Interview – Jon (Yuan) Jiang

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Jon (Yuan) Jiang is a PhD student in the Digital Media Research Centre at the Queensland University of Technology, focusing on the Belt and Road Initiative. He completed his Master's in Political Science at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, and his Bachelor's in Law at Shanghai University. As a Russian speaker, he worked in Moscow both with ZTE Corporation as an Account Manager, and with Asia Weekly and Pengpai News as a special correspondent. He has written for a wide range of publications, including the South China Morning Post, The Diplomat, The National Interest, Asia Times, Global Policy, China Daily, The Mandarin, as well as with the Russian International Affairs Council, the Australian Institute of International Affairs and the International Association for Media and Communication Research. He has given lectures at Shandong and Shanghai University, and has been interviewed by the Financial Times, ABC, DW, SBS, Russia Today, Russian Channel One, SCMP, Euronews and Weekendavisen among others. His publications can be found on Twitter and LinkedIn.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I would like to say that curiosity is the crucial aspect that inspired me to pursue my PhD in Australia. I have always been fascinated by the thinking of individuals from different cultural backgrounds and my passion lies in engaging with these varied perspectives. I am from China; I finished my Bachelors in Shanghai and my Masters in Moscow. Both countries have their unique worldviews and a significant influence on their neighbours. The Chinese economy has been booming for decades and is expected to become the largest during this century. The Chinese Confucius way of thinking is also becoming increasingly critical. On the other hand, Russia is a former superpower with robust military might, a massive territory and an Orthodox Catholic Church tradition. Despite its lost glory since the disintegration of the USSR, as well as its grim economy, Russia's influence and worldviews have been embedded into the blood and bones of several post-Soviet countries. That being said, deep down I believe that I have missed a significant component of the world – the Western perspective. Arguably, modernisation is westernisation, since the West initiated the first three industrial revolutions. So, doing a PhD in media and communication in Australia, helps me to complete my world to some extent by engaging with the Western perspective. Especially so during this period of political volatility between China, Russia and the West; understanding these different perspectives may enable me to become a bridge and a peacemaker.

How do you see the future of Sino-Russian relations?

Realistically, I see the future of Sino-Russian relations to be promising, unless some leadership changes come to Russia. Even though the Alexei Navalny-led protests have drawn global attention, the possibility of a change in leadership remains low, since Navalny's public base consists of a minority of the Russian population. From my experience and observations, the majority of Russians long for social stability, despite entrenched corruption issues.

Returning to the big picture of bilateral relations, both countries have an authoritarian political system with similar

collectivist traditions. This means that their relationship relies heavily on communication between those in the highest leadership positions, rather than public opinion. This communication between President Xi and President Putin has been progressing well. Admittedly, they both face pressures from the West, especially the US, which has deepened their ties. More importantly, there is no territorial issue between their borders. My research indicates that some Western and Russian stereotypes of China's demographic expansion into the Far East, and more general Sinophobia, is more of a historical sentiment or myth, rather than a reality. Also, the previous "hot in politics, cold in economics" and "hot at the official level, and cold at the people's level" (meaning high levels of political collaboration and frequent visits from senior leaders, compared with relatively low levels of economic cooperation and tourism) between the two countries has been, to some extent, transformed into bond enhancement at all levels. Ultimately, this means closer ties in the economic and political realms, as well as both official and non-official levels.

The actual power-play between China and Russia is in Central Asia, and their economic imbalance has increased, as Chinese economic influence has overtaken that of Russia. However, I personally feel confident about their relationship in the short to medium term, not only because of Western pressure, but also because Beijing really knows the strategic importance of Russia in terms of its global geopolitical strategy and geo-economic initiatives. Beijing respects Moscow and knows where the bilateral boundaries lie, and so far, has maintained them well. In comparison, the strategic mistake that the US made is that they won the Cold War and potentially feel superior in front of the Russians, which cannot be assimilated into the Russian mentality, due to Russia's domestic nationalism, robust self-esteem and superpower memory.

How could India potentially cooperating with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), impact Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia?

It is almost impossible for India to join the EEU, since it's a relatively rigid, protectionist, and Russia-dominated economic block, and since its main aim is to facilitate regional economic integration for post-Soviet countries. That being said, it is very possible that the EEU is willing to cooperate with India in some form, which is normal for regional economic cooperation. Undoubtedly, one of the intentions is to balance China's economic influence in this area. The logic is that Russia finds multiplayer-competition in Central Asia more appealing than a China-dominated landscape. Also, Central Asian countries would not want their trade relations limited solely to China or Russia, but would prefer to maximise their interests. In my view, Beijing clearly knows this and probably won't and can't do too much about it. This has happened before. As with the enlargement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), this appears to be a Russian tactic of using India to balance China's increasing economic power in Central Asia. In this case, China reluctantly agreed with Russia's proposal on the condition that Pakistan should also be invited.

In another possible scenario, I think that when Beijing sees Russia's invitation to India, Beijing may be happy for Moscow to become a mediator and reconcile Sino-Indian relations. In addition to reconciliation with India for the benefit of its long-term strategic interests, China's real attention is with the US regarding trade, technology, the South China Sea and Taiwan. The Kremlin understands that the two nuclear powers don't want to escalate their conflict, as the priorities of each country are focused on domestic issues during the pandemic. More importantly, Moscow benefits strategically from playing a role as a conciliator between China and India.

How do you see the short and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Belt and Road Initiative?

In the short term, due to the pandemic, some BRI countries may not be able to make their repayments on time, and the BRI may face financial losses. A June 2020 report by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that Covid-19 had "seriously affected" nearly a fifth of projects along the BRI. Beijing may either opt to reduce debt obligations or seek to postpone payments and extend terms, as sovereign lenders often do in response to a financial crisis. However, these two options may not be feasible. Renegotiating the terms of BRI-related debt bring their own political and economic risks and could increase the possibility of debt-trap diplomacy, thus hurting China's international prestige. Postponing payments would also increase the financial sector's total debt, which goes against China's key economic policy of debt reduction.

There are two other solutions that Beijing could adopt. Firstly, Beijing welcomes the participation of multilateral and national financial institutions in BRI investment and financing, and encourages third-market cooperation. Secondly, the BRI has been rebranded the "Digital Silk Road" and the "Health Silk Road" in order to fit global uncertainty as a result of Covid-19. Beijing can still retain its lending for the BRI because policy banks are able to maintain the loan pace of 2015-2019. That being said, they may become more risk averse.

In the long term, I assume that Covid-19 won't affect the BRI that much. In October 2017, the BRI was incorporated into the constitution of The Communist Party of China (CPC) during its 19th National Congress. This attaches unparalleled importance to the economic and diplomatic initiative that is the BRI. It also symbolises that the BRI is not a temporary economic initiative, such as the "Go Out policy" or the "Great Western Development Strategy", both of which were not regularly mentioned once the associated president retired. Additionally, even if the BRI does not succeed economically, China can easily rebrand it into something else, as mentioned previously, or simply argue that the BRI succeeds in other aspects. In China party legitimacy is key, which means that the BRI must broadly succeed, even if its real success is only nominal.

What challenges and opportunities are the Victorian state government in Australia weighing up when considering whether to pursue the Belt and Road Initiative?

Currently, the Victorian state government's BRI issue is not about assessing challenges and opportunities, but an Australian domestic political issue, or more accurately, a constitutional issue. In 2020, the Australian Parliament passed Australia's Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Bill to strengthen federal authority and foreign policy consistency across state and territory. While the Australian Government has not officially stated that one of the bill's intentions would be to cancel Victoria's BRI deals in the future, some politicians have admitted that giving the government this choice was "one of the reasons the bill was necessary". As of December 2020, Victoria's BRI deals have remained intact. However, the Federal Government has the power to cancel concrete projects under the BRI framework, such as the Victoria-Jiangsu Program for Technology and Innovation Research and Development. It may still exercise that power.

Although this may make the future of Victorian BRI projects seem gloomy, the government will likely keep from tearing up what is mostly just a piece of paper, at least for now. There are four main reasons for this. Firstly, Victoria's deal is a vague and non-legally binding document that does not actually commit the state to any specific projects. Secondly, revoking Victoria's BRI deal will potentially cause a much tougher response from China, as the Chinese embassy in Australia has already stated. This is because the BRI is strongly linked to the personal brand of President Xi Jinping. Since the BRI's legitimacy is imperative for China's foreign policy doctrines and culture, it would be an ill-advised move for Australia's relationship with China to inadvertently damage that brand. Thirdly, in response to a potential slight, China may commit to an all-out Sino-Australian trade war, which would lead to a catastrophic loss of six per cent of Australia's economic power. Fourthly, Australia needs to keep its primary ally, the United States, happy. The newly elected President Biden's BRI policy is emerging, but it is still not entirely clear, therefore it would be wise to wait this out given the geopolitical volatility in the region. Altogether, rescinding these agreements will likely cause more trouble than it's worth. Australian leaders should only consider revoking BRI deals if what they want in the near future is an even more confrontational Sino-Australian relationship than has characterised the recent past.

What are you currently working on?

I am currently working on my PhD thesis. This research critically analyses the Australian media discourse on the Belt and Road Initiative from the 2010s to the 2020s. My mixed-method research approach explores the interplay between Chinese public diplomacy narratives and Australian media discourses on the BRI, drawing upon theories of public diplomacy, communication and media studies methods, such as framing theory. The thesis aims to contribute to existing scholarship on media, culture and communication, against the background of Sino-Australian relations, taking into account the different media systems of the two countries.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

Taking care of your own wellbeing should always be a priority. I think young scholars tend to overwork in order to progress their career. Any career advancement at the cost of your own health is unwise. Having several confidants to talk to and an exercise routine will have far-reaching benefits for your career.