

每周时事分析：拜登身边有真正的中国问题专家吗？
Is there a Good China Hand in Biden Team?

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Summary: As Joe Biden prepares to assume office, questions are being asked: Does Biden have China experts around him? Who is a 'true' China expert? - Cao Xin

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The ICS is an interdisciplinary research institution, which has a leadership role in the promotion of Chinese and East Asian Studies in India. ICS Translations aims to introduce views of the P R China scholars, analysts, and commentators coming from across disciplines.



Image: Matt Pottinger
Source: news.cgtn.com

On the eve of the World Health Organization (WHO) experts' visit to China to investigate the source of COVID-19, the US deputy national security advisor Matthew Pottinger (also known as Matt Pottinger) recently remarked in a conversation with politicians from around the world that COVID-19 virus "most probably" leaked out of a laboratory in Wuhan in China, the international media on Monday reported.

Pottinger has in the past worked for The Wall Street Journal as its China-based correspondent. He is the expert on China in the Trump administration and has worked a lot on issues related to China and North Korea. Along with Pottinger, another person who has held the position of a China expert in the Trump administration is Miles Maochun Yu, a professor of Chinese descent at the United States Naval Academy. Yu, a graduate of the History department of the Nankai University in China, is also Mike Pompeo's "Principal Advisor for China Policy and Planning". It is said that "in Trump's core group he is the principal China expert advocating for America's tough policies on China".

Considering that in almost a fortnight, Joe Biden is going to be sworn in as the new president of the United States, the following questions have arisen: are there China experts around Biden? And who can be called a genuine China expert?

'The Half-baked' China Expert

Like the United Kingdom used to in its early years, the United States government too pays a lot of attention to the post of the "Expert" in its set up of the diplomatic positions. Such an expert serves two functions for the president of the United States. First is to understand the politics, economy, culture and diplomacy of the country concerned, in order to be prepared for the president's consultation. At the same time, the expert formulates relevant policies or gives suggestions during the implementation of the policies. From behind the curtains making a direct entry onto the front stage at the time of conflict and providing guidance through policies and propaganda tools is the other function of such an expert. Pottinger and Yu, as mentioned, are two such China experts in the Trump administration.



Image: Yu with Mike Pompeo
Source: yqqlm.com

On the basis of their actual performance, possibly due to various factors, it can however be said that the China experts around Trump have exhibited a distinct “half cooked rice” characteristics.

Let us look at Pottinger first. He worked in Beijing as The Wall Street Journal’s China-based correspondent. In America, he is viewed as someone who is familiar with China. At the same time, probably because of geographical and political proximity between China and North Korea, he is also seen as an expert on North Korea.

Within China, going by its social media, a general impression is that a series of events causing friction between China and the United States have Pottinger’s imprints. From the stigmatization of COVID-19, to pushing the United States to “cut off supplies” to the WHO, to United States heavily cutting down on the number of Chinese media personnel stationed in America – all these happenings bear Pottinger’s imprint.



Image: President Trump and Matt Pottinger
Source: politico.com

In the opinion of this author, Pottinger played a major role in the Trump administration on the North Korean nuclear issue. What deserves a special mention is he attached a great importance to the role of China on the North Korean nuclear issue. Especially following the second meeting between the head of states of the United States and North Korea held in Vietnam, back home in America he highly appraised the importance of China. Pottinger went as far as to suggest that China could play the most important role on the North Korean nuclear issue. Thus, it can be seen that besides Trump’s personal factor, the Trump administration’s policies on North Korea were also hugely influenced by Pottinger.

Furthermore, in October 2018, when the United States vice-president Mike Pence in his speech looked back at US-China relations and asked China to return to Deng Xiaoping’s path of reform and opening up, it too had the imprints of Pottinger. The speech reverberated through China. Moreover, it is said that Pottinger was recommended as an expert to the US government by none other than Pence himself. Two recent actions of Pottinger fall under the category of him personally carrying out first-line operations, which inadvertently led him to be at the receiving end of severe criticism.

The first action being him specially releasing a message to eulogize Dr Li Wenliang. However,

due to his occupational needs, he attached the tag of “May Fourth” on Dr Li Wenliang, which was met with great ridicule by the Chinese people at home and abroad. Because if one speaks in terms of its spiritual essence, the act of Dr Li Wenliang, who was later on named a martyr by the Chinese government, is generally regarded by the Chinese people to be closer to the “New Culture Movement”, which at its core advocated democracy and science. Moreover, as reported this was the second time when in an important speech Pottinger has garbled the spiritual essence of these two historical movements. This exposes his lack of adequate understanding of Chinese history.

The second is Pottinger’s recent statement given prior to the visit of the WHO to China to investigate the source of COVID-19 virus. He told the media that early last year, the epidemic in China resulted from a leak at the Wuhan Institute of Virology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Even though he admitted that the leak was not deliberate on the part of China, but from the standpoint of his profession he violated a major taboo. In case what he was saying is true, he inadvertently ended up dragging the United States government into it.



Image: Yu Maochun

Source: scmp.com

The above mentioned facts show that as quintessential American, Pottinger exhibited professionalism on some issues, but at the same time he has been naive and immature in other issues, international propaganda being one such example. Simultaneously, he has also come off as “unskilled” while directly carrying out first-line operations against China, thus giving the impression that he is still not “baked” enough.

An ethnic Chinese who no longer ‘knows’ China

Speaking of the other top China expert in the Trump team, the principal China policy and planning advisor, Miles Maochun Yu, who is actually “half cooked rice” (a Chinese metaphor meaning someone who is naïve and not yet professional - editor) and knows very little about contemporary Chinese society, Chinese ruling party and its leaders. His profile describes him as history graduate – both bachelor and master’s degree – from Nankai University in Tianjin, P R China; he is a professor of East Asian and Chinese Military History at the United States Naval Academy and is also currently serving as the principal China policy and planning advisor to the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. According to reports, Yu is “chief China expert” in Trump’s team and is an advocate of tough US policy towards China.

Miles Maochun Yu is introduced on the Chinese social media as someone who has been an “influencer” in the Trump administration’s policy towards Beijing in the following ways: in restricting US-China cultural exchanges; in trying to cut off the CPC from the Chinese people; and in advocating the view that the US must be arbitrary and provocative or tough towards China. Yu strongly believes China is afraid of “opposition” from the United States, therefore he upholds the view that the US must persist with its anti-China stance. Last but not least, Yu’s vigorous propaganda that China is proactively involved in stealing activities in international business and technological circles, which led Mike Pompeo to exaggerate in his speeches, that China is increasingly indulging in cyber-attacks and in stealing the US Intellectual Property Rights.

between China and the United States, who has a greater influence? This is a hugely controversial issue in China, and Yu Maochun himself is a good example. As regarding the issue of trying to separate the CPC from the Chinese people, the least said the better. Not only it is unrealistic, the issue does not even have any propaganda value. Recall a speech by the US vice president Mike Pence in October 2018 in which he asked China to return to Deng Xiaoping’s reform and development path. It clearly shows even Pence acknowledged that China’s reform and opening up policy is very good. And who has been leading China’s reform and open door policy – of course, the Communist Party of China. His poor knowledge of China clearly embodies typical American traits, that is, a combination of anxiety and ill-temperament, which results in extreme behaviour.



Image: Will Jeff Prescott be Biden’s China hand?
Source: twitter.com

On the other hand, regarding some of Yu Maochun’s suggestions, don’t forget he must still be living on with his ideas he nurtured during his growing up years in China.

All the above mentioned clearly shows that Yu Maochun, who was born and educated in the mainland China, has practically no or very little understanding of today’s China. Take for example the issue of cultural exchanges

Of course, President Trump is not going to return as president for another term. If he (Trump) continues to subscribe to and implement Yu Maochun’s advice, it is impossible to predict whether he can achieve the goals of the United States. However, China being the world’s second largest economic and military power, and the fact that China is an ancient civilization with long history, it is as

good as anyone's guess what can happen between the two powerful nuclear weapon nations if America continues to follow the path being shown to it by experts such as Yu Maochun. And imagine the impact it will have on the world.



Image: Biden, Prescott
Source: scmp.com

A contemporary of Yu Maochun recently told the author, Yu had left China for the United States as long back as in the 1980s and has since been living in the US. He has remained cut off from China and has no idea about China of today. Besides, as a history major, his intellectual or academic prowess to analytically look at China is limited too.

As this author sees it, between Yu Maochun and Matt Pottinger as the two US China experts, it is the latter edging out the former. The reason is simple. Pottinger has long years of experience as the foreign correspondent for major American newspapers in China. Pottinger reported from China during the early years of this millennium. In contrast, Yu Maochun has been away from China since almost four decades. Relatively speaking, Pottinger has had a better understanding of things in

contemporary China; Yu, on the other hand, is clueless about today's Chinese society, the Party and its leadership.

Yu's ethnic identity might have been a big handicap for him too. Moreover, Trump administration's China policy was determined long before Yu Maochun was inducted as an advisor. Overall, it is too obvious that Yu Maochun's role as advisor was nothing more than "half cooked rice."

Who is a true China expert?

Given the reality of the US-China relations today, it is but natural that the position of China expert is going to be crucial in the coming days. So, what qualifications are required for someone to be considered a genuine China hand?

First and foremost, a thorough knowledge of China's past and how the past is impacting the thinking and behaviour of the Chinese people today. An in depth understanding of the past will form the basis to judge China's present actions. Second, a sound familiarity with the individual history, family history of the top leaders and what social, political and cultural environment has been instrumental in shaping the thought process and growth of the leader. The third is to understand the history of the CPC in general and particularly the Party's growth and actions in the current and/or contemporary times. Fourth is to have a clear idea of the Chinese economic

history, its strengths and weaknesses; and its growth trajectory and the income levels of Chinese people; to have deep knowledge of the country's economic size and the quality of its economy. All these factors will enable one to judge China's national comprehensive strength and its military potential as well as capabilities.



Image: Yu and Pompeo
Source: bannedbooks.com

All that is mentioned above is a prerequisite for anyone to call oneself “a China hand.” Only when one is well-equipped with the knowledge above, one can talk about having a good understanding of China's diplomacy and military affairs, etc. and so on. Besides, good

proficiency in Chinese language is as important as practical experience of having lived in China.

Finally, the two China experts discussed above each has one's own strengths. For example, Pottinger doubles up as an expert on North Korea too. Furthermore, Pottinger's response towards China is far from being as divorced from reality and extreme as that of Yu Mochun.

The author reckons Biden might even continue with Pottinger in some capacity as the new president's team doesn't seem to have found a genuine China expert so far!

Series Editor: Hemant Adlakha

The views expressed here are those of the original author and not necessarily of the translator or of the Institute of Chinese Studies

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