

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, August 14, 2018.

In the US-China trade war, where is the bilateral humanity and the listening ear?

Tom Plate says a three-dimensional view of China rather than stereotypical and simplistic thinking is needed to break the current impasse in US-China relations

PUBLISHED : Tuesday, 14 August, 2018, 5:03am

UPDATED : Tuesday, 14 August, 2018, 7:02am



Tom Plate

A China of 1.4 billion people cannot possibly be sewn up into one massive blanket of monochromatic metaphor. And if the [Communist Party](#) (membership: 89 million, all by itself) does efficiently enlist so many of the country's brightest, how can all these ambitious Communist Party minds possibly agree on everything?

Beneath the comforting cover of the imagined totalitarian China blanket, a surface which is often all the West sees, one can detect not only an interior yin and yang – not to mention the occasional foreign-relations ping and pong – but a measure of

ongoing “conversations” over this and that, if only we would just listen and read between the lines.

New reports highlight that Xi Jinping, China's president and party chief, is [narrowing the parameters](#) of permissible debate, that the mainland media is feeling more fenced in than usual, and that professors are [being pressured](#) to toe the party line.

A law professor from the famed Tsinghua University, Xi's alma mater, fears that his beloved China is [heading back to the future](#), one with intellectually closed ranks and mandated Communist catechisms. Last but not least, out in China's West, a sort of [Rohingya-comparable](#) detention and purge campaign looks to be playing out against [Muslim Uygurs](#).

For the first time, doubts about Xi, the [term-limitless president](#), are starting to crawl out from under the party floorboards. On the one hand, it is said, Xi enjoys too much control. Pessimists – or alarmists – now claim to see, rising from the historical miasma of mainland politics, the ghoulish outlines of the [ghost of Mao Zedong](#), though it must be noted this would hardly be the first such post-Deng Xiaoping “sighting”.

On the other hand, Xi is said to be disappointing his people by not demonstrating enough control over negative events. A complaint one hears is that Xi [failed to take the measure](#) of US President Donald Trump's combative uber-nationalism and was blindsided by Trump's [tariff attacks](#).

“If not being prepared for the Trump tariff tantrum was a measure of leadership competence, half the leaders in Europe and the Asia-Pacific flunked as well”

That may be true, but to be fair, everyone else was blindsided too, including [long-standing US allies](#) who should have known better – and earlier. If not being prepared for the Trump tariff tantrum was a measure of leadership competence, half the leaders in Europe and the Asia-Pacific flunked as well.

One special trait of the unusual US president is that at heart he is an “I win/you lose” type of man who takes no prisoners. Not many international relations theorists actually would quarrel with that approach; most believe that clashes between nations will almost [always produce win/lose outcomes](#). Trump is certainly of that harsh religious ilk. But the probable result of his primitive, aggressive and idiotic trade policy is the very scenario that seems not to occur to him. Call it “lose/lose”.

In this ever-shrinking world, win/lose makes for abhorrent, reckless foreign policy. Its prevalence and normative acceptance makes it much easier to fully appreciate the [Leviathan philosophy](#) of 17th century thinker Thomas Hobbes – as a true vision of the shocks we will face in future centuries, not just in his own epoch.

The late theoretical physicist Stephen Hawkins was said to have insisted, unsweetly, that human beings “are chemical scum on an average-sized planet, orbiting around a very average-sized star, in the outer suburb of a million galaxies”. Such a thought hardly makes one feel better about things, of course, but its rattlesnake bitterness does concentrate the mind about what’s possible.

It’s hard to completely dismiss that sentiment when the government of the world’s richest nation feels the need to declare economic war on the world’s most populous nation. Where is the humanitarian vision in that? The US should be helping China, not trying to bring it down or cause it pain – and China should reciprocate. Where is the bilateral humanity?

“A three-dimensional sense of China cannot be achieved from a single viewpoint which posits China as either good or bad”

Does one planet, two superpowers, have to equal war, economic or otherwise?

Soon, students at my university will be offered a new course on China.

Undergraduates will listen to different voices and texts, from Dr Henry Kissinger’s epochal *On China*, to [Debating China](#), a yin-yang type of book assembled by the brilliant Dr Nina Hachigian, former US ambassador to the [Association of Southeast Asian Nations](#). My teaching assistant will be a recent graduate hailing from Hong

Kong. A Fulbright intern visiting from China will presumably offer mainland perspectives.

The aim is to avoid dreary dogmatism; international courses taught from one national perspective are inherently provincial. A three-dimensional sense of China cannot be achieved from a single viewpoint which posits China as either good or bad, the Communist Party as either marvellous or completely evil. Only a complex sensibility – and a willingness to listen hard – can comprehend the reality of China.



A worker loads building material on a cart outside a construction site in Beijing's central business district in March. Understanding the complexity of China requires moving away from binary thinking. Photo: AP

“Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.” So begins one of the most memorable orations in Western literature – Marc Anthony’s cunning [take-down of Brutus](#) and his heartfelt tribute to Julius Caesar in Shakespeare’s play. Well worth treasuring, especially as a reminder that to understand what is being said, you must listen carefully between the lines.

The current turbulence in the [China-US relationship](#), the most important in the global system, is deeply worrying. Neither Trump nor Xi, who each in his own way faces immense pressures, is wholly responsible for the trend. But they need to make it more evident that they are aware of the danger of the downturn’s gathering momentum.

To return to Marc Anthony: “O judgment! Thou art fled to brutish beasts, and men have lost their reason.” Put an end to the trade war now, Trump. You’re leading us towards the big lose-lose. You’re not listening hard enough to history. And Xi, help yourself out, by helping him out.

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