

## **MAKING SENSE OF CHINA**

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In April 1994, after four years in the Defence Intelligence Organization, I was promoted to the position as head of China analysis. This may sound rather glorified, especially given how much more significant China has become in the past ten years than it was even then. It may come as something of a surprise to you if I then add that, when I took over as ‘head’ of DIO China analysis, I was China analysis. There was no-one else. Indeed, for the six months before I took over this supposedly important desk, there had been no-one occupying it. Ten years before, there had been twenty people in DIO doing China analysis and many more in DSD (the Defence Signals Directorate). Then some bright spark had decided that China was no longer a ‘threat’ and resourcing of China analysis started to diminish.

The consequences were rather striking and offer, perhaps, a suggestive analogy for thinking about the resourcing of China *education* at the present time. Let me share with you a few anecdotes from that period which illustrate the extraordinary dearth of knowledge in the system a decade ago. China was very much in the news and open source as well as classified material was abundant, but there was no channel within DIO for it to be systematically absorbed and made sense of. When I took over the desk, for example, I found a pile, literally a foot high, of secret intelligence reports, averaging two to three pages in length, sitting on the desk untouched for six months. My predecessor had been overwhelmed by the inflow and had simply not got around to reading this material, responding to it or filing it.

Within twenty four hours of my taking over the desk, I was informed that the Surgeon General of the Army and his Staff Officer were coming over and wanted a briefing on Chinese military medicine, prior to going to Beijing to discuss that subject with their Chinese counterparts. I checked the filing system and discovered that there was nothing whatsoever on file about Chinese military medicine. When they came across to DIO, I showed them into my office and sat them down, with a map on the wall behind me showing China’s military regions. Before I could say anything about the subject in hand, they asked me, “So, is that all the provinces of China?” “No”, I corrected them, “that’s not the provinces of China at all, that’s the military regions of China.”

I was somewhat relieved at this display of basic ignorance, because it suggested that my briefing on military medicine would not have to be nearly so detailed as I had feared. Suitably emboldened, I then remarked that I could not give them such a “briefing” at all, as there was nothing in the file on which to base it. What I could do, I said, was to discuss with them how I would go about generating a useful conversation with their Chinese hosts on

the subject. Consider, I suggested, that China invaded Vietnam in 1979 to 'teach it a lesson' and suffered heavy losses itself before withdrawing. What problems did the People's Liberation Army run into with field hospitals and logistics at that time and what had they been able to do about it in the intervening fifteen years?

Our 'briefing' session was off to a sound start and my customers not only went away an hour later declaring themselves satisfied, but wrote to me on their return to thank me for helping them prepare for what they believed had been a fruitful and very interesting visit to China. But this was winging it, obviously. My concern was that that episode had been merely one symptom of a fundamental problem – we were so badly prepared to do China analysis that we had to rely on the instincts of a generalist in order even to get to first base. This would simply not do and would certainly have been seriously inadequate in a business or diplomatic context.

One of the things I found, after settling into the desk, was that, while resourcing had shrunk to the vanishing point over the preceding decade, the notional collection and analysis requirements had remained unreviewed and unchanged. Supposedly, DIO was still monitoring China's transport infrastructure, ports and foreign trade, infantry and armour, power projection capabilities, strategic weapons systems, defence industries, economic development, diplomatic relations, domestic politics, internal security and unrest and on and on – including military medicine and, of course, the intelligence services. In reality, only a fraction of this had been getting done for years and all of it superficially.

Appalled by this state of chronic and unrecognized disarray, I went to my immediate boss, drew his attention to the situation and declared that something had to be done to draw the attention of senior bureaucrats and policy-makers to the yawning gap between what the intelligence system was *supposedly* collecting and analysing in regard to China and what it was *actually* able to do, given the almost total lack of resourcing. He told me that the front office, never mind those higher up the chain of command, did not want to hear about problems, they wanted to hear about solutions. "Well", I responded, "I'll tell you what the solution is and I'll put this in writing. Only a small number of these tasks will be done. The priorities will be China's strategic weapons programs and power projection capabilities, with basic background on its politics, economics and diplomatic relations. The rest cannot be done and will not be done."

Now, I could go on at much greater length about what I found at DIO and what I endeavoured to do about it, but I am not here this evening to diss the DIO of a decade ago, but to discuss with you the state of Australian education with particular regard to China. I have related these old 'war stories' because I suspect they might be a useful metaphor for the challenge we face in preparing the younger generations in this country for a world in which Asia in general and China in particular are playing and seem likely to continue to play a far larger role than they did in our own youth. In the universities and, I suspect, though I do not speak with first hand knowledge, in the schools, we

face a problem of too few people with too little training and too few resources trying to handle a task which is itself too little understood by policy-makers who, preoccupied as they are, do not want to hear about problems, just solutions.

In approaching the question of education, I cannot help but reflect on the fact that, when I was at school, in the 1960s and early 1970s, China simply did not feature in the curriculum. Nor was it other than a fleeting background presence in everyday life. The books I read, whether history, in which I developed a precocious interest, or children's stories, were overwhelmingly about Britain or centred on it. The earliest recollection I have of any awareness of China at all was when my parents gave me, as a birthday present, a Ladybird book about Marco Polo, when I was perhaps nine years old. It had wonderful illustrations and the one which remains most vividly in my mind's eye is that of the young Marco, kneeling on a dockside in his home city of Venice, gazing in awe at the Chinese characters on a large bale of silk.

Let me emphasize that this encounter with Marco Polo was extra-curricular and had nothing to do with what I was being taught at primary school. And Marco was, of course, not Chinese, but Venetian. My own awe at the wider world was awoken chiefly by two things in those days, reading whatever history books I could find outside the school setting and the enormous impression made on my ten year old mind by a fifth grade teacher reading our class *The Lord of the Rings*. It was in that context, at the age of eleven, that I played truant from school one Friday, bought the then new biography of Mao Zedong, by Stuart Schram, with a dollar in pocket money, and spent a whole day and the following weekend reading, it with deep fascination.

When I returned to school on the Monday and was asked where I had been on the Friday, I simply told the truth. I strongly suspect that my teacher must have thought this the most improbable and outlandish excuse for truancy she had ever heard. Perhaps thinking to find me out, she declared that my punishment would be to give a talk to the class about the Chinese civil war. Punishment? I was delighted. This was my idea of what an interesting day at school would be about. With alacrity, I asked for a large display map and, using a long pointer, proceeded to tell the class about the origins of the Chinese revolution, the Northern Expedition, the Long March, the Communist sweep from Manchuria in 1948 and the founding of the People's Republic.

My teacher later told my mother, "He seemed to know what he was talking about, but it was lost on the rest of us." *China was lost on the rest of them*, even the teacher, in 1968. My interest was truant and eccentric. It remained so the following year when, having again used my own pocket money to buy and my own time to read Franz Schurmann and Orville Schell's three volume set of documents on imperial, republican and communist China, I gave a talk, at my secondary college's public speaking night on the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement in China in 1919. There was simply no context, in 1969, for a twelve year old to develop an interest in such matters, save on an extra-curricular basis. Of course, China was in the background of vague Australian anxieties about the outside world, given the Cold War, the Vietnam War and the Cultural

Revolution, but any understanding of the roots of these phenomena was confined to a few scholars and diplomats. As Tolkien wrote, regarding the obliviousness of Shire folk to the looming developments in the outside world and their historical roots, “little of all this, of course, reached the ears of ordinary hobbits.”

Somehow, I had stumbled on the drama of modern China, but there was absolutely no facility at my school for nourishing that interest, much less beginning to learn the Chinese language, and China did not move into the centre of my studies until many years later. I can't help seeing in this personal story a rough analogy with Australia's historical engagement with China. For until very recent years, Australia's engagement with China was marginal. Yet with startling suddenness, it has become apparent in the past decade or decade and a half that our trade with China is mushrooming, that China's economy is growing at a staggering pace, that China itself is developing an economic presence and diplomatic self-assurance that it has not had for the best part of two centuries and that the beginnings of what could be a major power shift in world politics and in the Pacific basin are under way.

We are all, I think, roughly aware of how dramatically things have changed in this regard since 1969, especially since Deng Xiaoping initiated the famous 'reform and opening' of China in 1979. As Tom Dusevic wrote, in *Time* quite recently, China is rapidly making a profound impact on Australia in terms of trade, investment, immigration, culture, tourism and geopolitics. Over the next decade, there are strong indications that that impact will deepen markedly and with what could be profound and enduring implications for our national political and cultural life, our economic development and, in a number of quite fundamental ways, our education system. It is the latter with which you are chiefly concerned, but the education system is not something apart from politics, culture or economics. It is inextricably a part of it and will necessarily have to adapt to cope with larger, overarching and intrusive developments.

One now encounters China – China in the news, China in the shops, China in the financial markets, Chinese students, Chinese tourists, Chinese political leaders visiting the country, Chinese defectors seeking haven here – in a way that simply was not the case when we were children or even when we were university students. It might have been eccentric of me as an eleven year old to read a biography of Mao, but it would certainly not seem eccentric now for any student to do so, though it might still seem precocious for them to read one at primary school. In many ways, talk of China, an interest in China, travel to it, study of it, the learning of Chinese, the study of its culture and its history are all things that come far more naturally to young Australians now than they did a generation ago. In other words, there is an unmistakable and wholly understandable groundswell of interest in China in this country.

The question is, do we have in place the educational infrastructure, the strategic vision, the resource commitments to do justice to the challenges all this presents us with – or, to pitch it more positively, to enable young Australians to seize the opportunities that are opening up? One possible

response to this question might be to say, 'Well, America had a huge impact on us in the decades after the Second World War; were we prepared for that impact? Is there anything we could or should have done then that we omitted to do, looking back, that has disadvantaged us? And, if we have absorbed the American impact since the 1940s and, for that matter, though on a lesser scale, the Japanese impact since the 1970s, what reason do we have to think that we will not adapt organically to the Chinese impact in the same incremental, market-driven manner? Why should we be especially exercised about resourcing of education? Won't it take care of itself, as demand generates the resources?'

Perhaps. Certainly, I do not want to suggest that we should get things out of perspective, or become so anxious that we invest massive resources in ways which may turn out to be uneconomical. However, on the model of my anecdote about DIO, I would suggest that getting perspective and reviewing our 'collection and analysis' requirements, which is to say our strategic vision and our educational priorities, might be no bad thing at this juncture. Let me be a little more assertive on this point: I believe we need to give very energetic thought to how we can incorporate into our standard curriculum a quite new approach to what it means to be an educated and enabled young Australian in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That new approach should, I suggest, pivot on a vision of Australia as a cross-roads between East and West, rather than as an enclave of Western civilization awkwardly planted on the periphery of the East by a vanished Empire. We must look to our future and there are some important guidelines, now emerging into the light of day, as to how we might best do so.

Let me sketch out these guidelines, to begin with, in terms of a couple of analogies, which may be suggestive. I mentioned earlier how my own first encounter with China was through the eyes of young Marco Polo, gazing at Chinese characters on the side of a bale of silk, at the Venice docks in the thirteenth century. We are all, in Australia now, young Marco Polos. We all see Chinese characters on the sides of merchandise of a rapidly proliferating variety and our equivalents to Marco's father and uncle, Maffeo and Nicolo Polo, are talking up China, or have been there and returned to describe with fascination how vast it is and how impressive its new wealth and dynamism are, how tantalizing the opportunities there now seem. Let's not get distracted by the argument as to whether China is really, at the end of the day, more important than the United States, Japan or Europe, or an emerging India, in this regard. It is enough for the moment to consider that Marco Polo has become our common progenitor more completely in the past decade than he ever was in the preceding seven and a half centuries.

Second, Australia might be compared with ancient Sicily. Sicily was a large, resource rich island in the Mediterranean, settled by Greeks in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, which then found that two great powers, on either side of it, Carthage and Rome, were vying for strategic supremacy in the Western Mediterranean. Its Greek citizens had to come to terms with the rise of a non-Greek Mediterranean. Between the rise of China and the hegemony of the United States, we are starting to confront a roughly comparable future

scenario. There is no need to think in terms of the great powers trying to physically annex our resource rich island, but there are good reasons to take stock of the geopolitical and economic changes that are occurring and to reflect pro-actively on what their implications could be. As Hannah Arendt put it, some forty years ago, in *Between Past and Future*, education's role is to introduce young people to a real world for which, in their turn, they will have to assume responsibility. Whereas our education, until a generation ago, had deep roots in the British past and has, in recent decades, been striving to come to terms with an America-centred global economy; it must now refocus its basic goals and assumptions in terms of the rise of Asia in general and China, in particular.

Let me step back, for a moment, from the specific question of China, to make a larger point. The palaeo-anthropologist Richard Leakey has observed that, in terms of our collective understanding of the geological history of the Earth, the evolution of life and our impact on the biosphere as an uncannily innovative and voracious species, we are at the beginning of a profound shift in our basic picture of things; a shift that is virtually without precedent in recorded history. Such works of grand synthesis as David Christian's *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, Brian Fagan's *The Long Summer* and Ian Tattersall's *Becoming Human* transcend all historical human cultures, with their inherited myths and folk customs. They open up a perspective in time and space that simply dwarfs everything a mere few thousand years old, which we have long been accustomed to think of as 'ancient' or unchanging. They put everything – religion and economic history included – in a profoundly new and universal perspective. They require us to rethink and modify our ideas right down to their roots.

I am suggesting that we look at the matter of China's rise and our situation and prospects in a similarly radical perspective. The scale of the operation is less vast than that involved in the huge paradigm shift Leakey was writing of; but it involves a good deal more than just emphasizing a few practical skills such as Chinese language fluency, business management or a general awareness of China's potential power and weight in the Asia Pacific region. It involves putting the whole of Chinese history in perspective as part of the larger human story and then seeing the global significance of that history and of China's current resurgence. That demands a large vision and much imagination. It entails finding, translating or actually conceiving and writing new histories and stories; it involves transcending clichés about China's so-called 5,000 years of history and its modern grievances about Western imperialism, to access more of the human complexity of China's past and open up more of the divergent possibilities for its future.

My own approach to this has long been to see China as the Asian counterpart of Europe. Mediterranean civilization, including Egypt, Anatolia and the Levant, all integral parts of the Greco-Roman world in classical times, is every bit as old as China's. It has simply been more diverse and has changed more over time than China's has. Qin Shih Huangdi, who forcefully unified the central and parts of the northern regions of what is now the People's Republic of China, in the third century BCE, thus founding 'China', properly speaking,

was a contemporary of Hannibal and Scipio Africanus. The Roman and Han Empires existed at the same time, covered approximately the same extent of territory, had much in common in terms of governance and ruled roughly the same numbers of subjects – about 100 million. After the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, the paths of the two civilizations diverged in interesting ways and a basic understanding of those divergences should be a central part now of a serious humanistic education – not just in Australia, but throughout the West and in China itself.

Consider three things:

1. Western Europe lapsed into poverty and barbarism for centuries after the barbarian invasions and these centuries, generally called 'the Dark Ages', coincided with a golden age in China, that of the Sui, T'ang and Sung dynasties, during which, in many respects, Chinese civilization reached its apogee. Thus, it could be thought that disunity served Europe badly and imperial unity served China well. Yet imagine a Europe forcefully reunified by the Eastern Emperors – starting with Justinian in the sixth century – and held together until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Would its democratic and civil liberties have developed? Would science and critical inquiry have taken root? Would Europeans have turned outward to explore and master the world?
2. China was well ahead of Europe in wealth and technological sophistication during the golden age just mentioned and one of the most enduring conundrums of human history is that the scientific and industrial revolutions did not occur in China, but in the 'barbarian' West. Joseph Needham's and Mark Elvin's inquiries into why this was so are profoundly interesting and thoughtful. There is no simple explanation, but there seems to be good reason to believe that the disunity of Europe, the separation of church and state, the evolution in competition of different polities and economies, the freedom of cities to trade and change contributed to Europe a dynamism that was absent or suppressed in China. This was most especially so from the fifteenth century onward, when the Ming dynasty withdrew from its outward looking naval expeditions and opted for a kind of introversion comparable to that which Tokugawa Japan chose, in the seventeenth century. This isolation cost it dearly and it is only now, in a radically changed world, made to order for economic growth, that it has begun to make up the ground.
3. China does not come fresh and does not come free to this radically changed world. As Mark Elvin has shown in his acclaimed environmental history of China, *The Retreat of the Elephants*, the human impact on the natural environment in China has been very heavy, starting in ancient times. Vaclav Smil, a specialist on the subject, has observed that by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, China's natural environment had the appearance of being worn and despoiled and was under severe strain, on the brink of breakdown in a number of crucial areas. Its population is large and unbalanced. Its major cities are the most polluted in the world. Its watersheds and river systems, especially the Yellow River, cradle of ancient Chinese civilization, are

severely stressed. Its arable land is shrinking relentlessly, from both erosion and urbanization or infrastructure development. Moreover, it suffers, in Bill Jenner's phrase from *The Tyranny of History*. The Communist Party remains far too much the heir to more than two millennia of despotism in China and as George Gilboy put it in *Foreign Affairs* recently, political reform of a quite fundamental nature is crucial to China finally being able to meet its challenges and fulfil its potential.

These basic realities need to be common currency. For China is *not* the fabled and mysterious 'Middle Kingdom', with a culture all its own and timeless. It is an integral part of the human world and we all have a stake, more than ever, in how it grapples with its demographic, environmental, economic and political challenges. The broad outlines of how it has been brought to this point and of the struggle for political modernization in China over the past hundred years or more – a story more of disaster, and even calamity, than of triumph – must become as central a part of our school curriculum as the histories of Greece and Rome, Britain and the United States have long been.

We should educate young Australians to appreciate not the 'verities' of traditional Chinese culture, but its question marks, not the propaganda of the authoritarian political system in China, but the voices and testimonies of those many Chinese thinkers from Yan Fu in the late nineteenth century to Wei Jingsheng in the late twentieth, who challenged that authoritarianism and saw China as having a more open and freer future. That is the common human China; that is the China we can all relate to; that is the China we should want to see flourish in the decades ahead; that is why it is the China we should draw to the attention of young Australians, all of whom will have to understand the phenomenon of China in their lifetimes, even if they do not themselves learn Chinese, or specialise in matters directly to do with China.

I have spoken for rather more time than I should have done, so let me draw these remarks to a close. If there is a single message I would want to leave with you it is that we should be creating a coherent curriculum in our school and universities that can introduce young Australians to the general knowledge and cognitive skills necessary for them to feel at ease in a global world, not a backward or inward looking one. In such a curriculum, China must bulk large, both because of its impressive place in the global human story and because of its current resurgence and emerging importance. We should cast all this as a vast and rich enlargement of the old idea of a classical education and encourage our best young scholars to delve into the great conundrums of the past as well as the big challenges of the future. If we do that, we will give Australia its best chance of dealing comfortably and creatively with a world that is changing in rapid and fascinating ways. We shall also deepen our own humanity and enlarge our living culture in the process.

