

Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 33: Exploring China in Six Keys

Guest: Jing Tsu, John M. Schiff Professor of East Asian Languages and Literatures and of Comparative Literature

Description: Professor Jing Tsu and President Salovey preview the 2023 DeVane Lecture series, "China in Six Keys," in which members of the Yale and New Haven communities will explore China's complex relationship with the United States and examine contemporary issues in historical context.

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FULL TRANSCRIPT

Peter Salovey: Hello, everyone. I'm Peter Salovey and welcome to Yale Talk. So 50 years ago, the DeVane Lecture series first offered members of our local New Haven community a chance to learn alongside Yale College students. Since then, the program has enjoyed enormous popularity. Its sweeping course offerings have spanned 'Bach, the Theologian' to 'The Evolution of Beauty.' And in the coming weeks, Professor Jing Tsu will resume this rich Yale tradition with a pathbreaking new course on China's cultural and historical background. "China in Six Keys" is the first DeVane Lectures course Yale has announced since the series was paused during the COVID-19 pandemic. And it will be the first DeVane course to focus on China since 1996. Next semester, Jing and a rotating cast of guest speakers from diverse fields and disciplines will examine six contemporary controversies related to China within deep historic context. Among them: artificial intelligence and technology, environmentalism, the Chinese diaspora and language revolution, and other projections of global cultural power. Jing's course has sparked extraordinary interest from Yale alumni and friends. So it is with great pleasure that I welcome Jing Tsu today to provide our listeners with an early preview of her course and discuss some of its key themes. Jing is the John M. Schiff Professor of East Asian Languages and Literatures and of Comparative Literature in Yale's Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Earlier this year, she served as a cultural commentator about China for NBC during its coverage of the Olympic Winter Games in Beijing. And her most recent book, *Kingdom of Characters*, explores the language revolution that made China modern. Jing, thank you so much for joining me today on Yale Talk.

Jing Tsu: Thank you so much for having me, Peter.

Peter Salovey: Great, so let's begin with your DeVane Lecture course. You will take six contemporary controversies and headlines about China and look at them in deep historical context. So tell us a little bit more about the unique structure of this course and how you conceived of the idea.

Jing Tsu: Well, I think the first question anyone would have is probably 'Why six keys?' and 'Why these six keys?' And for me, this course grows out of another course I've been teaching at Yale, "China and the World." And for that course, we also take different topics at different points of entry into this complex phenomenon. Of course, Six Keys is not meant to cover everything under the sun. But they're meant to be six particular tools, ways of thinking through problems concerning China in the world, the complexity to unpack the different dimensions of what is going on between U.S. and China. How do Chinese Americans get caught in between? And what does this mean in the longer arc of interaction between China and the West? So these six keys are meant to give us six different perspectives that hopefully will give our

students and community participants a way of accessing this continuous unfolding phenomenon even after we leave the course.

Peter Salovey: It seems that the six keys incorporate the topics that reflect the breadth of your own scholarly interests. Maybe you could say a little bit more about what students should expect.

Jing Tsu: Well, because this is such a living phenomenon, where we're watching history in the making and we frankly have no idea where it's going to go. So I thought it was really important that students and our community listeners don't just get my take on things--as much as I try to give them different perspectives, the two sides, he said, she said, they said, but rather to bring outsiders like people who work in different industries and different sectors of society, who look at this problem with a vantage point that we don't normally have in the classroom. So I want to bring people from the boardroom, from the war room, from the press room. Among them, for instance, as an AI scientist from Google. And he and I will be talking about what does this tech race mean between China and the U.S. and where is it going and what are some of the backdoor cooperations that we nonetheless have to engage in? Then we're also going to have a linguist who speaks about dialects and Americanism, because I think this is also very important to think of language from the perspective of what we know here, the diversity with American society, the tensions, the race, ethnicity, culture, issues that are bubbling up and even at a crossroads in our very society, and then use that as a lens to look back at China. We're also going to have the first woman Chinese American who's trying to start up the first museum dedicated to Chinese America in New York. And so, a different lens and different perspective of Chinese diaspora. And then we will have an artist, and an old-fashioned old-school China Hand who's been watching this phenomena unfold for decades talk to us.

Peter Salovey: This all sounds great. I'd be interested in how you're going to integrate it all. We all love a parade. And a parade of guests can be very, very interesting. But what characterizes a parade is that the different segments of the parade don't really interact much with each other. You must be the synthesizer of it all that pulls it all together. How will you do that?

Jing Tsu: I'm now picturing myself wielding a baton in front of a parade, Peter. I think that's what I will aim to do, which is to put these together as a more or less complete context for thinking about the most pressing issues of our day. And there are a few take-homes that I hope that our listeners and participate will take with them. For one, China actually has never been more like the U.S. Now, a lot of times when we read the news, we think we're dealing with a new nemesis, a completely unknown. But the fact is China and the U.S. have been inching towards each other for two centuries now. So institutionally, culturally, even economically, China has never been more like the West. And I think that's where the tension resides. We tend to find the greatest disparity with those who are closest to us. They're the ones that we compare ourselves to. And so, we kind of come to the age where some people call it 'great powers.' But I actually think of it as 'great peers' rivalry. So that's one take-home, which is to reshift the frame which we sort of talk about China. You might remember, a few years ago actually, when we had our guest on Financial Times, Jamil Anderlini, he has said, and you who write about China in a newspaper has to do one of three things: China big, China bad, China crazy, right? It has to be one of those three headline grabbers. And for me, that's precisely the kind of premise we need to shift in order to really understand what's happening. Another take-home is that this space of rule does not exclude the space of individual agency in China. Now, that's a little hard to wrap our heads around because we tend to think of China's authoritarian system as a place of unfreedom. But if you're a Chinese on the ground and this is a society you navigate around, you actually devise a different way to carve out a space in which

you can still be creative, still say what you want to say. So this is why one of my guest speakers actually is going to be a Chinese science fiction writer who will come talk to us about environmentalism. And this is vitally important for me to undo some of these biases we have. Not just to undo them so we've become more aligned, but so that we can be more strategic in our way of thinking about what is this peer rivalry mean in the foreseeable decades. So those are two of the take-homes.

Peter Salovey: That's a great set of overarching questions that will serve to integrate the perspective of the guests and pull it together as a whole. It really does sound fascinating. You mentioned science fiction and you actually have a scholarly interest in science fiction. Isn't that true?

Jing Tsu: Yes. In fact, I started out in literature and intellectual history, and for the past four or five years or so, I've been very interested in Chinese science fiction, because science fiction has been one of these genres that been marginalized and then recuperated by the state at various points throughout the 20th century. So it's almost like a shadow presence when we look at what's happening with science technology in China. And at the moment is a very intricate kind of interesting relationship because the Chinese state has taken a great interest in science fiction as a kind of cultural arm of furthering its attempt to make science and technology a positive creed for contemporary China. So writers have to navigate the space of rule and the space of freedom that I was just referring to.

Peter Salovey: And that'll be part of the course? Students will read science fiction?

Jing Tsu: Absolutely! We are actually going to tackle the most impactful science fiction in recent years, *The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin.

Peter Salovey: There'll be a wonderful conversation. There's a connection here, right? Science fiction and then the development of new technologies happening in this country, happening in China. There's this sense of rivalry between the two of us in the area of tech advancement. Is there a connection between what one generation's science fiction is the next generation's science?

Jing Tsu: Well it's interesting that you should say that, because science fiction, even in this country, Arthur C. Clarke, was the adviser. They were consulted in governmental like in NASA research. They would be brought in as a sounding board for scientists and developing policies like where could this possibly go that we have not seen yet, right? So that's why you bring in science writers to bring that dystopian perspective or way of thinking about science and what it could do for humanity in that imaginative way, unfettered by policy or money or resources. So I think in this sense that science fiction really is a very special niche right now in which we can think about how culture, science, technology, state power come together in contemporary China.

Peter Salovey: So interesting to me, the science fiction that fascinated me as a child: what has already come true and what hasn't, right? So communicating by speaking into your watch. I do that every day! But when Dick Tracy did it, I was fascinated. On the other hand, I was sure when I was a boy that we would be colonizing the moon or Mars or something, by the time I was, what am I, late-middle aged? Is that a good euphemism? And of course, that hasn't happened. And we actually don't look that close to doing it. So it's interesting to me the interplay between science fiction and science.

Jing Tsu: Actually, I love what you just said because since I made this foray into history of science and technology is to see how there's so many innovations. We think of innovation almost in a linear path. But

that's not true at all. There's some innovations are invented, but then kind of set aside, because other conditions were not in place to push it forward. So, for instance, I remember in 19th century China, there was this article in one of the first science magazines that introduced Western science where they thought an invisible cloak was just as likely as a scuba suit. Certainly now, I mean, scuba diving, I don't know if you do it. I used to do it. It's very common. But then can we have made that leap from that to invisible cloak? Probably not yet. So I think there are innovations that we cannot imagine, right? Because technology happens in leaps, and there are these step functions where it really changes the world. If you think about even ten years ago, where was I with iPhones? I mean, these days I'm only reading on my phone, which is horrible. I'm still missing the days where you have printed pages. So I think in some ways, technology is way ahead of what we can absorb consciously.

Peter Salovey: And maybe that accounts for some of the nostalgia.

Jing Tsu: Nostalgia and confusion, and I think feeling overwhelmed. We live in a time where we are actually overwhelmed and trying to catch up with the technology we've created.

Peter Salovey: I think that's a very useful perspective. So we spoke at the beginning of our conversation about your professorships in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and by extension, your teaching in Yale College as a professor in East Asian Language and Literature and Comparative Literature. But you also hold a faculty appointment in the Jackson School of Global Affairs. And I be very interested in the way in which that appointment might have led to new perspectives for you and how your teaching in Jackson coexists with your teaching in arts and sciences.

Jing Tsu: In the past three to four years, I started teaching a course just for Jackson and is basically called 'Asia Now,' and it changes from cultural conflicts, globalization, human rights to environmentalism. And the reason why I made that pivot is because I study China. I always feel like I'm trying to catch up with what I study and have to catch up with reinventing tools and finding new ways of looking at this problem. And at Jackson I get to explore just that. In the humanities, I will always be indebted to thinking freely, creatively, deeply, historically. But I feel like Jackson challenges me and gives me an opportunity to translate, to funnel this slowly cumulative academic knowledge into practical, relevant, policy-driven perspectives, and has been enormously stimulating to interact with policy people or people who work in defense or the military because they look at the world very differently. And I feel that's very good for every academic to get a sense of what the real world really is like beyond these walls. Certainly the way I'm going to approach the DeVane, I hope, will also bear the imprint of my experience at Yale as a faculty since 2006. I think of myself as having been brought up on this campus and it is only on a campus like this where I feel had access to people like at Jackson or the law school or to sciences or social sciences or the humanities. Yale's a pretty complete microcosm that allows you to roam freely intellectually, and I've been very grateful for that. And I certainly hope that also is something that I can bring uniquely to the classroom and hopefully impart and inspire my students.

Peter Salovey: And you certainly join a long tradition of interest at Yale by faculty in China. Whether we think of Professor Wells and his teaching of Chinese language at the end of the 19th century, or Professor Spence and his incredibly popular courses on modern China, and I'm so sorry that he passed away fairly recently, but he had an impact on generations of Yale College students. Both of them did. And you're the kind of heir to all of that intellectual tradition at Yale.

Jing Tsu: It's pretty extraordinary to think about that. All I can say is I have big shoes to fill, but it certainly feels like an honor and privilege to be in the footsteps of these predecessors.

Peter Salovey: And we are privileged to have you take on the DeVane Lectures this year and to inspire our students as well as our neighbors in New Haven and others who will join the course. And I thank you for taking it on. When people talk to me about contemporary China. One of the things that is mentioned all the time is, you'll never understand contemporary China if you don't understand Chinese history and literature. Do you think that's true?

Jing Tsu: I actually do think culture is a big factor that is often left out when people analyze China at the moment. If you read a newspaper, we're mostly preoccupied about what's happened in the past 20, 40 years, and I think that is kind of a problem because culture understanding are meant to pre-empt conflicts. So by the time you are in a crisis mode, which I think we are now, and you're expecting culture to be at your fingertips, that's not quite all there. And I think we're missing a critical part of who we're actually engaging with. Who is this rival, what have they been thinking? And I think on this score, China has been way ahead because China has been a diligent understudy of the Western system. And it's been studying us far longer and far more carefully than we have in return. So this is a chance for us to catch up.

Peter Salovey: When I have traveled to China, I hear it all the time: we know you better than you know us. I think there's some truth to that. Today, as we recorded this podcast, President Xi and President Biden are speaking with each other. And I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about what will come of all of that and whether we should be optimistic that a little bit of this freeze between the two countries will begin to thaw. Will this make any difference, these kinds of talks?

Jing Tsu: I certainly think it's helpful that they are making this step, because I think it is quite clear that neither side wants this conflict to escalate. And this is not like a Cold War where there's no economic interaction or stakes between U.S. and Russia. This time, we're so entwined, and what happens to one will impact the other irrevocably, as much as we try to now build these walls around ourselves. So what I hope will come of it, more slowing down. I feel like the more time we have to strategize our position vis a vis the other, the better. Because I think we're also now, I hope, past a stage where there's a lot of vilification, demonization on both sides and shock of, 'I didn't know you were like this.' You know, I use a metaphor where I feel like the U.S. and China have been dating for a few decades. And all of a sudden, they're at the point where you're thinking, 'Wait a minute, you didn't tell me you didn't want this. I thought, you're perfectly happy to spend time with my in-laws all the time!' So for a while, it did seem like there's this shock and disappointments on both sides. But I think now the mood is sober. I think we're now into really probably on a course of competition. And there's been a lot more strategy, a lot more long-term thinking. No one wants a war. I think that is fair to say.

Peter Salovey: On a level playing field and done in a fair way, competition is good.

Jing Tsu: I think competition will be good. And boy, is this a competition we have not seen in a while, because this is really a competition between systems. It is not just in the area of AI. It's not just in the area of economy or global power. This is really two different systems. They managed to both prosper, and now they want to see who's going to win out.

Peter Salovey: Does one side have to win out or can two very different systems coexist?

Jing Tsu: I think they would have to, because we also remember this is not just about U.S. and China. This is actually about rest of the world. Look at Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia is split on this, and they don't want to get caught in between. This is not like the Cold War where it's only after the fact that we get to learn how much has this impacted the rest of the world. This is happening real-time. There are other stakeholders that want a seat at the table, that want to persuade or dissuade both powers from taking things up yet another level.

Peter Salovey: Yeah, I think that's very true. I saw it when I was in Singapore a month or two ago, how challenging it is for a place like Singapore to navigate between the U.S. and China, wanting to have good relations with both. You see it in India's policies currently too, trying to maintain relations with both parties. And of course, we're never going to solve, in my view, the major issues facing the world today-- climate change, inequality, migration--if we try to do that in isolation. I think we have to do it cooperatively, might not be the right word, but in some way jointly with China.

Jing Tsu: And with some kind of respect. And I absolutely agree with you there.

Peter Salovey: So let me move to your own scholarship. You have a recent book called *Kingdom of Characters*. It has been met with broad acclaim in the national press, and it explores the century-long effort to make the Chinese language, which has three hundred spoken dialects, 80,000 written characters, more accessible to the modern world. Here at Yale and in your teaching, you're going to review the way China has tried to make itself and its language more user friendly. Tell us about this revolution in the Chinese language and what it means for all of us.

Jing Tsu: It's really an extraordinary history, far beyond what I thought I was getting into the beginning. It's essentially a story about China and the West but told through the lens of language. And for more than 470 years, Chinese and Westerners have been trying to understand each other through this language. First, it's trying to master to communicate. Then they try to master it to technologies and to modernize. And it's a story that really takes you from the challenges that China had within to unify these hundreds of dialects. Because in the 19th century, or turn of the 20th century, people from the north couldn't understand those from the south. And there was this great impediment and great concern for the Chinese who look abroad and see how alphabetic languages and nations who use them seem to have much less of a problem. There's a concern about Chinese language slowing you down. I mean, it's really the first and last Great Wall of China, right? Every foreigner who's ever gone to China from 16th century to the present would notice and remark something about the difficulty of the language and how utterly different it is. And I have to say, embedded in that is also long-standing suspicion. Can a people who write and think in a language like that be anything like us? And I think that's kind of a deep-seeded doubt that's always been deposited along with the difficulty of language. So this book was set out to demystify that and to tell a story from inside China and out about a tale of collaboration. You were talking about earlier how we must work together. China and the West have not always been foes, and we've been friends at times, long before we became rivals. And I think that's important to recall.

Peter Salovey: We fought on the same side in the Second World War.

Jing Tsu: That's correct, we're forgotten allies, we have indeed. But the moments of allyship, I have to say, were also strategic. There's no soft-focus love relation here. At times, maybe, but it's more of an alignment of agreeable interests. So this book was my way of giving glimpses into these large historical moments, but interspersed with this fascinating story of, I call it 'second and third stringers of history.' So

not the first stringers, not the radicals, the revolutionaries, but the progressives, people who actually picked up the pieces from one revolution to the other, because we knew there were plenty of those in 20th century Chinese history and tried to inch towards the world.

Peter Salovey: And do you think that this linguistic revolution and this shift or simplification of the Chinese language is part of what's propelling China's standing in the world?

Jing Tsu: Well, I think absolutely China was thinking about this in the fifties, that if they were to modernize, they have to, first of all, make their written language, the Chinese script, compatible with all these Western technologies that were built for the Western alphabet, not for the Chinese ideogram or character writing. Anything you can think of from telegraphs to typewriters to computers and the corded keyboard we use, these are transformative inventions of our century. But none of it was for non-alphabetic languages. It's really a challenge for China to figure out how to get through each of these bottlenecks just to be on a level footing with the alphabetic world.

Peter Salovey: Jing, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today and for such a stimulating conversation. I encourage listeners who are not local to New Haven to read more about the topics we've discussed today in Jing's new book, *Kingdom of Characters*. And I know those who can attend her course are awaiting its start with great anticipation as next semester approaches.

To friends and members of the Yale community, thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.

The theme music, *Butterflies and Bees* is composed by Yale professor of music and director of university bands Thomas C. Duffy and is performed by the Yale Concert Band.