Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom

A Response to William Hurst on the Field of Chinese Politics

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In his powerful essay, William Hurst raised the question of how to make the study of Chinese politics relevant to the discipline of political science. Yet, the prevailing question should not be ‘how do we make China relevant to the discipline?’, but ‘how can the study of China help us rethink the study and practice of comparative politics?’

In his essay ‘Treating What Ails the Study of Chinese Politics’, included in this issue of *Made in China*, William Hurst raises the question of how to make the study of Chinese politics relevant to political science. I applaud and entirely agree with Hurst’s diagnosis that the study of Chinese politics risks falling into obscurity if it focuses obsessively on methodological sophistication at the expense of substantive questions (personal disclosure: Hurst was my dissertation advisor and remains a close friend). I would, however, like to offer a different remedy for some of the field’s other symptoms. The primary question should not be *how do we make China relevant to the discipline?*, but *how can the study of China help us rethink the study and practice of comparative politics?*

About half way through his essay, Hurst puts his finger on a key issue: although scholars may have access to ‘bigger and bigger Chinese data sets and fancier and fancier methods’, what research questions are they posing? What kind of work is being done with these data, and in the service of

Traditional Chinese Watercolor Painting, Unknown author.

what kinds of arguments? As Hurst puts it, ‘such research can end up asking the wrong questions, cutting itself out of the most essential conversations before it has settled on findings.’ Hurst’s preferred solution to these trends is cross-national comparison, grounded in linguistic competence and time-intensive fieldwork, especially (though not exclusively or even necessarily) with countries in Southeast Asia. While I am not opposed to this approach (in fact, my new research project is a cross-subnational comparison of urbanisation patterns in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, and several localities in China’s Inner Mongolia), Hurst’s proposed corrective stops short of a more radical and exciting possibility to overhaul the study of comparative politics.

What China Can Teach Us About Ourselves?

What can we learn about politics from how it is conceptualised and practiced in China? Recently, in my Politics of China undergraduate seminar, comparisons between China and the United States kept spontaneously arising in conversation. On the one hand, reference to the US is inevitable, as it is the frame of reference for most of my students. On the other hand, our discussions readily leapt to technologies of control and discursive production in China alongside those in the United States. During our class on Communist Party propaganda, my students directed the conversation to instances of US patriotism, public discourse after 9/11, and the current political banishment of **NFL Quarterback Colin Kaepernick**. Although these measures were not government-imposed, they are still forms of control, policing behaviour, and silencing or erasure of dissident voices. In examining *practices* that cut across both authoritarian states and democracies, we can start asking difficult and uncomfortable questions about our own

political environments.

While still acknowledging and studying respective institutional and historical contexts, we can de-exoticise China and tease out commonalities as well as differences. I suggest that we examine practices—at least in addition to institutions or bounded comparative units—as a fruitful avenue of inquiry. Comparative politics can be (among other things) about generating experiences of the *uncanny*—or the disturbing recognition of familiarity in an unfamiliar place. It is salutary to be reminded that we may not be as democratic as some would like to believe. Conversely, this practice-oriented approach can also limn *differences* between political systems, and remind us why some of our beloved conditions of possibility may be in need of passionate defence against those who desire to extinguish them.

An inspiration for this methodological approach is **Lisa Wedeen’s claim** that there can be democratic practices in authoritarian states (a claim which cannot be seen if one is only looking at institutions as units of comparison based on deeply engrained binary and normative assumptions about how those institutions organise political life)! In the China field broadly construed to include political theory, **Leigh Jenco’s project of building ‘global theory’** is based on the premise that thinking born in local conditions can ‘produce new and broader insight into social and political conditions elsewhere.’ Jenco’s own work (and the collective projects she has organised) are welcome antidotes to the tendency to indiscriminately apply Foucault to everything (I write this half-jokingly as someone who loves Foucault’s work and often references it). Will comparative political scientists working on China engage ‘global theory’? Sadly, probably only a few, as the intra-disciplinary boundaries between comparative politics and political theory stifle research projects that attempt to do two things at once (perhaps I am being hyperbolic but it

is in order to emphasise a point). In the field of comparative politics, **Maria Repnikova's excellent new book** starts from in-depth empirical analysis of how critical journalists understand and pursue their own work, and its relationship to the state, and on that basis she demolishes the stereotype of an inevitably, and normatively, adversarial relationship between the media and state.

Reinforced Structural Marginalisation

What Hurst calls 'the methods arm race' is structurally reproduced by the conditions of training graduate students, journal gatekeeping, and career prospects. Is it irresponsible to train a graduate student to adopt a qualitative methodological approach to Chinese politics? Which disciplinary venues will they publish their findings in? Will mainstream political scientists recognise their work as genuinely comparative and not as some hybrid whose language is at the margins of intelligibility? Will they fall through the cracks of heavily policed disciplinary boundaries? Under these institutional conditions, to encourage a qualitative approach that interrogates the definitions and practices of the political in China, would set a PhD student down a path of obscurity and increase the difficulties of landing a tenure-track position in an already cut-throat environment of neoliberal competition. Of course it is possible to make it work, and I would like to think of myself as a positive example (and there are others who often land in different disciplines), but the question remains: is it *advisable*? Over the years many people have attempted to dissuade me (with a few notable exceptions) from pursuing a qualitative approach and line of questioning precisely out of concerns for my future 'hire-ability'.

The bizarre thing is that nearly everyone admits in private conversation that the field is

READING SUGGESTION

Fabio Lanza's *The End of Concern* (Duke University Press, 2017)

In 1968 a cohort of politically engaged young academics established the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS). Critical of the field of Asian Studies and its complicity with the United States' policies in Vietnam, the CCAS mounted a sweeping attack on the field's academic, political, and financial structures. While the CCAS included scholars of Japan, Korea, and South and Southeast Asia, the committee focussed on Maoist China, as it offered the possibility of an alternative politics and the transformation of the meaning of labour and the production of knowledge. In *The End of Concern*, Fabio Lanza traces the complete history of the CCAS, outlining how its members worked to merge their politics and activism with their scholarship. Lanza's story exceeds the intellectual history and legacy of the CCAS, however; he narrates a moment of transition in Cold War politics and how Maoist China influenced activists and intellectuals around the world, becoming a central element in the political upheaval of the long 1960s. (Buy the book [here](#))

going in the wrong direction, even some of the people at the forefront of the ‘methods arms race’! I have heard this refrain of discontent from people across the academic spectrum: junior, senior, qualitative, quantitative, top-tier research university, small liberal arts colleges, and so on.

The question is: *what are we going to do about it?* Are we going to organise the same conferences and panel themes ad nauseam out fear of rejection? Are we going to allow big data to do the work of thinking for us? The reason I am passionate about this topic is that China is a place with endless lessons to teach us about our lives as political creatures and a world held in common. Methodology can shape (and sometimes constrain) what kinds of questions get asked, and what other kinds do not get asked. It therefore bears upon how we think about and engage the world, and we must engage it reflexively, critically, and forthrightly.

To achieve the modest goals I propose, it does not matter whether one’s preferred method or tools are quantitative or qualitative. What is essential is to direct methodological antennae toward what is happening on the ground in China. Rather than approach China as a case that might confirm or disprove political science puzzles generated in other institutional contexts, we should allow our research questions to develop in response to and conversation with the contexts they seek to explain. In other words, *inductively building theory from the ground up* that can then speak back to other contexts and support a more robust understanding of politics the world over.

Conclusion: A Call for Intellectual Generosity

I am not attempting to preach that everyone must abandon the church of big data for the gospel of qualitative transcripts—I like to think of myself as *methodologically*

ecumenical. There is excellent work being done in both camps, across them, between them, and beside them. Unfortunately, a deficit of intellectual generosity and curiosity prevents certain kinds of questions from being asked. Of course, no one can be expected to have a limitless archive, or to read everything that comes across one’s desk with careful consideration. There is never enough time in the day to read all that one wants to read, let alone articles and books with faint relevance to one’s own interests. That is not something that can be changed. What can be cultivated is a willingness to be surprised in one’s own convictions about what counts as ‘political science’ based on the realisation that an interesting question is after all an interesting question.

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