

Harvard on China, China's War on Smuggling, with Philip Thai

James Gethyn Evans:

Welcome to the Harvard on China Podcast. My name is James Evans. And my guest today is Professor Philip Thai, Associate Professor of History at Northeastern University here in Boston. Professor Thai is an historian of modern China, and his research spans legal history, economic history, business history, and history of capitalism. He is the author of *China's War on Smuggling: Law, Economic Life, and the Making of the Modern State from 1842 to 1965*, published by Columbia University Press.

The book examines the impact of smuggling and illicit trade in China from the late Qing Dynasty to the People's Republic. Through looking at the link between illicit coastal trade and the Chinese state's attempt to prevent such activities. The book demonstrates that the fight against smuggling was not a simple law enforcement issue but rather an impetus to centralize authority and expand economic controls. So Philip Thai, welcome to the Harvard on China Podcast.

Philip Thai:

Thank you very much, James.

James Gethyn Evans:

Most studies of the movement of goods look at trade. Why did you focus instead on smuggling?

Philip Thai:

Well, that's a very interesting question. One origin story that I always tell about my book is that I originally wanted to study trade commerce on the China coast. Very broadly speaking until I got to the archives and found considerable materials related to smuggling. At first, I was very upset at the fact that I could not find trade and materials on trade, but only materials on smuggling until I realized that, of course, smuggling is trade. Just not the legal version or what the authorities considered to be the legal version.

So I thought that smuggling was one avenue for me to basically study what I originally wanted to study. But like some kind of... I don't know, Russian dolls. You unpack one thing, and you see another. Basically, smuggling was also a great vehicle for me to understand state power. To understand how states define what is legal and illegal trade. And also to understand what did ordinary people consider to be legal or illegal trade? Basically, trying to understand how state power was enforced, exercised and how ordinary people responded to such enforcement and exercise of state power.

James Gethyn Evans:

So what are the kinds of goods that you saw being smuggled or being encountered as smuggling?

Philip Thai:

That is also a very good question. Many people ask me what kind of goods usually get smuggled. And I think that generally speaking, everything, anything that is prohibited or taxed. Basically, smuggling has no fixed sort of taxonomy. It depends on whether the level of taxation, the level of regulations, basically, state power is injected into the dynamics of supply and demand.

So in the early part of the 20th century, there was considerable smuggling of opium, weapons, narcotics, salts. These were things that were prohibited or heavily taxed. By the 1930s, when the new nationalist

government under Chiang Kai-shek would raise tariffs on all sorts of consumer goods, it widened dramatically the categories of goods that could be smuggled. So all of a sudden, you not only had narcotics, opium, weapons, but you also had sugar, rayon, kerosene, very ordinary innocuous goods.

And then, going forward into the early People's Republic, when the new communist government would try to impose very strict regulations on trade, you'd have various commodities like wristwatches that would be very popularly smuggled. So again, we have to look at what the government policy is. Also, look at the dynamics of supply and demand.

James Gethyn Evans:

So let's say I am a villager living on the Fujian coast at the turn of the 20th century, and I want to make a quick buck.

Philip Thai:

Yes.

James Gethyn Evans:

And in my head, I've decided that the rewards from illicit smuggling are greater than the risk of being caught. As a Fujianese fisherman or villager, what is the best way for me to make a quick dollar on the side? Or a quick yen on the side?

Philip Thai:

I suspect that if you were a Fujianese villager in the early 20th century, your primary article of smuggling would probably be opium, narcotics because that is one of the major commodities where the risk-reward ratio just works in your favor. If you're going to take that much risk, you might as well make a lot of money. And I think that other consumer goods, which were taxed at a very low rate, 5%, that just did not really make sense. If you run the risk of smuggling, you only make a 5% profit that just did not make sense. So I think that to answer your question, yes, mostly commodities like opium, which were expressly prohibited and quite dangerous to traffic.

James Gethyn Evans:

So if you're going to do it, go big?

Philip Thai:

Yes. If you're going to do it, go big. And the problem is that once the state begins to expand its categories of taxation, regulations, all of a sudden, any kind of goods would become very profitable. In fact, many officials pointed that out. Once the government in the 1930s, starting 1930s, would impose all sorts of tariffs and all sorts of regulations. The relative profitability of a lot of goods shifted dramatically. A lot of people, a lot of officials, noted that "Yes, there were still a lot of smuggling of narcotics."

But all of a sudden, any ordinary person could buy a bag of sugar in Hong Kong, walk across the border or try to get it across the border and sell it in China at a significant mark-up. And, of course, sugar is not illegal, unlike narcotics or weapons, which were inherently illegal and thus more difficult and more dangerous to traffic. Other innocuous consumer goods, the legality rested not upon the item itself but the mode by which they were trafficked. And that's very, very hard for any official to discern.

James Gethyn Evans:

Geographically, a lot of the focus of your book is along the South China coast. Where are these smuggled goods coming from? And where are they going to?

Philip Thai:

That it is a very good question about the geography of smuggling. Basically, general continuity that I've seen from the late 19th century all the way through the 20th century is that the Pearl River Delta, basically, Hong Kong and Macau, but mostly Hong Kong is this funnel where a lot of foreign goods would flow into China. And the foreign goods could come from anywhere. It could come from the West. It could come from America. But most of the smuggled goods in the 1930s came from Japan or Japanese colonies like Taiwan or Korea.

And so, the geography of smuggling shifted certainly over time. But most of the vectors of trafficking, you can probably trace it going through Hong Kong, going through the Pearl River Delta. And once smuggling became big-time business, you would have fleets of ships. These big junks that would ply the waters between China and Taiwan. Taiwan at the time was a Japanese colony. Or go, as far as say, Japan and make their way to the China coast.

James Gethyn Evans:

And I guess if it's anything like migration, you also end up this sort of grooves. That is, once a smuggling route is established, it probably stays there overtime for quite a while.

Philip Thai:

Oh, indeed. I think that one of the most striking things that I have realized in doing this project is in looking at the various paths of smuggling is to realize how enduring they are. One thing I always tell people is that when I was in Hong Kong at one time still doing research on this project, I was reading a newspaper, the South China Morning Post, with this headline story about how smuggling from Hong Kong to China, a major problem says, officials. And I almost choked on my coffee because I realized that the routes they were describing were virtually the same routes that I had encountered in my own research. Of course, the goods were different, but the geography of smuggling, even the micro geography of smuggling, from this cove to that cove, from this village to that village. I was very surprised to see that these are the same places that continued over time.

James Gethyn Evans:

I think one of the very interesting things that your book does is try to address this idea of temporality that we often see in modern Chinese history. That is, studies of the late Qing, the Republican Era, and the People's Republic of China are often quite distinct. So that is studies of China before 1911, the Republican Era from 1911 to 1949, and then after 1949. And your book takes the late Qing, the Republican Era, and the early PRC as one period. Did you initially set out to do that within your project? Or was that an accident of the materials just said to you that this has continuity?

Philip Thai:

I originally chose a very narrow temporal focus for my dissertation. I focus primarily on the nationalist rule from 1927 to 1949, and I wrote the dissertation. But I always knew in my heart that that was just too narrow of a focus, at least for my taste. So I wanted to expand the temporal framework by going

backwards into the late Qing. And I wanted to move forward as a way to understand the pre-history and the post-history, I suppose.

But then I realized that there are a lot of continuities across these different epochs in modern Chinese history. And I thought that that was something worth pointing out. Because as you said, many scholars tend to treat these periods as discrete periods, understandably so. Emphasizing the changes over these different periods. And I do that in my book. But I also wanted to highlight the continuities.

Moreover, I thought it didn't really make sense for us to understand what the nationalists were doing unless we understand what they were reacting against from the late Qing. So one of the most important agendas of the nationalists was to dismantle what I call the treaty port legal order. Basically, all of these treaties, these international treaties, these unequal treaties that constrain Chinese authority, removing China's tariff autonomy, introducing extraterritoriality and so forth, all these foreign privileges. This is the target that the nationalists were aiming their efforts at. And I thought that we needed to talk about that.

And I also wanted to look at the afterlife of some of these policies that the nationalists put together after 1949. What happened after 1949? Originally, I thought it was going to be a story of the communists come in, sweep everything away and ta-da: new China. Everything that the nationalist did sort of disappear.

Instead, I find that the communists come in, dusted off some of these institutions, changed their names, changed their leadership, but then would effectively have these institutions continue or they would write new laws. But these new laws were based, more or less on the laws of the nationalists. Or they were inspired by the nationalists. They just didn't say so explicitly. But when you actually read their content. You can see a lot of connections.

James Gethyn Evans:

So speaking of reading that content, I imagine that studying what is essentially crime is actually quite a difficult thing to do. You're looking for the gaps in the archives rather than something that is explicitly said. Or, if anything, you're looking at cases where people were caught rather than places where they were not. How do you go about approaching the materials? And what are you looking for, in particular, in the archives in order to create your story?

Philip Thai:

The challenge for historians of crime and criminology, in general, is what they call the hidden figure. Basically, activities that happen in the shadows do not often come to the attention of authorities. The historian just has to be very comfortable with the idea that we're not going to be able to reconstruct everything. I am quite certain that I have not written the most exhaustive history of smuggling on the China coast.

But one way we can overcome some of these problems or at least shed light on things that are otherwise hidden is to consult a diverse range of sources. So to not rely strictly on official sources, on what, say the police or the customs or the government said what was happening. But to survey other materials like newspapers, personal writings, business records that could talk about this from a different perspective. So that we have a much more diverse way of looking at these activities that are not always captured in official documents. And to be able to have a much more, I suppose, expansive view of this kind of activity in the shadows.

James Gethyn Evans:

Sort of looking for the thing that is not reported. And I guess in some cases, the official documents may not report crimes if they want to make it seem as if crime is lower than it actually is. Or there might be tacit agreements between police and smugglers that certain activities are allowed or not allowed.

Philip Thai:

Exactly. I think that one of the challenges of trying to understand trends in crime. Whenever you see, say, numbers of crime going up. The question should always be, "Are we seeing a crime wave? Or are we seeing an enforcement wave?" And this is a classic question in criminology. Basically, are we seeing this because this is actually happening more? Or is it because the state is caring about it more? Is focusing on it more? Or people care about it more and so forth.

So in general, in writing this history is not to always assume that what I'm seeing is the complete picture, but to basically let the sources tell me. What did the people who have actually observed this? What were they thinking? I mean, some people were saying, "This is actually unprecedented." Well, that would be a good starting point. But then we have to triangulate with different sources to see, well, is this unprecedented or not? And that's, I think, one of the challenges of trying to do a history like smuggling.

James Gethyn Evans:

You mentioned about state enforcement. And one of the main arguments you're making in the book is about the state capacity. And indeed, smuggling is not only defined by the state, but the state's ability to deal with smuggling tells us a lot about whether the state had the capacity to deal with something like smuggling taxation, how it raised revenue. With the Republican Era, one of the main critiques of why it collapsed was because it was unable to raise tax revenue and therefore pay its soldiers or its public servants. What did you find in your studies of smuggling? What did it tell you about the expansion or contraction of state capacity over this time period?

Philip Thai:

I think one of the thing that struck me when writing this history was that smuggling was not just about smuggling. As you said in the beginning, it's not just a law enforcement issue. It's a lot more than that because smuggling touched upon many important facets of state power. As you just mentioned, smuggling threatened state finances. Throughout much of modern Chinese history, many regimes relied heavily on duties, tariffs from foreign trade. The nationalist government, for instance, during the decade from 1928 to 1937, draw roughly 50% of their funds from tariffs, which of course, smuggling would be a direct threat to government finances if it was allowed to fester.

Moreover, smuggling also threatened the authority of the government to basically set the boundaries of what is considered to be legal and illegal trade. Fighting smuggling was an avenue for the center, for the national government to basically assert its authority and tell, not just ordinary citizens, ordinary consumers, ordinary businesses, but also local governments. "This is what we define as legal. This is what we define as illegal. This is the boundary. This is a border that we are now asserting and all of you have to abide by this. And we're going to enforce this with more men on the ground, more lethal weapons, more advanced ships and so forth." And finally, one thing that also struck me in trying to understand this campaign against smuggling is how much it's tied to what the modern Chinese States believe to be the proper role of the state and the economy.

If you read the writings of late Qing officials, early Republican officials or statesmen, they strongly believe that China could and should. That the state, the government should play a major role in trying to

regulate foreign trade. In the late Qing, they believe that all this time, China had a massive imbalance. They saw this as sort of money that was leaking out from China to foreign powers.

During the early Republican Era, you had officials, statesmen, activists like Sun Yat-sen, who basically said, "Because we don't have sufficient tariffs, we cannot develop a domestic industry." So the idea of fighting smuggling was one way for the officials, for governments to try to keep out foreign goods and to encourage, nurture a domestic economy, a domestic industry. And so smuggling was very much tied to visions of political economy. The proper role to state in modern China.

James Gethyn Evans:

We should mention that looking at tariffs, in particular, in the Republican Era, is the topic of Felix Boecking's book from Harvard University Asia Center Press. He was also a guest on this podcast. So I guess smuggling is not only fundamental to our understanding of the state but also economic life writ large in China. What did you find from the materials about how ordinary people experienced smuggling? How they maybe managed to get illicit goods? How did they find these smugglers? And how were the goods connected to those individuals?

Philip Thai:

One thing that I realized in looking at smuggling from the perspective of consumers and businesses, you could argue that basically, they just wanted a good deal, so to speak. Like any sort of rational person, they wanted to pay less rather than more. And I think that looking at smuggling and the underground economy more generally. You could see basically individual choices playing out. And you can also see this parallel logistics channel, where you had very sophisticated smugglers moving goods from one place to another. And you can follow different points on this route and understand how ordinary people play a role in this.

But I don't want to say that ordinary people were basically governed strictly by money, by their personal interests. Because one thing I've also discovered was that there was a lot of public anxiety about smuggling. There were people who, yes, they would buy smuggled goods, either knowingly or unknowingly. But they also understood that this was not necessarily a good thing for the country. Because if they're buying a lot of these smuggled goods, especially goods that are from, say, Japan, which was a major geopolitical rival of China, this, at least in their minds, was not good for China or Chinese businesses, Chinese goods, the Chinese consumers. So there was a very lively discussion within the popular press about the harm of smuggling.

Also, I realized in doing this was that there were a lot of fiction, short stories, plays about smuggling. Smuggling was used as this sort of trope or this topic in discussing social problems, social ills. There are a lot of these children's stories, for instance, that I found where the villain is a smuggler, and the heroes are these young children who realize not only that smuggled goods harms the nation. But these children saved their father, who was captured by these smugglers, and thereby save their family and yet contribute to the wellbeing of the nation. I mean, the point is that this was something that was definitely in the air. So being able to look at smuggling from that perspective gave me a window into what people were thinking at that time.

James Gethyn Evans:

So this was a very open-ended approach to materials. You're not just looking at archives. You're looking at a whole range of materials and objects produced at this time. So it's interesting what you're saying about the short stories. Because in the UK, for example, a lot of the ideas of smuggling or piracy is this

glamorized view of it. It's less about, "Oh, the smugglers are damaging the nation." And more, "Look at these brave smugglers," especially in the Southwest of the UK around Cornwall, who managed to evade capture or somehow had this life of piracy that was seen as very exciting.

Philip Thai:

Oh yes. Yes. I mean, it's interesting that you mentioned the UK because another inspiration for my project was looking at other historical cases. For instance, in the 18th century, as you know, the UK was waging its own very vicious war on smuggling. When the British government would raise considerable revenues on things like taxes on tea and various customs and excise taxes, and it would wage these very violent campaigns against smugglers.

This is at a time when Adam Smith was writing about the virtues of free trade. Well, he was writing about the virtues of free trade at a time when free trade was not... This was not a period when free trade was in effect. So that's why I think that it's important to keep in mind that this, "Yes, this is a Chinese story." But it also has considerable resonance with other historical cases, 18th century UK, 18th century France, 19th century United States, and so forth.

James Gethyn Evans:

I was going to say we're set in Boston at the moment.

Philip Thai:

Oh, yes.

James Gethyn Evans:

The home of... If you talk about tea and taxation, it's what everyone immediately here in the United States and probably will think of.

Philip Thai:

Oh yes. I think that early America was a classic case of where you had a faraway government trying to impose its own visions about what trade should be and how much people should pay for goods. And then ordinary people resisting that sort of imposition of state power. And then leading to, at least in the case of the United States, the revolution.

James Gethyn Evans:

So one thing that you've been quite vocal about online, the number of modern Chinese history books that have incorrect maps in them. And I've noticed you're picking fights or fights is the wrong word. It's a bit strong. Sort of pointing this out to various people, specifically over their inability to correctly map Guangdong Province. What is this fight about?

Philip Thai:

Thank you very much. It's a little embarrassing. I would not say this is a fight. It's just something that-

James Gethyn Evans:

A bee in your bonnet.

Philip Thai:

Yes. So basically, obviously, this is a podcast. I can't show you what I mean by this. But the province of Guangdong in the South actually shifted its boundaries. What it is now today, the boundaries of the Guangdong Province did not come into being until the 1950s. So historically, they have different boundaries. But one thing that kind of struck me was that every time I looked at books with a map of China, they always had the incorrect boundaries.

Now, this is not a big, big deal. But it's just one of those things that I think that we have to get right. This is one of the easiest things to get right. And yet, when we get it wrong, it is the most flagrant thing that would cause people to doubt the quality of your own work.

Now I'm not challenging the quality of the works with the incorrect maps. But I wanted to point out in some of my online comments was, "Wow, you have all of these books from major scholars, published by major presses. And wow, they still get this map wrong." And my exhortation is to everyone, "Just look, just check this, just double check your map." It's just such an easy problem to fix. And I hope that everybody will fix it.

James Gethyn Evans:

So to those who are about to publish books on the history of Guangdong, Philip Thai, the cartography stickler, will come find you if your map incorrectly labels Hainan as part of Guangdong, for example.

Philip Thai:

Yes, yes. It's one of those things that people who don't know will not really care. But people who know will really, really care. And once they see an error like that, they're going to harp on it. I mean, this is not even the worst error I've seen. In graduate school, we were shocked to see how many studies, studies that I very much admired, would get certain maps' geographical boundaries or place names wrong. And it's just something that's I would say, it's akin to your shirt being unbuttoned wrong, or things of that nature where something is so glaringly obvious and embarrassing. And something that I hope that everyone can just fix and remedy because it's really easy to do so.

James Gethyn Evans:

I feel like the line that you just said, which was, "The people who don't care won't care, and the people who know about it will care very much," can be a nice moniker for all of Chinese history in some ways.

Philip Thai:

That's true. But one thing I would like to urge people to understand, of course, I mean, as a historian of China, I obviously believe that Chinese history is important. But one thing that I would urge people to keep in mind is that no matter what you decide to do, or what is your field of interest, whether it is business, whether it is science, whether it is the environment, whether it is technology, geopolitics, whatever the case is, China is going to play a very, very big role in all of these. So it is incumbent for everyone to know something about China, to know something about Chinese history and to understand how that history shapes how China engages with the world today. So I would warn everyone, you ignore China at your peril. So be sure to know your Chinese history or know some of your Chinese history, because it's going to be very, very important in the future.

James Gethyn Evans:

So your PSA for all of-

Philip Thai:

Yes.

James Gethyn Evans:

... us in the China history field is for people to pay attention to us.

Philip Thai:

Yes. But I suspect your listeners... I'm preaching to the converted. But I do hope that non-China specialists pay heed.

James Gethyn Evans:

This book comes out of your dissertation work, as you were mentioning. What are the next steps for you? What is the second project that you're currently working on?

Philip Thai:

That's a great question because-

James Gethyn Evans:

I don't mean to put you on the spot with that question.

Philip Thai:

Not at all. This is something that I have been thinking about quite a bit lately. Because my second project, I decided it's going to be a sequel to this first project. Because during my research for the book, I amassed considerable materials that I was never really able to use, even though I found them to be very, very interesting. So I decided to use them and to apply them into the second project on what I call looking at the underground economy, these informal connections of the region I would just call "Greater China." Including communist China, nationalist Taiwan, British Hong Kong, Portuguese Macau during the Cold War. Basically trying to understand how during the Cold War, this region, which was, at least on paper, politically divided. Divided by geopolitics, global rivalries, colonial legacies. Despite this division, there was considerable underground connections.

You had actors like front companies, businessmen, criminals, ordinary fishermen, who would be able to move back and forth behind this what they call the bamboo curtain at the time, separating these different areas. So the second project is looking at the underground economies of Greater China. And I've already started research on this. This past summer, I have looked at archival materials from London, from Taiwan. I've also, in the past, looked at archival materials from China and from Hong Kong and from DC. This is going to be a continuation, a sequel to the first book.

James Gethyn Evans:

And I guess the strength of both the first book and the second book is that these are very interesting ways to go beyond the confines of national boundaries and the nation-state. When you're looking at people flows, you can immediately see how borders don't matter as much in a way that if we were thinking in geopolitical terms, we might think otherwise.

Philip Thai:

Yes. I think that it's important to sometimes break out of the nation-state box to identify some of these flows. Whether you call them national flows, international flows, whatever, flows of people and goods going from one place to another. Also, for me, what I found interesting about this project, not only because it builds off my first, was the resonance it has for this region today.

One of the cases that I stumbled upon in deciding to write this new history was this case of a smuggler from Taiwan who was able to move various goods back and forth between Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland. And once he was discovered by authorities, he fled Taiwan and fled to Hong Kong, where Taiwanese authorities could not bring him back to Taiwan for a trial.

Of course, this is a similar incident is what sparked the protest in Hong Kong last year when there was a gentleman from Hong Kong who killed his girlfriend in Taiwan. There are these fractured jurisdictions that are still in place today, that I would like to use this project to understand how these things came about and how they were dealt with in the past. And what sort of resonance they have for us today.

James Gethyn Evans:

So one question that we like to do for essentially all of our interviews here is to ask our interviewees if they would give advice to other historians in the field or younger historians in the field in particular as to what kinds of future projects might be done off the back of your own work? So if you're working on smuggling, what is a project that somebody else might also look at that might compliment this work? What advice do you have for future historians who are also interested in this field?

Philip Thai:

That's a really good question because one would love to say, "Oh, you can do so much from my own work. There's so many possibilities." Let me just outline a few. One thing that I would say is in looking at my book, one of the strengths that I believe of my own study is to look at this long chronological and geographical art. Looking at smuggling, not just in any one place, but looking at it on the China coast over a long period of time.

Now that is good because it provides a sort of macro picture, but it does have the weakness of losing sight of some of the more regional or local specificities. So I would say that if you are interested in crime or criminality or smuggling or anything like that, local economies, zooming into one place and telling that local story might be a good approach.

I know some scholars who are actually already doing this. For instance, I know one colleague of mine, Peter Tilley at the University of Mississippi. He's already going to be writing a book on opium smuggling in Fujian and its connections to Southeast Asia. And I anticipate that it'll be a really, really brilliant history. So zooming in into specific localities might be one way to build off of my own work.

Another research topic that I developed in the book. And I think that is something that I want to think about a bit more. And I encourage other scholars to think about as well is why does the Chinese state believe in having a very important role for the government in the economy? Why is it that discourse about the relationship between state and economies always comes down on the side of the state could and should have a very visible hand in the economy?

This is something I came across when I was reading about the discussions of why the state should impose more tariffs, should impose more controls over foreign trade. All of these things eventually helped spark smuggling. And I think that this is very important because obviously, even though China today has transitioned or trying to transition to a more market-oriented economy, the state still plays a huge role.

This is one thing that I always try to tell students that despite the fact that China and the Chinese economy seems very market-oriented. You can get all sorts of consumer goods. You can get all sorts of goods, foreign goods. You can get your Starbucks coffee. You can get your McDonald's fries and burgers and so forth. That does not necessarily mean that the Chinese economy today is a capitalist economy. Because most of the major companies, industries are very much state-owned or state-controlled. And I would urge scholars who are looking at my work to consider this state economy relations. Because again, it also has considerable resonance for China today.

James Gethyn Evans:

And I guess that's a topic that is interesting from a history perspective and that it nicely combines what we would otherwise think of as different silos within the field. So economic history, legal history, nation-state history, it has to mix them necessarily in order to understand what's going on.

Philip Thai:

Yes, yes. I think that for me, the reason why I wrote the study the way I did was that I was very much inspired by research from different fields and different fields in legal history, economic history. And I sort of used smuggling as a way to connect them. And I would urge anyone who is starting their research now to keep broader questions in mind.

How do I take my research and not only go very deep into this topic and very deep in engaging with my own field? But how do I find adjacent fields? Adjacent disciplines to make my work appeal to fields outside my own field of modern Chinese history? And also not only be able to identify comparisons, but also identify connections. Basically, being able to place China in its comparative context, but also see the connections between China and other parts that are trends, whether they're regional or even global.

James Gethyn Evans:

Finally, part of this podcast is we do a quickfire round.

Philip Thai:

Go ahead.

James Gethyn Evans:

You feel free to riff. However, you see fit. Our first question is, it's called the Fairbank Five. Our first question is what is your favorite Chinese food?

Philip Thai:

My favorite Chinese food. Oh, dear. Well, recently, I have been eating a lot of Mapo tofu. That is something that my wife also enjoys very much. So I've been eating it quite a bit myself lately. But I don't want to say, I like to eat tofu. That's, anyway, if you know Chinese, you know what I'm trying to say. But as someone who grew up in an ethnic Chinese family, I generally like most Chinese food. And I would say, Southern Chinese cuisine.

James Gethyn Evans:

Your favorite place in Greater China?

Philip Thai:

I am a city person. So, I like cities. I like the conveniences of modernity. I understand that big cities could be very alienating sometimes, but I still like cities. So if I had to just say, what are my favorite places? I like Hong Kong. I liked Taipei. I like Shanghai. I liked them for different reasons, but I do like the conveniences and also feeling as if I'm in these very cosmopolitan places where not only is your local character of the city is reflected, but also it feels like the world is coming to them. And it seems very exciting, in my opinion.

James Gethyn Evans:

Your favorite Chinese phrase?

Philip Thai:

Favorite Chinese phrase. One thing I always use when I am talking to my wife I always exclaim like "ai ya" or "ma fan". And like, it's really just a hassle. And it's interesting how I would slip in Chinese phrases even when I'd be speaking in English. So this kind of weird mix of Chinglish with words like that, I would say. I suppose those are, maybe not my favorite, but my most often used phrases.

James Gethyn Evans:

A book that you have read recently on China that you would recommend to our listeners?

Philip Thai:

I recently read this book by Rana Mitter about the second Sino-Japanese War. It's called, I believe, The Forgotten Ally, basically looking at the role of China, the importance of China in the Second World War. How many people when talking about the Second World War basically, did not really talk about China. And his major thesis about the role of China is that it was involved in the war. And that is not only enough, but it was actually very essential in tying up Japan's forces on the Chinese mainland. And thus playing a major role in the course of the war that most people seem to have forgotten.

James Gethyn Evans:

Shout out to Professor Mitter, who is my undergraduate-

Philip Thai:

Oh, okay.

James Gethyn Evans:

... professor.

Philip Thai:

That I didn't know.

James Gethyn Evans:

And finally, a class that you have either took or have taught about China that helped change your thinking about the country in some way?

Philip Thai:

One course that I've taught. It's not explicitly about China. But China does come in and play a major role. I've recently been very interested in diplomatic history as my second project takes shape. And I have taught a course called The Global Cold War, which was a course that my colleague Gretchen Heefner, who's a specialist in US and the world. She started, but when she was on leave, I took over and taught it.

One thing that I've come to realize in teaching this course is the importance of China, as sort of this player in the background. And also the importance, sort of the global dimensions of the rift between the People's Republic and the Soviet Union. How that Sino-Soviet rift was not just this sort of bilateral problem between, say, China and the Soviet Union. But it had a lot of repercussions worldwide. In fact, when you look at certain hotspots, Cold War global hotspots, many of these hotspots became scorching hot because of this Sino-Soviet conflict.

For instance, I've been reading a book about the Vietnam War. How competition between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic basically egged on the North Vietnamese. Or the North Vietnamese were actually able to sort of exploit this to their own advantage, which in turn shaped how the Vietnam War unfolded. So teaching that course, it's taught me how to look at something that I've always sort of knew. The Sino-Soviet rift was something you just know about Modern China but didn't actually see it in a completely different light and see it in sort of this global perspective.

James Gethyn Evans:

Yeah, and I guess that's the topic of Jeremy Friedman's-

Philip Thai:

Yes.

James Gethyn Evans:

... book called in the Shadow Cold War. Exactly.

Philip Thai:

Exactly.

James Gethyn Evans:

Well, Philip Thai, thank you so much for being with us here today on the Harvard on China Podcast.

Philip Thai:

Thank you very much, James. Thank you very much.

James Gethyn Evans:

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