

# If it cares about its global standing, China should allay concerns about Hong Kong's missing booksellers

**Tom Plate says Beijing should be guided by common sense, rather than principles, in its response to international criticism of its handling of the case**

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BY TOM PLATE

There is a way one can be wrong even when technically one is right. This happens upon approaching (what I call) the famous “twilight zone” of common sense. When you find yourself entering, knowingly or not, this zone of cosmic uncertainty, the recommendation here is to, as quickly as possible, ‘rise above principle’ (see John F. Kennedy’s Profiles in Courage) and notch down to a less elevated posture. This is the way the best way to avoid severe political turbulence.

Consider the “twilight zone” experience of a senior diplomat from China at a UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva who flipped out when Council members, ginned by the U.S, tried to make political hay out of the unresolved case of the “Five Missing Booksellers.” The details of this bizarre story scarcely need to be recounted to the well-informed readers of this newspaper.

Taking the view that this entire matter is sovereign to the authority of the People’s Republic of China – and thus no one else’s darn business - Fu Cong, the Chinese deputy permanent representative in Geneva, pulled few punches in countering the American diplomat who raised the issue. That was US ambassador Keith Harper, detailed to the Rights Council, for whom the “unexplained recent disappearances and apparent coerced returns of Chinese and foreign citizens from outside mainland China” raised doubts about the commitment to its “one country, two systems” principle for Hong Kong.

Mr Fu went ballistic: “The US is notorious for prison abuse at Guantanamo prison, its gun violence is rampant, racism is its deep-rooted malaise,” he declaimed. “The US conducts large-scale extra-territorial eavesdropping, uses drones to attack other countries’ innocent civilians, its troops on foreign soil commit rape and murder of local people. It conducts kidnapping overseas and uses black prisons.”

Fu’s bombast has some basis in fact, of course. Truth be told, many Americans also wish we’d invest more energy and enthusiasm cleaning up our own backyard instead of complaining about others’ maintenance of theirs. People in glass houses who initiate stone-throwing would be wise to consider their own vulnerability. But little ever seems to cause us a moment’s lecturing pause – as if elevating the imperfections of other nations makes our own seem less grievous or urgent.

Fu's fulmination was also completely consistent with his government's proclaimed policy of official non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. However, the reality of Hong Kong is that Hong Kong hovers in a global "twilight zone" – not in a normal political realm. Since the 1997 handover, its astonishing high profile has not gone away; even two decades later it remains a premier global city. Normal sovereignty standards do not apply; but the reality of "one country, two systems" does. Hong Kong is not, after all, Wuhan, much less Macao. Fu, it seems, was splashing around in the bumpy international political twilight zone and didn't realize it.

A grounded position on the Missing Booksellers Case came recently from the Press Freedom Committee of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Hong Kong. It urged "the Chinese government ... to engage in good-faith dialogue when legitimate concerns are raised over possible breaches of international legal norms and human rights, such as in the case of the five Hong Kong residents.... The FCC calls for the immediate release of the five detained to prevent further weakening of damaged confidence among the local, international and business communities in the robustness of Hong Kong's rule of law and protection of free speech guaranteed by the Basic Law."

In principle, to be sure, Hong Kong is now an integral part of China. There is no quarrel with that. But the issue here isn't the sovereignty principle; it's common sense, especially when you're in the political twilight zone. Yes, we offer diplomat Fu the courtesy of acknowledging that he was speaking from principle, as he saw it. And I cannot say that Fu's outburst seemed insincere or out of line; the U.S provoked him. But what to think? Principle or common sense?

In this context the rumination of hard-charging Chinese author Yang Jisheng, in acknowledging an award from the Neiman Society of Harvard University recently, acceded to the need for modesty when entering the twilight zone of issues impossible: "[Ours] is an unfathomable profession: while journalists are not scholars, they're required to study and gain a comprehensive grasp of society. Any journalist, no matter how erudite and insightful, will feel unequal to the task of decoding this complex and ever-changing society."

But Yang would also be first to reject a journalism of hedging that reflects intimidation by hard issues of significance. The constant worry that history may reverse the view we have today for more a deeper, more rounded one in the future cannot handcuff us from trying to decode the present.

So to me there remains a special brilliance and deep cosmopolitan validity to the policy of one country-two systems originally recommended by Deng Xiaoping that is vital to maintain --- not just for Hong Kong but perhaps as much for Beijing as well. Thus, the Xi Jinping government might well consider offering a full and un-redacted report on how this bizarre Bookseller-Five Case came about; why it is not good for Mother China; and what measures will be implemented to insure that its like can't happen again. Only due diligence of this high level can bring this unnerving affair to a proper end. The political wisdom and maturation thus displayed would increase China's soft power around the world more than

any number of Olympic-size edifices. As for diplomat Fu, he was not wrong; he was just caught in the twilight zone. It's a tricky place for anyone.

**Columnist Tom Plate, Loyola Marymount University's Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies, is the author of the "Giants of Asia' book series.**