

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Monday, April 22, 2019.

The world can think its way out of a US-China deadlock, starting by reading Singapore's Kishore Mahbubani

More than ever, the world needs scholars who offer good thinking and writing about China, from Kishore Mahbubani to Hugh White to China's Central Party School professors. Scholarship can buffer US-China tensions before they get out of hand



Tom Plate



In his writing, scholar-diplomat Kishore Mahbubani has warned a complacent West to wake up and take the full measure of the epochal rise of Asia and China. Photo: Handout

Last week I almost fainted when Singapore's Kishore Mahbubani, that subversive champion of the world beyond America and the West, was honoured by one of America's most revered cultural institutions.

In a wonderful surprise, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (founded in 1780 by John Adams, John Hancock and so on, and headquartered in Cambridge Massachusetts) announced his investiture as an International Honorary Member.

Among this year's honorees is former United States first lady Michelle Obama.

Nancy C. Andrews, board chair of the American academy, proclaimed that "the members of the class of 2019 embody the founders' vision of cultivating knowledge that advances ... a 'free, virtuous, and independent people'". Their induction takes place in October.

To my mind, the dean of forward thinking about China is surely Mahbubani. This provocative scholar-diplomat is worth a documentary all by himself. Title it: *Citizen Disrupter*.

In the 1990s, after Lee Kuan Yew started edging off centre stage, Mahbubani, then ambassador to the United Nations in New York, hit his stride.

In articles that would become the book with the bitterly sardonic title, *Can Asians Think?*, this deep-thinking, blunt-speaking diplomat warned a sleepy, complacent, provincial West to wake up and at least take the full measure of the epochal rise of Asia and China – so the West might start thinking hard about how to handle itself with geopolitical finesse in the coming 21st century.

Oh how, with that, Kishore got the West's goat! Many critics resented his over-the-top prose style and rhetorical arrogance. But what a wonder: my university students embrace his straight talk and global-mindedness for the blast of fresh air it was.

In American academia, humility is not a requirement for a PhD in government or political science either.

But from America, I will read anything by the near-saintly Orville Schell, now with Asia Society's Centre on US-China Relations; or by globe-trotting Nathan Gardels, whose superb fourth chapter in his just published book (with Nicholas Berggruen), *Renovating Democracy*, puts China in a crystal-clear context.

Some Australians, too, offer good thinking and writing about China. For my money, Hugh White is near the top. His book, *The China Choice: Why We Should Share Power*, out six years now, set the gold standard for rigorous geopolitical calculation.

How does China view itself and the United States? I've met a few profs from the Central Party School. They were brilliant – far more informed about the world than, say, the average US congressman.

Given the school's central role in training officials in a system advertised as more meritocratic than mendacious, it's good to remind ourselves our Harvard profs do not have a monopoly on geopolitical wisdom.

Central Party School professors who can think clearly and confer openly with their colleagues on the political conditions of own country are staggeringly important to global peace.

They may actually help nurture a more sensible atmosphere in Beijing and buffer tensions between the two superpowers before they get dangerously out of hand.

One party school professor is reported to have forthrightly decried (this comes to us in translation) "the explosion of narrow-minded nationalism and exclusionism that has followed recent frustrations and difficulties in our foreign relations".

What China needs, according to him, is “confidence without arrogance, pride without conceit”. Agreed.

Can anyone think of a superpower besides China that would improve itself by taking such words of wisdom to heart?

And so for a few fleeting moments, I am feeling warm and fuzzy about Godzilla and Dumbo (right, Beijing and Washington): maybe the superpowers are not “destined for war”; maybe the world will come to measure human progress less by econometric crudities such as purchasing power parity and more by the humanistic currency of sustainable peace; and finally, may the rule of reason increasingly overshadow the risible leadership of rude rulers and their marching minions.

British futurist H.G. Wells warned: “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.”

I imagine there’s enough military hard power between Beijing and Washington to blast a black hole through Mars with a ricochet over to Venus.

It is not the militarists but the great educators – the Hugh Whites and the Kishore Mahbubanis, not to mention open-minded profs at the Central Party School trying their best – who are the true guardians of peace and security.

The world needs less gunpowder and more brainpower. Can we read and think our way out of a third world war? Most of us would agree that it is well worth a try.

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