

Speaking of Research

South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership Podcast

Series 1 – Episode 7 – Max Dixon

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SPEAKERS

Max Dixon, Catherine McDonald

Catherine McDonald 00:04

Hello and Welcome to Speaking of Research, a podcast from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. I'm Catherine McDonald, and in this first series of our podcast, we're talking about impact and how researchers can achieve it. We're recording at the amazing Cumberland Lodge, and we're speaking to doctoral researchers about their research, who might benefit from it, and how they hope it will make a difference. In this episode, I'm joined by Max Dixon from the University of Portsmouth. Could you tell us a bit more about your research Max?

Max Dixon 00:36

Yes, so effectively, what I'm looking at is British foreign policy towards Taiwan in the 25-year period after Taiwan's first democratic election in 1996, and how that shifted, the way Taiwan has been approached in British foreign policy, and the kind of ramifications of that change, or not change, that I've looked at in my research.

Catherine McDonald 00:38

And what made you want to look into that?

Max Dixon 00:46

So my original interest comes from, and I very fervently believe that normative interests are vital in research. So, I lived in Hong Kong during the protests in 2018, 2019 and became interested, very interested, in British legacies, colonial legacies, how that impacts British foreign policy today. And was very fortunate my supervisor is Taiwanese. She encouraged me to incorporate Taiwan into my master's dissertation that I took at Portsmouth, and that led to a PhD. So yeah, I'm fascinated in how Britain approaches that region more broadly and the kind of legacies and shadows of British colonial engagement in that region, and how that impacts British foreign policy today. Okay, so tell me how you're going about conducting your PhD. You know, what's your methodology? So I'm taking an interpretive approach which is different. Most foreign policy analysis is positivist. It's interested in material capabilities and how that shapes foreign policy approaches. For me, I look at Taiwan as a kind of it's a philosophical question, really, on what Taiwan is or isn't. It depends on how it is framed. In Beijing, in Washington, but also, I'm trying to argue in London as well, how that has an impact on the way Taiwan is seen in global politics, and how it is seen has certain ramifications. So, I'm undertaking a discourse analysis, a post structures discourse analysis in the kind of Copenhagen School of International Relations, that kind of approach. And I'm

interested in how dominant discourses frame certain issues, and how that dictates how they are approached. So what is seen as a crisis and what is seen as kind of a faraway country of which we know little, to kind of paraphrase Neville Chamberlain. So that's where I'm interested in language and how that frames it, and how parliament plays a massive role, in my opinion, in shaping what is possible in foreign policy.

Catherine McDonald 02:48

And you feel those methods are delivering for you.

Max Dixon 02:51

Yes, it's been fascinating. So, there's not much written on British foreign policy towards Taiwan or even East Asia more broadly, and in trying to bring parliament in undertaking a discourse analysis of hand side records which are freely available to us. It's nice that you can see exactly kind of where these debates are being had. It's a really, I think, interesting way, because it questions what I would argue is reflexive, an argument that Britain would reflexively come to the support of Taiwan following the United States. I couldn't see that in the initial data, so it's been really interesting to see how Taiwan has been shaped, and that there is not a natural response that Britain might follow.

Catherine McDonald 03:34

In terms of new insights that you hope will come about as a result of your PhD. What do you hope they will be and how do you hope they will benefit people? So, one of the key ones that I've found, and I've been very fortunate, because Taiwan is so pressing, it's quite a hot topic, so to speak, and that I've had opportunities to speak to policymakers, parliamentarians. One I did some research for a parliamentarian who would go on to be chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee and Taipei's representative in London sort of the De Facto Ambassador, because they want to know how Britain frames Taiwan and understands Taiwan, and how that might impact it. So, yeah, my main finding really has been that it is most, Taiwan is most salient in foreign policy debates when it is directly referenced in debates on Hong Kong, which, to me, shows that there's a colonial legacy, which is an important, an important finding, I think, because it shows the language and the ideas within which Britain engages with that region. So I think that's quite an important thing for policy makers, know, for instance, because they recognised that if there was an escalation between China and Taiwan, that to make it to sell the conflict, so to speak, or to sell British engagement, they would have to reference it really, through Hong Kong and what's happened in Hong Kong, which, in my understanding, shows quite disconcerting colonial legacy, but is also important, because Taiwan's a democracy, and how you can balance those, those two things, I think, is really interesting. It's going to be interesting in the coming years. So, the potential for impact is clear. How do you intend to ensure that impact happens?

Max Dixon 05:17

So I say yes to everything. I think that's one of the kind of key ways, really. So, I've been fortunate, I've presented conferences, but also, we, me and my supervisor, we organised a conference on UK Taiwan relations at the University of Portsmouth, kind of bringing together people that have done writing on it, on UK Taiwan that was that had the Taiwanese embassy came to the to the conference, right? So, we're trying to be constantly recognising that this naturally has policy implications and kind of highlighting that. Also, I try and write for blogs. So, I've written for The Diplomat, a Washington based Indo Pacific magazine. The SCDTP has got a great blog, for the LSE I've written a blog. And so, I just constantly try and kind of contribute to the discussions, I suppose. And to make sure that I get a better understanding what's out there. But also, it's been great to kind of build networks and see how I can improve my research and improve my focus. The Diplomat – Asia-Pacific Current Affairs Magazine

Catherine McDonald 06:16

Well, you talk about your research in a really compelling way. So, thank you so much Max for speaking to us today, and thanks to you for listening to this episode of Speaking of Research from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. To find out more, please visit southcoastdtp.ac.uk, don't forget to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to access earlier and forthcoming episodes. This was a Research Podcasts production.