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We stick labels on China – or the US – at our own peril

Tom Plate

Tom Plate says generalisations only mislead when we're trying to understand complex giants like China and America



It was a little awkward. The Council on Foreign Relations had organised a fine luncheon to present an august policy report (many months in the making) from a high-level independent task force of US experts very concerned about North Korea. And herein lies a story.

The Council on Foreign Relations is a pillar institution of the American establishment, its members offering views so carefully mediated as to comprise virtually a power-elite consensus on international issues, intended as all but official briefing papers for the White House, the Pentagon and the State Department.

How China can turn the tables on Donald Trump's America

The luncheon, held in Los Angeles, was well attended, and the report (“[A Sharper Choice on North Korea \[2\]](#)”) beautifully presented; even so, it was awkward. The hard work behind it was probably all for nothing – as it was clearly intended for the woman who eventually lost the country’s presidential election, as a kind of inauguration gift from well-meaning policy wonks.

But it is a him, not a her, moving into the White House; and the prospect of Donald Trump bothering to ponder the report issued by the council – or any of the other similar

work products from Washington or New York think tanks that were lining up like toy soldiers to salute a Clinton administration – are next to zero. All those reports timed for Hillary Clinton’s coronation might now as well be heaved into the Potomac.



Trump’s America: The good, the bad and the ugly

Consider this: until the first Tuesday of this month, the entrenched New York/Washington elite was not just the life of the party; it hired the bouncers. Now they become the bouncers – the new policy outliers, red-faced with loss: another America is on top – the one not of our two flashy coasts so much as of our core interior heartland.

You see, the very term “United States” (50 states, but not so united) was always a sort of summing up – a dash of certainty blanketing a lot the normal eye could not see. So what you are now viewing of the American polity – and what the media is sure to label (the “Trump Era”?) – has always existed, it is not new; it is simply visible now, surfacing with a whale of political force.

In today’s demonic world of generalisation filling in for insight, China, it seems to me, gets the worst of the demonisation

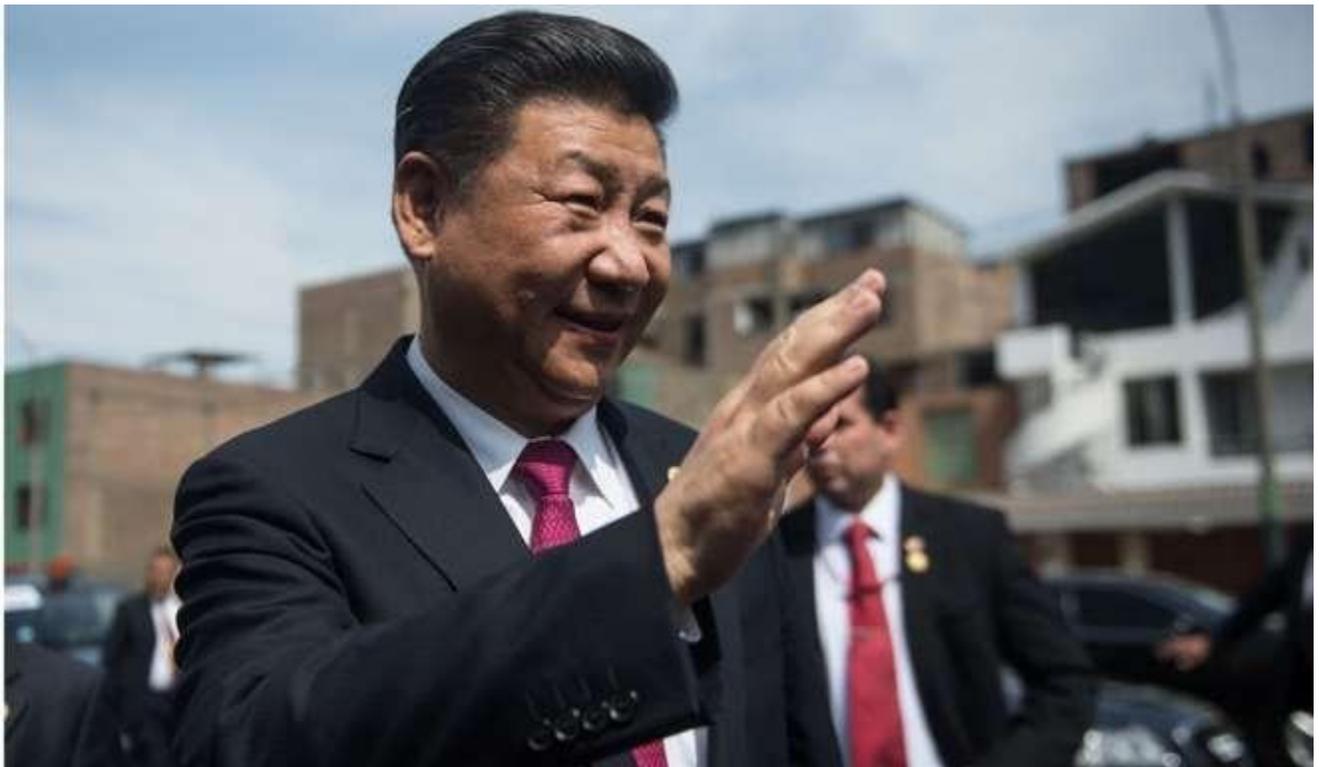
The term “America” itself is a very broad generalisation, as, it has always seemed to me, is the term “Europe”. I like to quote this from novelist Vladimir Nabokov, already a reeking genius at 27: “When people pronounce the word ‘Europe’ with ... metaphorical,

generalising intonation, I see precisely nothing”. There is, he said “a very seductive and very dangerous demon: the demon of generalities. He captivates man’s thought by marking every phenomenon with a little label, punctiliously placing it together with another, similarly carefully wrapped and numbered phenomenon ... into a neat little office.”

Pity us journalists. Because of the automatic alacrity with which we are forced to react to contemporary history, and the time pressure under which we are required to birth our frail judgments, we are the commonest carriers of demonic generalities. Yet this is the satanic fate with which we live in order to perform for public observance in the currency of the historical moment.

All this is by way of trying to prepare not only for the gush of asserted certainties/generalities that are sure to greet this astonishing US election, but also from the continuing rise of China’s president that will be aggressively processed – as Nabokov put it – with “the temptation of completely comfortable generalities”. Observe the widespread use of the proper noun “China” to tent over that amazing sprawling and grandiose culture, nation, civilisation, people. (But what else, after all, to term it?)

How the West got China wrong



President Xi Jinping waves upon arrival at the Lima Convention Centre for the Apec summit last weekend. Photo: AFP

Why China needs Xi Jinping as its core leader

Similarly, you notice the cascading commonality of Western commentary on Xi Jinping (习近平), the openly active but yet so-difficult-to-read president, since 2013, of the People's Republic of China. Yes, it seems that the world has entered a new Chinese "era" or "period" or "system" – the usual jaunty but suspect type of term strung together and hung on a generalisation wall as if a Degas.



[SCMP Pictures](#)[6] In fact, in today's demonic world of "generalisation" filling in for insight, as derided by Nabokov in [his 1926 talk recently translated](#) [7], "China", it seems to me, generally gets the worst of the demonisation of generalisation. A book I have just finished tells of how China is heading towards a "new hard authoritarianism". While the author did concede that China's size and complexity might well be unique, this was no reason (it seemed he was saying) to spare it the criminal sentence of relentless generalisations of blanket negativity.

But isn't there? Some 1.3 billion human beings in that sprawling nation rumble along with more history in the DNA of their fingertips than in the entire corpus of America's comparatively brief existence. Today's "China" is, on its slowest day, an insane complexity of provinces (23), autonomous regions (five) and special administrative regions (two).

If anyone believes that the word "China" is anything more meaningful than a broad generalisation screeching to a halt just short of vapidly, then I am the second coming of Vladimir Nabokov, Xi Jinping, the second coming of Stalin, and Donald Trump, the new Lincoln.

I know enough "Chinese" people to know that I like the Chinese people, as I do the Japanese and the Korean, and so on; and not one of them that I have ever met reminded me of Stalin.

We must be more careful with what we say and think about others, especially those with whom in one way or the other we disagree. Generalisations about “them” just will not suffice, as they will not about “us”.

Let us leave the final words to Nabokov: “We should not slander our time.”

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