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Editorial: China, change & collaborative research

Mary Griffiths, Ying Jiang, Michael Griffiths

China's impact on world politics, national economies, and financial markets means that the questions emerging around its commitment to continued liberalization and to the preservation of harmonious relations have global urgency. The speed of urbanization and modernization alone create a range of issues for China. For outsiders, speculations about the transparency and stability of its political culture and the censorship of its media are as enduring as the conflicting forecasts about what its new political leadership is likely to signify for the rest of the world. Can China's rapid growth and opening up continue, and what are current party political attitudes to 'the market', geopolitical influence, structural reform, and democratization?

The call for this collection of papers, simply titled *China*, invited submissions on the dynamics of external and internal relations, a theme timely and relevant for 'China watchers' and the journal's regular readers. Singly and together, the articles in this issue provide fresh insights into China's diversity and vitality, and the contradictions and challenges of the momentous change it is undergoing. They make rarely accessible topics available for western academics not located in Asian, international or political studies. China's pragmatism in the making of common ground internally, and with other countries, is prominent in discussions in this selection. This emphasis is not only present in the themes highlighted by contributors but also in what the reports themselves reflect about 'doing' research on China, and on partnerships more generally. All but two of the articles are the result of research collaborations. The collection includes articles directly addressing China's soft power and cultural diplomacy; and others dedicated to understanding how increased popular access to communication technology and social networking are affecting the modus operandi of centrist power. The two themes converge: as power shifts of an unprecedented kind are shown to be emerging in China, the developing uses of the Internet by Chinese citizens can also be regarded as exercises in soft power.

An Australian perspective on China research collaboration

Collaboration and the sharing of the results of research are an essential part of responding to China's opening up. So, before discussing the articles, it is worth noting that it can still be difficult to locate research partners in China, and funding for media and communications research in and on China. Although information is now available on how associated disciplines work in China, following the establishment of English-language institutional websites, this can be perfunctory, open to misinterpretation, or silent on the pragmatic issues of critical interest to foreign communication and media scholars: how to understand the degree to which key institutional mediators are 'party-line' (Wang 2012) or liberal-minded, and what

the realistic possibilities are for specialist knowledge exchange? Non-tourist visa applications, for example, still require academics to attach a personalized invitation from a respected figure at a host institution. For non-native speakers, research cannot be contemplated without a Mandarin-speaking collaborator who has contacts, and *guanxi*. In the recent past, arts faculties in Australian universities have tended to regard Chinese institutions primarily as a source of soft funding. Involvement in such commercial endeavors is sometimes where individual research contacts between academics in humanities and social sciences can initially be made. In 2012 the global financial crisis, changes in the global and education markets, and China's own phenomenal investment in education and infrastructure, mean that interactions do not occur in the same routine way. Confucius Institutes (CI) host distinguished visitors and promote an interest in Chinese culture, although their success depends to a great extent on the commitment of locals, as Hartig notes in his article on the care taken by the eleven CIs operating in Australia, in walking the political tightropes. He notes that there are still unwelcome topics for public talks at CIs—Tibet, Falun Gong and Taiwan—resulting in potential self-censorship, and possibly reluctance on the part of others to engage more fully.

The Australian government actively encourages hard science research collaboration with China. In 2011 the Australian Government's Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR) conducted a survey of universities, learned academies and state agencies to assess existing collaboration with China and its future potential. Currently the priority discipline areas are the sciences and engineering. The future ones are expected to be similar. Arts and social sciences are not seen as priority development areas, despite the many Memorandums of Understanding operating between establishments; and the frequent staff exchanges, often at a senior level, being reported (DIISR, 2).

Australia in the Asian Century (Australian Government 2012) was generally welcomed. It included other Asian countries equally in its sweep, not content to focus solely on the way China alone will reshape the region and the world. Australia is seen as not 'Asia-ready' and the rapid development of 'a deeper and broader understanding' of Asia in the Australian population is recommended. Among the proposed pathways are: the renewed development of the teaching of Asian languages (particularly Mandarin); Asia-relevant education; the nurturing of specialized Asian expertise, experience and capabilities; and closer peer connections. These goals are more inclusive of future collaborations in arts disciplines. The eventual implementation and funding levels of multiple Asia-relevant education pathways will indicate how strong and inclusive the Australian government's whole-of-Asia commitment is. Time will tell.

For the moment, non-science researchers do not seem to have equal access to support, and this judgment is borne out by the list of non-arts projects being funded by the Australia-China joint councils and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Adding to the shortfall of information about research opportunities, the results of Chinese research in communications, humanities or social sciences are not being disseminated quickly enough to external non-Mandarin speakers to keep pace with the interest of a growing body of foreign researchers. There are many reasons for the disjuncture between keen interest and the means to satisfy it, including of course the

relative imbalances in language acquisition, the deficits in prior historical knowledge and cultural capital, and the inequalities of access to current and reliable information: the space of an editorial is not adequate to do justice to these broad issues.

China

Soft power has become a significant indicator of new global order politics since the collapse of Cold War certainties and European colonialism. The first article in the issue analyses China's influence in Ghana which achieved independence from Britain in 1957, a very early date compared to its African peers. Its continuing Commonwealth connections and official language of English—which remains for the present also the language of the global Internet—are arguably why it is seen as one of the most liberal of African states today, and why the authors of the first article note that it has a relatively freer media model compared to other developing nations. Ghana has also been the recipient of large-scale and diverse development aid from China, which has been accused of neo-colonial ambitions by leading representatives of other powers. In media aid particularly there have been successful African partnerships with China. This fact, along with knowledge of China's restrictive approach to its own media, has consolidated onlookers' anxieties about its growing geopolitical influence on the continent. Why is China in Africa? Is it developing a specifically Chinese aid template for developing countries, and what does it want in return? Garliardone, Stremlau and Nkrumah consider these questions in a study of Chinese aid to the Ghanaian media and e-government sectors. They argue that speculation about the 'real intentions' behind the generous gifts, loans and investments that China makes is inadequate, and that the questions raised deserve more than reductive and ideologically-driven stereotyping. China is searching for unexploited natural resources, but this fact alone does not deliver a comprehensive explanation of what China is undertaking in Africa. Three possible ways of framing China's involvement with Ghana are offered: as a *prototype* of aid to developing countries in Africa; a *partner* in aid; or the actions of a *persuader*. The three terms are then assessed against research on practices and outcomes on the ground. The validity of influential claims that Ghana might be a 'training ground to launch the socialist revolution' are considered to ascertain whether Chinese aid can indeed be 'understood as ideologically driven; how the Chinese approach differs from those adopted by other donors; and who is benefitting' from China's interest.

A complex picture of Chinese aid emerges, revealing a multi-faceted approach, flexible and sophisticated in techniques, and pragmatic at its core. The interview material is rich in detail about the importance of the Western model of journalism and about collaborative developments in the media and e-government sector, providing the deepest insights into media's complex influence on Ghanaian democracy. The discussion of political journalism and its relays across platforms is especially informative. Very low circulation papers have great political impact. Used as megaphones by local politicians, their content is repeated unchallenged, in the absence of dedicated reporters, by 'lazy radio.' Once stories reach radio, politically funded 'serial callers' swamp the airwaves. China also broadcasts directly into Ghana through CCTV Africa, competing with Al Jazeera for global audiences. Is

acceptance of ideology the price of aid? The authors conclude that no such expectations exist. The Chinese method of cultural diplomacy in Ghana is to seek collaborations of mutual benefit by trial and error, so the very pragmatism of the approach does not guarantee any accuracy when predicting China's next steps in Africa. The authors call for more comparative research in Africa and note that China's preferences for high profile and state-supporting projects mean that questions need to be asked about the representativeness of such endeavours for the whole of a citizenry.

Cheng's theme is the changing forms of labour resistance in Shaanxi province, and the actions of state workers at the receiving end of the negative impact of state sector reforms. The reforms, including structural overhauls and redundancies, are indicative of the uneven nature of exponential Chinese economic growth. They have resulted in much less secure employment in certain sectors and regions, where few developed safety nets exist for the unemployed. Local authority-worker interactions based on *danwei* (socialist worker units) developed familiar protocols of negotiation in the past, but the forced redundancies have placed workers outside the support of these units. Cheng argues that the new factor, cyberactivism, is proving to be a successful adjunct to more traditional strategies in industrial action in communist China. A willingness to experiment on the part of workers, despite the extreme difficulties experienced by individual leaders, is a contributory factor. Confused, uncertain local authorities are recognizing workers' unprecedented access to communicative power. The article highlights the challenges faced by a centrist approach to national economic change, and the different forms of collectivist governance emerging through online communication. The instances of peer mobilisation share characteristics with the routines of networked political activism elsewhere, but the impact of 'rightful resistance' in Shaanxi is fuelled in part by Maoist communitarian traditions, and by distrust of central authorities. As Cheng concludes, Xi Jinping has dismissed both Western democracy and a return to Maoist communism as future paths for China: something new will emerge. Labour action in Shaanxi can be seen as a microcosm of the ideological and practical struggles facing China, and an indicator of the future volatility in labour relations when communicative power shifts.

Indeed, negative or reconsidered responses from authorities to the impact of interactive communications are not confined to workforce activism. Increasing security and censorship concerns were evident when China established Baidu as its national search engine. Consumption of foreign news is still controlled by state television, where the coverage of political conflict, and individual and group resistances is also carefully managed. The rise of Chinese micro-blogging influence signals that the stranglehold of state-endorsed journalism and firewalls may be things of the past but that judgment may prove premature. Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of social networking phenomena Facebook and Twitter, is the online space where pressures for greater individual freedoms are being negotiated. Weibo began in 2009 and has over 324 million users (China Internet Watch 2012). Online activities have diversified as subscription rates have exploded: a 2012 Australian news item reported that citizen watchdogs were posting photographs on Weibo of high-profile CCCP politicians wearing western designer watches and other items

(Grigg 2012), and making no other direct criticisms. Recent Internet strategies such as the move to eliminate online anonymity, and the imposition of less noticeable search term controls, indicate that online surveillance is simply becoming more sophisticated.

The third article returns to the theme of China's relationships with western powers, and focuses on China's representational practices as they demonstrate stronger awareness of its own super-power status. In 'Crumbling Giant, Rising Dragon', Bain, Chaban and Kelly use content analysis to explore Chinese newspapers' representations of the Eurozone crisis in republished and adapted political cartoons. The authors argue that, despite the relatively recent arrival of the mass-circulated political cartoon in China, it has had an impact in political culture post-WWII. The cartoons demonstrate surprisingly negative Chinese attitudes to Europe's handling of its dilemmas. Twelve cartoons from the larger sample are the first coloured illustrations for the journal.

China's different rates of technology diffusion are highlighted in Ye's study of rural residents' attitudes to Internet technology. Ye selects attributes of innovation against which to assess the perceived impediments to Internet adoption. He concludes that adult readiness (e-literacy) is a major factor hampering the spread of new technologies and, although hardware costs are now a less important consideration in adoption, parental concern about young children and the lack of awareness about what technology can do to assist farmers are significant factors in the pace of technology diffusion in rural areas.

Hartig's survey of Confucius Institutes (CI) demonstrates the strengths and limitations of these foci of soft power in Australia. Co-funded by the host countries, and often primarily staffed by local employees, CIs provide a variety of activities and resources, with different emphases, promoting awareness of China and its language. The location and interests of the host population define the individual agendas pursued, which do not appear to be overly prescribed by Hanban/Confucius Institute headquarters, although compliance with the 'one China' policy is required. Hartig's 2011 interviews were conducted with staff members, and the results indicate that CIs are developing distinctive strengths particularly in major Australian cities, although the level of cooperation between points on the network varies, and negotiation over activities is ongoing.

The provenance of information affects mutual trust and confidence, and equally the reportage of diplomatic visits shapes understandings of China's intentions. Leshuo and Chitty analyse news frames in their study of Xi Jinping's visit to the United States, using coverage by six US and China newspapers (for example, *The New York Times* and *China Daily*) to reflect on the comparative shaping of the public image of the potential leader-elect at a time when the movements and personalities of China's elites are more carefully scrutinised than ever before, both in China and internationally.

A significant Chinese visitor attracts increased US attention, but so do a politician's short absences from public life in China. These events result in very careful examination and speculation at home and in the West, as was recently illustrated by the propaganda chief, Liu Qibao, who went out of the public eye for a week (China Media Project 2012). Mutual interest is usually combined with mutual

caution in reportage. Even an Australian Minister visiting Beijing for celebrations for the 40th anniversary of the Sino-Australian relationship drew a sharp question from a *China Youth Daily* reporter about Australia's continued alliance with the US. It prevented a continuing 'love-in', and caused the ABC reporter to comment on the conduct of nations who 'might be friends' (McDonnell 2012). While outward appearances of mutual good will were present, and its existence is clearly crucial to future regional harmony and prosperity, the framing of news can result in 'suspicions' and misperceptions.

This is a productive moment for new research questions to be formulated about China's economic, online, social and political landscapes; its global influence; and the possibility of democratization. We hope that, as CPC is now an open-access journal with a wider reach, this issue will help stimulate further research and collaborations.

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