

# Enigma variations

Colin James

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[Preface: My first Chinese experience was in my last year at primary school sitting beside a very bright son of a market gardener, surname an unsurprising Young. He was different but the same. I knew him but did not know him. Fast forward 12 years to a post-first-degree paper on China at Victoria University when I ignored the textbooks and read journal articles on the cultural revolution. Then came Norman Kirk's recognition of China in 1972, a striking contrast with the just defeated government (though Sir Keith Holyoake, it has since been revealed, wanted to but was blocked by his cabinet. Forward to 2011 and talking with Whakatōhea about its planned mussel-farming and sea cucumber joint venture with a Chinese company and the mayor of Opotiki (population 9020) talking of his grand civic welcome by the mayor of sister city Yantai (population 6.5 million).]

I bring to this session the great advantage of ignorance, having never got past Hong Kong into the walled empire. I look in from the outer rim of the world's periphery, the hanging participle of humanity, the planet's "last, loneliest, loveliest" hutch for fugitives from the centre: from Polynesia, then from Britain, then, from the 1990s, China, India, Korea and other ancient kingdoms.

I do bring one near-certainty: that our core foreign policy task for the next 20 years (I take Australia to be quasi-domestic, or at least sororal, business) is managing China's management of us. The first Chinese scabbled for the residual specks of gold and discriminatory laws kept them for 100 years in the margins. Their great-great-grandchildren and their children are professionals and businesspeople. The next Chinese were students and bolt-holders and they generated an anti-Asian populist party. The Chinese come now as lenders and owners, buyers and sellers and, in the future, gentle and not-so-gentle adapters and adjusters of our systems.

We have a choice in how we manage China's management of us. We can huddle in with Australia and the United States, determinedly peripheral. Americans are kin (mostly). Chinese are not. Or we can choose independence, our default positioning ever since the United States and Australia kicked us out of the alliance for refusing to play with some of their lethal toys.

If we choose the first option, we may find the Chinese less welcoming and less willing to fix behind-the-border issues for us that smooth our path to its enriching consumers, though that may be overstated. But we may get compensating, or part-compensating, deals from the Americans and be able to run a smaller and less deft foreign service by largely cruising on their initiatives and their (and the Australians') analysis and think-tanks. We may also find common cause in south-east and south Asian capitals to the degree that they want a counterbalance to China's power.

If we choose the independence option, we will need to be agile, innovative, active, persistent and resilient. That will imply investing much more heavily in our foreign service and in our connections with other countries' governments, think tanks and business organisations. Independence would help, though not guarantee to, keep us sweet with China. If promoted with skill, independence can give us a degree of very soft influence as an honest broker and active participant in multilateral systems. It can win friends in south-east and south Asia.

My guess is that, despite the Americaphilia in the current cabinet, it will not bend the independent foreign policy line so far as to "take sides". The next Labour-led cabinet will reaffirm the independence line and the next generation of National MPs will be comfortable

with it — though looking out beyond 2020 is hazardous because there will be much potential for intra-state and inter-state tension in Asia.

That uncertainty signals that I should avoid statements and retreat to the journalist's trade of questions not answers. Here are some questions about China and its implications for this pimple of a society and economy over the next 20 years:

1. What will be the trajectory of China's society, and therefore its politics, through the next 20 years as its middle class expands and enriches and travels the world of ideas and images through cyberspace? What tension will there be between haves and have-nots and between the privileged and the non-privileged and what form will it take? Will there still be endemic and corrosive corruption in 20 years? How fast and deep will China develop social security, decent labour conditions and wages and equitable access to health, housing and education?
2. What will be the trajectory of China's economy through the next 20 years as its dynamic expansion and integration into the global trading and financial systems stretches autocrats' and bureaucrats' capacity to manage it? When at some point, or points, it goes into recession, will the banking and support systems cope? How will demographic change impact on economic capability? How will the new generation of production technologies affect its competitiveness and capacity to generate enriching employment?
3. Looking out over the next 20 years, will China rely more on soft power than hard power in its international dealings in trade and security or will hard power at some point prevail as its economic strength or, conversely, its need for fuel, minerals and water, emboldens it? Can it manage North Korea's reintegration? How will it treat Japan? Will it see India as a rival or an also ran? Will it respect international and multilateral institutions and abide by their rulings when they are unfavourable? Or will it stick with its strong line on the inviolability of national sovereignty? If the second, will that slow or reverse its global integration?
- 3a. Might China by 2032 become the big, bag guy — the new coloniser — as a result of its aggressive drive for resources and food (that is, land and water) across the world?
- 3b. Will New Zealand stick to its independent foreign policy line?
4. What will China's role in the South Pacific be through the next 20 years? How will it influence what New Zealand does there? How will the United States and Australia respond?
5. How quickly will China build capacity to generate new science and new or adapted technologies? How will that affect its treatment of intellectual property? Will it genuinely develop and adopt environment-friendly technologies?
6. How will New Zealand — and Aotearoa — respond to Chinese state and private companies' bid to own more of our productive capacity, supply chains and access to water (that is, land)? Will New Zealand become increasingly dependent on Chinese funds for its equity and private and public borrowing?
- 6a. What will be the role of Chinese in New Zealand — New Zealand Chinese — vis-à-vis China? Will they be a bridge into China and from China into New Zealand? And can we make use of the alumni, those who studied here?
7. Assuming more Chinese involvement in our economy over the next 20 years, how will we manage increasing migration pressure? Will we in 50 years have been in effect recolonised?
8. Will Australia's responses to those questions about China's ownership and migration be a constraining or influential factor in how we can and do respond?

9. Will this country sometime wake up to the point that children and adults should get to know Chinese history and culture and fluent in mandarin? Or will that happen when Chinese residents here bring it about?

10. How many of those questions are (to use a prime ministerial epithet) dopey? How many dozens of more apposite questions have I not known enough to ask?