

# The Rights and Responsibilities of Disagreement

Posted on 21 September 2014 by Katherine Morton

## Editor's Introduction

As part of the robust engagement of the People's Republic of China with media and academic opinion internationally, outspoken interventions, pointed critiques as well as rambunctious declamations are increasingly common. This should be the cause of celebration: multiple voices from China on topics of moment will surely enrich our understanding of that important country and the variety of professional and public opinion.

Whereas in the academic environment a multiplicity of views and interpretations of ideas, incidents and facts is the lifeblood of intellectual life, sadly the all-too-often set pieces of party-state propaganda masquerading as authoritative media or personal opinion frequently reduce the complex, nuanced and varied views of Chinese thinkers, scholars, media workers and everyday people to a dull and belaboured monotone.

In recent years the dreaded 'Hall of the Unified Voice' 一言堂 of the High-Maoist Era has reappeared with baleful, and often risible, results.

When I last lectured at the [TOChina Summer School](#) in Turin in 2013, I devoted one session to the rejigged concept of The China Dream, its histories and interpretations. Mainland Chinese participants, although of varied backgrounds and very different personal opinions (in private) felt that, after one of their number requested that she be given time to make a 'personal' statement on the subject of The China Dream, they all had to fall in line publicly and, hands raised, chorused a series of anodyne and vacuous declarations. If nothing else, I remarked to the non-Mainland students present, they had an insight into the Communist-inculcated cultural practice of 'performative declamation' 表态, a form of verbal posturing, an example of 'group think' aimed at presenting a united front in the face of independent thinking. It's just this kind of knee-jerk solidarity that also vouchsafes the individual against the ever-present threat of being reported to the authorities back home.

Katherine Morton is a Senior Fellow in the Department of International Relations, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University. She is presently completing a book titled *China and the Future of Global Governance* in which she examines China's role in shaping the rules of international conduct across diverse realms of global policy-making, with a particular focus on human freedoms and the global commons.—Geremie R. Barmé

The eighth annual TOChina Summer School for China Studies hosted by the University of Turin, Italy, in partnership with the Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW) and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was a significant occasion. The TOChina summer school was established in 2007 to advance the study of contemporary China by bringing together a plurality of perspectives from across the globe. Since then it has established an outstanding reputation, attracting some of the world's leading experts and most promising scholars and practitioners of the next generation. A recurring theme addresses the intersection between transformations of the past and emerging trends in the future. What makes the annual Turin event unique is its creative and open spirit of debate which the organisers actively foster.





TOCHINA Summer School: the class of 2014

At first glance, the sub-alpine city of Turin appears to be an unlikely venue to host a China-related summer school. But looking back in time it becomes evident that the city's historical and cultural heritage serves to enrich the intellectual agenda of the school. Parallels can be drawn between Turin's rise to prominence as a powerful city-state in the eleventh century under the House of Savoy and the flourishing of Chinese civilisation during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE). The Italian *risorgimento* – the nineteenth-century unification movement – leading to the establishment of the Italian Kingdom's founding capital in Turin in 1861 coincided with China's Self-Strengthening Movement 自强运动 in the late-Qing dynasty, aimed at adapting Western institutions and technologies to the broader purpose of building a modern dynasty. Moreover, the historical patterns of global commercial success in both parts of the world provide a complementary backdrop to contemporary concerns over financial crisis and economic downturn.

For a two-week period in June-July 2014, over thirty graduates and professionals from sixteen countries gathered for intensive dialogues and lectures spanning Chinese politics, economics, culture and foreign policy. The summer school agenda covered a mix of politics (including such topics as the Central Party School and the party at the grassroots), economics (state capitalism, state-owned enterprise reform) and foreign policy (Sino-Indian relations). An overarching theme connected many of the lectures culminating in a keynote speech titled 'The Chinese Middle Class Going Global' presented by CIW's Luigi Tomba at the Centro Einaudi (named after the Italian politician, Luigi Einaudi, a staunch advocate of human freedoms). There was a mini-Tombra called 'China Room Conversations' on China's presence and strategies in the Euro-Mediterranean – translated more adroitly into Chinese as South Europe, West Asia, and North Africa 南欧西亚北非. It represented a new crossroads for discussing European and Chinese strategic concerns, with Romano Prodi, a former President of the European Commission, referring to the region as a 'sea of opportunities between Europe and China.' More sober analysis by Chinese speakers focused on hard policy choices in zones of conflict and energy security.

Nestled between lectures on China's grand strategy, US rebalancing and the latter's impact on West Asia and North Africa, my own lectures on 'China and Global Governance' raised the fundamental question of who makes the rules in international politics. More specifically, I asked what China's role was in shaping the rules. In addressing the academic debate, I emphasised the importance of understanding the relationship between power and principles rather than relying upon traditional either/or distinctions. To illustrate my approach, I presented my research on China's historic role in shaping the laws of the sea; the political, economic, legal, and strategic motivations behind Chinese responses to maritime disputes; and the diverse state interests and normative preferences underpinning Chinese state activism in the maritime arena. I drew on debates in China and interviews with scholars and legal and military experts to argue that the Chinese leadership does recognise the regulatory potential of international law as well as the pragmatic imperative to work more cooperatively with its neighbours. The problem is that these cooperative impulses are now being eclipsed by a renewed sense of moral entitlement to nation-building and national security. Looking at the bigger picture, I suggested to the young scholars and other participants that the preservation of maritime rights and freedom of navigation could not be realised in the absence of safeguards. Such safeguards would require on the part of all states, including China, a more judicious shift towards protecting rather than commanding the global maritime commons.

A signature feature of the summer school is its extensive Q&A sessions that typically last as long as the lectures (often one to two hours). At one of these sessions, before the discussion commenced, an intervention by a reporter from China's commercial-nationalist and party-funded paper *Global Times* 环球时报 sought to preempt debate. The reporter accused me of scholarly bias in what can only be described as a contemptuous tone. In my first lecture, the same person had already interrupted a discussion on the theoretical debate over global governance and its relevance to Chinese participation. On this occasion, my alleged offense was easier to anticipate: apparently, in the course of a ninety-minute lecture, I had used the Japanese name for disputed maritime rocks in the East China Sea, Senkaku shotoo 尖閣諸島, without immediately listing the equivalent Chinese name, Diaoyudao 钓鱼岛. The intervention was poorly timed. I had been discussing the problem of how to recognise international sovereignty over a group of rocks and islets that had not been named in international treaties at the end of the Second World War, and were not clearly defined in terms of geographical coordinates in pre-existing maps, with the exception of those with English names which were later rendered into Japanese. Of course, international convention encourages the use of parallel names to acknowledge a dispute over territorial claims. But while such practice invokes an image of impartiality, it is by no means a guarantee of independent reporting or scholarship. It struck me that given the professional and convivial educational setting of the summer school, the hectoring tactics of the *Global Times*' reporter were less a defense of the international convention and more an attempt to undermine the speaker, the value of what she was saying and ultimately the spirit of open intellectual exchange itself.

Accordingly, my response was to trust the audience to decide over questions relating to academic integrity. For over one hour we discussed counter-arguments relating to the determining features of structural power in the region, the role of bureaucratic politics inside China, the divided state problem in defining territorial rights, the new maritime silk road, deep sea mining and resource scarcity, US responses to Chinese provocations and Europe's potential role in building a more inclusive regional maritime order. It was a privilege to be part of such a rich, lively and genuinely open exchange. Significantly, not everyone agreed on how to interpret China's assertive behaviour in the South and East China Seas, including participants from the People's Republic.

Among the Chinese members of the audience, a united front did not exist. The lone voice from the *Global Times* disrupted but did not foreclose debate. Behind the scenes, many Chinese participants ruefully acknowledged the importance of reading more about controversial topics to alleviate the burden of 'not knowing' – Luigi Einaudi made a similar appeal to his students in his liberal treatise against fascism. Relevant historical comparisons can always be drawn to highlight the power of intellectual debate; the challenge is to find a way of amplifying the muted voices in the background.

## Copyright

This website and the China Story Yearbook are open-access materials published under a Creative Commons 3.0 Unported license.

We encourage the widespread circulation of the material published on this website. While all content may be used and copied, we request that you credit The China Story Project and provide a link to:  
[www.TheChinaStory.org](http://www.TheChinaStory.org).

We occasionally publish images from other websites; we do this under the terms of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act; if you are a rights owner and object to our use of an image, please let us know via our contact page.



Australian Centre on China in the World 中华全球研究中心/中華全球研究中心