

Talking China: Podcasting and Pedagogy on Sinica

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In 2010, I started a podcast with another longtime resident of Beijing, Jeremy Goldkorn. We had been chatting one evening in mid-March of that year about the podcasts we'd been listening to, and one of us—neither can remember who—asked, “Why aren't there any good podcasts on current affairs in China?”

We decided right then that we would do one. Long years spent working in media in Beijing meant we both had sizeable networks and would never want for guests. Between us we knew most of the English-language journalists in town, numerous folks running NGOs, quite a number of diplomats, entrepreneurs at every stage of success, and even a handful of Chinese celebrities. Jeremy suggested we reach out to a UC Berkeley political science grad student in town, David Lancashire, who had created a podcast-based Chinese language learning system. David readily agreed not only to let us record the show at his apartment-cum-studio, but offered to edit it and host it as well. It made sense: he figured we would bring him customers (we did), and for his part, he could deliver a ready-made audience for Sinica on the theory that people already interested in learning Chinese would likely be interested in a current affairs program. (They were). So we revived the name and logo of an abortive China news startup we'd briefly formed back in 2004: Sinica. And we invited our friend Bill Bishop, by then already a formidable presence in the Beijing China-watching community, to join us for our first show, which launched in April 2010.

It was a lucky moment to launch a China podcast. Smartphones were becoming ubiquitous, podcasts were easier to access than they'd previously been, social media platforms made it easy to spread the word about a show, and with the Olympics still fresh in memory, interest in China was palpably increasing across the English-speaking world. No one was really keeping track of metrics—both of us had good day jobs, and neither of us was looking to profit from it—but soon we realized that there was a growing appetite in a growing community of China-watchers for a show like ours.

It was a lucky moment in another sense. Neither of us was a proper China-watcher; rather, we were both what a friend once called “feral Sinologists,” and around the time that we launched Sinica, feral Sinology was starting to become acceptable, perhaps even respectable, in more reputable Sinological circles. I confessedly had a bit more academic training than Jeremy, but neither of us was credentialed academics. And yet people like us—and there were many knocking around Beijing and other cities in Greater China back then – who had spent many years in China, had written for various English publications, had acquired decent Chinese, had wide circles of Chinese friends, had worked in Chinese companies, had written blogs when that was the thing to do, had jumped early onto platforms like Facebook and Twitter, were suddenly being asked to moderate panels, speak at events, offer commentary for foreign and Chinese media alike, and were even being invited to academic conferences.

With Sinica, neither of us explicitly set out to teach. The show was just supposed to be a conversation between the two of us and a guest or two, usually foreign correspondents in China, with whom we'd have an unscripted chat focused on the major China news of the week. We thought of it as an opportunity for reporters to provide context for stories that they couldn't fit into print, to talk about the reporting process, and to restore some of the quotes and details left on the cutting room floor. But only a few months into it we realized we could do more with the show than just the week's news. We began tackling topics that we thought would have a longer shelf life and create shows that listeners might value months or even years after they were recorded. We also expanded to include explorations of different chapters of modern Chinese history, and episodes that just showcased the work of interesting or quirky individuals engaging with China.

As one of the podcast's hosts, my ability to push a particular take on some issue or controversy is somewhat circumscribed. But I recognize that I still wield considerable control through choice of topics and guests, through what questions are asked and how they are framed – and of course through the tone and timber of my responses. Sinica has never been an adversarial show: we're not out to make our guests look bad, but rather to give them a platform to talk through their ideas at length, and I imagine that our listeners have long ago concluded that if a guest comes on, the hosts are at least partly sympathetic with his or her views. Still, any listener to the show in its first few years recognized that the hosts had carved out quite different positions, especially when it came to the Chinese Communist Party: Jeremy was more combative, cynical about the Party's motives, and generally more pessimistic about China's overall direction; my instinct was to contextualize, to withhold judgment, to try to see how a given issue looked when viewed out Beijing's windows. To an extent, this basic dynamic persists on the show.

There was never a specific moment when the show became self-consciously educational, but I've always been aware of a latent pedagogical intent, at least on my part. I've certainly used the show to try and nudge listeners toward certain approaches and away from others: context is good. Mono-causal explanations usually don't cut it. A holistic, interdisciplinary approach gets you closer to real understanding than you can ever hope to get with a single discipline. Awareness of the baggage we as Westerners (and especially as Americans) bring to the discussions on China is vital – our habitual teleological thinking, say, or our maddening tendency to compare Chinese realities with western (and especially American) ideals. History matters, especially when you're talking about China—but take your pet historically based explanation too far, and it becomes essentialism. Engagement is only meaningful as a conscious strategy when the relationship is bad. It's not something we need bother think about in the other times, so puzzle through the problems, look for solutions, and don't give in to what

Barack Obama once called "the satisfying purity of indignation."

But above all, if there's been one approach I've pushed, it's for what I've called "informed empathy" – more properly, *cognitive* empathy, as distinct from that easier form common to nearly all of humanity, *emotional* empathy. Attaining informed or cognitive empathy is inherently about learning. After all, to see the world out the eyes of another, one has to *learn* something about the historical forces that shaped that other, about their values, beliefs, and habits of mind, about their day-to-day experience and much more. The task is greater still when the intended object of that empathy is an entire civilization.

In 2016, Sinica was acquired by a New York-based startup called SupChina. Jeremy and I were brought on as employees and given shares in the company, and we were able to quit our old day jobs – his at Danwei.com, which had been acquired some years earlier by the *Financial Times*, mine at Baidu – and turn something that for six years had been only a hobby into a livelihood. After a few months, Jeremy shifted roles and began editing SupChina's newsletter and website. I was to be in charge of Sinica, and of the other podcast projects we've since taken on under rubric of the Sinica Network. Thankfully, Jeremy still joins for most shows as co-host. But some listeners have noticed a change: there are more historical topics, for instance, and there's a good deal more tolerance for the kind of academic discussion that Jeremy might have dismissed as so much theoretical palaver. The format has become less conversational, and Sinica is now more of a traditional interview program; with this change, the show's once-latent educational impulses have perhaps surfaced and become more conspicuous. It's well that this should be happening. Interest in China in the U.S. and elsewhere in the English-speaking world appears to be growing – however regrettable the reasons – and I'm glad we've created a resource that people can tap with the specific goal of learning.

The pedagogy, insofar as there is any, isn't remotely systematic. Topic and guest selection is still more haphazard than it ought to be. It depends to a great extent on what I happen to have read, or who I happen to have bumped into at a conference, or exchanged ideas with on Twitter or Facebook. Since moving to the States in mid-2016, the show's become more U.S.-centric than I'd like it to be, still more male than I want it to be. But with much more time now to dedicate to it – for booking guests, background reading, question prep, engineering, and editing – I'm confident that it's a better product.

Like many self-described China-watchers, I am painfully aware of the limitations of my own knowledge about China. I read Chinese too slowly, and even then I miss many of the nuances, much of the wordplay, and probably most of the allusions. I read far too little of it from week to week, and have no patience for reading the turgid Party documents I know I ought to wade into. I don't keep up with the major academic journals. I have no well-placed sources that tell me the inner secrets of the Communist Party. When I bristle at the now (thankfully) outmoded moniker "China expert," there's not one bit of modesty in play: I'm simply nothing close to an expert, and I suspect not many people actually *can* be. I had lunch recently with another China-watcher—a respected

scholar with real academic bona fides, now working at a think tank in DC – who confessed to suffering from the same impostor syndrome that I and doubtless a huge number of people with better-honed skills than me suffer.

But I *do* have confidence at least in some of the maxims, the principles, and the instincts that together comprise my approach to hosting Sinica. And I hope that in producing the show I might at least model a style of interrogation, encourage in others a broad, multidisciplinary curiosity about China, get them to aspire to informed empathy toward China and by extension to other cultures and nations, and most of all, draw out gems of insight from the show's guests, that listeners to the show might truly learn.