

A China-hand from Mexico

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Dr. Granados in Hokkaido

I met Dr. Granados for the first time in Japan. He was one of the guest speakers at the international conference, *Northeast Asia's Fault-line: One Hundred Years of Sino/Russian/Soviet Competitive Cooperation*. The host and sponsor of the conference was the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center (SRC) at Hokkaido University. The timing of the conference, July 2017, was quite interesting. All the participants enjoyed a sweet summer in Hokkaido. They knew, however, that a storm was coming. Donald Trump had just begun his term in January and started withdrawing the U.S. from commitments all over the world. At the same time, the Russian and Chinese autocrats, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, were consolidating their power at the top.

The diversity of the conference was impressive. The conference covered wide and large disciplines: international relations, geo-politics, regional studies, border studies, and international economic/information transactions. Prominent scholars came from Russia, China, Great Britain, and Canada. In addition, the conference featured a special session, *Northeast Asia Viewed from the Outside*. For this session, the SRC invited three speakers from India, Mongolia, and Mexico. And so, Dr. Granados showed up in Sapporo city.

Did Dr. Granados convince all those inquisitive attendants? Yes, he did. In fact, he did more than that. I was lucky because I had not known him as a researcher beforehand. I had just read his brief academic self-introduction. My expectation at that time was, frankly speaking, not too high. Here came another proponent of the “China threat” argument and a hardline realist, that was what I thought. When I listened to his presentation, however, I changed my mind. Here was a real researcher I could talk to. He knew the subject and was willing to share his view. It was gratifying to meet someone you could talk to without any inhibitions, either ideological or organizational. It was such a sweet surprise that such a colleague, an independent thinker and researcher, lived and worked in Mexico, a country far away from China across the Pacific.

After reading some of his academic works and his full resume, my first impression at the SRC conference turned into a conviction. Here was a man who could see things critically and, at the same time, objectively. He kept his initial interest and built up his academic career in pursuit of that interest. In Mexico, he studied “China’s Hong Kong Recovery” and wrote an MA thesis on the “Spratly Islands.” In Tokyo, he completed his dissertation on the “South China Sea Territorial Conflict.” These were important subjects worth studying. His more recent publications indicate that he kept on studying territorial disputes and international relations in Asia and the Pacific Rim.

His approach to his research subject was comprehensive and well-balanced. He did not seek a simple solution or a simplified explanation. Rather, he dug deep down into the ground until he found the roots of the conflict. Well-known publications often show us a simplified picture[1]. The territorial conflicts in the South China Sea were, they would say, zero-sum games played by a big bad China and a group of good but small players, such as, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. Dr. Granados argued that the matter was not that simple. To Dr. Granados, the history of colonization by past empires, Ming, Qing, and Japanese Empire, did matter. The modernization process which happened in South East Asia in the first half of the

twentieth century also mattered. Cooperative relations could develop and so could competitions and conflicts[2].

His tenacity was admirable. I knew from my own experience that he must have encountered serious obstacles on the way to become a China-hand. There were several ready-made questions: “Forget China. Study more friendly and important countries, like the United States and/or Japan.” “China study market is already very crowded. There are thousands of Chinese, Japanese, and western scholars studying China. What can you, a Mexican, add?” I do not know how Dr. Granados responded to these questions. However, although he knew that there were many landmines and pitfalls in the field of China studies, he was not intimidated. He kept on fighting. He brushed off those not-too-friendly questions. His academic works are proof of his perseverance.

If he were alive, we could have exchanged our research notes. We could have organized a joint research project, like Professor Iwashita of the SRC did a few years ago. We could meet somewhere like, Singapore, Manila, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. He could show up again in Hokkaido, Tokyo, or anywhere else. We could have met again in Mexico City. His sudden loss really hurts.

Professor Granados in Mexico City

One month after our initial meeting, I was in Mexico City. From mid-August 2017, I delivered seven three-hour lectures in two weeks. My lectures were part of the summer course Professor Granados taught at his home institute, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM). To most China scholars in Japan, Mexico is perhaps one of the most remote nations. I was not an exception. I had little knowledge about Mexico and ITAM. What should I teach there? Did it make any sense that a Japanese researcher would talk about China?

At first, I considered to take a tried-and-true route. It was also the easiest option. I was to deliver the same lecture I was doing at my home institute, Gakushuin University. In Tokyo, I divided my lecture in two parts. In the first semester, I focused on Mao’s China and covered the first 30-odd years of the People’s Republic. In the second semester, I took up the reformist China that began with the death of the Great Leader, Chairman Mao, in 1976. I gave up this option, however. Teaching in a different country and facing different students was a new challenge, and I wanted to learn from this experience. I did not want to play it safe.

The previous year, 2016, China began a grand project, the so-called Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China’s global reach and presence had become a real time issue[3]. In Tokyo, I had a chance to talk about the “Rise of China” in front of non-Japanese audiences, first at the Norwegian Embassy and then at the Culture Center of the French Embassy. On these occasions, I talked about “How China Became Rich.” The talk was based on my research and experience in Guangdong province and Hong Kong. From the summer of 1991 to April 1994, I worked at the Japanese Consulate General in Hong Kong as a cultural attaché. There, I witnessed Deng Xiaoping’s so-called Southern Trip and succeeding “Economic Boom” in Southern China and Southeast Asia[4].

The question was if this theme was suitable for the lecture at ITAM. What would Professor Granados say? His reply was a non-conditional “yes.” Later, I found out why he said yes to my not-so-orthodox theme. First, Professor Granados’s lecture covered so many important areas and disciplines that I could concentrate on my rather narrow field. I have

lost his course outline for that year. But I remember that his course on Asia and China was quite comprehensive. He began his lecture with the history of China and its interactions with neighboring nations, including Russia, Korea, and Japan. China's drive to become a great socialist state was a constant theme of his lecture. His lecture was, in short, not so different from those courses on Asia and China in the major institutes of the world. No wonder my lecture easily fit in.

The other reason why my lecture was welcome was the special nature of ITAM. Its universalistic and elitist character stood out. According to Wikipedia, it is one of Mexico's most important institutions of higher learning; highly prestigious in the social sciences. It is also considered one of Mexico's think tanks and has the highest rank of admission to the Mexican Foreign Service. In the first session of my lecture, I conducted a small survey: "How many of you have been to the United States? How many of you have been to Asia, including China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, two Koreas, and Japan?"

To the first question, about eighty percent of the 70 students answered yes. About twenty percent of students answered yes to the second question. I thought twenty percent was very high. If I had conducted the same survey in my home institute in Tokyo, the percentages would have been much lower. Besides, all the students chose to take this course during the summer vacation. They were eager to learn about East Asia. There were quite a few students from Asia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, China, and Japan. They might be a bit curious about me, an unknown professor from Japan. What was he going to say about China and Japan? Could he speak English or Spanish?

It turned out that ITAM students were genuinely interested in Asia. The political-economic developments in China and Japan, in particular, were the main foci of their attention. Most of the students were interested in three major areas: economics, international relations, and international business. It also turned out that Professor Granados was an ideal instructor for them in all these three academic disciplines. He knew both China and Japan. He had worked in the higher education industry in Japan for a long time, more than thirteen years. He had accumulated professional skills in Intercultural Communication, Political Science, Translation, Lecturing, and International Relations.

At ITAM and in Mexico, Professor Granados proved that studying in Japan made a lot of sense. You did not have to major in Japan-specific disciplines, such as literature and history. You could study China, Russia, the United States, or any field of study you chose. He was a model of a hard-working researcher. He was also a good teacher. He taught at the ITAM since 2012 and built a large body of students who had professional skills and knowledge. He was a big bridge between East Asia and Mexico, and its two main corridors led to China and Japan.

Ulises-san in Japan

Ulises-san and I had a lot in common. Both of us spent a considerable time, about 13 years or so, in foreign countries. In the case of Ulises-san, it was Japan, and for me, the United States. Both of us received a degree from foreign institutes, in the case of Ulises-san, the University of Tokyo, and for me, the University of Michigan. Both of us returned to our home countries, eventually. He settled down in Mexico City at the ITAM, and for me, in Tokyo at Gakushuin University.

Besides these similarities in our academic career, we shared a common experience. We worked. If you stayed in a foreign country as a graduate student for a few years, you might be

able to support yourself with grants or scholarships. After that, living was not easy if you had a family to support. After I finished all my coursework, I started working in Detroit as a technical interpreter. There were strong demands for that kind of job at that time.

It was the early 1980s, the so-called Reagan Years. Japan, not China, was emerging as an economic giant. Japanese auto manufacturers started investing heavily in the United States. The U.S. dollar got so cheap. As a result, U.S. policy makers in Washington D.C. started talking about a “Japan Threat.” The U.S. Congress passed laws for unilateral economic sanctions. These laws targeted the Soviet Union in the 1970s. In the 1980s, the target was Japan. China became a new target in the 1990s. There was a rumor in Detroit that Mazda was going to buy out Ford, which was in serious financial troubles.

I learned a lot about the United States, Japan and their relationship through that job. These lessons would not have been learned if I had stayed in Ann Arbor, where the University of Michigan was located. These lessons became an integral part of my research on China. I learned, for example, that not all the American executives were a bunch of fools. American engineers and Japanese counterparts could communicate without an interpreter. When I stumbled on some technical details, they just drew a diagram or numbers on the white board. Then, the problem was settled. My job became easy after that.

On the streets in Detroit, some of the union leaders and local politicians were smashing Japanese cars. To those workers who were about to lose their jobs, Japan was a real threat. Detroit looked like a very dangerous place for the Japanese. The workers I met on the factory floor were not dangerous but very friendly. Some of them spent a few years in Japan as members of the U.S. armed forces. Most of them had fond memories of Japan. I did not encounter any racial discrimination or harassment at work. Perhaps, I was lucky. After I worked in Detroit, I became more cautious about accepting somebody else’s judgment and analysis about the United States and its relations with Japan.

I believe Ulises-san had a similar experience in Japan. In Mexico, I heard from Ulises-san that he had worked in Tokyo, first, as a teaching assistant and a part-time instructor. Later, after he completed his doctor’s degree, he became a full time Associate Professor at the University of Tokyo. He also worked with NHK, the Japanese Broadcasting Station, as a news anchor at the International news service, NHK World. He must have met various kind of people on the job, just like I had in Detroit.

His work experience in Tokyo seemed to have enriched his academic resources. After he returned to Mexico, he became a regular news analyst on Asian events for major international news service, such as, AFP, CNN and BBC. Quite a few Chinese must have known his name. Besides the English and Spanish media, Dr. Granados showed up in the Chinese official media, Xinhua news agency, People’s Daily and China Daily.

If we learn something through written media, like a book, our learning remains two-dimensional. The same is true with the internet. Books and the internet are effective and powerful tools for learning. The learning of this sort lacks, however, the important third dimension, that is, historical and social context of the time. Living and working in a foreign country will help you understand that. The time, place, your social status, your personal characters all matter in that dimension.

Ulises-san’s three-dimensional understanding of Japan really mattered. I did not have to explain to him how the Japanese politics and the bureaucracy worked. Often, he knew better. His understanding of Mexico was, evidently, much deeper than my two-dimensional

understanding. That made him an excellent coordinator of the Asia Pacific Studies Program and other Pan-Pacific projects. During my stay in Mexico, I had a chance to deliver my lecture on the rise of China at the University of Colima, a historical port city along the Pacific Coast. The lecture was funded by the Japan Foundation and Ulises-san was a coordinator. The lecture went very well and the operation and the logistical support were impeccable.

Ulises-san a Sure China-hand

Let me touch on our differences. Although both of us belonged to the so-called China School, our approaches to China differed. First was the time frame. To me, the starting point of my China study was 1981. I stayed in Beijing, at Peking University, for seven months. The United States and China normalized their relations in 1979, and Peking University started accepting students from the United States. I was doing my masters at Indiana University and joined a group of forty students. There was no direct flight to Beijing at that time. We flew to Hong Kong and took an intensive course on simplified characters. Almost all the universities in the United States taught Chinese language using the Taiwan-style complicated Chinese characters. Our teachers at Peking University regretted that they did not speak English. The only foreign language they could learn in their youth was Russian. Those were the days.

When Ulises-san came to Tokyo and began his doctoral study in 1998, China was no longer a poor developing nation. China had survived two crises, the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Deng Xiaoping died in February 1997. The power transition to his successors happened peacefully. The return of Hong Kong in July 1997 also happened smoothly. China withstood the financial crisis in Asia in the same year. While the major Asian economies like Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea stagnated, the Chinese economy kept on growing in double digits. In short, China had risen. And this proud and confident China was Ulises-san's starting point.

Secondly, our approaches to China differed. My academic background belonged to political science, the academic discipline which had developed mostly in the United States. Back in the 1980s, and perhaps still now, the University of Michigan was a Mecca of the quantitative approach. All the graduate students were required to take advanced courses in statistics and research methodology. There was a strong China studies faculty. But those students who majored in area-studies disciplines were in the minority. I was educated to study my subject, that was modern China, using some of the frameworks of political science[5]. For example, I tended to choose a specific event or decision that happened in a particular time. Then, I tried to assemble the objective data, mostly in numbers, and build a hypothesis. In this setting, your analysis was the testing of the hypothesis you had chosen.

Ulises-san's approach to China was quite different. The theory and hypothesis did not appear in the forefront. They came out in the end of his analysis. He looked at the matter from several different angles, historical, societal, economic, and political, for example, and tried to come up with a convincing narrative. His approach was empirical, inductive, and, in a good sense of the word, traditional. Ulises-san stood on the shoulders of the great experts of Asia and China at the University of Tokyo, such as Yuzo Mizoguchi, Takeshi Hamashita, and Akira Ishii.

Do our differences matter? Yes, in a positive way. There is an ancient saying about China. China is like a big elephant. It is so big that the whole picture is hard to get. If you are blind and rub the nose of the elephant, you may conclude that China is a rubber hose. This is a good lesson in China studies. Certainly, our knowledge of China is limited.

Are we in a better position than those ancient people now? Yes and no. Let us begin with no. Today, China has grown into a giant or a dragon. Now, China is larger and much more complicated than an elephant. Getting China right is more difficult than in ancient times. Now, let us turn to the good news. For blind people in the ancient times, rubbing was the only way to get to know China. Not anymore. Now we can rub the elephant with virtually a thousand hands. We can stretch our hands in different directions and we can rub in different ways. We can add up all those data and come up with a sharp graphic.

The point is we need a sure hand. Most of the time, a sure hand is more efficient and precise than a blind touch. Ulises-san had just such a sure hand. His hand was not only sure and experienced. It was also unique and delicate. His hand might have drawn an interesting picture of China, one no other hands could. He knew Japan and Mexico. His picture might have brought together Chinese-Japanese-Mexican characteristics. I deeply regret that I cannot see such a picture, at least for a while.

[1] Peter Navarro and Gordon Chang, *Crouching Tiger: What China's Militarism Means for the World* (New York: Prometheus, 2015); Robert Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of A Stable Pacific* (New York: Random House, 2014).

[2] Ulises Granados, "Modernization and Regionalism in South China: Notes on Coastal Navigation in Guangdong Province during the late-Nineteenth, early-Twentieth Century", *International Journal of Maritime History* 24-1 (June 2012): 89–114.

[3] David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power* (Collingwood: Black Inc., 2012).

[4] Yoshifumi Nakai, "How China Became Rich: Japanese Business in Guangdong in the early 1990s," French Research Institute On Japan, March 18, 2016; "The political consequences of peace: China's retreat for survival, 1988–91," in Shinichiro Tabata ed., *Eurasia's Regional Powers Compared: China, India, Russia* (London: Routledge, 2015): 120–136.

[5] Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984); James March and Johan Olsen, *Ambiguity and Choice in Organizations* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1976).



Ulises Granados and Yoshifumi Nakai in Mexico, 2017