

Interview - Steve Tsang

Written by E-International Relations

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Professor Steve Tsang joined the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London in 2016 as Director of the SOAS China Institute. His research interests focus on Chinese foreign policy, China's soft power, China-Taiwan relations, the nature of the political system in China, and Hong Kong's relations with mainland China. Professor Tsang is a frequent commentator for the BBC, including programmes such as *Newsnight*, *BBC One News*, *BBC News Channel*, *Today*, as well as the BBC World Service's various programmes such as *Newshour* and *World Tonight*. He has also appeared on Sky News, Channel 4 News, Channel 5 News, Voice of America, France 24, Channel News Asia, CNBC, Al Jazeera and Russia Today.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The study of Taiwan's politics and development in juxtaposition to that of the People's Republic of China. As a scholar, I do not take a view on whether Taiwan should be deemed a part of China or not. What matters to me is the reality that Taiwan, a Japanese colony for 50 years, was Sinicized after it came under the rule of Chiang Kai-shek at the end of the Second World War and became the torch bearer of Chinese civilization and culture. This happened as China proper came under Leninist rule after the Communist Party came to power under Mao Zedong. Some seven decades on, Taiwan upholds China's civilizational heritage more faithfully than Mainland China. Being able to compare Taiwan's democratization and the internalization of human rights, while sustaining its Chinese heritage, against the PRC's determination to sustain its Leninist system and reject democratization is illuminating. It underlines the fallacy of 'China exceptionalism', implying that Chinese civilization is so different from that of the West that 'Western' concepts of democracy and human rights cannot and should not apply to the Chinese people.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The spectacular display of hubris in Western governments from the invasion of Iraq to the global financial crisis reminded me the importance of not being complacent, and the need to guard against groupthink. They highlighted to me that we, living in ever richer democracies after winning the Cold War, got carried away and failed to reflect critically sufficiently to see our failings. This is a problem that is not political system specific. Intellectuals have a duty to challenge established thinking and ways of doing things, as well as explanations being put forth by governments or so-called established authorities. If we don't keep doing so, we would repeat mistakes similar to the invasion of Iraq and the global financial crisis.

During the recent National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CCP), Xi Jinping enshrined "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" in the party constitution. Could you summarise the key tenets of "Xi Jinping Thought"?

Since Xi Jinping Thought was put forth in October more than a dozen centres are being created in Chinese universities to study its contents. This reflects not only the enormous commitment of resources by the Chinese state to this subject but also the reality that Xi Jinping Thought has not yet been clearly articulated in an easy to summarise form. If we all know what Xi Jinping Thought is, why are universities setting up centres to study it?

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To put it in a nutshell Xi Thought amounts to making China great again by putting China first and by reinvigorating the Communist Party as a Leninist instrument under his leadership. Xi outlined his vision for China in the next three decades but did not provide a roadmap at the Party Congress. Instead he provided general guidelines.

The key to leading China to become the rich, powerful, modern and beautiful country Xi promised is to make sure the Communist Party functions effectively as a Leninist instrument for control and governance, so that it will lead and guide China to development in the right direction. To do so, it will also require the leader (who, by implication, is Xi himself) to impose strong discipline on this massive party of nearly 90 million so that the will and vision of the leader will be implemented loyally by its members.

Xi Jinping Thought also draws a close to the Deng Xiaoping era of 'opening up and reform' that emphasized 'crossing the river by feeling for rocks underneath'. Xi articulates a confidence in the China model. He knows how to lead China to the promised land. He is no longer looking outside of China for ideas or models for China's further reform and development.

What are the likely ideological, political and socio-economic implications of the recent changes to the composition of the Politburo Standing Committee? Who will be the key actors within the new committee?

Xi has reduced the significance of personalities in the Politburo Standing Committee by making them all the President's men. The inclusion of two senior figures clearly not of Xi's patronage network was not the result of having to bow to pressure from the so-called Youth League Faction (in the case of Wang Yang) or to the Shanghai Faction (in the case of Han Zheng). If Xi were not certain that his preferred membership of the Standing Committee would not be challenged at the Party Congress, he would not have allowed its membership to be leaked to both the South China Morning Post and the New York Times days before the Congress concluded.

Xi has effectively neutralized the factions and has promoted Wang and Han to show he is the leader of the entire Communist Party, not just the Xi Jinping faction. Han was moved out of his Shanghai powerbase just after his elevation to the Standing Committee. Wang has not yet been allocated a specific portfolio beyond membership of the Standing Committee. Even Premier Li Keqiang, another top-level leader with a very strong Youth League background was publicly humiliated before he was allowed to stay on as Premier. The humiliation was delivered by allowing rumours to run wild before the Party Congress that Li would be moved from the Premiership. So, all three of them know full well that they are on the Standing Committee by the grace of Xi. Of the remaining three, Li Zhanshu and Zhao Leji are Xi's followers. While the remaining member, Wang Huning, served both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao before joining Xi's inner circle, he has no powerbase of his own and is completely dependent on Xi.

The most important implication is that Xi has now managed to impose a high degree of uniformity in official thinking in the top leadership. Who will now dare to say something like "With the greatest respect General Secretary, this particular policy you have just outlined is likely to prove counter-productive for reasons x to z?" This reduction of the scope for internal policy debate creates the conditions for promoting groupthink. If the top leader gets the policies right, they will be implemented more effectively and efficiently than previously, but if he should get them wrong, the consequences can be enormous.

During the 19th National Congress, Xi articulated a grand vision of China as the pre-eminent power in the world by 2050. Considering the various socio-economic challenges confronting China, is this an achievable target or just a vision?

China in 2017 achieved far more than what Deng Xiaoping imagined possible in 1979. One should therefore not underestimate the capacity of China to surprise us. But the next decade or two will be very challenging for China, whoever may be in power. The demographic bonus that facilitated China's rapid development in the last three decades is turning into a demographic deficit. The risk of a Minsky moment (things turning bad dramatically just as they look all very promising, as it did just prior to the Global Financial Crisis) is not irrelevant, as recognized by the central bank governor Zhou Xiaochuan. There are also issues such as rising debt levels, the rebalancing of the

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economy, the middle-income trap and the slowing of growth in the global economy that will need to be addressed effectively. To achieve Xi's vision three decades on, China will need to overcome most if not all of these challenges first.

Under Xi's leadership, the CCP has revised its "principal contradiction" for the first time since 1979. Today, the principal contradiction facing China is the "unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life." How will governance in China adapt to the needs of a more educated and affluent population?

Xi made it clear when he became leader of the CCP in 2012 that under his leadership the Party will not make the mistake which the Communist Party of the Soviet Union made that ultimately led to its collapse, which was to allow 'traitors' like Mikhail Gorbachev to look to the West and appear weak in confronting domestic challenges. Xi will continue to focus on strengthening social governance to pre-empt and contain challenges which may come up within the country, whatever the social background of those who may pose such challenges. Xi will seek to indoctrinate the people on what appropriately balanced and adequate development would mean and seek to deliver this. If any individual should challenge the success of such a policy, Xi will use the full might of the state to help such an individual to correct his/her mistake and learn to be a 'good patriotic' Chinese person again.

How have cross-strait (Taiwan-China) relations evolved since Tsai Ing-Wen took over as the President of Taiwan in May 2016?

The PRC Government does not trust Tsai and her Administration, and will require Tsai to embrace publicly Beijing's one China principle before seeing her as someone Beijing can partner with. This is politically impossible for any state president to do in Taiwan.

Xi is, however, aware that setting a specific short-term timeframe for unification will prove counterproductive as it ties his hands. Beijing has increased steadily pressure on Taipei but has refrained from pushing the relationship to the breaking point. This is likely to continue in the next few years.

China has been opening Confucius Institutes around the world to export cultural values and enhance its "soft power". What represents China's "soft power" and have the attempts to develop it been successful?

The Chinese Government confuses public diplomacy with soft power. Confucius Institutes have very mixed results in 'projecting soft power' as the projection of soft power is a bit of a contradiction in itself.

Great powers regularly use public diplomacy to promote their international standing and project their cultural influence. But those which enjoy real soft power do so by virtue of their attractiveness in different spheres. China's spectacular economic achievements in the last three decades do generate soft power for China. But this is fundamentally different from what Confucius Institutes do.

Different Confucius Institutes operate differently. But the fact that some of them have proved very controversial does not help to promote the reputation of Confucian Institutes as a whole, hence Chinese soft power. This notwithstanding the Chinese Government will continue to use Confucius Institutes to 'project soft power'.

What is the most important advice that you would give to young scholars studying China?

Understand China for what it is, and not accept any permutation of 'China exceptionalism'. To understand China it is necessary to understand its history and culture but this is not the same as accepting the official version of history and the official rendition of Confucianism. The brand of Confucianism the Chinese Government now advocates is not recognizable to Confucius himself if he could be brought back to life.

The political system in China is fundamentally a Leninist or consultative Leninist one, which implies the state holds a

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monopoly of history and 'the truth'. Understanding China and the Chinese does not mean learning to know China and the Chinese people as the Chinese state would like you to know them. Chinese people are not fundamentally different from others who have long and proud histories of their own. Accepting 'China exceptionalism' and treating the Chinese as fundamentally different from others is contrary to respecting the Chinese as fellow human beings.

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This interview was conducted by Bhargav Sriganesh. Bhargav is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.