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If American and Chinese youth believe in closer Sino-US ties under Trump, it's time the experts did as well

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Tom Plate

Tom Plate says optimism among randomly sampled youth about the future of the China-US relationship, and the Donald Trump presidency, may well prove the power of positive thinking



Surprise! Few parents, perhaps including those in brand-adoring Asia, realise that Stanford University, on America's sunny West Coast, is tougher for kids to get into than Princeton, Harvard or Yale. One star centre to which some of its best students – and faculty – gravitate is the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Centre (Aparc), in the heart of the campus. It focuses only on the Asia-Pacific, and no one does it better – whether Harvard or anyone else.

And so, given the fallout from President Donald Trump's jaunt through Asia, and as I'd been previously invited by the research centre to hold forth on China-US relations, the moment to head up north from southern California had come.

True confession: put me in front of avid students, and I am the happiest clam in the harbour. During the session, one laser-sharp undergraduate, born in Vietnam, had a subtle China question that almost knocked me over. The first-year student inquired with indignation why I (allegedly) underrated her home country's historic and heroic resilience to China's aggression.

I managed to evade her total moral condemnation only by deploying Henry Kissinger's famous quip about how one can do virtually anything successfully with the pragmatic Vietnamese – except invade them. She liked that.

At the end of the excellent 90 minutes, a brief opinion questionnaire I'd prepared was passed out to seminar attendees. Would relations deteriorate under Trump? Was war with China all but certain? And, if politicians on both sides of the Pacific could be kept from interfering in the bilateral relationship, would the American and Chinese people, even left to themselves, wind up with a better outcome?

I took their responses back to my university – Loyola Marymount (LMU) – and put the same triad of questions to my Asia class. Would there be significant differences of perspective? After all, the Stanford group weighed in much older – invited were faculty as well as other adult professionals from upscale Palo Alto, in addition to Stanford students; my Los Angeles sampling was comprised entirely of LMU students, aged 20 to 23.

Surprise again! There were hardly any significant differences. By a composite near landslide of 2-1, the vote was that relations with China would get better under the controversial Trump. Secondly, only 4 per cent felt war was all but certain. (Lopsided and inspirational.) And 78 per cent assessed that US-China relations would improve if only political figures on both sides would park their big egos elsewhere and leave everything to “the people”.

That seemed like genuine California dreaming to me, but what do I know? We so-called experts tend to get bogged down in the details of transpacific tensions and differences – and they are serious ones. But it would be a happy notion indeed were the China-US relationship not so

poisoned in American public opinion as to be beyond redemption – as suggested by these two campus groups informally and very unscientifically surveyed.

As for comparable mainland opinion, this is notoriously hard to gauge. Just as American polling establishments have been messing up – again and again their predictions miss the mark – scientifically solid opinion-taking in China is an even tougher pursuit.

Perhaps a touch more revealing, precisely because it is self-generated and random, are the views of the Chinese people in the heat of social media usage. While monitored by government censors, their social media is nonetheless so sprawling, robust and accessed that, at this point, it counts as virtually China's “great wall” of self-reflection and revelation. (Westerners who think the Chinese people have utterly no thoughts of their own are very seriously misinformed.)

So a bright, bilingual mainland-born LMU student undertook a survey of Chinese social media opinion of post-trip Trump. Like my quickie polls, this was no rigorous social-science sampling. But it was an honest snapshot – and the results were similarly unexpected.

It turns out that the Chinese like what they see of Trump because he is so atypical. Social media users, discouraged from expressing blatant political views, tend to depict him as a TV star and “web celebrity”, with “funny facial expressions” and “using interesting words”.

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Reports my researcher: "For these people, Trump is not a negative character for China. He seems really funny and he is nothing like other serious presidents. For them, that seems a big plus."

Not everyone was positive, of course. Some worried that businessman Trump is one sly fox of a trade exploiter; some referred to the Chinese saying: "A weasel paying a New Year's call to a chicken, with no good intentions."

They view Trump as not stupid but worry that he will drag China into the complicated North Korea issues even more.

But, on the whole, the TV star image of Trump appears to be playing nicely in China, notably better than the dreary picture presented by the East Coast US news media.

What I learned last week was no more than a split-second snapshot of the moment, at the end of the day no more conclusive or predictive than is – say – the Dow Jones Industrial stock average at midday.

But for those of us who like to stay positive about the China-America relationship, a bit of sunshine cannot be so bad for our sense of balance. Professor Gi-Wook Shin, the Aparc director, lifted his eyebrows as high as mine over the apparent optimism, in north and south California. Positive thinking can generate a power all its own.

Columnist and professor Tom Plate, whose recent book on China is Yo-Yo Diplomacy, thanks LMU Asia Media staffers Deng Yuchan and Yi Ning Wong for their assistance

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