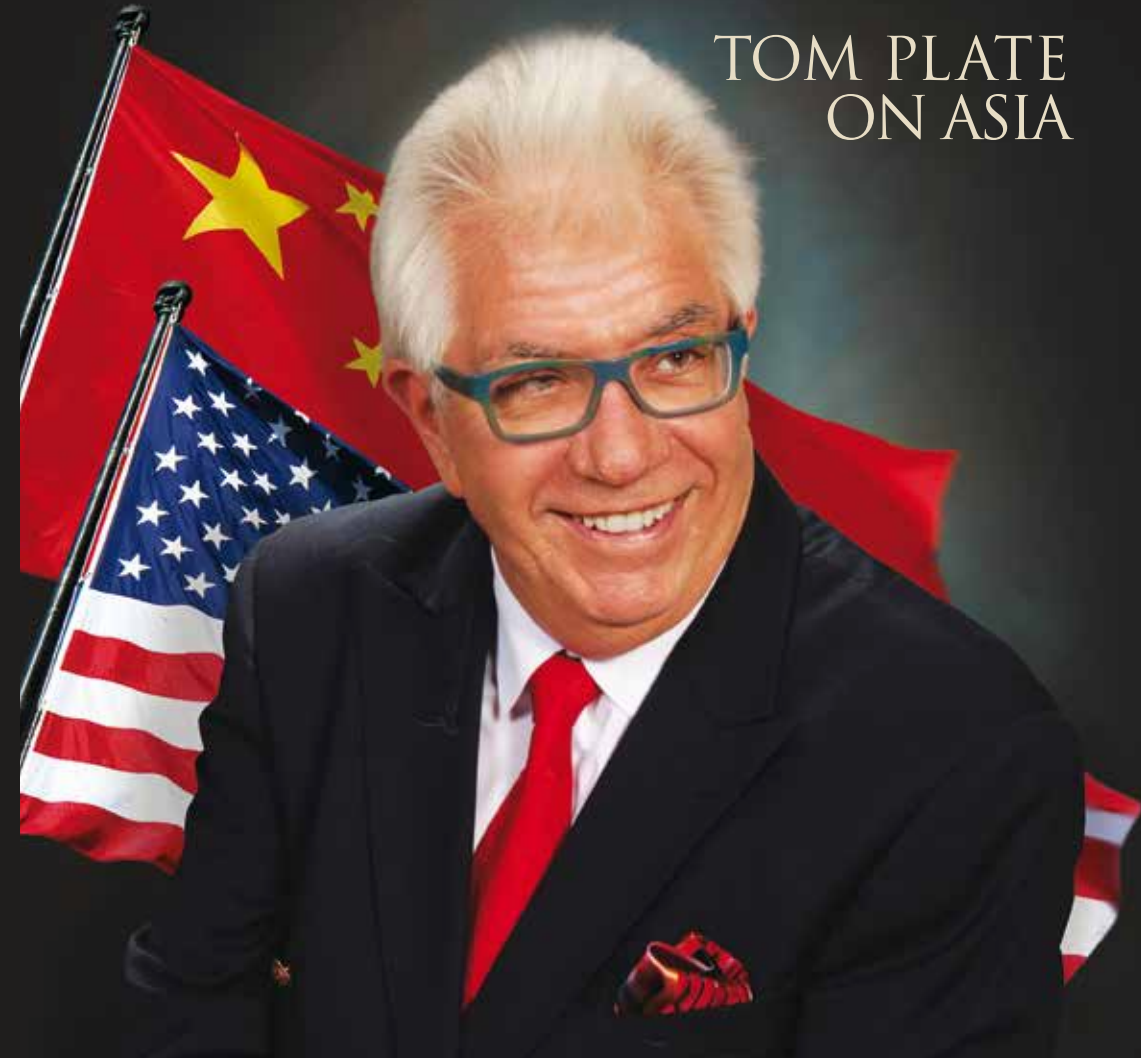
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By the author of the bestselling “*Giants of Asia*” series

YO-YO DIPLOMACY

TOM PLATE
ON ASIA



AN AMERICAN COLUMNIST TACKLES
THE UPS-AND-DOWNS BETWEEN
CHINA AND THE US

For Review only

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**To Maximus Pierce Keys,
our first grandchild,
fabulously born July 2017 of
Mr and Mrs Ashley and Sam Keys**

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FOREWORD BY GEORGE YEO

Over the years I've known Tom Plate, he has been constantly reinventing himself. One day, many years ago, he came to my office in Singapore and did a one-man video interview with me using his new Sony video camera. I watched with admiration how he set up the cute little tripod, mounted the palm-sized camera professionally and then proceeded to record the session. On another occasion, he sported a completely different hairstyle with matching eyewear which made me wonder whether he was going through a mid-life crisis.

He developed a keen interest in China very early in his career and took care never simply to follow the crowd. Wisely deciding not to accompany a huge gaggle of American journalists rushing to China to cover a historic US presidential visit, he went to Taipei instead to cover the same story from a refreshingly different perspective.

He affects not to take himself seriously, which is his charm. He disarms you by immediately confessing his ignorance. In this way, he skilfully gathers information from a wide range of sources. His style is perhaps particularly well-suited to an Asian environment. He rarely puts on the show of scepticism which many Western journalists display with furrowed brows as part of their craft. When he thinks something is justified, he is prepared to show enthusiasm and shower praise. He is critical without being nasty.

Tom Plate's columns in the South China Morning Post have been

INTRODUCTION

well-received. In Hong Kong, I often hear comments that he is an atypical American commentator of Asian affairs. He is less wont to judge China and other Asian countries as if they were all falling short of Western standards. He was politically incorrect before political incorrectness became fashionable, and remains so. He is neither a China watcher nor a China scholar, but he has a sense of China. More importantly, he has what is not in common supply — common sense. He also has one admirable persistent motivation, which is to encourage diverse communities around the Pacific Lake to live together in harmony.

All this makes Tom Plate worth reading even when we don't agree with him, which is not often. He presents to the Western reader a view of China and Asia that is in short supply.

George Yeo is the former foreign minister of Singapore (2004–2011). Previously, he served in various ministries, including the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Trade and Industry. He is now chairman of Kerry Logistics Network and a member of the Foundation Board of the World Economic Forum.

INTEGRITY AND TRUTH

Analytically, this is what the book is about: a practising American journalist aiming to make the case that war with China is anything but inevitable, and that the unthinkable might happen unless the good people on both sides of the Pacific lock arms in peace and into coherent public-arena intellectual combat against insanity.

A central fact of our times is that China (a superpower trying to get its act together) and America (a superpower trying to keep it together) are baked into emotional and historical angst and substantive contemporary tension. But at the same time they are also totally baked into desperate mutual economic and strategic needs.

So what is the best way to unwrap this twirled-together fortune cookie, see what is inside, and put it back together in a way that adds to, rather than negates, a new world order?

Oh yes, there are good recent books about China ... you could probably spend a slice of your lifetime reading them all. In fact I have, and some of them are great efforts. In the back, a partial list of my campus office collection is recommended to you as to my university students. So it's not as if we don't have enough information or enough perspectives.

But maybe what we face is a measure of information overload — combined with a measure of wisdom under-load as well? As many of

these valuable works are by distinguished historians, political scientists and even lawyers, impressive as they are, it is sometimes difficult to see where you and I – the individual – fit in.

It always feels as if history is under the control of forces and people far above our heads. We seem irrelevant to the sometimes frightening, sometimes gripping China-US strategic drama.

In important respects, this can be said to apply to Chinese people on the mainland and in their diasporas around the world, as with Americans.

This book, written by a practicing journalist/newspaper columnist who is also a Prof at a university in Los Angeles, will try to bring it all down to earth. Forget what the leaders of China and America (or their respective foreign-affairs advisers) think of the relationship, what do we (you and I) think? What should we think? What is our moral obligation to think, even if we're not so-called "leaders"?

Or maybe we are leaders.

See if this slightly complicated thought by a true deep thinker on my university campus works as well for you as well as it does for me:

"We are all leaders when we choose to live according to the values of integrity and truth. These values bind us up together in mission and enable us to overcome fear-causing ideas that are projected upon us. In our good-willed attempts to move beyond the anxiety or confusion that arises from what we hear and read as 'news', each of us can ask ourselves: 'Who – or what grounds me – in my personal desire to uphold my values?' The answers to our reflections empower us to act with and for others."

This fine thinking comes from the mind of Fr. Randy Roche, S.J., Director, Centre for Ignatian Spirituality at Loyola Marymount, the US West Coast university where I teach, and it begins this book

because it is so insightful and moving and – really – different. His thought is meant for all of us (you – whoever you are, in whatever country – and, in the case of this book, for me, the journalist still careering while teaching and trying to work through the gnarled and gnarly China-US relationship).

The suggestion here is that we look inside ourselves first, well before looking outside ourselves in a search for answers or for certainty, or for good and evil.

This thought was sent to our faculty by Fr. Roche for a number of reasons, none particularly related to China-US; but with the lack of reverence for which I am known, I stole and privatised the Jesuit's message to purpose this book as a personal guide to an individual's thinking about America and China, rather than as some tendentious tablet of policy prescriptions with which you must agree.

It is more for you – the intelligent, caring citizen – than for the genuine specialist, not to mention the all-knowing and perhaps somewhat dogmatic expert. It is a set of thoughts, not an ideological platform. It is a book for peace, not a book for war. It respects China, and will not demonise it. It respects the US, but will not canonise it.

TWO HALVES MAKE A WHOLE

The book was written over a span of two years and comes to you in halves that are quite different.

Further on, the second half (the columns) presents my fortnightly thoughts, over a two-year span, on the bilateral relationship, such as I had been able to sculpt into "Insight" essays every other Tuesday in an English-language newspaper in East Asia. Since June 2015, there have been 50 such columns in that very good newspaper, and they comprise this book's latter half, with substantive post-publication observations to update intent and add retrospective.

That publication is the South China Morning Post, out of pivotal Hong Kong.

Founded in 1903, headquartered in Hong Kong, and now owned by the giant Alibaba Group after a succession of owners, including the Kuok Group and at one time the Rupert Murdoch empire, this newspaper has served history decade after decade as an essential and unbreakable bridge between East and West, offering timely reports and observations not only about one of the greatest cities in the world, but also about its perspectives given its unique proximity to the world's most populous, historically riven and psychologically driven nation: China.

Despite the general opening of the modernizing mainland to the outside world after the Mao era, Hong Kong still offers a perch of special perspective. Now formally a special administrative region of China, its sovereign since 1997 after long British rule, Hong Kong's media nonetheless operate under the territory's local law rather than the national law of Beijing. And so the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong's leading English-language newspaper, owner after new owner, rolls along, doing its greatly admired thing, remaining a rightly respected newspaper and one of the world's best-known media brands.

Criticisms of changes on the paper's ideological tonality and allegations of the loss of total journalistic objectivity (which exists nowhere) are neither surprising nor upsetting. But they may be misconceived. Newspapers that do not change will surely die. I agree with an observation by Joseph Tsai, executive vice-chairman of Alibaba Group: "We think the world needs a plurality of views when it comes to China coverage. China's rise as an economic power and its importance to world stability is too important for there to be a singular thesis."

How can this be wrong? By US standards, my own columns tend

to be rated as "Beijing-friendly". But by Asian standards, they tend to be viewed as balanced. What you see depends on where you sit, right?

As for the editing of my columns, you need to know this: every one has been published in whole by the SCMP, all with a calibre of collegial overview that has proven at least the quality-equal to what my columns received when appearing in the Los Angeles Times, their birthplace, or in any other newspaper anywhere afterwards.

The first half of this book – again, where you are now – will offer a collection of interrelated thoughts that have percolated over the past two years, in the wake of decades of newspaper journalism about Asia and America in various newspapers. The aim is to help us "... move beyond the anxiety or confusion that arises from what we hear and read as 'news'." As journalists, professors and citizens, "we are all leaders when we choose to live according to the values of integrity and truth."

Not a bad way to start, don't you think? We need to be guided by integrity and truth, not only if we happen to be journalists but, as importantly, as citizens of this planet.

YO-YO DIPLOMACY

One day it seems warm, civilised; the next week it's anything but. One month the feel of the bilateral relationship is akin to the long-gone Cold War with the Soviet Union; two months later, clouds darken and it feels as if a big black ugly gathering storm is coming down on your head; and then – something positive happens and you have the feeling of No War, Ever – we love China and Chinese people and they love us too.

This is yo-yo syndrome in the US-China relationship. Up and down, down and up, around and around, and nobody knows where and when the yo-yo will stop.

This became the book's title. Up and down go our emotions,

deepest worries waxing and waning, tension ever present but hope mysteriously hanging around as well.

Some China experts will tut-tut, perhaps partly rightly, about the yo-yo metaphor. It is indeed a rank simplification. It might be read to depict China and the US as two coherent bodies, gym-toned prize fighters in the championship ring going at it; or, going the other way, as two love birds longingly cooing from touchingly adjacent cages; or even – my fear – as a pair of idiot yo-yos edging us toward the apocalypse.

The whole reality of China and the US is an odd-couple relationship. As my colleague and fellow Pacific Century Institute board member Donald Gregg properly notes, the very words “China” and the “US” are huge umbrella terms for a maze of different, competing or cooperating – or both – sectors and forces and various interests of government or vested economic interests. Think not of a pair of slender and gym-toughened prize fighters but two complex and sometimes unfathomable celestial universes hovering in uneasy but geopolitically fixed positions.

Yo-yo suggests two for the tango or for the tangle – no more.

But the bilateral relationship is no simple yo-yo, further explains Don Gregg, who, among other achievements in his illustrious life, was deputy national security adviser under former George W. H. Bush Sr. In reality, it is a constantly roiling ocean beneath which powerful and sometimes dark forces of great power push and heave, churning up potential violence ... but also sometimes leaving us with a placid surface no more violent than a great lake, if deep of depth in periodic repose.

Yet, for the cover of this book, the title is *Yo-Yo Diplomacy*, a surface moniker for sure and without apology – but serving the purpose of introducing the theme. Which is to say: sometimes it seems

as if China-US relations are absolutely in a yo-yo state, endless up and down pistons, as if in a bad marriage into which both sides are stuck – ready for yet another post-quarrel reconciliation with the unspoken understanding that life without one another is unimaginable.

This is the yo-yo of our times.

Oh, one more aspect of yo-yo terminology: sometimes it seems as if the bilateral relationship is in the hands of officials and generals and politicians and influential journalists who are ... I hate to say it ... absolute *yo-yos*.

PEACE COLUMN

Call me an idealist or even a wild-eyed optimist or whatever you want, but realistically, neither China nor the US will ever invade the sovereign territory of the other.

Let us begin with that. Let both sides keep this in mind. It is bottom-line important.

It is never going to happen. Such atavistic adventurism would be, by far, more nonsensical than China's forays into Vietnam or America's into Iraq.

And yet some stubbornly insist that war with China is in effect inevitable. Why? There is a no valid moral reason, of any ideological or geopolitical gravity, to justify war – or any broadly significant military clash – between China and the US.

War would be an immoral maelstrom and a deep stupidity. The plunge into blackness would allow room for no side to be able to say its reasoning was more legitimate than the other's. There could be no just war at all as both would be morally guilty of endangering the world, not to mention their own existences.

Both governments would have shown as incompetent their military and foreign policies. And both proud militaries would end

up substantially decimated, if not worse, even if the tragic and foolish conflict somehow stayed non-nuclear.

This book's hope is to make a small contribution to convince Chinese and Americans alike to lean in the opposite direction, to think of peace not war, and to distrust fiercely the ideologues and warmongers, on both sides of the Pacific – the “inevitable” crowd.

Stupidity and its twin pal war are not inevitable. Enduring peace and plus a high level of cooperation between the two superpowers is the only intelligent option if the species itself is not to be endangered by the highest known level of insane international non-cooperation conceivable: nuclear war.

RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT

When it comes to China, journalists as well as government and military officials have a responsibility to exercise the utmost care and responsible judgment. To my mind, even blithe predictions of a war-conflict are nearly as morally reprehensible as arguments justifying war, as if such could be in either's true national interest.

The fate of the earth depends on these two gigantic powers, with their nuclear arsenals, operating at the highest exposition of best global practices. Scare literature – out of whatever misguided inspiration, ideological idealism or sheer malignity – is not the proper business of journalism or of the press. It is deplorable and must be condemned – always – as well as bravely fought.

The high calling of the journalist is to help foster, by her or his own good work, the most intelligent reportage so as to illuminate common interests and visionary co-responsibilities – not to fire up anew the embers of over-heated and over-reported differences.

This is not to pretend to sainthood, but surly there is humanitarian value in trying to avoid doing the evil of the devil. Make no mistake

about it: war, except in purely existential circumstances, is evil. Ask anyone who has been involved in war.

Sure, absolutely – the views of warmongers need to be evaluated with a cool and level head; but conflict conspirators need to be deprived of credibility to the extent possible through the powerful forces of reasonable scorn and immaculate scholarship. In part – small or large, who knows? – the fate of the earth may depend on peace journalism out-weighting war journalism. This is what is at stake.

Public opinion is often minimised as at best soft power. It can be much more. United, it can be a epochal force to slow the warmongers, even push them back, helping to keep war from coming together in fusion. Conversely, united in a passion for war, feral public opinion can push our over-nuclearised planet over the edge and down like a falling planet into the abyss of doomsday.

Journalists are a key driver of public opinion. In a sense their collective finger is on the nuclear trigger too. So the responsibility to protect the public – and our future – is in the hands of the media as much, perhaps, as any other single driver.

THE PROFESSION OF RUSH HOURS

By its very nature journalism is imperfect, even if some journalists believe they are all but perfect.

The sheer speed of journalism can be the enemy of balance and perspective. The conditions of journalism can be as exasperating as they are thrilling. It sometimes breaks my heart that the journalist is rarely permitted by the definitional nature of his work to slow down, to measure the event or development or personality with an almost religious ritual of detail and precision.

But that is the life – and the profession of the rush hour. We have to do it *now*.

We try to get it right but – little surprise – we can sometimes get it wrong. China is easily one of the most difficult of substantive challenges and “current-events” issues to get right. I know – I have tried and I am still trying and I won’t ever give up. You can’t give up. (*You may well have been wrong with that last column, Tom – so try harder next time.*)

Any prediction or even general sense of direction about what will happen in the future that has to be announced in the immediacy of the moment is inherently a hazardous way of making a living. But this is what journalism does and is.

My university history-department colleagues say they cannot possibly imagine what it must be like to be a journalist, where edgy timeliness is of the essence. I agree and tell them that the pressure of time can be almost unimaginably repressive (but also, frankly, thrilling in the intellectual pressure of the challenge). They shake their head – and walk away and continue with their discussions of the origins of ... the First World War ... or of the Hundred Years ... or the Peloponnesian. What bliss – *for them*.

Still, professional academics, especially my history and social science colleagues, might also tell you that even their work is somewhat time-tentative, in a sense. They too struggle with realities not entirely settled. New data surface to undermine old assumptions. A forgotten trove falls off the top of an archive shelf and shatters a paradigm. A new and more accurate translation of a revered canonical document raises serious doubts about long-assumed narratives.

But yet, the comparison is not wholly right either: academic work is to journalism as Beethoven is to Beyonce. The latter is for now; the former is for eternity. (But maybe in 100 years more humans will be entranced by Beyonce than Beethoven? Hmm... probably not.)

Haste can indeed make waste. Government work itself offers

ample examples. Like journalists, officials sometimes must make quick decisions based on the available (and less than complete) evidence. And, like journalists, they sometimes get it wrong. The only logical procedural alternative would be to delay making decisions; but then in many instances you might have lost timeliness beyond the point of efficacy. This too is a mistake common to the profession of government, of journalism.

The need for speed can become an addiction, of course. Psychologists might tell you that journalists as a class of “patients” tend to require almost pathological instant gratification, reflecting a kind of infantile narcissism – as if a version of candy in mouth along with thumb! And the diagnosis may be correct. I, for one, admit it.

NO DELAYED REACTIONS

No journalist can ever be “right” with a story if the article misses the deadline and is “late”, or is in any way substantially dated or lacks currency. Time is – yes – of the essence.

If last week’s newspaper on the coffee table appears terribly “old”, that perhaps is a sign that it is a very good and timely newspaper indeed. Take a look at the LIFE magazines of the 1930s and 1940s in a library archive. They seem older than rare wine, but at the time of their publication they were as fresh and lively as the latest Beaujolais.

Is anything older than yesterday’s tweets?

The true journalist constantly worries – because speed does kill, as well as win races. Surface ships do move more rapidly than submarines, but they lack depth. Does anyone really care? The best editors and news people do. One of my greatest mentors was the late David Laventhol, the founder of modern Newsday, the Long Island and New York newspaper; and at the end of his career the publisher of the Los Angeles Times. In his time he was easily one of the world’s

most thoughtful of American media leaders.

David tried to impress on his young charges that journalism needed to prove itself not only “quick” but “deep”. Without a measure of depth, it would prove too transient and thin to matter; without the quality of timeliness, it would prove irrelevant – not be noticed in proper time.

Like some other notable figures in the world of letters and publishing – but perhaps too few in US newspapers – Dave studied at a great university, Yale. Unlike for a doctor or a social worker, there are no minimum educational requirements, much less continuing-education requirements, for the American journalist. Many top journalists are well aware of this and do go to great lengths to acquire, on top of their basic undergraduate education, a professional degree or even a PhD, or a new language.

Only the well-prepared journalist, he felt, would possess the ken and the zen to interpret the historical moment with efficacy – and so arose the mantra of “quick but deep”.

This is not by any means easy to pull off, but in political and international journalism, there is no Plan B. Consider the riveting ruminations of Chinese author Yang Jisheng, in acknowledging an award from the august Neiman Foundation at Harvard University. Acceding to the need for modesty when entering the twilight zone of issues that seem impossible to solve, Yang said: “[Ours] is an unfathomable profession; while journalists are not scholars, they’re required to study and gain a comprehensive grasp of society. Any journalist, no matter how erudite and insightful, will feel unequal to the task of decoding this complex and ever-changing society.”

I always have, I always do. But we have to keep trying. Sometimes it is really important – as with the case of China. Surely no one needs an advanced degree to know that.

CHINA SYNDROMES

There are serious differences of opinion among observers of contemporary China as to whether this amazing geopolitical phenomenon is *sui generis* (“something entirely unlike anything else”) – or simply a vaster but still mundane glandular nation (“no, we’ve seen it all before”).

The “special view” insists that, with something of the order of 5,000 years of history, and a beehive of 1.4 billion people within its borders buzzing around as busy workers, China cannot rationally be viewed as Just Another (If Very Large) Nation.

That would be characterising China as little more than a lumped-together totality of 240 Singapores (a snugly compact and successful nation of 5 million-plus people). One shudders in mild shock and no awe over the lack of insight.

Almost any rounded, reasoned view of China will risk criticism for perceived moral laxity in its propensity to plea-bargain down this gigantic nation’s serious sins (as adjudged by the West, always entirely virtuous, of course, and indeed by critics on the mainland itself) from murderous felonies to mere misdemeanours.

There may be some validity to the exculpation charge of excessive empathy, but it is a relatively small transgression or risk if you compare it to the opposite tendency, which is to blame the Chinese government in as many ways as possible for things that go wrong (US trade problems, etc. etc.); to condemn its ruling Communist Party as if it were the second coming of the Devil, when without its centralising and networking force China would come apart like a hundred Yugoslavias; and to tend to interpret China’s every thought as ill-intentioned and its every other external move as propelled by a premeditated malevolence for global domination.

Understanding China properly and fairly will take more than

defaulting to intellectually flabby binary moralism and knee-jerk worst-case hypotheses.

Yes, China is “saddled” with Communism – certainly in the sense that its political system garners scant overall respect in Western circles outside of a few cafés on a few boulevards on Paris’ Left Bank, and perhaps in a handful of Western university faculty reading rooms.

In the US especially, China’s political system remains a reviled one, even though by any measure its performance in economic-development leadership probably rivals the growth achievement of any political system known to history. Yet it is deemed so deficient in its human-rights observance, its respect for religions and many other kinds of fair-playing norms that it gets no respect at all.

Where is the balance in that?

By comparison liberal capitalism, until recently anyway, gets higher marks in all categories, almost by default or ideology, rather than by comprehensive and non-parochial evaluation.

If the infantile black-and-white view above were fair and balanced, when in fact it is absurd and parochial, it might do as the roughest of guidebooks to Communist China. But instead of serving to help us understand this giant nation, it creates a fog of ideology that impedes an understanding of its motives, psychology and strategy.

Every 10 years or so we should all go for a healthy ideology wash and re-read our J. William Fulbright, particularly his 1966 book *The Arrogance of Power*. The then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee shows that the fierce and heroic Vietnam pushback against first France – and then the United States – was not the backlash so much of militant communism as of nationalism in a communist wrapper.

And so today, understanding China makes it urgent that we understand China on its own terms, across the extraordinary sweep

of millennia, without obsessing on the relatively recent European ideological overlay that is formally called communism. We must not wind up making the same mistake as we did in Vietnam: to misapprehend what we are dealing with, and thus to give hasty, inappropriate, irrational and self-corroding responses.

SELF-BRAIN WASHING

Ideology works like those trendy, easy-to-use virtual-reality goggles. You slip them on not to take in what is Out There, but rather what you have purposely programmed to orbit round-and-round inside your head. Why not? Escapism is fun.

But while the selected entertainment can be comforting, virtual reality, for all its techno-wow-and-know-how, cannot tell you about true reality. Worse yet, it may somehow lead you to believe that what you are seeing is the truth, and what your brain may come to believe is the truth, if you re-play the same programme over and over, searing into your head embedded brain-muscle memories that trigger cycles of self-brain washing that spares us the need to see and think for ourselves.

At its worst, our news media in its total impact tends to work in virtual-reality mode. Rather than emphasise the presentation of the new – in the sense of fresh information or new perspectives – it will tend to recycle re-runs, re-heat slightly different versions of previously presented “realities” and interpretations thereof that have been programmed before. Often enough, the so-called “news cycle” is not much more than a process of recycling old or warmed-over news.

Blind anti-communism is one obvious political ideology used to colourise the goggles with which some “view” China. Ethnic hatred against Chinese people is another. They are not the only filters. Others are subtle, and perhaps even less conscious or intentional; but they infect the perception of what is Out There. The path to reality that we

seek to understand “passes inevitably through the dense and dark forest of the assumptions and desires that the researcher carries with him”, the legendary historian Eric Hobsbawm has written. “We approach our work not as pure minds but as men and women educated in a particular context, in such and such a society, in a specific part of the globe, at a given point in history.”

Like fly paper, our minds may wind up embedded with more bugs than truths.

BINARY BALONEY

Beijing Consensus versus Washington Consensus.

Asian Values versus Western Values.

Absolute Good versus Absolute Evil.

If we were to substitute the People’s Republic of China for the late Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, with the understanding that the USSR was the ultimate “evil empire” incarnate, then the logical inference is that the PRC is the new big evil.

This example reflects one of two tendencies that blur or confuse perception.

One is the obvious inclination to demonise “the other” – people, political systems or religions that are different from the observer’s. This syndrome is familiar and you have heard of this and observed it many times over. Others think this way about us; and we think such-and-such about “them”. No sensible middle ground or cultural overlap is conceivable.

What is less obvious is the epidemic of all sorts of hidden biases, even in our best professional efforts to make “objective” comparisons and assessments.

A study by RAND once examined 27 different forecasts of the

economic growth of China as compared to India. The resulting predictions were varied, in part because of the difficulty in making such complex forecasts, but also because one methodological bias or another tainted every one of the forecasts – each bias driven by the nature of the professional discipline making the forecast, not by intended evil.

Forecasts by business groups, for example, factored in heavily the comparative regulatory climates and property-right protections. Forecasts by academic institutions or groups were influenced by a favourable view of government intervention and central planning – factors that other studies ignored. Studies by international institutions were prone to give great weight to improvements (or lack thereof) in the nation’s educational system and social reforms.

There is absolutely nothing wrong – and there is a great deal of merit – in including all of these factors, as well as any others of value. But not one study managed to factor all of them into the equation in an objectively balanced and clear-headed way. Each and every conclusion was the product of a model that may be sophisticated but was not all-inclusive. No wonder at the end of all these studies, the conclusions of the China versus India prognoses varied widely.

This is the case with almost all such projections – the outcome is determined not just by the data that is inputted but also by the formula that processes and weighs that data.

This is true of even the best thought-out social science studies at our best universities and think tanks. Our minds are invariably coloured by those factors that weigh most heavily on them and/or by the sheer absence of factors that should be weighing more heavily. Any sort of formulaic or algorithmic approach cannot be unbiased because of all the factors that could be included, including the human factor.

Imagining China today as if it were a Soviet Union Redux (as

many Americans do) is perilous for many reasons, not least because of the pat presumption that the past is much like the present. Yes it is; but then again, it isn't. This is a tough issue even for our greatest historians, and reminds me of the reflection by Eric Hobsbawm about reconstructing something as singular as our own life: "Finding one's earlier self is to reconstruct a buried stranger... even one's own past is a foreign country."

Consistently capturing in some objective way a phenomenon as complex and dynamic as the China of 1.4 billion people – and their million problems – is impossible. Our judgments about the Chinese – and indeed theirs about us – need to be arrived at with great care and consummate mutual humility. We would be utterly irresponsible to operate otherwise.

Simplistic binary thinking is the product of a lack of respect for the complexity of others and their world.

One nagging problem, of course, is we are all guilty of the binary conceit, to one degree or other – including, and perhaps especially, the American journalist. I, for one, am hardly sinless. But more than ever these days, I am trying to see the world as it is (complex), rather than as we might like it to be (simple).

BEIJING CONSENSUS?

To me, it is foolish to imagine that the "Chinese model" of development is coherent and transportable enough to serve as a roadmap for other countries in their struggle to develop. But paranoid pessimists in the West believe exactly that.

They worry that the once triumphant "Washington Consensus" – which crashed like the Wall Street stock market in the winter of 2008–2009, triggering what Anatole Kaletsky described as "the intellectual equivalent of a nervous breakdown" – will be superseded

by the so-called "Beijing Consensus". In other words, the return of binary thinking: If *we* are not the model, then *they* must be the model.

What exactly might that be?

It's not entirely clear but a key element would include a firm authoritarianism, certainly a system far from anything as remotely mushy as our messy American democracy (a reservation not so hard to understand, actually).

However, for the purpose of both clarity and subtlety, it is the case that not all authoritarianisms are equal.

One example of a kind of authoritarianism to which the West accords increasing credibility is that of the successful Republic of Singapore. Its system is often labelled "soft authoritarianism". International assessments often favour this small city-state, especially for its economic achievements, low level of corruption, professionalised government and educational excellence.

By contrast, an example of an unacceptable authoritarianism would be that of the Russian Federation.

So, where does Beijing fit into the political-export picture? In my view: nowhere.

The extraordinary Chinese experience is anything but a globally applicable, consensus-building phenomenon. Their history is unique, their culture is Confucian, and centralised rule is no stranger to China's history, whatever -ism it is called.

Every nation evolves from its own special background. Some start fast and morph into an empire. Some take their time. Others take forever – and some are still struggling to get it together and may never get anywhere.

Any nation that looks for secrets of success – or some developmental model – from the experience and track record of China, with its many admirable accomplishments but with more than a billion people and

(still) a million problems, needs to have its head examined.

Even if Nation X were to wake up one morning and say – wow! Beijing’s way is exactly the way for us – it would find the Beijing model very difficult to emulate. China itself struggles with its own Beijing “model” and is well aware of its deficiencies. After all ... the Chinese “invented” it!

China’s leaders, for whom growing inequality appears to be one extremely worrisome outcome of the Beijing blueprint, themselves often refer to an old Chinese proverb that “inequality, rather than want, is the cause of trouble”.

One of America’s great political economists, the late Charles Wolf Jr., once wrote of China: “Many an oligarch has lost his head after ignoring this point. With its vast geography, enormous population, rapid growth, and an increasing impossibility of [completely] limiting access to outside information, some observers believe China may be or may become a political tinderbox.”

China’s leaders have more than enough on their hands ensuring that the so-called Beijing Consensus remains the steady consensus even within Beijing before they’d dream of packaging it for prime-time export. Unlike some semi-hysterical Western commentators, its leaders sensibly try to keep their heads about them. Fear clouds thinking and creates nightmares in the mind that scramble reality, sometimes beyond reason.

Reason is our only hope for the future – and non-binary observing and thinking.

THE TIGHTROPE OF REALITY

Many Chinese believe their nation is the new big thing and the United States is the old big thing.

For their part, some, though not all, Americans tend to agree –

that the US is declining while China is rising. Paradoxically, both sides are only half-right, and that’s the paradox of the current world order.

As Oscar Wilde puts it in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “The way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test Reality we must see it on the tight-rope.”

The tightrope is the Sino-US balance. China is rising, obviously, but a serious loss in overall economic ground speed could cause the giant superliner to stall. The impact of a crash will be devastating not just in surrounding Asia.

America is not declining (in my opinion) but surely is in a holding pattern; it appears to be falling only in contrast to China’s obvious rise. The US flight path gets bumpier but overall manages to hover on a more or less level altitude.

But now when it flies it sees, for the first time since the 1980s, another superliner on a similar altitude.

Experts disagree when, if ever, China will “overtake” the US. That will not be tomorrow, surely: China’s population is ageing while America’s is constantly freshened by immigration. The two political systems are deeply flawed: the former often moves too rigidly under central command, and the latter often freezes up due to partisan and vested-interest fragmentation. In their own way, each system is both dysfunctional and at the same time inefficiently effective.

The consequences of China’s “stall” and America’s “stasis” would suck much of the life out of the global economic bloodstream. Neither Africa nor Latin American, even rising together, could pick up the slack and set right the bilateral collapse. It is thus in the interests of both China and the US to help each other survive so as many as possible can thrive, especially themselves.

This geopolitical idea for the future is not that widely shared in either country. The opposite view is more common. This means that

both sides are in effect rooting for each to fail. This would amount to a doomsday machine – triggering world collapse, maybe even world war.

The truth of the Sino-US relationship is that it is on the tightrope of a tightly wound paradox. To prevent slipping off the tightrope, each is in desperate need for the other to succeed in maintaining their own balance. Instead of leading to war, the challenge of keeping their equipoise on the tense tightrope of mutual need can only deepen the peace.

It would help if both sides were to put their guns away and lock them in a cabinet. But, alas, it appears that we humans are not hard-wired to always choose the best option.

THE QUEST FOR CERTAINTY

In one of my university courses – “An Introduction to the Media and Politics of Asia” – in front of a classroom of undergraduates with little knowledge of Asia, when the giant subject of China comes up, I always try to simplify. Try to throw a dozen arcane geopolitical complexities at young-adult Americans, and you wind up turning them off and tuning them out faster than you can say Martin Heidegger.

The urge to explain the complex with the attractive qualities of clarity and simplicity is a risky business, of course. Often it fails. Nothing has failed as embarrassingly as economics, for example.

For centuries, economic theory has surpassed in mathematical refinement and reasoned rigour any of the social sciences, and yet has singularly failed us in vital ways. Chief among them has been its ineptitude in predicting serious economic crises so that we can minimise pain and suffering.

This, really, is both a moral as well as intellectual failure. It is as if modern medicine, for all that it costs, could not predict the probability of a disease in the presence of defining symptoms.

In his 2017 book *The End of Theory*, risk-manager guru/author Richard Bookstaber writes knowingly: “Economic theory asserts a level of consistency and rationality that not only leaves the cascades and propagation over the course of a crisis unexplained but also asserts they are unexplainable. Everything’s rational, until it isn’t; economics works, until it doesn’t.”

The disease of economic scientism is like a god that repeatedly fails us. Nonetheless, economists will evangelically seek to propagate the faith with formulaic gospels that would seem to make sense, except that in real life they do not.

One such believer in the possibility of pluperfect precise prediction was the otherwise modern-epoch economist, William Stanley Jevons. Though far superior in every sense to most of his contemporaries, the English mathematician fell in love with a pet theory that was to severely take a bite out of his overall credibility.

He believed that severe downturns or stomach-churning economic crisis were related to sunspot cycles, because of his conviction that economic science was a true sister/brother to natural science. Sunspot storm cycles had been pegged to last 11.11 years. If commercial downturns could be shown to similarly correlate, a true science of economic prediction would be established.

Jevons’ problem was that, try as he and his researchers might, no data could be found to support the sunspot theorem. It was very frustrating, because no matter how the data was sliced or diced, or put into the theoretical mixmaster in hopes of a different outcome, the conceptual recipe never worked. He should have given up long before he did; but true believers are not known for a gracious acceptance of reality.

This tale of the errant sunspots is of course cautionary, and it is told not only to offer you a sense that economists will sometimes go to

insane lengths to prove they are not in fact insane; but also to remind myself – a putative social scientist as well as practicing journalist – that all theories are at best metaphors, or conceptual outlines and frameworks – at best a sort of thought experiment designed to enlighten and deepen our understanding but not to boldly and precisely predict the future, which will relentlessly and eternally escape comic-book pre-capture.

China is no comic-book character. No one should presume to predict the path of its future. Including the smartest Chinese Communist brainiacs.

THEORY OF THE TWO SUNS

So, in view of all of the above, here is my metaphor about China. But it is not a grand theory. And we'll see why.

For my students, I sometimes refer to this metaphor as the “Theory of the Two Suns”. This is to get their respectful attention. But it is far less a theory than a mild metaphor – but an insightful and helpful one nonetheless.

It arises out of the rich minds of two Singaporean brains – George Yeo, a rightly praised former foreign minister, and Kishore Mahbubani, currently dean of the celebrated Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. They are serious thinkers about our current world who offer wisdom and perspective.

Their metaphor of the two suns is simple enough.

After the Soviet Empire's collapse, there was only one sun remaining to pull everything together in the geopolitical solar system. That was the United States, and as it was the sole magnetic centre of the universe, all the big planets and all the little planets had to revolve around it, seeking to avoid running up against one another or getting too close to the one big sun and maybe even burning up in

fiery denouement. Some revolved closely; others kept their orbits at a distance but not so far away. During this time period, basically, world politics was relatively monotonic.

But that was then, and this is now.

These days, we see clearly that a second sun has arrived on the scene, edging closer to the first sun and starting to challenge its visual prominence and palpable heat, thus upsetting the unipolar gravitational system that was once so simple to understand and even to sketch out on a classroom blackboard.

But with the re-entrance of the China sun into the political solar system – for centuries lost in some dizzying black hole of history – the magnetic fields are starting to work at cross purposes.

Many planets/nations want to edge closer to the second sun but they don't want to get too far removed from the first. But others think it might be in their interest to do just that – make a new break for the second sun and settle itself there. Others want to orbit as they have been, at least for the time being, as if nothing is happening. The rest are unsure and nervous.

With this new second superstar pushing closer, everyone feels new pulls of gravity, and one way or the other adjusts their orbits – in the process taking great care not to smash into one another, or allow their new orbit to bring them too close to either sun and risk being marginalised, or even getting burned.

This is a marvellous metaphor for the psychotic geopolitical rumbling of our time. Until we are sure of the finalised positions of the two suns in relation to one another, no one is entirely sure of where they stand, or how they are to move. And, last but not least, the two suns themselves are not sure of where they will stand in relation to each other as events are so much in motion.

This is now the world in which we live.

MAKE ROOM FOR BEIJING

Suzerainty is a word not often used.

In your own life, assuming (as I hope for you) that yours is more healthily normal than that of the political journalist or political scientist, you may never hear of it.

Surely the world's most famous literary spider, the ultra-literate Charlotte, created by the real writer E.B. White, would never spin a word of such obscurity and pretention across her web. After all, if no one seeing it knew what it meant, there would be no way it could have an effect on anyone – whether farmers or their hands.

Every word in language has a purpose, or at least once had a reason for its origination. Otherwise it would not exist. And sometimes there is only one word for the precise description of a situation, where no synonym will do the matter justice.

This is exactly the case in describing what China desires in the South China Sea. There is only one word that captures it best. Suzerainty.

To simplify, suzerainty is sort of like ... sovereignty *lite*. Sovereignty means, in effect, that you own it; but *suzerainty* means that, while you're not the owner and maybe wouldn't really want to own it, you want a great deal of sway over it.

The Chinese want to suzerain the South China Sea. I know, suzerain is a noun, and here it is being used as a verb. So let us inaugurate a new verbal usage: to *suzerain*.

Beijing aims to suzerain over the seas and nearby territories the way Washington has always levied a measure of *suzeraination* over the Caribbean and the territories thereof.

Make no mistake about it: China wants to be boss of its backyard. It believes this outcome to be embedded in its destiny. It believes it has been held back for too long by others, outsiders, mainly European.

And it is in a rush to make up for lost time.

Years ago, the late Richard Dennis Baum, an esteemed political scientist at UCLA, a universally respected “China watcher” and a friend and colleague, was trying to describe the return of China to centre stage.

I recall him saying that any short description would run the risk of worst-case analysis if the threat were overstated (my preferred word was warmongering) or, to go the other way, of risk-denial if the threat were underplayed (my word would be panda-hugging). A proper, honest, careful explanation required a delicate balance, he said, but it would be a grave intellectual dishonesty to downplay the significance of China's fierce build-up of its navy.

They mean to dominate East Asia.

You mean, I ask, to invade as opportunities arise?

Probably not, Baum replies, not if you mean the vacuuming up of others' sovereignty. More like they are aiming to achieve, overall ... yes, then he used the word ... suzerainty. That exact word.

Then, when Richard was asked whether that obscure word of art might be too soft for a hard problem, he thought for a moment and said: “No, I think that's the exactly the right word for it.”

WORLD DOMINATION

Probably is not the word for certainty, of course.

What “everyone knows” is not always known to everyone as undeniable fact.

Everyone knows that China's long-range objective is total world domination; yet how that will be achieved or when it will become our collective global destiny is not at all known to everyone. But a lot of people think they *know*. Period.

Perhaps the “certainty” arises from the simple equation of equating

Communist China with the former Soviet Union, the Communist superpower whose existence as an empire was in fact an indisputable fact until it came to collapse in 1989.

Certainty by analogy: While Beijing is not yet a superpower, its political system is still classically communist – certainly more than its mix-and-match economic system. So if the USSR was expansionist, so too must be the People's Republic of China.

It's that simple.

Actually it is not.

If anyone inside the government or the party of the People's Republic of China is seriously thinking of world domination, they should think again. It is difficult to achieve, and perhaps even more difficult to maintain.

Ask the British; ask any surviving Soviet Communist. World domination is a tough assignment. Throughout history empires have risen and fallen on the conceit that they did not have enough and needed more – territory, space, lebensraum, religious converts, whatever.

But with 1.4 billion people to house, feed, educate and otherwise keep content and loyal, the government and party might be best advised to succeed first at the many onerous tasks at home still undone, before venturing out to “dominate the world”. On that standard, the People's Republic of China has a very great deal of work to do indeed before it can set sail for world domination.

Common sense might suggest that the Chinese elite could come to that conclusion on its own. Although the post-Mao governments and the post-Mao party can correctly claim to preside over a China that lifted probably a half billion people out of dirt-poor poverty between 1981 and 2012, something like one in 10 Chinese have been left behind in the dust. So we see that there remains plenty of work to do

inside the borders of China before the People's Liberation Army makes plans to force-march into Montenegro, Monaco and Minneapolis on its domination tour.

No question, China will indeed aim to dominate transnational economic sectors that it views as central to its survival (energy, commodities), as well as beg, borrow, steal – and if absolutely necessary invent – every last piece of needed technology. Perhaps it is in this sense that we can agree that it plans to probe and stride across the globe as a new colossus. And it may be that the only force that will prove capable of slowing this march toward a more civilised and economically stable survival would be its own unforced errors, whether self-inflicted wounds, breakdowns in concentration, errors of governance and residual excesses of ideology, such as the return of Maoist fundamentalism.

All nations make blunders but with China the penalty for the last blunder would be gigantically tragic. Mao had his day. Let history move on.

The word “certainty” and “China” are not joined at the hip, though there is certainty that China will be with us for another 5,000 years unless we somehow manage to blow the world up. But there are uncertainties of note.

“There has always been some doubt as to whether ... the Chinese ever believed that equality ever really existed in international relations,” famously wrote the Singaporean scholar Wang Gungwu back in 1968. “This doubt partly explains the current fear that, when given the chance, the Chinese may wish to go back to their long-hallowed tradition of treating foreign countries as all alike but unequal and inferior to China.”

Fortunately or not for the Chinese, the world has changed greatly since the dizzying days of the Middle Kingdom at its greatest width and

length. There may be many more good days for China. But the good days of old are long past and they won't be like the good days ahead.

Suzerainty, probably.

Global sovereignty for China would take a very great deal longer. Like forever. Which is another way of saying: never.

THE PRINCIPLE OF HOPE

The self-deception of some public intellectuals – whether academic expert or media “expert” – is a phenomenon of our time.

Merely writing about a problem hardly solves it. Newspapers everywhere expose corruption in government and then move on to expose other “problems” as if the corruption is no more and the issue had shrunk to moot.

Similarly, simply developing a new intellectual and philosophical framework, even if from the greatest centres of learning, won't easily or rapidly change public opinion or public perception.

In one sense, of course, I wish otherwise. If the best and wisest ideas were to rise to the surface and the worst were to sink to the bottom, how would we not be better off? How can China and the US reach an optimal relationship that will add to the vigour and depth of world order if the dialogue is constantly degraded by misconceptions and lies? Bad ideas only help us to the extent that, as part of a dialectical public process, they rouse our best minds to fight them with better ideas.

The value of insisting on best ideas and best practices must never be abandoned. Intellectual despair will lead to moral erosion. By contrast, hope raises our spirits and promotes the possibility of progress by insisting that we do our best, not slide back into darkness from nihilism and exhaustion, if we want to better our world.

As the utopian German philosopher Ernest Bloch put it, we

absolutely must live by “the principle of hope”. Without it, where are we? What future is there? Why go on?

A GLINT OF EVIL

I have put below four direct unaltered quotations.

Each comes from the work of a different writer, well respected. If you don't mind, though, the authors' names are not included; I find that political debate can become much less reasonable when it becomes much too personal. What's more, my concern is not with the integrity of their views but with the sanity of their views. Consider each perspective, and see if you don't hear some echo of unreason, though not (one hopes) the glint of evil.

1. “... Sooner or later, if present trends continue, war is probable in Asia.... China today is actively seeking to scare the United States away from East Asia, rather as Germany sought to frighten Britain before the First World War.”
2. “... The Chinese leadership views the world in much the same way Kaiser Wilhelm II did a century ago”
3. “To put it bluntly, China cannot rise peacefully.”
4. “... The United States is much more likely to go to war with China than it is with any other major power.”

War is not inevitable anywhere if there is the political will to block it. If there is war, then somehow that political will has been undermined. The question is, how did it weaken and who weakened it? Was it by design or was it by happenstance?

Many factors will be at play (ideology, national interests, domestic politics, etc.). But no one can quarrel with the proposition that what writers write and say about the world can affect our view of the world, perhaps even change its direction.

The writer Rachel Carlson helped give birth to the ecology movement with *Silent Spring*, her 1962 masterpiece. George Orwell's 1984, first published in 1949, created images of centralised mind control that remains indelible to this day. Jonathan Schell's 1982 *The Fate of the Earth* made subtle linkage between the inherent evil anarchy of sovereign-nation world order and the odds of an earth-threatening nuclear war.

These were not writers who underestimated the impact of their words. For them, their prose had to be the pathway to truth. Precisely because we, the readers, might actually believe in what we were reading, they had to believe absolutely in what they were writing.

The greatest writing may not be recognised in its time, while lesser writing may well be. It is clear in my mind that this short book – just like my first-ever book *Understanding Doomsday* (1971) – will not likely be commercially mistaken for *50 Shades of Gray*. So the task of the ambitious writer is to seek to imagine how the thought and the writing might be read fifty years from its origination, not simply for the instant reaction on opening night.

A book titled *50 Shades of China* might well market more forcefully while lacking any gradations of gray whatsoever. This, to me, is any book that predicts, much less recommends, war with China.

It is hard to imagine that God (she or he) would have a positive view of using his-or-her God-given writing talent for such a purpose. Like that of the rich man having about the same chance of “entering heaven as a camel fitting through the eye of a needle”, that writer would presumably have a long wait in a notably hot place behind a long line of saint wannabes before receiving her or his eternal reward, which should be an eternity in a hellish queue.

Ethical political journalism needs to increase love and cut down on hate. There are no shades of gray of any colour coordination to

mitigate that deeply moral responsibility. The fate of the earth, the fate of mankind (and all its other animals) in part depends on it.

Call it the “Silent Earth”. It is crying out for peace and respect.

A WEST COAST POLICY TOWARD CHINA

Is there such a thing as a “West Coast” mentality?

If there is, is it a factor in the bilateral relationship?

There is not the slightest doubt that the emotional mentality of the West Coast versus the East Coast of the US on a vital East-West issue such as the China relationship is different.

Let us start with the obvious fact that the West Coast is different from the East Coast. The latter represents fraying, unhappy cities propped up against the washed-up Atlantic Ocean, seaway to the past (Europe). By contrast, consider West Coast cities – Santa Barbara, San Francisco and San Diego, not to mention Seattle, Vancouver and Los Angeles ... sprightly and pleasant... all set against the Pacific Ocean, super sea-lane to the future (Asia).

Geography may not be destiny but it sets a tone.

One is outlook. Ours is generally sunny; the East Coast's is generally gloomy. We here tend to believe; they tend to despair. Consider the weather factor on the human psyche: It's happy-go-lucky California Hawaiian versus Kierkgaardian Scandinavian.

On the USA West Coast, there are more Asians than anywhere else outside of Asia. More and more, from all over Asia – and nowadays especially from the mainland – they come and settle. In Southern California there are more people of Korean heritage than anywhere outside of Seoul. There are so many Vietnamese-Americans that a freeway exit-sign on our monster-405 reads “Little Saigon”. Asian student musicians populate our high school orchestras.

There are so many Asian college students around here that one

of our universities is sometimes dubbed the “University of Caucasians Lost among Asians” and another the “University of Spoiled Chinese” (which before that was known locally – and affectionately – as “University of Spoiled Children”!). In Los Angeles city, Caucasians now officially number a minority.

There is much optimism in the air, from the ongoing Silicon Valley to up-and-coming Silicon Beach, just south of Los Angeles (and near to my dynamic Loyola Marymount University). Hollywood executives get up in the morning and after a non-fat latte or two ask themselves: how well will my film market in China? The last one hit the jackpot. And they hear the whisper that the Chinese have become so movie-crazy 10 new modern theatres are being opened every ... day!

New-age non-profits – such as RAND (a think tank) and the Pacific Century Institute (a good-works tank) – add fresh wind to old policy storms. The effect of this demography in our geography is to nurture and sustain a sunny politics of possibility regarding China and Asia, rather than a dreary politics of impossibility.

Perhaps this summary of West versus East coasts is somewhat over-drawn – but not out of all proportion! The attitude is not the same in Washington.

Let me say this about Washington, understating it a little: It is a horrible place – maybe the meanest political town in a First World country, fully in the feral class of other notably mean-spirited capital cities. Many from the West Coast when in Washington on business stay no longer than they have to.

So this book arises out of a West Coast mentality. It honours the optimistic, persistently doubts the worst-case scenario, believes in our common humanity, Chinese or Caucasian. By psychology if not by mileage, we are equidistant between Beijing and Washington. Instead of searching for *cause belli*, we search for the equipoise of balance,

mutual respect, understanding and common purpose – a Pax Sino-America.

Yo-yo diplomacy, in the age of the Two Suns, won't do the job. Too many chances of collisions, even of a devastating strategic one. It's too risky, too amateurish, too yesterday. The 21st century needs better, the Chinese and Americans together deserve better, the rest of the world has got to have better.

The good professional diplomats on both sides have done a yeoman's job of keeping all the many planets and the two suns from colliding. This book is no criticism of their hard, grinding work and in fact admires them greatly. But evil forces as well as good are in this mix and a profound struggle is underway.

I find this yo-yo hidden war extremely disturbing and dispiriting. Here we have two great nations and peoples – the American and the Chinese. If nothing else, they each deserve respect. Their relationship should be one of mutual respect. That, along with common sense and mutual trust, will save the day. Our best diplomats need our best efforts and help. This book means to be a part of that – to make the case that the warmongers are not only certainly wrong-thinking but probably evil-minded.

The part *Yo-Yo Diplomacy* seeks to play is to suggest to you, with conviction and convincingly, the need for a transformation in attitudes and trust between the two great peoples of China and America. Nothing of significance will move forward without this; and without it something of a monstrous evil lurks ahead. I, for one, can see no other way long-term to get a higher, safer state of global order.

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01

ZHU RONGJI'S LIGHT TOUCH IS SORELY MISSING IN TODAY'S CHINA

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST, MONDAY, 15 JUNE 2015

*Tom Plate says China today could do with the foresight
and calm self-confidence of a Zhu Rongji*

RETROSPECTIVE:

And a very appropriate headline it was. To start a fortnightly series of essays on China and America off on a negative note perhaps might not seem like the most optimistic of beginnings. But the fact of the matter is that the answer to China's leadership problems rests mainly within the vast talent pool of China itself. The only question is whether the system permits the very ablest to rise to the top – or only the most conforming and risk-averse. Of course, that same question can fairly be asked of our own system in the United States, most people would agree. No political system has a monopoly on excellence. Chance and confusion can rain on any day. Inspired leadership can arise at any moment, in an unexpected way. Former premier Zhu Rongji seemed to me to be about the best that you could want or hope for, for China; many Americans might say the same about former president Barack Obama. But one quality that great leaders invariably display is the ability to communicate, to build the consensus, to take their people along with them and to get important things done. This was Zhu in a nutshell.

Because we're human, we sometimes imagine nations as human beings – and babble on about their personality failures as if indulging in serious psycho-political analysis. We envision them as human-like, and declaim their boldness or weakness, or whatever, as if they were a singular personality.

Take the United States, for example – it's an ongoing, semi-functional jumble of competing forces, interests and partisanship that roil above and below constitutionally entrenched layers of competing government authorities. And yet we will depict the America of today as no more complex than – say – Barack Obama without the Harry Truman.

Even though China has four times America's population, it draws comparable anthropomorphic caricature as well. And yet it is such an endlessly sprawling kaleidoscope of the rural and the urban, Confucian/capitalist, central-party/deeply engrained native culture that it's folly to try to sum it up in fewer than a few billion words and a thousand metaphors.

But that doesn't stop us, because when thinking of Beijing, the anthropomorphic feeling is especially pressing: you feel in your heart that some important dimension in its current political personality is missing.

It is just a feeling, not a Princeton PhD thesis. Yes, China is not just emerging, it is emergent; it is no longer weak, and its diplomacy is starting to flex as muscularly as the well-photographed exercises of the People's Liberation Army. And, no question, even with the economy cooling, it is already a powerhouse. We all get this.

But, at the same time, we have the sense of an absent dimension and we glance back in time for something, or someone, to fill in the blank. No, it's not Mao Zedong; the last thing we'd long for is a neo-Maoist figure; Deng Xiaoping was fine, but that's not it. And the

current president, Xi Jinping, has been providing strong direction and making tough decisions – generally getting good marks from many international as well as domestic observers.

Still, something is missing – a top-level political personality who listens carefully, with a sense of subtlety and nuance, with placid self-confidence; even the ability to take a blow or two and not get instantly psyched up for war; some supreme serenity, with a brain born for geopolitics.

Here's a hint: Who on the mainland recently has said anything like this – and obviously meant it? “What we want to do is to work for the people's welfare and build China into a strong and prosperous country with democracy and the rule of law. We absolutely won't engage in hegemony or power politics as some other countries do, as we've suffered enough from these. What good can come from bullying and oppressing others? We can become rich and strong through our own efforts, and we won't bully others.”

Yes, this was said in June 2001 by the same man who in 1989 refused to unleash troops onto Shanghai's streets to smash demonstrations, as had been done in that other metropolis up north; who wasn't afraid to meet students; who guided China into the great globalised unknown of the World Trade Organization, despite a million honest doubts back home; and who managed to settle down his fellow Politburo colleagues after the “accidental” US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 – just one month after his White House humiliation by Bill Clinton, who cravenly back-pedalled and reneged over his promises on the WTO.

Through all this, Zhu Rongji, then the fifth premier of China, now in retirement, kept China cool simply by keeping his own; by averting his eyes from the inevitable setback, no matter how bitter, and affixing them to where China needed to be 10, 20, 30 years down the

road. He was then – and now – exactly what was – and is – needed: a visionary with foresight.

It is no doubt an extreme case of anthropomorphic romanticizing to want to believe that a Zhu-type figure would handle “bratty” Hong Kong with the same tactical deftness and insight as Zhu himself did with those 1989 demonstrators in Shanghai. The strength of the light touch reflects the core of self-confidence that breeds flexibility.

So when, as many expect, Hong Kong’s legislature later this week fails to pass the electoral overhaul package for the chief executive election of 2017, many also expect Beijing to turn predictably cold – and sullen – and somewhat forbidding. Or will it shock the world and offer an unexpected but utterly self-confident turn of warm understanding?

Some countries are grand but not great, others are great but not grand; the rare ones are both great and grand.

The late Noel Annan, a Cambridge don, was famously insistent that the legendary thinker Isaiah Berlin’s relentless emphasis on the impact of leaders on history was tragically underappreciated, particularly by academics. He once lampooned them this way: “Social scientists have depersonalised acres of human experience so that history resembles a ranch on which herds move, driven they know not why by impersonal forces, munching their way across the prairie.”

Real life takes place on no such barren ranch but on vast windy steppes of difficult historical realities. The exceptional leader can prove a huge value-added force. As authors Orville Schell and John Delury put it in their deeply illuminating book *Wealth and Power*, “Zhu ensured that China would enter the 21st century poised to advance ever more rapidly ...”

China faces great historic challenges and decision-crossroads now. If only its complex political personality contained a visible dimension of the Zhu Rongji touch.

P.S. It is difficult to be sure whether the current president Xi Jinping has a touch of the Zhu in him. The strong-willed leader of China is obviously struggling to keep it altogether. Perhaps the stylistic calculation that worked 15 years ago – the orchestra leader cajoling the brass section to behave itself – had to give way to the Strong Daddy threatening to cut off the children’s allowance.

AND THEN THERE’S...

“As we often say in China, a single flower does not make spring, while one hundred flowers in full blossom bring spring to the garden. [...] We should, under the guidance of Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thought of the Three Represents and the Scientific Outlook on Development, enhance our strategic thinking and confidence, and better balance China’s overall domestic and international interests.”

– *The Governance of China*, by Xi Jinping, Foreign Languages Press, 2014

02

CHINA AND THE US MUST INCLUDE JAPAN IN TALKS ON SECURITY OF EAST ASIA

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST, MONDAY, 29 JUNE 2015

*Tom Plate says Beijing needs to rethink its policy
towards Japan for the good of the region*

RETROSPECTIVE:

Perhaps because Asians allegedly tend to have famously long memories (certainly longer than Americans'), they sometimes tend to have short tempers. Case in point is the Chinese versus the Japanese. Mutual hatred is too often over the top, from two of our most profound and developed cultures: there must be something deeply wrong. But young Chinese university students who travel to visit Japan return home so impressed with that country and culture. Japanese university students, among the sharpest in the world, are smart enough to know that a nation of 127 million has got to work things out with a nation of 1.4 billion. When will both sides come to their senses? I pray that it is sooner rather than later.

Let us divide tense East Asia, Caesarean fashion, into three geopolitical parts.

One is Chinese, the other is Japanese, and the third is – yes – American (even though, as the Chinese are inclined to point out,

America is not exactly native to East Asia, right?).

By the way, no disrespect intended towards the Koreans, but they cannot compose a fourth because of their own division into two parts – a peculiar Korean-style Caesarean sectioning.

Last week, representatives of two-thirds of geopolitical East Asia met to calm tensions. The occasion was the worthy US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, with both sides in Washington hoping to talk through bilateral differences and potential confrontations. An excellent idea: the world doesn't need any more wars, and East Asia doesn't need any. But the issues are tough, complicated and the Sino-US relationship continues to need immense work. It is to the credit of the two governments that this urgent task is not lost on them.

But it is also fair to ask how betterment of the East Asian neighbourhood can be achieved if a third of it is excluded from the management committee. No doubt, if East Asia's remaining third had been sitting at the table as well, Beijing wouldn't have shown up at all; or if it had, the talks would have been nightmarish. Even so, it might also be speculated that sectioning Japan off to the side might well prove a serious miscalculation.

Japan, after all, is not remotely Greece, right now the world's saddest modern economy. On the contrary, its per capita income dwarfs China's, and for a population of a mere 127 million, the fact is that its overall economy probably ranks No. 3 worldwide, even above powerhouse Germany. What's more, the Japanese people, according to opinion polls, while remaining pacifist and anti-nuclear, have begun to worry about the soundness of their China tack: go with the prevailing winds, just sell and buy, don't argue, and everything will be A-OK.

China is now Japan's No. 1 foreign preoccupation, and the US second. The political impact is titanic. "To be successful, Japanese leaders must persuade their public that cooperation with China will reduce

Japan's vulnerabilities rather than exacerbate them," advises Japan expert Sheila Smith, senior fellow on the US Council on Foreign Relations, via her surpassingly comprehensive book *Intimate Rivals*: "The old ways of managing its relationship with China are no longer effective."

Japan has begun viewing China more as an existential challenge than as just a jolly-good super-big-time importer and exporter. The causes of this sea change are many, but of course the various claims and counter-claims – and bumps – in the East China Sea have scarcely bolstered bilateral comity. Another is that China's advocacy of a worldwide policy of non-interference in a country's internal affairs (especially its own) tends not to apply to Japan's internal affairs.

Japan is certainly vulnerable to criticism, as is any country. China and others often complain about its "bulimic" memory, especially regarding war atrocities. But as Smith points out, the unintended result of all the nagging is to harden domestic sentiment against China. It is no coincidence that the two most politically significant Japanese prime ministers in recent times have been the showy war-shrine-visiting Junichiro Koizumi and the overtly nationalistic Shinzo Abe. Note, too, that indignant right-wing pressure groups and lobbies that do wish China serious ill have juicy new leases on political life and the Japanese are now debating whether to revise their constitution to expand their military space and, presumably, jump into an East Asian arms race with that good old fighting spirit.

There is immense irony here, and it is truly heartbreaking. Smith points out with poignant perspective that support from the Japanese public for grandstanding PM visits to war shrines and the like actually has been undergoing structural erosion due to generational turnover. And, she reports, the nation's nationalistic right wing is actually less unified than fragmented: all Japanese conservatives are not cut from the same grumpy cloth. But harrowing sea confrontations between

fishing vessels and military ships serve to narrow differences; loud rhetoric from Beijing plays into the wrong political hands. Instead of winning over public opinion, Chinese policy would appear to be making the Japanese wonder about their military readiness. Wasn't it Sun Tzu who wrote: "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting"?

Beijing's policy towards Japan needs to be rethought. Smith's definitive book nails the point that Japanese foreign policy in general (and towards China in particular) is almost entirely driven by domestic politics, pressures and lobbies. There is no overall conceptual framework; the national emotion is becoming increasingly existential.

The problem for Chinese as well as Japanese diplomacy is daunting. Both nations field diplomats of exceptional talent and cosmopolitan subtlety; they understand each other's domestic problems; and, when the two sides do talk, they come away believing that deft diplomacy can somehow heal all wounds. That might be true if the bilateral relationship were being left entirely to the diplomats. But it's not. Pugnacious groups on both sides are gaining leverage, and mutually respectful diplomacy loses out to petty pugnacity, especially over stupid territorial issues. As Smith concludes: "The potential for heightened tension – and perhaps even conflict – will make it increasingly difficult to go back to Deng Xiaoping's approach to leaving the problem to future generations to resolve."

And so to recycle Caesar yet again: all of East Asia will remain in three unhappy parts until and unless all three parts get their acts together. Without that, there surely will be conflict. Trilateral issues require triangular diplomacy. No one should be excluded. It is very dangerous. China's Japan policy is in a box that Beijing has got to begin thinking itself out of. That won't be easy, but it is mandatory for East Asian peace and security.

P.S. At this writing, military conflict had not broken out between the two. But there is every reason to have believed it would, could and in a sense should. The problem with representational politics, whether of the voting democratic kind or the non-voting communist kind, is that what is represented sometimes is lunacy.

AND THEN THERE'S...

“As I just said, the main trend in Sino-Japanese relations is good at the moment, but there are indeed some comments that are highly offensive to the Chinese. We hope that Japanese popular opinion will keep the big picture of Sino-Japanese friendship in mind and not do anything that would provoke or offend the Chinese people. This is the only way for our friendly and cooperative partnership to continue to develop.”

– *Zhu Rongji Meets the Press*, by Zhu Rongji, Oxford University Press, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photograph by Harvey Keys

Tom Plate is a university professor, a veteran columnist focused on Asia and America, and an educational innovator. A Los Angeles resident, this full-time Clinical Professor and Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University has orchestrated live interactive seminars with major universities across Asia, as part of LMU’s path-finding Asia Media International. He teaches courses on Asia, the United Nations and US Foreign Policy; and is the author of 13 books, including the bestsellers *Confessions of an American Media Man* (2007) and the “Giants of Asia” series, published by Marshall Cavendish. Born in New York, he was educated at Amherst College, where he was Phi Beta Kappa, and Princeton University, where he was awarded his professional degree in public and international affairs. He has received a number of journalistic recognitions, including from the American Society of Newspaper Editors, its Deadline Writing Award. For more details, please see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Plate