

The Interview of Professor Geir Sigurðsson

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Chen: We usually start by asking a bit about your family background and your schooling experiences that have led to you having contacts with China or even have introduced you to China.

Sigurðsson: Well, it took a long time for me, in fact. I was a student of philosophy here at the University of Iceland at that time during my early twenties and I even ended up studying philosophy kind of accidentally. It was just something that I stumbled upon; I was not even very happy within philosophy, so I changed to anthropology, thence to sociology and thereafter I came back to philosophy, and I was only focusing on Western philosophy at that time. However, I was always very interested in non-Western philosophy. The situation here was simply such that we did not really have any access to it. I was not thinking about China at all during the early stages of my studies – I was rather thinking about Islamic philosophy in particular, and maybe some Indian philosophy to some extent. However, as I finished my BA, and one of my professors here at the university, Mikael Karlsson, was trying to establish some kind of a collaboration with, I believe, the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation (蔣經國國際學術交流基金會). Mikael Karlsson is actually originally American. He grew up in New York and also has had a lot of Chinese influence during his life and has therefore always been interested in Chinese philosophy. I do not know the details, as this was a long time ago, but he was trying to establish some kind of collaboration between the Department of Philosophy at the University of Iceland and the National Taiwan University through the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation, so he was applying for some kind of a grant and he was trying to build something whose details are unknown to me. However, he knew that I was always open and a bit undecided about where I stood in terms of Western philosophy and that I was interested in non-Western philosophy, so he asked me if I was interested in helping him out and joining this enterprise which probably would have meant that I travel to Taiwan to study Chinese language and philosophy there, I guess, and then I would have become a kind of a man on his side. Now, I do not know exactly what went wrong, but something did, and it took a long time for him to get a final response from his contact persons in Taiwan, and in the meantime, I had already started my MA on Western philosophy at the University College of Cork in Ireland. So, as I was only studying contemporary Western political philosophy in Cork, he received an answer, and it was negative. However, by then, I had been reading on my own about Chinese philosophy for preparing myself for my destiny, so to speak, and had become very interested. So, after finishing my MA in Cork, I came back home for a year. I was doing some work for Karlsson on Western philosophy and I was thinking about how to proceed thence. I managed to find some kind of an obscure scholarship for studying in Germany at the University of Kiel. I think this scholarship was intended for students of marine biology, but as nobody applied, I was the only the applicant, and I actually applied for studying at the Department of Sinology at Kiel. So, I got the scholarship and studied Chinese there

for a year. I really liked it; it was a lot of fun and very interesting, and I was even thinking about changing my career completely and switching from philosophy to sinology. However, I was getting older and was already approaching thirty, and the idea of beginning from scratch was a bit difficult to fathom, and must have also been financially very difficult, so during my stage in Germany I decided that it would be wiser to apply for a PhD programme on philosophy somewhere, but I did not want to do just Western philosophy. I actually think the last thing I wanted to do was an ordinary thesis on Western philosophy.

So, I started looking for universities offering PhD programmes on philosophy which also cover Chinese and other non-Western philosophies. Now, this was in the late 1990's and as the Internet was not yet what it is today, so it was difficult to get information. I was not very interested in going to China to do my PhD; I actually have to admit that I was not particularly interested in China per se, but I was interested in Chinese philosophy. However, I found this one programme and only applied for it. It was at the University of Hawai'i. Everything worked out somehow, and I was really destined to go. I got a Fulbright Scholarship and was accepted into the programme. So, in 1999 I went to Honolulu and met Roger T. Ames (安樂哲), who became my doctoral supervisor. I did not know anything about him beforehand even though he is actually quite well-known. So, I ended up spending two and a half years at Hawai'i. During my PhD studies I also got the opportunity to go to China and I thought that it would be a good idea in order to at least grasp some of the basics of the language. Of course, I had done this one year in Germany, which is not very much, and I wanted to get a better grasp on the language, but I ended up staying there for two years, and finished in 2004.

So, my focus was on philosophy, and what I studied at Hawai'i was a mixture of both Chinese and Western philosophy. I also did some other cultural disciplines as well as some Japanese and Indian philosophy, but not to a large extent as I really wanted to focus in particular on Chinese philosophy. Prior to this I had only taken a couple of courses on Chinese philosophy in Berlin in the early 1990's, but it wasn't until I went to Hawai'i that I had an opportunity to study intensively with experts in the field.

C: Were you quite unique in Iceland at that time for having taken this kind of a path? Were there any other Icelandic students doing comparative philosophy?

S: I do not think there was anyone doing this kind of research in Iceland. The only one I could think of was someone who was in China very early, in the 1970's and who had finished his BA on philosophy at the Peking University. However, he is a diplomat. From the point of view of philosophy, he is quite influential because he has translated both the Analects and the Tao Te Ching into Icelandic.

C: What is his name?

S: He is in fact an excellent scholar. His name is Ragnar Baldursson. Had he not chosen the diplomatic career, he would have, in my opinion, become an outstanding academician.

C: So, at that time, Iceland could not offer you the opportunity of doing China studies here.

S: No, there was nothing like that here. Mikael Karlsson might have offered a course on Chinese philosophy once. However, he did not do that during my time as a BA student.

C: Was it completely impossible to learn the Chinese language here?

S: It was entirely impossible. There was no teaching offered.

C: So, that is the reason you went to the US. After that, you obtained a PhD. Did you come here thereafter, or did you have other journeys?

S: Well, I met a woman in China and we ended up in marrying each other later. I followed her from China to Switzerland where she did an MA on business studies. So, I finished my dissertation in Switzerland while being a kind of a housefather staying home, working on my dissertation and cooking. Then I had an opportunity to get a temporary position at a different university in Iceland, namely in the University of Akureyri¹ which, despite the small size of the town where it is located, is quite a good university.

C: What did you teach there?

S: At first, my tenure was only going to last for a year and it had nothing to do with China or Chinese philosophy. It was just about teaching basic courses for first-year students, something like research methods and ethics. I also gave a course on the philosophy of education at the Faculty of Education. I was considered qualified for that because my dissertation, which dealt with Confucianism, was mainly about education. So, my academic interests were in education. I had been hired by Mikael Karlsson who was acting as the dean of the newly founded Faculty of Law and Social Sciences and after that, he was interested in establishing some kind of China studies there. He proposed that we should apply for a teacher through the Chinese embassy in Iceland. The teacher would be funded by the Chinese government, at least for the most part. So, this worked out and we did have a teacher of Chinese language coming to Akureyri. If I remember correctly, this was in 2006. She came from Ningbo University. We wanted to establish some kind of a China studies programme, but it really was not possible for various reasons. Therefore, we offered courses on the Chinese language taught by this teacher, and I then taught a course or two on contemporary Chinese culture and society. However, we had to offer it through the Institute of Continuing Education, so it really was not an academic programme as such. Also, during my stay in Akureyri it became clear to me that I really did not want to live there. It is a very small community. So, I decided to leave and thought about doing something completely different. However, the decision was then made to move the programme to the University of Iceland in Reykjavík. I was offered the position as the head of the new programme.

C: How many students were taking your courses when you started the programme in Akureyri?

S: After advertising the courses, we got about thirty students in the beginning which is quite amazing considering the size of Akureyri. The corridor was full of people and we could not believe our own eyes.

C: As it was the Institute of Continuing Education, was it so that some of the students were not university students?

S: Certainly. The demand for such courses had been growing since there had never been such courses in the region. However, there had actually been a Taiwanese teacher in one of the secondary schools up there in Akureyri.

¹ Akureyri, located in Northern Iceland is the northernmost town of Iceland, and with its roughly 17 000 inhabitants, the second largest town in Iceland after the capital, Reykjavík.

C: Interesting. Why do you think there was an interest towards China at that time? Was it just out of curiosity, due to people thinking about China becoming important or what?

S: I think it was probably a mix of those. When I look at my own students now, twelve years later, I also try to figure out what motivates their interest. I can see that the motives vary and depend on the student. Sometimes it is due to personal experience with China, and sometimes the student is more practically oriented and considers China to be very influential in the future and consider having a knowledge of Chinese language and culture and having the ability to do business in China to be profitable.

C: So, you carried the programme with you here.

S: Yes.

C: Did it grow over the years?

S: Yes, it did. We did not have so many students to begin with. I think that during the first year we only had seven students due to not having had time to properly advertise the programme beforehand.

C: Was it also continuing education?

S: No, we only had it as an academic programme. I was responsible for the whole programme apart from the language teaching; I have never taught language and I think I never will apart from maybe Classical Chinese. The Chinese teacher also suggested that we propose the establishment of a Confucius Institute, and this is actually what we did. The Northern Lights Confucius Institute was formally established here at the University of Iceland in 2008. I do know and understand that these institutes are controversial and have had issues in many places, but we have actually never had any problems with them. I actually think they have saved the China studies programme here because we do get very qualified Chinese teachers from Ningbo University, which is our partner university, through the institute. In 2008 we had the economic meltdown in Iceland. At that time our Confucius institute had been running for much less than a year and we did not have that many students. So, as the economic crisis had a really severe impact on the university, without the language teachers, for which our university did not really have to pay for, our programme probably would have been closed down.

C: So, you were the director.

S: Yes, I was director of the Confucius Institute from its establishment until 2012.

C: How many teachers did you have?

S: For the first two years, we had one. Thereafter, we had two. Now, I think, we have five.

C: How many students does the institute have?

S: The number of students did not immediately grow very much. I think we had the same number of students in the first and second year, perhaps seven or eight. However, due to the high unemployment in Iceland caused by the economic crisis, the number of students in the university increased by 30% from 2009 to 2010. The China studies programme also got a share of that, and suddenly, we had twenty plus students. I would say that number stayed quite stable for the following six to seven years until very recently when the number of students has been decreasing again. This year, for instance, we only had nine.

C: Do you mean nine on the BA level?

S: Yes.

C: So, they do get a final BA degree at the end of the study.

S: Yes. In order to get their degree, they must study one year in exchange in either Mainland China or Taiwan.

C: So, one year abroad and two years here.

S: Yes.

C: So, you do have enough teachers to cover the diversity of the subject.

S: Well, it is difficult because I am the only one with a permanent position at the programme. The others are language or part-time teachers whom I can find from time to time. I am basically responsible for organising the whole programme and during the first two years I really had to re-educate myself quite a lot as I had to teach all kinds of things in which I really was not specialised; for instance, Chinese history, which I still teach, and then I also designed the course on contemporary Chinese society and culture, which I taught for years but, fortunately, not any more because I am really not following the events in China that much. China changes really quickly, and one really has to follow its development in order to know what is happening there. However, I have someone else teaching that course and this person does a very good job. I have also given a course on Chinese cinema twice but after the second time I decided that I would not do it anymore.

C: So, your students need to have skills in Chinese language and various disciplines in order to get their BA.

S: Yes. There is a heavy focus on language in terms of both hours and credits; maybe even a little bit too much, but of course the Chinese language is very demanding, and they need a lot of contact hours.

C: So, the Confucius Institute provides for that.

S: Yes.

C: That means their teaching is part of the credit system here.

S: Yes.

C: That is very good, as some of the Confucius Institutes around the world are not part of the credit system of the university in which they operate.

S: Exactly. We have never experienced the kind of tension between the Confucius Institute and the China studies programme which some have, as they are integrated here.

C: So, since 2012, there has been another director of the Confucius Institute.

S: Yes.

C: With what are you engaged now? Are you still heading the China studies programme?

S: Yes, I am. We made some changes in 2012. I used to have a co-worker here who had a 50% position and I had a similar position as an associate professor and was a half higher by also being

the director of the Confucius Institute. Now, when my co-worker left for Korea where he ended up living for six years or so, I decided to make use of the opportunity because I was frankly being very tired of being the administrator and the director of the Confucius Institute; I prefer not having to deal with embassies and such sorts of things – my aspirations are more academic. In order to get out of this, then, I proposed to the dean that we change the system so that we hire someone as a full-time director of the institute and I would become a full-time academician. My proposal was accepted, and that is how it is now. Now I am just an ordinary professor. I have my teaching obligations, including still many courses on China as there is no-one else capable of doing it here, and then, like everyone else, I have a 40 % research obligation.

C: So, you are basically the head of the China studies and then there is a separate head of the Confucius Institute with whom you cooperate.

S: Yes, we do cooperate, but I think it is a much better organisation as there is now a clear formal division between the Confucius Institute and the China Studies and the things on which they are working. Of course, we collaborate on teaching the Chinese language. However, it was somewhat more difficult when I was wearing several hats. I do not think we had any real problems in this regard, but it did not look very good. Also, when it comes to organisation, it is much better to have a clear division so that any problems of interfering interests possibly coming up can be prevented.

C: What is the relationship between the China studies and the Chinese embassy here like?

S: Well, after I left the Confucius Institute I really have not had much contact with the embassy, and I need not have, either, as the Confucius Institute does that. However, I think the relationship is quite close and they take a lot of support from the embassy. The people from the embassy are sometimes around, but I don't see them much. Overall, I do not think they are meddling with anything. Generally speaking, they provide support for the institute if that is needed, but otherwise they let it operate as the director decides.

C: So, this is the only Confucius Institute in Iceland.

S: Yes.

C: Is this also the only China study programme in Iceland.

S: Yes.

C: How many students do you have now?

S: Roughly about thirty.

C: In the BA?

S: Yes.

C: Is there any MA or PhD programme?

S: No.

C: So, if they want to continue after the BA, they have to go somewhere else.

S: Yes.

C: Do they want to continue in China Studies?

S: I must admit that not many do that. Actually, the number of such students is quite low. Many of the students do continue their studies but they enter some other programmes, such as international politics or business studies.

C: Is this because there are not enough job opportunities in this field?

S: Obviously, there are not many jobs in the academic sector as we are just a “micro-department”. However, there should be quite a few jobs in tourism now, where a knowledge of Chinese is needed. However, this has only come about recently, so we may not have yet received a lot of people who realise that there will be a lot of jobs in the tourist sector.

C: I noticed that you also have Japanese studies here. Do you also have other East Asian disciplines?

S: Those are the only ones.

C: So, no Korean studies.

S: At least not yet.

C: Do they have more students in Japanese studies?

S: Yes.

C: How big is it?

S: I think that they are maybe twice as large as we are.

C: That means that Icelandic students are more interested in Japan than China.

S: Certainly.

C: Why is that?

S: That brings us back to your question about the profile of the students and the reason of their interest in China. Like I said, there are many different motives for the students’ interest in China: personal, professional or practical. However, with Japan it is very different. The students are pretty homogenic – they are truly passionate about Japanese culture and their passion has been cultivated by manga, anime and other aspects of Japanese pop-culture. They are sometimes called the nerds because they are considered somewhat strange and different by the other students. However, I must admit sometimes envying my colleague in Japanese studies for having such a big group of students who are simply truly passionate about what they are doing.

C: I think the passion has been with them since their school times and their choice is influenced by Japanese popular culture.

S: Yes. I think their choice is not practically motivated because even though the relationship between Japan and Iceland is very good, I do not think there is really much going on between the countries. I think the Sino-Icelandic relationship is much more active.

C: Could you tell me a bit more about the intergovernmental relationship between Iceland and China? I think China has been more active towards Iceland recently, particularly after 2008.

S: I have not followed that so actively, but I have sometimes been contacted by the media to make some comments on current issues. I think the relationship is generally speaking very good. We have

a free trade agreement finalised in 2014. The negotiations concerning it had been already started shortly after the crisis of 2008 but had been delayed by our plans to join the EU. That was a problem and it was not until it was clear that Iceland would not join the EU that the agreement could be finalised. Iceland then became the first European country to sign an FTA with China. I think that in itself is already quite significant. However, there is also a lot of collaboration with regards to the Arctic, for instance. The China Polar Research Institute has a permanent collaboration with the Icelandic Research Fund in terms of some research platform for researching the Arctic. I have really not been involved in this because it is not my field of academic interest, but I think they have conferences every year, every second year in China and every second here. More members, especially Nordic ones, have probably been included in the programme now

C: Does the Icelandic government not comment on the sensitive issues like human rights?

S: I think they have expressed their concern about human rights but overall the Icelandic governments have tended to be quite pragmatic. Another important factor influencing our relationship has to do with the aftermaths of the 2008 crisis. When we were desperate for money, nearly no-one was ready to borrow us any. We did get a nice, but small and symbolic loan from the Faroe Islands, and Poland did give us a rather significant loan. However, the Chinese exchanged a lot of currency with us when our own currency, the króna, was very volatile and weak. The fact that we could exchange our own currency for the Renminbi, was very important for us.

C: That is quite interesting. Did this Chinese “goodwill” force Iceland to move closer to China rather than the EU or the US?

S: Not at all. I do not think that anyone is suggesting moving closer to China in that sense. I do not know if you know about Huang Nubo (黃怒波), a Chinese businessman and poet who has some connections to Iceland through an Icelandic classmate who was studying in China. Huang wanted to purchase a rather large swath of land in the North of Iceland for the purpose of tourism. However, he was denied by the government of Iceland. It is not very clear where the Icelandic government stands in issues like these so I would not say that our government has been moving very close to China and simply been brushing aside the human rights problems; it has been critical but pragmatic at the same time.

C: So, I guess it was a positive sign from China to have helped you in your times of financial difficulties. Was it some kind of no-strings-attached help or were there some conditions for the help?

S: I do not think there were any conditions. I think it was gesture of goodwill. Maybe China thought it could have a positive impact on other things. I mean, there is a lot of suspicion about China in Iceland; the people are generally speaking very suspicious about China.

C: When did this thing with Huang Nubo happen?

S: I think it was maybe in 2010 or 2011. He wanted to establish some kind of high-level tourism in Iceland on a piece of land in the central-northern part of the country which is basically uninhabited. Initially, he was not intending to buy a very large swath of land, but a very large swath happened to be on sale and the seller was not willing to sell Huang just a part thereof, so he had to make an offer for the whole lot. He offered a million dollars, I think, for an area which was about 0,3 % of Iceland’s total land area. However, this thing ended up going to the ministry of interior who basically denied him the permission to purchase the land.

C: I wonder if there are any other foreigners buying land here.

S: Actually, there are a lot of them.

C: Interesting. So, only this Chinese purchaser was denied the right to purchase.

S: Yes, that is interesting, as we have people from Switzerland and all over the world buying large land areas. Recently, a millionaire from Britain has bought two salmon rivers. However, no-one seems to have a problem with that.

C: That shows the government is cautious. However, I would like to return to your academic career. What is your self-perceived contribution to China studies? Is there anything you think you have contributed to China studies in Iceland apart from setting up the Confucius Institute and China studies here?

S: Well, as you know, my field of research is philosophy. Therefore, even though I teach all kinds of things related to China studies at the programme, I only research philosophy, especially Chinese philosophy. I also publish in Icelandic. I am working on a translation of Sun Tzu's Art of War. So, my contribution is much more important here than anywhere else. However, I am very active internationally; I go to a lot of conferences in Europe and in China. I also sometimes go to the US, but more rarely. Additionally, I am a member of several academic bodies and have a large number of colleagues and friends with whom I collaborate. I think my network is quite good and I get a lot of people to come here and talk, usually on Chinese philosophy, because that is the focus of most of the people in my network. I do publish abroad quite a lot. However, I do not think my contribution abroad is really that meaningful as there are so many people doing this kind of stuff. Whatever I write might not be that significant internationally, but I can make a significant contribution here.

C: In that sense you are really *the person* who has brought China studies up in Iceland even though you were very modest in the e-mail.

S: To a point, yes, but I more or less explicitly focus on philosophy. I think it is so difficult to be all over the place. When one is trying to be all over the place one spreads oneself out very thin and I do not feel very comfortable doing that. For example, if the media contacts me in wanting to have my comment on some China-related issue, I feel obliged to give them the interview as I am, after all, an academician at a public university funded by taxpayers. So, even though I do not consider myself an expert of China, I may know a little bit more than most people. So, if I am asked to, I always try to show up at the radio and sometimes also on the TV, fortunately rarely, in order to at least give my take on the issue at hand. These are often political issues which are not something on which I am an expert but at least I think I can put it in a context and maybe explain it a little bit better than most people could.

C: Is it possible to cultivate the younger generation to take this up in the future, especially doing more politics in which you are not that interested?

S: We do actually offer courses on Chinese politics and those are taught by Magnus Björnsson who is the current director of the Confucius Institute and has an MA on international politics. He teaches a course every second year on Chinese politics. I think he has also taught in the department of political science.

C: So, maybe he could someday relieve you of commenting on politics so that you could focus on philosophy.

S: Yes. In fact we do have some members of the younger generation who may not be very young anymore and who do have extensive knowledge on the political realm of China. Unfortunately, there was a person who taught here as a part-time teacher and I was encouraging this person to do a PhD, but we lost this talented academician to diplomacy like we usually do.

C: So, I think there is still a challenge on cultivating the next generation of academicians in our field in Iceland.

S: Well, we do not have the critical mass. I am the only researcher in the China studies. I must say, from my own, maybe egoistic point of view that I am not going to do research in fields that I really do not know. I can answer to the media and make some superficial explanations, but I think my time is best spent focusing on what I know. Therefore, I try to focus exclusively on philosophical issues.

C: What do you think is the challenge for Iceland in expanding China studies during the next ten or twenty years?

S: For the time being, we do not have enough students, so it would be very difficult to come up with an argument for hiring someone else in addition to me. I have even talked with the dean of our faculty that it would serve everyone's interests that I leave the position of the head of China studies in order to focus on philosophy. I would not mind being the kind-of-a person focusing on non-Western philosophies. I can also teach Japanese and Indian philosophy; maybe not magnificently well, but probably better than most people in Iceland. Then they would get a younger person here focusing more on social and political issues and contemporary China. However, it is very difficult to make these kinds of changes as so many people have to agree on it. The Department of Philosophy would have to express their intention of having me, and then there are always the costs associated with these kinds of things. However, I still think this would be the best way for everyone. So, in a way and simplifying things a bit, it is I who is in the way of further development of China studies!

C: Well, if Hanban (國家漢語國際推廣領導小組辦公室) were to know this, maybe they would offer their help, or would you rather not want it?

S: No, I do not want their help in this situation. This is a kind of a hands-off-situation. I do not mind having Chinese teachers. I know the teachers not only teach the language but say other things about Chinese society, obviously, as they are just humans and want to present a positive image of China.

C: So, they are not teaching anything else than the language.

S: No, I do not want them to teach anything else. That is where we draw the line. Other courses need be taught by qualified academicians.

C: Is there no Taiwanese influence here? I assume your students learn simplified characters.

S: Yes, they learn simplified characters. The Taiwanese teacher teaching at a school in Akureyri whom I mentioned moved down here with her husband who happens to be a philosopher; they have now moved to the UK. However, she was also teaching at our programme for some time as a part-

time teacher and even she taught simplified characters! She did not like doing it, but otherwise she would just have confused the students. We have had some visits from the Taiwan Representative Office. People from there have visited us maybe two or three times and they have been very friendly and have offered assistance. I must however admit that I have never made use of it. However, some students have gone to Taiwan for exchange because we have a formal partnership with the National Taiwan University and the National Chengchi University. So, we have had a few students going to Taiwan and they have been very satisfied. I actually try to encourage the students to go to Taiwan because it is different kind of China.

C: Could you tell me a bit about your Nordic connections?

S: I have been involved with NIAS for many years and I think that has proven very important for our university. I was a full member of the board of NIAS for some years; now I am not anymore, but I used to be there all the time for meetings. Right now it does not look very good with NIAS as it seems to be on the brink of disintegrating due to lack of funding. However, I am still in contact with Geir Helgesen; we are good friends. I do also have a lot of colleagues in the Nordic countries.

C: Are you a part of the Nordic Centre at the Fudan University?

S: Yes, we are also part of that.

C: However, you are not in charge of that, are you not?

S: Actually, I am, but that's a recent development. Someone else used to represent our university until last autumn and then I took over.

C: I am also there, but I have always asked Teemu Naarajärvi to go there on my behalf as I am very busy.

S: So, you will not be in Umeå.

C: I am still thinking as I will have maternity leave very soon, so I am not sure if I can make it, but I am officially the contact person. I will send people if I cannot go.

S: I will have to go to Umeå, as this is my first year in charge. I have also participated in the Nordic Association for China Studies as I am the only one at China studies in Iceland. I think that NACS required that there be four representatives for each country; one main and one vice-representative and two additional ones, but, as we do not have even four in Iceland, they had to change the rules when we joined in 2006 or 2007 in order to accommodate Iceland. For Iceland, only two are required. Even then, we have always had some difficulty finding the second one.

C: What is your own view of China's future? I know you do not research society or politics, but what is your take on it?

S: It is a big question.

C: Are you optimistic or pessimistic about it?

S: I think I am neither, really. It is interesting that, if one reads The Economist and different analyses, they have been saying for twenty years that the Chinese Communist Party is about to

collapse and everything else in China therewith, especially the economy. I think The Economist has predicted it four times and nothing has happened.

C: And they did not predict Iceland's economic meltdown!

S: Exactly. Things seem to be going all right, but of course, I am a little bit worried about Xi Jinping. I mean, after Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, it seemed that politics in China was normalising but now Xi seems to be intending to stay for more than two terms. I do not like how that looks. I also dislike the cult of personality that seems to be forming around him. We have seen something like that during the last decades. Obviously, China is full of contradictions, so anything could happen, and I do actually discuss this a lot in my classes that the CCP has a problem at establishing its legitimacy. If there were a severe economic crisis in China, anything is possible. It is extremely hard to predict what will happen. It could be as smooth as it has been, but I could also turn out really bad, which I hope will not be the case. I must say I am very curious about the CCP. I am not an expert on it, but it is an interesting body. Because I focus on philosophy, I can see some obvious similarities between the Confucian idea of meritocracy and how the CCP is conceptualised, especially regarding its elite who rule the country. Some people seem to believe, and some analysts even say that the party elite really is an elite, consisting of the most educated and talented people in the CCP. I wonder if all of them really dedicate themselves to the idea of socialism; I actually really doubt it. So, what we could be seeing is a very gradual development away from socialism. I think that is a possibility. A few years ago, I was told by Daniel Bell that we would be seeing a very huge change taking place in the CCP very soon. However, this was three or four years ago. I have not seen that yet, but Daniel Bell is of course optimistic in that the CCP would change its allegiance from socialism to Confucianism. I have not really seen this happen even though they have been somewhat more positive about Confucius and his influence.

C: That is a political thing, is it not?

S: It is a completely political thing, and I like Confucianism in many ways, but I do not think I would like it to become a state ideology and I wonder what kind of Confucianism that would be. To me, that would sound like a lot more repressive form of Confucianism which you find during the late Qing dynasty, for example, and which only serves political purposes. So, all in all, I have a lot of worries about China's future. It is curious and interesting to follow it.

C: What about Iceland's relationship with China? Positive or negative?

S: As you know, Iceland is just such a micro-nation. There is very little Iceland can do. I think Iceland's most significant achievement in international politics is our recognition of the Baltic states during their struggle for independence in 1991. In my opinion, this was the most important international gesture ever made by Iceland. Our foreign minister was really courageous for doing that because everyone was against it. Even the US opposed it as they did not want to rock the boat by angering Russia. Iceland has almost always followed the US. For a long time, we were a kind of an American protectorate even though we were formally independent, of course. We did not even recognise the PRC until 1971; that is when the US gave us the green light to do that. All the other Nordic countries had already established diplomatic relations with the PRC already in the early 1950's. So, we really had to obey the Americans. However, we did not do that in the case of the Baltic states and then the Danes followed suit and thereafter, everyone did, and thanks to this, their independence became a reality. I think this was our most important political achievement. I know a lot of people sympathise with Tibet in Iceland and I was once called to the TV to talk about the issues and problems in Tibet during the riots in 2008. I probably did not express myself very clearly

as there were a lot of angry people who thought that I was somehow defending the Chinese by stating that Tibetan independence is not a realistic prospect. However, I was speaking Realpolitik because I do not think Tibet is going to gain independence.

C: What happened then? Were you criticised?

S: Yes, a few people were angered; some people interpreted it in such a way that I was saying that Tibet *should* not be independent. I was not saying that. I was merely saying that it was not going to happen. I still think that it will not happen, and we should accept the fact, because so many things need to change even before it can even become realistic. Overall, I think Iceland tends to be quite realistic in assessing its influence on world affairs but there is also a sense of obligation to defend the people and nations that are in a difficult situation and are being repressed by bigger nations such as Tibet with regard to China. I think that the Tibetan issue really is something that the Icelanders tend to take to their hearts. That is something they would like to see resolved before they can truly accept China. For the Icelanders it is much more important than Xinjiang or Taiwan.

C: However, the government is cautious in taking a stance regarding the Tibetan issue, is it not?

S: Actually, all the governments are. No government with the intention of maintaining diplomatic ties with the PRC will denounce the Chinese policy in Tibet.

C: But the people do have their sympathies.

S: The general public and some associations in Iceland openly protest and there was much criticism during Jiang Zemin's visit in Iceland which was when I was studying at Hawai'i, maybe in 2002 or 2003. There were also a lot of Falun Gong protestors. However, the Icelandic government actually prevented many members of Falun Dafa from coming to Iceland during Jiang's visit. They also prevented them from protesting publicly. This is what the government decided to do and it was very severely criticised for that by the general public and I do not think such a take on any comparable issue will be repeated in Iceland because it was so completely rejected by the public.

C: I think we have covered everything. Thank you!

S: Thank you!