

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, December 31, 2019.



Opinion

From Donald Trump curbing his Twitter use to Xi Jinping retiring, here's what won't happen in 2020 – but probably should



- While it's very unlikely that the world will make substantial progress on climate change or come to a complete agreement on geopolitical issues, some simpler developments are also unlikely to come to pass

Tom Plate

Published: 11:00am, 31 Dec, 2019



Chinese President Xi Jinping (left) welcomes US President Donald Trump to China at a ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on November 8, 2017. The leaders of the world's two largest economies have had a testing year. Photo: AFP

Predictions for 2020? It's a lot easier to predict what probably won't happen in 2020 than what will. So why get taken for a wild ride on the sunny side of the street by "experts" only to get our hopes up, then dashed? There are many things we can easily agree will not happen next year.

For starters, you can safely bet that serious progress on climate change won't occur. You can also bet against global carbon emissions declining substantially. An outbreak of "we-are-all-in-this-together" unanimity at the United Nations Security Council on geopolitical issues is also not going to happen. Will US President Donald Trump suddenly cut down on Twitter time and morph into a dignified world political figure? Not happening.

That's the obvious list. What's far more interesting is what probably won't happen in 2020 but arguably should. This less obvious list is offered as light finger food for thought. The intent here is to elicit vehement disagreement from you, while also marking where we earthlings are currently teetering on the high wire between dystopia and utopia.

This won't happen in 2020: Chinese President Xi Jinping makes a visit to Hong Kong. In front of a well-known Chinese restaurant on Victoria Peak, Xi announces the need to end the violent protests and, pointing out that many mainland villages already hold local elections (sort of), concedes to the demand for universal suffrage at all levels of elections in Hong Kong. This is not a climbdown, he says, but a gracious extension of some mainland electoral rights to Hong Kong.

Here's a prediction for the other economic superpower in East Asia that won't come true: before the grand opening of the 2020 Summer Olympics, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe bows deeply no less than seven times in apology to South Korea for Japan's abduction of Korean women to serve as sex slaves during World War II, and other grave misdeeds of the past. The apology ceremony takes place at the gate of the Meiji Shrine, near the new Tokyo National Stadium in Shinjuku.

The response from Seoul is tepid; South Korean President Moon Jae-in doubts the sincerity of each of the apologies. Never mind, by the end of the Olympics, Japan's gold medal tally is twice its 2016 haul, far more than South Korea's. But, medals aside, everyone would cheer if the two would play nice on the political field.

This also won't happen: Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announces his successor as Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam. The public, caught off guard, is shocked that the choice is an Indian, not a figure from the majority Chinese community.

The surprise development for once crowds out the usual catty commentary as to whether Lee deserves to be pegged in the same elite leadership circle as his esteemed father, the late Lee Kuan Yew. Given that some wouldn't mind seeing Lee Hsien Loong at the top of a major world agency after stepping down, Lee Kuan Yew's son has clearly gained international stature, not least from the smooth handling of the Singapore Summit in 2018 between North Korea and the US.



Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who was then serving as International and Monetary Financial Committee chair and Singapore's finance minister, listens to a question during a news conference at the World Bank-International Monetary Fund spring meetings in Washington in April 2014. Photo: AP Photo

This won't happen: on the East Coast of the United States, a prestigious university – Princeton? Columbia? Harvard? – gratefully accepts the offer of an oversized donation from accused sex-criminal Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood mogul set to go to trial next month, to establish a Centre for Feminist Studies. How could any university stoop so low for money?

It would be like, well, universities accepting educational services and donations from China's Confucian Institutes! It's best to always turn down such tainted benefactions, right? But what if the donation were to create far more educational good than harm? Are we sure it would still be a no-go?

Sociologist Max Weber once said: "It is not true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true. Anyone who fails to see this is, indeed, a political infant." In his satirical novel, *The Warden*, Anthony Trollope also had some tart words for the excessively high-minded: "He took such high ground that there was no getting on to it."

Another thing that won't happen: Chinese President Xi Jinping retires. In China, the retirement age is 60 for men and (perhaps in a case of gender discrimination) 55 for female civil servants and 50 for other female workers. No one seems to want to point out to Xi that he is already over the limit at 66. Will he last until 95, the age of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, rated one of Asia's sharpest leaders? Would Xi even want three more decades in office?

Mao led China from 1949 to 1976 – a span of 27 years. Many Chinese think that run was more than enough. China, for better or worse, is no Western democracy, but wise leaders will always listen to their people.

A final development we won't see: only women taking very high office, at least for a certain period of time. Would the world be better off? The old Latin term used for the male quest for power is *libido dominandi*. Is the female gender free of such poisonous overreach in its DNA? Is it sexist to suggest this?

Political life these days is so confusing, don't you agree? Let's see what happens in 2020.

Clinical Professor Tom Plate is author of the “Giants of Asia” book quartet, Loyola Marymount University's Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Affairs, and the Pacific Century Institute's vice-president



Tom Plate

Tom Plate is a university professor and a veteran columnist focused on Asia and America. This Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University has orchestrated live interactive seminars with major universities across Asia, as part of the LMU's path-finding Asia Media International Centre. He is also the author of 13 books, including the bestsellers “Confessions of an American Media Man” (2007) and four volumes in the “Giants of Asia” series. His latest is *Yo-Yo Diplomacy: An American Columnist Tackles The Ups-and-Downs Between China and the US* (2017).