

“What do Canadians Need to Know About Chinese Politics?”  
Luncheon Speech to the Conference on “Political Change in China”  
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Thank you David Dewitt for that overly-generous introduction. The warm description was the kind of thing my father would have appreciated and my mother believed.

I'm very appreciative to have been invited to the conference and to have been given the opportunity to address you at lunch in this spectacular hall. It's a pleasure again to be with the Ontario chapter of “Bernie's People” and to be in the company of such an array of talented China watchers.

As a lapsed political scientist and China specialist, I feel more than a little humble in addressing you. I did my formal Chinese language training more than 30 years ago; I haven't taught in a political science department for more than 13 years; I've been outside the academy for almost 4 years while serving at the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada; and though I travel to Asia fairly frequently, most of it is to parts of Asia beyond greater China.

Thus my role in speaking to a group of genuine China scholars and practitioners is really as a fellow traveler, occasional contributor, and devoted observer. I'm really the outsider looking in and have great admiration for those of you looking at China from the inside out.

It was about 30 years ago that I did most of the writing for my doctoral dissertation, a biography of John Fairbank, in the Robarts Library just around the corner. The comparisons between the China field in Canada then and now are striking. At that time we could have had all of the academic specialists on Chinese politics across the country at one of the eight tables in this room. Not only has the number of specialists increased, so have their capabilities, their networks, and their contacts with living China. The sophistication and liveliness of the conversation at the conference indicate just how far the field has come.

Progress, most certainly. But are we doing enough?

I think all of us agree that China scholarship is functioning in a substantially different context. 30 years ago, China was an exotic and distant presence for most Canadians. Now China is no longer “over there” but a daily economic reality for average Canadians.

Beyond food, culture and people, they feel China every time they visit a shopping centre, look at commodity prices or negotiate a mortgage.

I remember vividly a discussion in rural Nova Scotia in 2004 when I asked a man selling apples out of the back of a truck how business was. “Bad,” he said. “Why?” I asked. “China,” he replied. He went on to tell me that China was now the world’s largest exporter of apples, that it produced about half of the apple concentrate sold in North America, and that McCain’s apple pies were assembled in China for export back to Canada and other parts of the world. Apple growers, manufacturers, and traders understand the force of global China more immediately than do many of our trade policy experts.

And this leads to the paradox that is the main theme of my remarks today. Our academic experts on China are far greater in number, far better trained, far better connected to China than ever before. But at the same time they have less influence on public perceptions and Ottawa’s policy responses.

How can we explain the paradox?

Before giving my own answer, let me ask you three questions by way of an informal survey.

In the past year have you had contact with a person from the media about your work and ideas, posted them on a blog, or published an op ed? Almost 50 of the 60 people in the room raised their hand.

In the past year have you spoken directly with a Canadian official or parliamentarian about China or Canada’s China policy? About fifteen hands went up.

Have your work with the media or government advanced your career or received professional credit? Four or five hands went up.

So back to the question, why the decreasing impact of the knowledge generated by academic specialists?

A good part of the answer applies to academics everywhere. We are awash in a sea of information and disinformation, ideas, images, and analyses of China from outside China and from within it. And though increasing in absolute number, in relative terms academics are a shrinking percentage of knowledge providers. Journalists, consultants, business people, tourists, NGO networks are by far the largest providers of material for the media, new media, and public information worlds.

Look how few academics were major protagonists in the public debates that swirled about the crackdown in Tibet before the Olympic Games.

Some of the answer is particular to Canada. Looking back a generation ago, the China academic was a special and privileged breed, rarely involved in the policy process but occasionally consulted as an individual expert. A goodly number were recruited, one-by-one, to serve as sinologists in residence in our Beijing embassy. Beginning in the early 1990s and consonant with the growth of “track-two” dialogue processes in Asia, our federal government set up a much more systematic set of arrangements not just to consult but partner with expert groups on bilateral issues with China and broader regional economic and security issues.

Contemporary Ottawa is now less “expert friendly” in two ways. There is less enthusiasm and even less funding for the interactive government-academic projects of the past. Further, the Conservative government is less interested in expert opinion whether it comes from academics or its own bureaucracy. Many Conservative MPs and members of Cabinet are far more likely to consult with rights-based and faith-based NGOs and diaspora groups about China than academic or business elites.

The social and ideational underpinnings of the Harper government’s “cool politics, warm economics” approach to China deserve further study and discussion. But it is fair to say that very few academics, business people or Canadian diplomats have been anywhere close to its architects.

Based on what we’ve heard at the conference so far, it’s clear that the large majority of you do not agree with the general thrust of this policy approach or the assumptions about political change in China that lay beneath it.

How to respond to this state of affairs?

One possible response is to continue with the patterns of research, discourse and dissemination of the past. Governments will come and go, policy errors will correct themselves, and academics can make their best contribution by going about their work as we did a generation ago.

I believe we need to make some adjustments. While curiosity-driven research remains the bedrock of university life, great political science is great because it addresses the societal challenges of the day. Understanding global China, its impact on Canada, and the appropriate Canadian response is one example of a great problem that our country faces.

So how to do it? Let me conclude with three recommendations framed as questions.

First, can’t political scientists learn a new language that is informed by their sophisticated disciplinary work but that speaks to a broader public? In response to Joe Wong’s comment, isn’t there something between political science and loose-tongued punditry? And is it important that we make the messy but necessary comparisons between political dynamics in China and the Canadian political experience? I noted for example that our colleagues from Tsinghua University detected parallels between issues being faced in

Canada and China. That may provoke debate among political scientists on the specifics of the comparison but it is a necessary part of talking to broader Canadian audiences. The challenge is to use the specialists' knowledge to make the best possible comparison.

Second, how can we better learn to talk to conservatives? In carrying the fruits of our research beyond the university, we have centres, institutions, foundations and other channels for regular contact with liberally-minded internationalists across the country and beyond. How many of us have addressed faith-based NGOs or church groups across Canada? How strongly have we tried to connect to MPs and political staffers who are close to the Reform and Alliance wings of the Conservative party?

Third, how do we communicate our ideas beyond the customary vehicles of books, journals and our classrooms? If we take the outcomes of this conference as an example, what will happen beyond a report on the meeting and the eventual publication of a scholarly volume? We have been enriched by the discussion during these two days. What about the world beyond? Are we ready to jump directly into the IT world, not just posting a report on a website but posting and disseminating podcasts featuring some of the key ideas from the conference articulated by their proponents in mini-module interviews? If visualizations matter, would a YouTube-like video be more effective than a hundred-page report? How do we unleash the capacity and imagination of the net-gen graduate students and faculty in our midst? And how do we revised the standards for our recruitment, tenure and promotion to acknowledge and encourage a new wave of public engagement and national service via unconventional means?

Many questions, a big challenge, and lots of risks. But caught between a China that is reframing global structures and a Canadian response that needs imagination and informed analysis, do we really have a choice? Thank you.

### **Q and A.**

**Q:** Aren't there real dangers to politicizing and de-basing scholarship if we follow the main lines of your argument. Shouldn't policy-focused research be left to think tanks?

**A:** Yes, there are dangers. At UBC we have been debating four ways in which the academic world can connect to the policy world. The first is along the lines of curiosity-based research that may change the world in huge ways but not as the primary aim. The second is policy-relevant research, where the aim is to connect the research to current policy choices but one stepped-removed from the policy community itself. The third is policy-related research in which groups beyond the university, most often governments, are direct partners in the definition and conclusions of the work. And the fourth is advocacy-based research where the aim is not just to contribute to policy but to work with a multiplicity of actors to implement it. At UBC, we have academic units and thematic institutes that run across this spectrum. The advocacy-based enterprise is the most controversial and we have extensive discussions on how to avoid the politicization of our findings, maintain the highest academic standards, and avoid the slide into simple advocacy. This is difficult terrain but it now seems inevitable that we are into it.

Compared to the United States, we have very few think tanks. Many of those we do have are within universities, blurring the distinction. My impression is that at our leading universities across the country, the younger generation of graduate students and scholars do not hesitate to jump into the public policy fray, often through electronic means. Note how many hands went up to the question I asked about using blogs and other IT devices to getting messages out.

Q: OK, we need to get our ideas and messages into the public discourse. What is the key message that we should convey about political change in China?

A: Nuance and complexity. China is the good, the bad, the ugly and the beautiful all at once. Its compressed modernization has produced an encyclopedia of social evils that stagger the imagination in ways not entirely dissimilar to the worlds described earlier by Charles Dickens or Upton Sinclair. When key people in our parliament describe China as a godless totalitarian country with nuclear weapons aimed at us, we have our work cut out for us. Nuance and complexity are essential parts of getting China right. And they should be linked to a narrative of change, including in the political realm, that keeps our minds engaged rather than closed.