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The Emperor's New World?

Engagement with China in the Age of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This piece considers post-pandemic expert analysis of contemporary China. It argues that the CCP has achieved a high degree of “decontestation” in the domestic arena given its considerable power over organs by which to frame citizens’ perceptions of reality. COVID-19 has emphasised this feature, marking a strong contrast between independent scrutiny of government decisions elsewhere, and continued ambiguity around the party-state’s initial response and the utilisation of vast resources to frame the pandemic for its domestic audience. Foreign organisations and individuals that engage the party-state without “China literacy” risk becoming unwitting performers in the CCP’s reality construction. At the same time, the consequences of the PRC’s domestic vicissitudes increasingly impact beyond its border. The essay argues that those working in fields related to contemporary China should carefully consider the role of elite domination and associated reality construction.

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The Emperor's New World? Engagement with China in the Age of COVID-19

By

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The ongoing COVID-19 crisis brings into sharp relief the question of Chinese Studies and its utility.¹ Of course, academic research need only define itself by pursuit of knowledge alone, but there are times when a field of study possesses the means to make a vital, direct, and wide-reaching contribution to society at large. In the current environment, Chinese Studies has that capacity. This short essay considers Chinese studies in light of COVID-19, the party-state response in Wuhan, and the subsequent global pandemic. Acknowledging the increasingly interwoven nature of domestic and international spheres (evidenced in research by Carroll (2010) and Thatcher (2007), for example), it argues that in the comprehensive reassessment of engagement with the People's Republic of China (PRC) that will follow the worst of the pandemic, those with expertise on contemporary China must consider the consequences of elite domination in the PRC. There is a pervasive ignorance amongst outside observers of the realities of power exertion in the PRC, sustained in part by a form of engagement dominated by commercial interests and metrics. The price of such ignorance is two-fold. International actors risk performing as part of the CCP's reality construction for its domestic audience. By extension, they further entrench power without oversight within the country. Where power is exercised without effective scrutiny, the capacity for catastrophe is great, and in a globalised world the consequences will increasingly reach beyond the PRC's border.

The immediate analysis of the response to COVID-19 will benefit by a division into two streams. There will be robust and deserved criticism of individual domestic responses to the crisis around the world, not least in the UK and the US, where serious mistakes by leaders exacerbated the catastrophe. But separately, questions about entanglement with the PRC will have to be raised as the world contemplates the cost of the integration into the global system of a party-state where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) holds a monopoly on truth. Beyond ideology, culture, and ethnicity, this is a question regarding construction and perception of reality, and control of the levers by which that perception is sustained. It involves the highest echelons of the CCP and increasingly, their commercial partners in the West.

¹ The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions.

In his landmark work, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, Michael Freeden (1996) describes ideologies not as static value sets but as a conceptual competition where “decontestation” centres around attempts to impose the terms of an ideology over wider debate. The objective is to put those terms beyond contestation. Whilst key concepts ‘help to make sense of an individual’s perception of reality’, one can also assert that ‘communication and relationships of power are mediated by linguistic competition’ (Szele 2012:128). In this sense, the PRC represents an enigma when viewed from home and abroad. Domestically, the CCP has achieved a near unprecedented level of decontestation in such a complex society, securing a significant amount of control over citizens’ reality perception. In the Party’s grip on education, media, and communication channels, to name but a few, it holds on to the ability to generate, scrutinise, or challenge its own conception of reality in a significant, organised manner. How does such a domestic configuration interact with the international realm?

No longer can one sustain a view of the world that sees nation states as ‘Cartesian..., largely self-contained..., each possessing certain essential and distinctive identity and occupying a more or less clearly demarcated territorial space’ (Pan 2018:341). The US’s role in the 2008 financial crisis serves as a stark reminder of the interconnection between nation and international community. There remains a blind spot, however, when it comes to the particular challenges posed by the continuing integration of the PRC into the international system. This is especially true when one considers the degree of decontestation achieved by the CCP, discussed above. Governments around the world have in many cases faced sustained criticism for their responses to the pandemic as actors from various political standpoints discuss the response across multiple media platforms. In the PRC, coverage must ultimately accord with the Party’s conception of reality, undergirded by the central pillar that the Party’s continued rule of the country must not be brought into question. Consider, for example, the difference in treatment of the journalists and experts routinely critical of government COVID-19 policy in the West with the most prominent critic of the official response in the PRC. Ren Zhiqiang went missing before it was revealed he was under investigation for ‘serious violations of discipline and the law’ (Davidson 2020). He has since been sentenced to eighteen years in prison for charges relating to corruption (Buckley 2020). For a further illustration of the disorder where realities meet, look to Hong Kong, for example, which sits not only at the edge of China’s landmass geographically, but at the periphery of the CCP’s authority over truth and meaning. It is unsurprising that unrest has set in where the CCP attempts to impose its own construction of reality in a location where a plurality of views and contestation existed before.

In the case of COVID-19, party-state actions such as silencing doctors, and party-state features such as reluctance amongst local cadres to report faithfully to superiors, appear to have created conditions in which a regional outbreak was able to spread across borders (Xiong & Gan 2020; Myers 2020). The relationship between power concentration and regulatory failing is an important one. In the case of the former, citizens that do attempt to carve out space for discussion, are quickly confronted with the Party's red lines, which have become more numerous and more prominent in recent years. A cursory review reveals what appears to be significant Party interference in media, education, and law amongst many other fields (Bandurski 2013; Clarke 2016; Weatherley & Magee 2019). This uncommon capacity of authorities to shape narrative and restrict dissent is coupled with significant regulatory weaknesses in fields such as food production, chemical storage, and nuclear energy (Graham-Harrison 2015; McGregor 2010; Ryan 2015). In the transnational age, the already unacceptable dangers of power concentration in the PRC's domestic arena increasingly spill out to an even wider group in the international community. China scholars will play a crucial role in how the world restructures its relationship with the PRC post-COVID-19.

As the hard sciences gather data to understand and eventually bring COVID-19 under control, they still depend on the "garbage in, garbage out" rule: Incorrect or poor-quality data results in erroneous conclusions. A better understanding of China would have led international experts to ask more questions of the initial PRC data that framed the first stages of the global response to the virus. A recent leak suggested that this data underreported COVID-19 numbers by half due to 'bureaucratic and politically-motivated errors' (Vallejo 2020). It seems international experts were not familiar with the party-state's relationship with reality and its malleability within the domestic arena to fit the Party narrative. Individual countries that have failed to respond adequately to the challenge of COVID-19 have rightly faced fierce criticism in their own media, and, it may be argued, the US administration's poor response was the primary reason the US President lost an election. This contrasts sharply with the PRC, where the Party has leveraged the media, reshaping public perceptions of the outbreak's early stages to 'fit an internal narrative of a strong China led by an efficient Communist party' (Graham-Harrison & McKie 2020). We must expect further international consequences of the PRC's domestic political landscape and engage in a way that reflects understanding of the vicissitudes of party-state rule. Here, a fact is only valid if it does not undermine the fundamental truth of the CCP's legitimacy to rule. We must note that the Party elite aspires not only to be judge, jury, and executioner, but also teacher, journalist and police officer. This is not to conflate wider Party membership with Party elite, let alone citizenry with political masters. Despite considerable elite control of the wider narrative, isolated bubbles of dissent still

occasionally rise up.² For those who venture too far from the Party's conception of reality, the risk of censure is high, and the chance of success is low; unsurprising when the object of their criticism sets the rules of the game. Simply put, life is made difficult for those who wish to be explicitly critical of power in the PRC today.

In light of this domestic landscape, a misreading of the conditions within the PRC by international actors is detrimental not only to their own interests. They are in danger of becoming unwitting performers (or in some cases, willing accessories) in the CCP's reality construction for its domestic audience. Their presence thus becomes an endorsement of unreality and an asset to be leveraged by a political entity that faces no effective scrutiny or oversight. As those with expertise on China, we must ensure the debate on the PRC's international relationships does not slip back into the more prosaic currents of cultural and ideological difference. Decontestation and truth monopoly remain little acknowledged fundamental elements of the PRC's cultivation of mainland society. COVID-19 is a spectacular demonstration of how the domestic quickly becomes international and vice-versa.

In making sense of the pandemic, China specialists must draw attention to the relationship between the party-state and its reality in light of the growing economic power the country possesses. This responsibility weighs particularly heavy on the field since much additional international engagement is dominated by commercial concerns and thus heavily influenced by the maximisation of shareholder value above all else. The unprecedented degree of decontestation achieved by the Party in a complex society signifies a victory for the Party elite. The consequences of this victory reach far beyond the territory of the bureaucratic state, into the education of the young, public media consumption, interpretation of the law, and the reshaping of history. All of these realms benefit from a plurality of Chinese voices, yet in the modern-day PRC, these debates are largely arbitrated by the Party in arenas that are dependent on its patronage. Rarely does a single political entity possess, without substantial oversight, the instruments to shape reality to such a degree within its polity. This reality construction and maintenance is a serious undertaking that, to borrow from sociology, must be 'sustained by institutions, explained by legitimations, and maintained by social

² Take history as one example drawn from many. The party-state's conception of history dominates all others in the PRC, resting primarily upon Party control of education and media. But there are isolated cases of challenges to the Party's narrative, for example, Yang Jisheng's (2008) book, *Mubei* 墓碑 (*Tombstone*), on the Great Chinese Famine, and Yuan Weishi's article contesting taught history in China for the magazine, *Bingdian* 冰点 (*Freezing Point*) (Pan 2006). Brave though they were, Yang's book was banned in the Chinese mainland and Yuan's article led to the closing down of the magazine (before it reopened with a new editor).

and symbolic mechanisms' (Vera 2016:5). Here lies a rich seam that China specialists must not ignore as they attempt to make sense of COVID-19, its origin, and aftermath.

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