

Ian Taylor and China: a long intellectual journey, called to a halt

Author: [Zhengyu Wu](#) 

Biography

Zhengyu Wu is professor of International Politics at the School of International Studies of the Renmin University of China (Beijing), where he has taught since 2002. Professor Wu earned his PhD from the Department of History at Nanjing University (Nanjing, China), and has travelled extensively to the UK and US as a visiting and research scholar. His areas of specialisation include the Theory of International Politics, Geopolitics and Grand Strategy, and East Asian Maritime and Naval Affairs. Some of his most recent articles have appeared in the *Naval War College Review*, *the Journal of Strategic Studies* and *The Pacific Review*.

Abstract

This paper is divided into three sections. First, it evaluates Professor Ian Taylor's characteristic approach to the study of China–Africa relations, as showcased in one of his articles. Then, it brings attention to Ian Taylor's engagement with China since 2009, with a special focus on his non-typical approach to China Studies. Finally, it deals with Ian Taylor's unfinished project on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China–India relations.

Keywords: [Ian Taylor](#); [China–Africa relations](#); [Intellectual journey](#); [Contextualised understanding](#); [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#); [China](#); [Africa](#)

Introduction

Professor Ian Taylor has been renowned for his distinguished career in Africa Studies. His most commendable achievement, however, lies in his contribution to reviving the study of China–Africa relations as a respectable sub-field in International Relations (IR). Ian established his academic status not just through his prolific publication record, but also through his unparalleled insight into the problems and challenges facing China and Africa today. His insights, which were accumulated through wide reading and laborious fieldwork, laid a solid foundation for his analyses of the events in China and Africa. Ian's impact stretches far beyond his illustrious academic research. He helped, in one way or another, to nurture a younger generation of scholars in China and Africa Studies.

Compared to his reputation in Africa Studies, Ian's engagement with China has been less well-known to his colleagues and friends. This relative obscurity could be attributed to his

research focus and personality. Ian's public comments on China had been focused on China–Africa relations. This topic can hardly hit the headlines in the same way that China–US relations usually do, not to mention attract much public attention. Besides, Ian was humble and reserved by nature. He preferred to stay out of the public gaze, much less advertise his academic activities widely. Notwithstanding his low profile, Ian had actually managed to establish himself as a competent China watcher over the previous decade. Had he been awarded more time, Ian could have made as distinguished a career in China Studies as the one he had accomplished in Africa Studies.

This commemorative paper is divided into three sections. First, I focus on Ian Taylor's characteristic approach to the study of China–Africa relations, as showcased in 'China's foreign policy towards Africa in the 1990s' (Taylor, 1998). Next, I bring attention to Ian Taylor's engagement with China since 2009, with a special focus on his unique approach to China Studies, which made him a non-typical China watcher. Finally, I examine Ian Taylor's proposed but unfinished research project on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially China–India relations since the early years of the Cold War.

Ian Taylor and China–Africa relations

Ian began his study of China–Africa relations when pursuing an MPhil at the University of Hong Kong. Drawing on his MPhil research, Ian later published an article entitled 'China's foreign policy towards Africa in the 1990s' (Taylor, 1998). This article, according to Dr Steven Kuo, filled gaps left by Yung-lo Lin's study, 'Peking's Africa policy in the 1980s' (Lin, 1989). Kuo has written an excellent review of Ian's article, especially in terms of revealing its significance to the study of China–Africa relations (Kuo, this issue). The value of Ian's article, however, in my view, probably goes beyond its contents. The article epitomises Ian's characteristic approach to the study of China–Africa relations. This approach comprises two elements: a combination of academic study and fieldwork, and a contextualised understanding of the motives behind China's policy and Africa's responses.

Ian was a highly practical rather than bookish scholar. Despite being a prolific author, he scarcely employed theoretical models in his studies. As such, Ian preferred to build up his research on the basis of solid fieldwork rather than pure desk study. His publications, in general, are full of references and quotations from his voluminous field journals, which he had accumulated through countless on-site trips and face-to-face interviews. This working style, unsurprisingly, was handed down to his PhD students.

Ian boasted a rare talent for contextualising his research subjects regardless of their background and different identities. This talent, in my view, has much to do with his formative experiences and his practical approach to study. Ian grew up in a relatively disadvantaged family. He made his career mainly through hard work rather than any inherited privileges. This growth trajectory helped him to develop a habit for scrutinising a topic from different

angles. Ian's highly practical approach to his study also helped him to develop a contextualised understanding of his subjects. He never approached his material from a rigidly theoretical or ideological perspective. His research was mainly built up on the basis of wide reading and carefully designed fieldwork. This practical approach shielded him from some common biases.

Ian's approach to the study of China–Africa relations was vividly showcased in his 1998 article. Ian was not misled by China's official rhetoric packaged in ideological platitudes and clichés. As Kuo contends in his review, Ian identified two practical motives behind China's African policy in the 1990s: a desire to garner as much political support as possible in the United Nations; and the need to compete successfully with Taiwan for diplomatic recognition. Likewise, Ian indicated that Africa's acceptance of China's offers was also based on similar practical motives, such as self-interest, sentiments of Third World solidarity, and the dire need of China's financial and material aid (Kuo, this issue).

The significance of Ian's article, as Kuo argues, persists to this day. Over the past decade, the world has witnessed a new honeymoon phase in China–Africa relations. The two motives Ian identified behind China's policy in the 1990s could be applied to the new situation without much distortion. The only variable that was left out in Ian's article is China's economic considerations. To be fair, this neglect is understandable given that China was still an economic dwarf when Ian wrote the article. In addition to political and diplomatic considerations, China's new enthusiasm for Africa in the early twenty-first century has been largely motivated by its pursuit for raw materials, energy and markets. These practical motives also fit in with the explanatory framework established by Ian in his article.

A non-typical China watcher

In order to understand Ian's academic achievements and the context of Kuo's review, it is necessary to bring to mind Ian's engagement with China since the 1990s. Ian had shown great interest in China as an MPhil student. At one point, he even planned to carve his professional career in China Studies. Nevertheless, he was dissuaded by the language barrier. Ian's engagement with China continued well into the late 1990s as a PhD student at Stellenbosch University (South Africa). His experience with China was confined to short visits until 2009 when he was invited by the Renmin University of China (Beijing) as a visiting professor for a year. It was then that I first met him face-to-face. I gradually became entangled in his academic activities in China ever since. Ian's approach to China Studies, in my view, shares a lot with his approach to Africa Studies. It is this approach that helped him to develop a highly contextualised understanding of China today.

With the rise of China over recent decades, China Studies has experienced a renaissance. Mainstream China watchers, however, are inclined to mystify China. That is, they tend to treat China as something unique rather than something akin to all other countries in

terms of values, outlooks and aspirations. This inclination is partly understandable since Chinese history, which goes back millennia, is replete with seemingly inexplicable puzzles that bewilder even native scholars. These puzzles may overwhelm many China watchers, fostering a deep sense of helplessness and frustration on the one hand, while spontaneously resonating with the Chinese exceptionalism that has been widely propagated by Chinese official media and publicists on the other.

To be sure, Ian Taylor differs from mainstream China watchers. He is non-typical in that he preferred to approach China from a practical rather than a theoretical perspective. He was also devoid of the condescending attitude that characterises many US China watchers, and treated the Chinese as equals who shared a lot with himself. His reading on China was focused on modern China, especially China in the twentieth century. He also exhibited great enthusiasm for the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and this provided him with many insights that informed his views on contemporary China. Ian's commentary on China was largely based on his fieldwork. Whenever he visited Beijing, his itinerary was usually full of presentations, seminars and interviews. His fieldwork not only complemented his background reading but also enriched his contextualised understanding of China.

Ian's practical approach to China Studies helped him to develop a sophisticated, rather than simplified, understanding of contemporary China. This sophistication is manifested throughout his publications on China–Africa relations. More specifically, Ian sincerely appreciated the vast benefits that humanitarian aid, business investment and infrastructure construction, provided by the Chinese government and business (both state-owned and private), brought to African countries. This appreciation, however, did not prevent him from publishing critical, even sarcastic, observations on some of China's more narrow-minded or short-sighted policies towards Africa. Importantly, however, Ian's unfavourable comments were based on his professional integrity and sophisticated understanding of China and Africa, rather than any theoretical or ideological dictates.

Ian's sophisticated understanding of China was most vividly manifested in his attitude towards Chinese exceptionalism. In some sense, the tendency to mystify China, albeit unsatisfactory, can hardly be remedied in the short term because it panders to both sides. Ian, however, showed sincere concern for this logrolling business. He cautioned many times against the lavish promotion of Chinese exceptionalism. He listed two reasons for his concern. First, promoting Chinese exceptionalism without limits is equivalent to self-isolation, which China should avoid as much as possible given its policies for reform and opening up to the international markets. Second, Chinese exceptionalism could make US policy elites increasingly impatient, forcing them to shift their policies drastically. In retrospect, Ian's concern has been largely corroborated by the radical shift of the US China policy during the Trump Administration.

China, India, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Ian's study of China–Africa relations brought with it an unexpected consequence. In the process, he became fascinated with relations between China and India. He had mentioned on many occasions that China's biggest rival in Africa is India, rather than any European country or the United States. Ian's academic reorientation towards China–India relations was catalysed by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was formally announced by China's top leader in 2013. In his view, this ambitious project would likely increase volatility in the delicate relationship between China and India in the foreseeable future.

Ian's attitude towards the BRI was ambivalent. On the one hand, he appreciated the potential benefits that the BRI, if properly executed, could bring to many Asian and African countries, especially to people living in less developed areas. On the other, he was fully aware of the potential pitfalls and complications that are concomitant with the advance of the BRI. His criticism of the BRI was focused on two points. First, Ian argued that China's approach to the BRI, despite its sincerity, seemed to lack proper coordination with international partners, as well as the necessary transparency to outside scrutiny. Second, he postulated that China's blueprint for the BRI, especially the three southern overland corridors and the maritime one, did not seem to take India's security concerns fully into account. In retrospect, these two points have been largely corroborated by a series of subsequent events. Ian was lucky enough to witness his two prophecies being partly substantiated by reality.

Ian's sophisticated understanding of China was also exhibited in his comments on the BRI. He had been intrigued by China's expanding maritime blueprint in the BRI framework. Intuitively, he thought that China was eagerly seeking to improve the odds of success for the BRI by expanding the blueprint without due consideration. This is contrary to the conclusion drawn by an American policy analyst. Ian's empathy, if not sympathy, with China had earned him some popularity in Chinese policy analyst circles, especially among those working for the government. In hindsight, this popularity could be ascribed to two factors. First, Ian's empathy towards China made his viewpoints more acceptable to Chinese policy elites. Second, his critical comments on China's foreign policy, especially the BRI, expressed what many of his Chinese colleagues were reluctant to publicise.

Ian's last academic activity in China took place in 2018. In the autumn of that year, he convened an international workshop on the BRI at the Renmin University of China inviting European and Indian scholars. Ian looked very confident and healthy. He told me with pleasure that he had received a number of invitations from some of China's top-gun think tanks to make presentations on the BRI. Of those presentations, Ian only made one. On the day after the workshop, Ian went over to the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) to make a presentation on 'India's policy towards the BRI'. He never had time for the rest. It was sad to see Ian off when he was only so young. If anything can be of some comfort, it is this: his footprints were forever left on Chinese soil, and his intellectual torch had been passed to

many younger scholars in China, Africa and Europe.

Endnotes

- ¹ The author would like to thank Professor Shaun Breslin (University of Warwick) for clarifying this point.
 - ² For a typical example of the mystification of China, see Pillsbury (2014).
 - ³ For a contrary conclusion on the same issue, see Fanell (2019).
-

Bibliography

Fanell, J.E. (2019) 'China's global naval ambitions and expanding force structure: pathway to hegemony', *Naval War College Review*, 72 (1), pp. 1–46 [Online]. Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7871&context=nwc-review> (Accessed: 22 May 2023).

Lin, Y. (1989) 'Peking's African policy in the 1980s', *Issues and Studies*, 4 (25), pp. 77–96.

Pillsbury, M. (2014) *The hundred-year marathon: China's secret strategy to replace America as the global superpower*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.

Taylor, I. (1998) 'China's foreign policy towards Africa in the 1990s', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36 (3), pp. 443–460.