

## The Changing Methodology of “Beijingology”

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I have been asked to address changing methodology of “Beijingology.” I assume that the question I am being asked to address is whether, given changes in Chinese media and the openness of the country, we need to adopt different methodologies to understand the basic questions we want to know the answers to, such questions as: What is policy? Has it changed? Do changes in a given policy have leadership implications? What is driving Chinese politics? Are the rules of the game changing? Who is on top? and What are the implications for Chinese foreign policy and Sino-U.S. relations? I assume I am being asked to address this question because I am getting old and have watched the changes in media and technology over the past couple of decades. As befits this hard-earned curmudgeon status, my first inclination is to say there really have been no changes, sit down, and save everyone listening to another talk.

But that would not be quite accurate, so let me give three answers to the question ‘What has changed?’: A lot has changed, nothing has changed, and a some things that are quite interesting have changed. Let me explain.

First, a lot has changed. There is simply a lot more information available to understand China. There are not only national statistical yearbooks, but provincial and municipal yearbooks as well. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) puts out various colored volumes – white book, blue book, yellow book, green book – every year, and these provide a wealth of data. Publishing, while still restricted in various ways, is lively, and a lot of valuable information and analyses comes out every year. This includes not only books but academic journals and newspapers. China’s intellectual community has also come unprecedentedly awake, and the fact that so many intellectuals now live overseas means that there is truly an international conversation. The fact that increasing amounts of this material is available on the Internet means that we have

unprecedented access to all sorts of information. This glut of information tends to make us ever more specialized, at the risk of seeing only trees. Indeed, the increasing diversity and complexity of China and the dizzying speed at which it is changing makes it increasingly difficult to discern the forest out of the plethora of trees. Perhaps that leads to the very different perspectives and often rancorous debates we have about China. Is China rising, or is it about to collapse? Is it a threat or is it a status quo power? Is its nationalism threateningly bellicose or a defensive reaction against outside pressures?

One has to add to this explosion of information the relative openness of China to foreign scholars, journalists, business people, tourists, and politicians. As academics, we can work with our Chinese colleagues, either formally in collaborative research or more informally in the academic exchange of ideas. There has been some very good field and survey work done on China in recent years and yet better work is certain to emerge in the coming years. Collectively we know a great deal about China, and often we can answer a specific question by checking the Internet or e-mailing a friend.

A couple words now, and a couple words later, on the Internet. The Internet provides a vast amount of new information that would either have been difficult to find out or simply unavailable in years past. The official Renmin Ribao web site has, among other things, a record of the activities and words of China's leaders. It also hosts a popular BBS, the Strong Country Forum, that not only allows us to track a swath of vocal public opinion but also to compare that opinion to more scientific surveys of popular opinion as well as to official policy and commentary. Many cities, counties, and organizations maintain websites. Individual scholars maintain websites, and some are starting blogs. Some of these are shut down in periodic crackdowns, and new and tighter controls are often implemented as the Chinese state grapples to control the flow of information and to prevent the Internet from becoming a tool of political mobilization.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the trend is clearly toward a greater amount and flow of information. We often find ourselves designing Internet searches that will turn up the information we are looking for without having to wade through several thousand "hits."

Sometimes this plethora of information makes us feel as if there is an embarrassment of riches. Sometimes it makes U.S government bureaucrats believe they can dispense with the translation of Chinese texts from Renmin Ribao and other official sources. Want to know what Hu Jintao said in a given speech? Go check AFP, Reuters, or whatever on the Internet! This impulse confuses two different types of knowledge that are important to keep separate. The first type, the type I have been talking about up till now, is of a factual sort (or at least reported as factual). We want to know about China's GDP growth, or the number and seriousness of public protests, or the details of some incident. This sort of information is very important, and it often sets the context in which the policy discussions and politics that are critical to policy formation take place.

Second, nothing has changed. There is indeed a lot more information available about China. But this sort of factual information does not tell us about the politics of China. For that, I'm afraid we have to go back to reading the texts of leadership speeches and policy documents carefully, paying attention to the use of formulations (*tifa*) and how they have or have not changed. This is often laborious work, but it pays dividends with insights into Chinese politics that you simply cannot get any other way.

As everyone is aware, China still maintains a hierarchical system of control over the media.<sup>2</sup> This should not be confused with a system of censorship. In a censorship system, authors generate products that are then passed by the censors to judge their "appropriateness" for public consumption (the idea of censorship can probably be applied to certain areas of Chinese media control, including movies, novels, and academic writing). But the whole point of a Department of Propaganda and the whole apparatus of control that is exercised through such organs as the Xinhua news service and the Ministry of Culture is to set the proper formulations (*tifa*) that people are to use. The ability to determine formal language and impose it on at least the major media outlets is an important part of power, one that the CCP guards jealously, in part because it is well aware of how effectively it used the media in its struggle with the KMT. Losing control over formal speech would be a major blow to the CCP.<sup>3</sup>

Because control over formal speech is important, those who disagree with current policy or power arrangements, or who want to launch new policy initiatives, must challenge previous *tifa*.

Two points.

First, as outside observers, we can and do learn about changes in policy and power from looking closely at these formulations. One can also tell a lot by looking at public discussion and comparing it with the *tifa* the regime decides to use. This is a point that I think is often missed. All political discourse takes place as a sort of conversation (often a rather rancorous one) that is set within parameters defined by a set of *tifa* that reflect policies and the claim to legitimacy of a particular leader or leaders. The more one knows about a given conversation, the more one knows about the possible parameters of policy. If, for instance, one is interested in the way Chinese military thinkers see the United States, it is necessary to trace the individuals involved, the institutions they are associated with, and the degree of influence they appear to have, as reflected in the policies and *tifa* adopted by the government. To look at the number of times such writers use the word “hegemon” in reference to the United States does not tell you very much. If “hegemon” is part of the accepted *tifa* at the moment, then all articles will discuss U.S. hegemony. What one needs to do is read the article. What sort of evidence does the author use to establish the claim of U.S. hegemony? More important, what implications does the author draw for China’s national security? More important still, what are other people saying about the same subject? In other words, single articles do not exist in a vacuum; they exist in juxtaposition with other articles. Find out what the discussion is about. Then look at Chinese policy in relation to this conversation.

Here, it is necessary to say something about influence. When I say ‘follow the conversation and then compare it to official policy,’ I am not making an argument about determining who is speaking into the prince’s ear. Certainly there are individuals who we know have influence in government circles, and their statements bear careful scrutiny. But influence is normally difficult to determine, even in societies much more open than

China. Sometimes the conversations in China's journal do not influence government thinking so much as reflect concerns in government circles. In other words, sometimes the influence is down rather than up. But the conversation is still worth reading and understanding. Combined with the sort of factual information I described above, it can tell you a lot about the concerns, policy directions, and disagreements of the leadership.

Sometimes *tifa* are ill chosen and manipulated for political purposes. The classic example of this was perhaps Deng Xiaoping's declaration that the student demonstrators in the spring of 1989 constituted a "counterrevolutionary" turmoil. Actually, this determination was made by the Politburo Standing Committee, which arrived at this conclusion after Zhao Ziyang had left the country for North Korea. The Politburo Standing Committee then reported to Deng, who then put this conclusion in his own words. What is interesting, if Zhao Ziyang's account of these events can be believed, is that the Politburo Standing Committee then, without separate authorization (which was not needed), directed that Deng's words be incorporated into the famous (infamous) April 26 editorial that appeared in *People's Daily*. According to Zhao, Deng was quite irritated at this action because it pushed him to the fore, thus reducing his room for political maneuver, no doubt one of the objectives of those who directed the editorial to be written. Of course, in this instance, the editorial, with its uncompromising *tifa* exacerbated the situation and made peaceful resolution of the spring demonstrations more difficult. Zhao Ziyang subsequently tried to get out of the box by declining to repeat this description in his speech to the ADB, something Li Peng took him to task for. In this instance there were thus both private and public disputes over the use of *tifa*.<sup>4</sup>

To take a more recent example, we know that the decision to amend the party charter to define the party as more than the vanguard of the Proletariat was controversial, but Jiang wanted to broaden the base of the party for good political reasons – after, all, that is why he introduced his "Three Represents." To give them legitimacy (and to elevate him into the pantheon of CCP leaders), he had to include them in the party charter. But there the Party was defined as being the vanguard of the party. Dropping that provision would not only deny the party's roots and ideology, but also to identify the

CCP as a “whole people’s party,” a notion associated with Khrushchev. The result was the awkward formulation that currently stands in the Party’ charter: “The Chinese Communist Party is the vanguard of China’s working class; at the same time, it is the vanguard of China’s citizens (*Zhongguo renmin*) and the Chinese people (*Zhonghua minzu*)....” This “two vanguard” formulation may not satisfy the logicians who believe that ‘vanguard’ is a singular word, but it is what it took to balance the political scales in Beijing at a particular point in time.

By the way, not only can we trace the discussions that precede a political decision, we can also trace the decisions that come out of a political decision, which gives one an idea of continuing disagreements, the extent of controversy, and where the discussion might possibly go. For instance, after Jiang Zemin’s speech on July 1, 2001, admitting “private entrepreneurs” into the party, there were renewed discussions about the “law of surplus value,” which lies at the heart of the Marxist concept of exploitation. Admitting “exploiters” into a Communist party not only challenges long-standing notions of what a Communist party is and what it stands for, it also challenges understandings of “exploitation.” It turns out, according to at least some of these discussions, that entrepreneurs contribute value to a product through their organization of labor and marketing of the product. So while they may extract surplus value, not all surplus value should be understood as exploitation; some is real labor. Whether or not such understandings get incorporated into official ideology remains to be seen.

Let me take one final example. We have heard a great deal in the past two or three years about “establishing the party for the public, govern for the people,” “people-centered policies,” and the “scientific development concept.” It did not take Hu Jintao very long to move away from the concept of the “three represents” *as expressed by Jiang Zemin*. Hu has not challenged directly Jiang Zemin’s ideological legacy, but he has chosen to redefine that legacy in new terms that suit his political aims and purposes. This is not as extreme as, but nevertheless somewhat analogous to Deng Xiaoping’s handling of Mao Zedong Thought. Deng did not reject Mao’s legacy wholesale (remember Deng’s conversation with Oriana Fallaci, in which he gave his famous 70 percent good/30

percent bad evaluation of Mao), but rather said that it had to be understood as a totality and subjected to the criterion of truth. Similarly, Hu has not confronted Jiang directly but rather moved away from his formulations rather forcefully. I do not know what Jiang Zemin thinks of the “scientific development concept,” but I would not be surprised if he does not take some umbrage at the implication that his development concept was not “scientific.”

So the bottom line is that the vast outpouring of new media and technology that we have seen in China over the past couple decades does augment a great deal our understanding of what is going on in China, but understanding the core political questions still requires the good hard work of reading documents carefully, understanding what the conversation is, and seeing where the political leadership comes out on the issues.

Finally, some things have changed, and these changes are very interesting. First of all, when leadership shifts from one leader to another, as it recently has, it inevitably legitimizes new topics. Hu Jintao’s emphasis on “people-centered policies” has legitimated much more discussion of the problems facing China, including corruption, mine disasters, and environmental problems. When new topics such as these are opened up, and especially when they are as wide-spread and difficult to handle as they are in China, it is difficult to know – even for the government – where the limits of discussion should lie. It will be interesting to watch as the Hu Jintao administration tries to focus greater public attention on such areas and yet maintain control over expression. Second, in this context it is increasingly difficult for the government to maintain control over the vocabulary in which debates are expressed. For instance, Chinese use of the term *zhiqingquan* (the right to know) certainly predates the SARs crisis, but it was that crisis – in which the public’s right to know had been dangerously curtailed – that popularized the use of this term. It is now quite wide spread, but the government remains sensitive about it. When CCTV reporters suggested a program with the title, “You have the right to know,” the government turned them down.

Finally, as direct control over the media (particularly the less centrally controlled media) becomes more difficult, there is a greater emphasis on the framing of issues. The classic case was the SARs crisis. One can imagine that such a crisis, complete with government cover up, had happened in the United States, there would have been enormous press interest in who covered up the crisis and what were the reasons for the cover up. Despite the increased emphasis on the “right to know,” nothing of the sort happened in China. Indeed, within days of the firing of the minister of health and the mayor of Beijing for their roles in the cover up, Li Changchun presided over a propaganda meeting that defined the party line for reporting on the crisis. Now the existence of SARs was to be reported, but the emphasis was placed on the national struggle against the disease. The people were to form into a solid wall in the fight against SARs. The role of the military, which had been deeply implicated in the cover up, was portrayed in glowing tones as they took the lead in the national struggle. This is not to belittle the seriousness of the crisis, but only to highlight the way in which the government very self-consciously thought about framing the issue to win back public opinion and side step questions of mis-management. As we see more issues on which information is difficult to control, we will see more effort to frame the issue. For instance, people are very much aware of the ‘Washington consensus,’ but also largely biased against it. This is not without a certain degree of official encouragement, including the use of the media.

The bottom line is that that despite the enormous changes in technology, as outsiders trying to peer into the black box of decision-making, careful reading of the media remains an indispensable tool. Indeed, it can be used to watch the way the government responds to new issues by framing their discussion in certain ways. Thus, even in areas where there have been important changes, the old tools remain useful in understanding those changes.

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<sup>1</sup> On control of the Internet, see Tamara Renee Shie, “The Tangled Web: Does the Internet Offer Promise or Peril for the Chinese Communist Party?” in the *Journal of Contemporary China*, (2004) 13 (40) August, pp. 523-540.

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<sup>2</sup> For a good overview of this, see Guoguang Wu, “Command Communication: The Politics of Editorial Formulation in the People’s Daily,” *The China Quarterly* no. 137 (March 1994): 194-211.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> See the interviews with Zhao Ziyang appended to Yang Jisheng’s *Zhongguo bashiniandai zhengzhi douzheng* (China’s political struggles in the 1980s).