
Construction of the Methodology of Sinology

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Summary

A more effective Sinology should take account of Analytical Refraction, or the distortion of “the Other”. It should be conducted with Humble Access, an open and respectful mind. There is a need for greater Transparency in China and for scholars to achieve, when appropriate, Disaggregation in analysis of data. Future challenges include inevitable Graduation, as China’s economy continues to expand and its demand for global resources increases, but Sinologues should guard against the dangers of Extrapolation. A Reprioritization of research in and on China may be necessary from time to time, to study newly emerging key issues such as Environmental constraints on industrialization. In the end, the deciding factors for future development will be the Motivation of China’s leaders and people and their willingness to strengthen and deepen international Partnership.

Key Words: Analytical refraction, Humble access, Transparency, Disaggregation, Graduation, Extrapolation, Wolfers wave theory, Opportunity cost, Reprioritization, Environment, Motivation, Partnership

It is a great honour to have been invited to speak at this International Symposium on “The Construction of the Methodology of Sinology”. I am delighted to be able to support this valuable cooperation between Aichi University and Nankai University in the second year after the inauguration of the ICCS. This symposium is timely, as China’s 27 year economic miracle continues, and now that China is an active member of the World Trade Organisation and will in three year’s time host the Olympic Games. China clearly ranks as one of the foremost countries of the world, judged not only by demographic or economic yardsticks but in a broader sense as well. Last month was also considered very special in my country, since it was marked by the State Visit of President Hu Jintao.

The contrast with the China I first visited 33 years ago, when I travelled 3000 miles around the country during the Cultural Revolution, could not be more marked. Many places I visited were at low levels of economic development, and diplomatically China had been a virtual outcast, supported in Europe only by Albania and at times Romania. Later I was lucky enough to visit China several times a year during most years of the 1980s and 90s and to travel widely. With my own eyes I saw the transformation of Shenzhen from a village to a metropolis or Shanghai from a decaying city of colonial concessions, revolution and war, to a gleaming giant of the 21st century.

I greatly value opportunities to understand China today through the perspective of history, whether it be through reading or listening to personal testimony or, closer to home, thanks to the good fortune to have grown up with a father who was 56 when I was born, and who lived 18 years in China starting in 1910. His photograph albums, anecdotes and writings gave me a sense of the old China, which predated the 1949 Revolution, as well as of New China. Since we are in Tianjin I should mention that my father had the honour of meeting Zhou Enlai during the 1920s and also that he served as Chairman of the International Chamber of Commerce in Tianjin. The well-known American Sinologue, educationalist and diplomat, Dr.

Charles Tenney was his then father-in-law and had close links with Tianjin, playing a key role in the establishment of Tianjin University 110 years ago and of real estate development in Tianjin.

Equally, as a student of the Meiji Restoration, I cannot help wondering if there are not important analogies for China today, especially in the attempts to combine Eastern values with Western technology. The *Seto Banpaku* for which so much infrastructure was prepared gave a chance for visitors from all over the world to gain insights not only into Aichi-ken and Japan but into the East Asian region as a whole, in particular China. I also draw deep satisfaction from the fact that Aichi-ken has long been an active host for the JET Programme, which brings thousands of young people to Japan each year from over 40 countries, including both my own country and China, in order to promote internationalisation and better mutual understanding.

Yet, having set the scene, I now want to focus on eight broad issues in the construction of the methodology of Sinology, which I consider to be highly relevant to many areas for the study of China.

The first issue is Analytical Refraction. By this I mean the inevitable distortion that non-Chinese may suffer in their efforts to analyse China from their background as outsiders. Just as rays of light refract when travelling through different transparent substances, such as air or water, so our understanding may be less accurate if we confront the “Other” with our own prejudice or mental baggage. The late Edward Said’s “Orientalism” highlighted one of many examples of Analytical Refraction. In analysing China our approach should at all times be self-critical, but as in Heisenberg’s Principle of Uncertainty we can never totally eliminate some element of Refraction.

The second issue is Humble Access. Already our more self-critical methodology will guide us in the Japanese concept of *teshise*, so that we achieve **understanding** metaphorically by “**standing under**”, rather than by boldly assuming with stiff necks that we have all the answers, no matter how brilliant we are or how strong the seeming evidence for our conclusions. China is famous for producing many paradoxes and contradictions.

The third issue is Transparency. China is obviously far more transparent than in the three decades before the new policies of reform and opening to the outside world, but more information or opinion is considered confidential than in the liberal democracies. It can sometimes be an offence to pass on data, because of concerns for national security. All governments have some such concerns, but there is an asymmetry in the degree to which the Chinese government currently allows Transparency and at times this may be a constraint on academic research or debate. On the other hand, a number of liberal democracies have introduced or are introducing Data Protection legislation to protect individual privacy, and China is considering whether to do the same. Such legislation brings benefits, but can reduce Transparency.

The fourth issue is Disaggregation. There are naturally many times when aggregate data on China should be used, for instance in some macro-economic analysis. However, in other cases it can be highly misleading to look at an average, since the People’s Republic of China provides examples of vast regional differences, and while resembling an LDC in some parts of the West of China, is an NIC or NIE along parts of the Eastern and Southern seaboard, or in and around great cities such as Tianjin. Moreover, there are certain industries, which are of global stature, which has to be taken into account in the analysis of some international trade questions. As a multi-tier economy, China is inevitably more complex to define than smaller economies.

The fifth issue is Graduation. This relates to the previous issue, but can affect analysis both in aggregate and when disaggregated. It again raises the problem of definition and has important policy significance in terms of China’s eligibility to certain benefits and responsibilities as an LDC and to others as an NIC or, in due course, an Advanced Industrial Country and member, say, of the OECD.

The sixth issue is Extrapolation. The rising trend of China’s economic growth and the progress of reform in the framework of law make it easy to forget that discontinuities have been a periodic feature of Chinese history. It is all too tempting to follow a certain fashion in analysis of China and merely extrapolate the future with reference to the recent past. The only sure guide when navigating these

deceptive waters is to steer by the compass of rigorous analysis of causality and to question all assumptions. On the other hand, Extrapolation can nevertheless sometimes prove a valid technique. For instance, according to Wolfers Wave Theory, as noted by the respected “Old China Hand” Marcel Wolfers, it has so far been correct to predict patterns of economic development in post 1978 China, with the first wave in the SEZs and large coastal cities, being followed by a second and similar wave up the Changjiang and Pearl Rivers, and a third wave moving currently to the West and the North East.

China faces many challenges, most of all at a time of drastic change in the world. With continuing good management and luck, China will surmount new problems, both internal and external, but there will sometimes be trade-offs and difficult compromises to be made according to the economists’ principle of Opportunity Cost. Some of the hardest that lie ahead will be decisions on the exchange rate of the Renminbi, which in spite of recent adjustment is still likely to be faced by mounting US pressure for further revaluation, not dissimilar to that faced by Japan in the 1980s.

The seventh issue is Reprioritization, in the sense that an effective Sinology will not slavishly continue to focus merely on established priorities when circumstances change, both in China and the wider world. Growing awareness of the Environment, as a constraint on aspects of economic growth and sources of energy is a relevant and timely example. More academic research is needed on this crucial but sometimes neglected area, which has great implications for China’s agriculture and population during the process of industrialisation, as well as for China’s neighbours and partners.

The eighth issue is Motivation. One of the hardest challenges for Sinology will be to judge correctly the motivation of different actors on the Chinese stage, whether Government leaders at national or local level, or different interest groups and segments of the population. How, for instance, will China wield its considerable and growing power on the world stage?

Since the ending of the Cultural Revolution it has been a factor for world stability, but every so often doubts about the future are expressed, as when some Chinese spokesman says, informally, “But China is still a developing country and external expansionism would be totally illogical”. It is right to look back at long traditions of stability in China within consistent borders, but the “is still a developing country” prompts the question, “And when you can afford to be a major military power?” China’s present armed forces and weaponry are already significant, and closer international dialogue between military as well as political leaders has already proved beneficial. China’s current role as facilitator of six party talks to resolve the North Korean impasse is a good example of China finding the motivation to play a more forward diplomatic role, though it might be said of Chinese foreign policy, as was said of British in the 19th century, “Britain has no friends, only interests”.

And finally, the ninth issue is Partnership. This should balance my last quotation, whose context is specifically about trends in long-term diplomacy. The essence of effective Sinology should be to build partnerships in academic circles within China and with Chinese scholars overseas. Through making a conscious effort to realise successful joint research projects and exchanges of lecturers, the first issue I raised, that of Analytical Refraction, can become less problematical. I should even like to see the process of internationalisation and better mutual understanding start with foreign language learning and area studies as early as primary school level, and to see active school exchanges at secondary school level, both face-to-face and via the Internet. The role of freer media exchanges also helps to create a positive environment.

Aidai’s longstanding links with China and proven excellence in Chinese studies, supported at national and local government level and by the respected local business community, are providing firm foundations for the ICCS. The fact that the first word in its name is “International” is a sign that its future success will be based in large measure on Partnership. As we are in Tianjin, it is also appropriate to remember that it was Premier Zhou Enlai, who created the breakthrough in Sino-US relations from an international table tennis tournament in Aidai’s home city of Nagoya, the so-called ping pong diplomacy that yielded such valuable long-term results.

In conclusion, I foresee a Sinology, which, to borrow a phrase or two from recent Chinese leaders, “unifies theory and practice” and “judges truth from facts”.