

CSCC Podcast Ep. 19: “How to Be a Sensitive China Watcher – Kaiser Kuo”

Introduction:

Welcome to the *second* season of the podcast of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Study of Contemporary China. I’m your host, Neysun Mahboubi, and in today’s episode, you’ll hear my recent conversation with Kaiser Kuo—rock star, host of the Sinica Podcast, and editor-at-large at SupChina—as well as good friend and mentor to *this* podcast, as many listeners will already know.

Kaiser visited the University of Pennsylvania twice this year. First, to kick off our Center’s spring speaker series back in January, with his talk on “Technology Tensions in the US-China Relationship”. And then again at the end of March to deliver keynote remarks at the Penn Symposium on Contemporary China, where he outlined “Five Precepts for China Watching”—drawn from his longtime and varied engagement with the country and its people, that he feels are especially important to share at this moment, when the U.S.-China relationship appears to be so fraught, and when the community of “China watchers” (in the U.S. and elsewhere) seems more divided than at any other time many of us can recall.

Kaiser’s first visit, in January, gave me the chance to appear on *his* podcast, along with our friends Rory Truex and Sheena Greitens, to discuss their paper exploring the notion of self-censorship by academics who research China, which is about to be published in the China Quarterly. If you haven’t yet listened to that Sinica episode, I think it’s definitely worth checking out—between all of our perspectives, we explored the delicate topic of self-censorship in fairly great depth, and our discussion generated a lot of positive feedback. And I’m happy to say that *both* Sheena and Rory will appear, separately, on *this* podcast as well, later this season.

But, more to the point right now, Kaiser’s *second* visit enabled us to finally get him on the CSCC podcast, which he’s done so much to support and promote as we’ve gotten it off the ground over the past year and a half. The basic premise of this podcast has been that there is an audience—a substantial audience, really—for in-depth, academically rooted conversations about China’s economy, politics, law, and society, that are well tailored to this new media format. As someone who has spent many years researching Chinese law, I’d like to think this was always the case, but I can understand that it might be particularly true today, as the reality and consequences of China’s rise have come to dominate news headlines the world over. Along with China’s rise has come rising tensions, of course, with the United States and other countries, that further reinforce current spiking interest in better understanding China’s story, in all its different facets.

Of course, these are the same kinds of insights that have propelled Kaiser’s development of the Sinica podcast over the past decade, together with his co-host Jeremy Goldkorn. Through some 400 episodes, and counting, Kaiser and Jeremy have featured on their program a rich tapestry of “China watchers”—including from the academy, but also journalists, activists, entrepreneurs, artists, and officials—in an accessible and engaging format that has set the pace for all the China-related podcasts that have followed, including this one. I hope expert and lay audiences interested in China will find and enjoy the CSCC podcast; I *know* they have already found and immensely benefited from Sinica.

For Kaiser himself, the experience of hosting Sinica, and the range of perspectives it has enabled him to contemplate, has naturally prompted deeper reflection on what it means to be a “China watcher”, and what habits of mind one might try to cultivate in order to capture the story as well as any one person can hope to, given the complexity of the subject. When I learned of his plan to share these reflections in his keynote remarks for the Penn symposium, I thought it would be wonderful to feature them in a CSCC podcast episode as well, and a particularly appropriate way to kick-off our second season. So that’s what this episode is about, presenting for your consideration one “China watcher’s” reflections on how to go about that task, in conversation with another—a dialogue that I hope builds on Kaiser’s insights, and altogether provides all of you with some useful perspectives to contemplate, as you reflect upon your own approach.

Now, as many of you will know, Kaiser’s own views are shaped by a personal history with respect to China that is distinctive to say the least—just to highlight one example, he is the only prominent “China watcher” I can think of who has also made a lasting mark on Chinese rock & roll. Both to situate his perspectives, and also because his personal history is so inherently cool, we spent a good amount of time in our conversation talking about his own story as well. Even for those of you who know quite a bit of that already, I think you’ll find some new material here that will surprise and entertain.

Recording this introduction just after a short visit to Beijing, right as the US-China trade war appears to be ratcheting up to a whole new level, and confrontational rhetoric in both capitals grows more pointed by the day, it occurs to me there has never been a more important time to think about “how” we think about China—whatever is our precise role and methodology within the larger category of “China watcher”. And so I’m delighted to kick-off the second season of the podcast of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Study of Contemporary China by sharing with you, now, my conversation with Kaiser Kuo.