

Interview transcript Qing Cao

Euan: So, we are here today with Qing Cao, a professor at Durham University. His work focuses on Western conceptions and representations of China, alongside discursive constructions within China and concepts such as national self-identity and modernity. We're going to have a discussion today about rhetoric in global politics and western conceptions and representations of China.

In relation to your past work, specifically analysing BBC documentaries of China, you argued that there had been a rhetorical shift around China from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era. You write about the rhetoric and framing of China going from being a 'rediscovery' of China in the 1980's to being a repulsion of political China in the 1990's. We would really like to get your thoughts on if you think we are entering a new framework now in current politics over the last five years around representations of China.

Qing Cao: I will start in the last few decades after the Cold War. China has started to take a very different image starting from the 1990's. In the 1980's the image was broadly positive, then after Tiananmen in 1989 the image changed to very negative for about a decade, and then from 2001 the image started to change from negative to what I would call an 'age of uncertainty'. So, I think we have witnessed that uncertainty for about 20 years. So, for these two decades, the UK and USA had a difficult time to define the nature of China, so the overall image is very mixed because they have lost the parameter to define China. But now I think we have entered a new age, which I call the 'age of hostility'.

The United States is going to start a new phase in terms of America-China relations. We are already in the first preparation stage of the age of hostility. There are clear indications because over the past twenty years, the United States have come up with various definitions of the nature of China, for example responsible stakeholders, strategic competitors, but now the United States started to see China as an adversary; that is the change of the nature from a mixed understanding of China to a more definitive understanding of China as adversary. This is not official, of course, but that is what is taking shape at the moment. So this is going to shape the mass media, because the mass media really follow the political rhetoric, rather than having an independent assessment of a country like China.

In regard to the second part of your question, we are entering a new framework of geo-politics. We are at the very beginning stage of this framework of hostility in terms of US-China relations, but not British China relations. British-China relations are going to be very much affected but is not going to be of the same nature of the US-China relations.

Charlotte: What do you think about the rhetoric around the emergence of a new Cold War or decoupling, do you think that the instability that characterised western conceptions of China in the post-cold war have swung towards being negative?

Qing Cao: The broad image of China has been mixed, but more on the side of being negative. Western reporting of the non-west has been broadly negative anyway in all ages, but I think the issue here is whether China is seen as an enemy or as an adversary. I think this is what is really important to watch for; the USA has China being seen in the mass media as an adversarial power, but this is not necessarily the same case in the UK. We should remember that 'Western' is very broad and imprecise, for example we have a difference between the Anglo-Saxon countries medias and the European perspectives

which are different as they are much more neutral in seeing the current strategic contest between the United States and China.

In terms of decoupling, I think this is one of the surest indications that we are sliding into the Cold War. The slide has already started; I see it at two levels, at one level is the definition of the nature of US-China relations and eventually UK-China relations. UK-China relations are going to be defined by ambiguity; It has been the case in the past two decades. I think in the next two years it is going to be very ambiguous, but there is a lot of pressure upon the UK by the United States.

The first level is policy, defining the nature of the relationship. The second level is what you do- what happens practice. I think decoupling is more important than rhetoric, I think decoupling is going to effect the nature of the relationships in the next decade, the United States is going to move away from China, they are going to have a real decoupling policy, which is going to effect a lot of countries. I don't think the UK is going to follow too closely with the United States, but to some extent the UK will engage in this area of decoupling.

Euan: We're going to drill abit deeper into British conceptions and representations of China now. How has British rhetoric around China shifted from the so called 'golden age' of British-Sino relations under David Cameron?

Qing Cao: There are two questions here as I understand. One is broadly how the media see China and one is the political rhetoric, including the nature of foreign policy upon China. The 'golden age' is an example for me of the UK governments ambiguity about UK-China relations, as the relationship has not been entirely stable. Sometimes the UK has been more critical about China, and sometimes more 'friendly' in terms of business relations.

Hong Kong is an issue which has impacted British-Sino relations, but Hong Kong is not going to define British policies about China because that is something the UK government has been very careful to manage. The 'golden age' is really about business relations; it is nothing really beyond that. So, it is quite superficial to some extent, I think which is going to change. It is clear that the UK do not have a real problem with Huawei and 5G; it is the pressure from the US which has been a major factor in the UKs decision making. British intelligence is one of the best in the world, if they had found any evidence that Huawei or 5G posed a real security threat- they would not cooperate with Huawei at all, so it is really the pressure from the US which has been the issue here. But my sense is that the UK is going to move away from 5G in the coming years, this will have real consequences in many years to come.

Euan: Do you think there is starting to be more of a negative conception of China in UK political bodies?

I think the general shift is going to be more negative yes, I think one of the major issues is America rather than the UK. If you take America out of the equation, the UK is going to have a different policy towards China which is warmer, more positive and constructive, but based upon trade mainly. But when considering Britain's relationship with the United States, I think in foreign policy the UK is going to distance from China.

Again, I think the mass media is going to be very ambiguous, so this trend is going to continue. It will move towards more negative representations and there will be more political reporting. The UK and China don't have a real strategic clash, which is fundamentally different from the United States. The

United States have seen China as a strategic competitor and now see China as an adversarial power. The UK's perception of China does not reflect this, the UK see China as a country which has a very different political culture, but also seeing China as a very important business partner for the post Brexit economic future. So I think the UK will be finding it difficult to manage the different factors coming in to play in the decision in terms of how to deal with China. I think the real issue is how to define the nature of UK-China relations; there is no consensus amongst British politicians of these relations, which is different from the case in the United States where the consensus is very clear. Anyone in the position of British Prime Minister in the UK has to be very careful to manage UK-China relations very carefully.

Charlotte: In our last question we want to talk more about your work about UK media perceptions of China. Especially in relation to your work, do you think there has been a change in how China is portrayed in documentaries and TV in the UK, particularly over the last five years?

Qing Cao: I think that the general pattern has not changed. Broadly, China is not dominant or as important in television reporting; there has been less documentaries about China than in the 1990s. This can be closely related to the fact that the parameter which defined conceptions of China is gone, because there has been no clear definition of UK-China relations over the past two decades. I think this trend is going to continue in the future.

I think what is interesting to note is that twenty years ago, very few people went to visit China, they did not have knowledge of China so really relied upon the media. Now many people travel to China, a lot of people have personal experiences and at the same time China has broadly disappeared from British television. We will continue to see a large absence of China in British media.