

This column by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Wednesday, April 5, 2023.



Opinion

US pandemic of dogmatism about China must end before it leads to war



- A recently published oral history of American foreign correspondents in China highlights how the best journalists recognise their limitations
- In contrast, the current political climate in the US has encouraged the repetition of the same stagnant facts, leaving no room for new narratives about China

Tom Plate

Published: 3:0am, 5 April, 2023



A demonstrator interrupts witness testimony during a hearing of the House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, in Washington on February 28. Photo: Bloomberg

Over the decades, even during rare warmish breaks in the tundra of US-China relations, I do not think I ran across a single American foreign correspondent who claimed that their Beijing posting was an easy job.

The other day, while thoroughly enjoying former CNN Beijing bureau chief Mike Chinoy's new book, *Assignment China: An Oral History of American Journalists in the People's Republic*, it came to me that in one way or another I'd crossed paths with more than a few American foreign correspondents in China, and that the ones I remembered best were always the last to ever trumpet know-it-all predictions about the country.

I respected them for trying so hard to explain China to us even if their reporting added up, by their own admission, to less than what was needed. In recent years, though, Western journalists [have been expelled](#) or denied work visas.

In all fairness, China is far from the only country that would like to do without prying foreign journalists. But many in the marvellous Chinoy account tried hard and were well-trained reporters. They are anything but, in most cases, "destined for war" geeks theorising from a faraway university, "China-collapsing" doomsayers, or the paranoid who see Chinese strategic planners as hitmen using AI to target the US.

To their credit, the best of the Western journalists who relived their experiences in Chinoy's oral history recognised their limitations, and even armed with impressive American university educations, grasped that the mandated empiricism in their reporting was not quite enough.

Aiming for precise measurements of China is impossible. US journalists start with such handicaps. They deplane in China with core values nailed onto their mental DNA. No matter how effortlessly they speak the local language or read so-called simplified Chinese, they are strangers in a strange land. They often find the Chinese who will talk to them uncommonly warm, but the government a party-run school of cold fish.

It's easy to blame the Chinese government for making things difficult. They are faced with boring press conferences; officials who don't know much beyond their remit or, if they do, cannot say much about it; soggy official statistics; and, intense cultural dislike of pushy American journalists.

The canon of obstacles to understanding China is no secret. But there is an additional dimension to this challenge, and more thoughtful journalists are inclined to reflect across a wider bandwidth of concerns that push them towards the realm of epistemology.

They know that their very presence at the scene can affect an event, **that** an event is not inherently discrete or singular but comes into focus with both precedent and momentum. They know that fact-based reporting requires not just an assembly of the seemingly relevant facts but putting those facts into context.

Context is key, and may be the hardest part of the puzzle. The best reporters accept that they are often trapped fishing in the same small lake, while surmising that other pools of facts must exist elsewhere but are inaccessible. This is very frustrating experience.

Because the usually available sources get overfished, the conventional fact-finding process hooks into the same connect-the-dots pictures time and again. Work becomes a cascading redundancy; constant contact with the same placid pool of facts dulls empiricism.

Next, empiricism calcifies into dogma. Different and challenging views of what China is or what its leaders intend are seen as fictional, precisely because they are not “factual”. This is serious matter for America and the West.

Constituted in January, the [House Select Committee](#) on Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party has commenced its “laser-focused” investigation into the oft-reported China threat. The committee will select its facts carefully, while – consciously or not – deprioritising inconvenient ones. Though advertised as bipartisan, the effort will wind up adding little to our wisdom about China, while managing to lend an eerie cast to most things Chinese.

Professional empiricism about China has given way to a pandemic of dogmatism. The net effect will be to make the possibility of peace with China little more than fantasy – and war a matter of realism. Due to constant repetition of more or less the same observed facts, the United States on the whole may well have brainwashed itself.

The country’s top military man, US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Mark Milley, recently issued a [thoughtful and timely warning](#) about the potential of “overheated” anti-China rhetoric to ignite a war. Pin a medal on the general for that.

But the problem goes beyond emotion to deeply rooted psychological perception. Alternative explanations as to what China is up to will not be considered without new facts in evidence. But all the negative and dismissive dogmas about China and its Communist Party rope off the discovery of new facts and leave current themes and hypotheses unchallenged, with little risk of refutation. How much of China that America thinks it knows is myth? Surely more than it thinks.

Tom Plate began reporting and writing about Asia and China for newspapers in 1996. Today he is the distinguished scholar of Asia and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles and vice-president of the Pacific Century Institute