

*The 3M Affair in Canada-China Relations, 10 December 2018 – 24  
September 2021, and Why for Canada it May not be Over Yet*

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Although I am not Chinese, China has long been an enormous part of my everyday life. I have been engaged with China and Chinese affairs since July 1980, first as a teenager doing voluntary service in Taiwan, then as an undergraduate student, then as a graduate student, and finally as a university professor of Chinese history and full-time professional China-watcher. My wife of thirty-seven years is from Taiwan and strongly self-identifies as Chinese. (Her parents fled to Taiwan in 1949 when the mainland fell to the communists, and when they became my parents-in-law in 1984 I watched in fascination how until their dying day they loved China as intensely as they detested Chinese communism.) I have thought of China every day for over forty years now, and during this time I have been watching China go through growing pains and undergoing searing and exhilarating transitions and transformations. But over these past few years, culminating with the 3M Affair (involving Michael Spavor, Michael Kovrig, and Meng Wanzhou), it has been painful and disconcerting for me to watch China descend into solipsistic fury, floundering and flailing about and insisting that almost all foreign countries are wrong and only China is right. This starkly Manichaeian

view of the world is inane, tiresome, and harmful to China. Lately, it has become increasingly difficult for me to avoid concluding that China is determined to act, unwittingly perhaps, against its own self-interest. America's greatest geostrategic asset in the Indo-Pacific region is Xi Jinping; he does much of the heavy lifting and spadework for American strategists. (The Americans don't need to do much at all to persuade many countries in the region that China is an emerging threat; they believe this already and may even wonder why it has taken the United States so long to come to this realization.) China is its own worst enemy; only China can grievously wound China.

### **The Frank Culmination of the 3M Affair as a Hostage Swap**

The 3M Affair is a case in point. China already has enough of a serious image problem internationally because of its initial mishandling of the Covid 19 outbreak, which has now become an international pandemic still gravely threatening many countries and jurisdictions (especially heedless and imbecilic ones like Alberta). But now the 3M Affair bids fair to set China's international image back even farther. As is well known all over Canada by now, in August 2021 Canadian businessman and entrepreneur Michael Spavor was sentenced to eleven years in prison for espionage. But as far as Michael Kovrig was concerned, Beijing didn't even bother to make the slightest pretense of sentencing him – it simply overrode its own avowedly legal process and released him, as well as Michael Spavor, as an administrative matter, and that ostensibly on medical and humanitarian grounds. Then, as a matter of mere happenstance, the Two Michaels (Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig) took off on a direct flight from Beijing to Calgary just moments after the wheels of the plane spiriting Madame Meng back to China left the tarmac in Vancouver. Just so.

Does the CCP actually believe that the international community is gullible and unsophisticated enough to believe all of this? No, and that's not really the point anyway. Of *course* nobody with a lick of common sense and decency takes such buffoonish pronouncements by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs seriously, not even its spokespersons Hua Chunying, Zhao Lijian, and their ilk who cynically mouth them. (What is more, they as spokespersons are playing to a domestic audience much more than to an international one.)

In all of this China has not been as clumsy and inept in the ways of the outside world as some of its critics might imagine. In being so blatantly and cynically political about the release of the Two Michaels Beijing, has indicated its view of the entire 3M Affair as, from beginning to end, nothing but political in nature. In other words, from Beijing's perspective, Canada's detention of Meng in early December 2019 was as political and non-legal as its own decision to release the Two Michaels. Beijing, in its own mind, was reciprocating in kind. Ironically enough, then, Canada, China, and the U.S. might well all tacitly agree on one crucial point: this was a Cold War-style hostage swap, plain and simple, and no embellishments or spin-doctoring by governments or commentariats will alter this adamantine fact.

### **The 3M Affair as a 1M Affair: Madame Meng Wanzhou**

Human rights are immensely important to Canadians, and for Canada, the 3M Affair has not yet bottomed out and likely will not until the full details of how the Two Michaels were treated in prison are divulged to the Canadian and international public. (If it turns out that they *were* tortured or mistreated in prison, the public outcry and reaction in Canada will be exceedingly strong.) Until such a time, Canada and much of the rest of the world are left to discuss the 3M Affair more or less as a 1M Affair, an affair involving mainly Meng Wanzhou. The other shoe, the Spavor-Kovrig shoe, has yet to drop.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically enough, the standard narrative in mainland China of the 3M Affair is also essentially a 1M Affair (Meng Wanzhou only; The Two Michaels are seldom mentioned) and goes something like this: In early December 2018 the United States

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<sup>1</sup> The Spavor family in particular has been very tight-lipped about Michael Spavor all along, from the time of his detention in China on International Human Rights Day (10 December 2018) to a week into his release from captivity and arrival home. The family has its good reasons for doing so, and one can only imagine the challenging adjustments to a life of freedom that Michael must be undergoing and experiencing. On 1 October 2021, the Spavor family briefly broke its silence on Michael since his arrival home in Calgary with a brief statement provided by Global Affairs Canada: "I'm overjoyed to be finally reunited with my family. It's humbling as I begin to understand the continued support that we've received from Canadians and those around the world, thank you. I'm appreciating being outside and the simple things around me." David Lao, "Michael Spavor breaks silence after returning from China, says he's 'overjoyed' to be home," *Global News*, 1 October 2021, accessed 2 October 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8237011/michael-spavor-huawei-statement-china/>.

illegally<sup>2</sup> demanded that Canada detain Meng Wanzhou on an extradition warrant, and Canada meekly complied because it has lost its sense of justice and become a running dog of the wicked American imperialists. The Americans moved to take Meng Wanzhou hostage because, as the daughter of Huawei founder and CEO Ren Zhengfei, she would prove useful to them as they endeavoured to impede Huawei's progress towards dominating worldwide 5G networks and outcompeting Western telecommunications firms. For mainland China, Western concerns about the espionage capabilities of Huawei equipment are mere smokescreens to obscure U.S. apprehension about the looming demise of American global hegemony. The electronic monitoring device she wears as an anklet<sup>3</sup> has morphed in Chinese media into an iron "manacle" (*jiaoliao*) around her leg that hobbles her movements and symbolizes her deep humiliation as a prisoner of the Americans and their witting and willing Canadian accomplices. In mainland Chinese media and on Chinese social media platforms, Madame Meng is continually compared and likened with one Liu Hulan (1932-1947), a spy for the Chinese Communists who actively supported the Chinese communist cause during China's civil war (1945-1949) and lost her life for it when the Kuomintang

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<sup>2</sup> I guess I am not quite as confident as many mainland Chinese as well as many of my Canadian colleagues in Chinese studies (none of whom, including me, are lawyers) are about the detention of Meng Wanzhou being improper or illegal. As well, I strongly suspect that the real story is more complicated and nuanced than considerations of legality and involves multiple missed cues and opportunities, mostly on Canada's part, for an early exit from the extradition process and proceedings. It will likely take a while (perhaps several years or a decade?) before full information is available, passions subside, reason prevails, and a full and objective account of the 3M Affair can be written.

<sup>3</sup> The GPS monitoring anklet device in question, a lightweight and unobtrusive plastic object that resembles no ankle manacle of any sort, is made by SafeTracks, a Canadian firm based in Alberta. It manufactures GPS location monitoring devices for both judicial monitoring and personal risk management applications. For the former, "SafeTracks™ Electronic Monitoring Solutions have been integrated and used by Government and Law Enforcement agencies across Canada. Many programs are customized to meet specific requirements throughout the industry." For the latter application (personal risk management), "Since the beginning in 2009, SafeTracks™ has evolved from distributing Electronic Monitoring (EM) Systems into the global leader of innovative design, manufacturing, and distribution of advanced GPS Personal Emergency Locator Devices used for monitoring at-risk individuals. SafeTracks™ Personal Monitoring solutions are used throughout North America for both individual and commercial applications in a multitude of industries including; Lone Workers, Young Adults, Victims of Domestic/ Family Violence, Independent Seniors, and those living with Alzheimer's, Dementia, Autism, or PTSD." <https://www.safetracksgpswellness.ca/> (Accessed 2 October 2021).

regime of Chiang Kai-shek executed her in 1947, thus securing her place in the CCP's pantheon of martyrs for the communist revolution.

Meng will continue to be celebrated and honoured in China for her perseverance under putatively adverse circumstances. As the daughter of the CEO of Huawei she is essentially Chinese royalty, and that in an avowedly socialist country. Upon her arrival back in Beijing she was much ballyhooed and fêted as a true national heroine, not treated anything at all like other Chinese citizens wrongfully arrested abroad and returning to China. The grotesque pulling-out-all-the-stops extravaganza the CCP orchestrated on her behalf has highlighted for huge numbers of Chinese the class tensions, class hierarchies, and searing inequalities of wealth in their society today. The Two Michaels, for their part, will never be anything like royalty in Canada and will not become national heroes even though they suffered many orders of magnitude more than Madame Meng ever did in her mansions in the very posh and exclusive neighbourhood of Shaughnessy in Vancouver. Canadians and their governments are too modest to make over-the-top, apothotic spectacles out of their heroes.

### **The Michael Spavor I knew before the 3M Affair**

But even if the Michaels will never be national heroes in Canada, at least for very long, Michael Spavor will always be a personal hero to me. His has been an extraordinarily and intensely lived life, and I consider myself singularly honoured to have taught him as an undergraduate. His captivity has been deeply personal for me because he is a former student of mine as well as a dear friend to me and my family. Throughout Michael's captivity, I maintained complete radio silence in the mass media because that was the way he and his family wanted it. I turned away many media requests for interviews or comments. (Even now I will speak of the Michael I know only from his pre-captivity days.)

I first met him in 2004, as an undergraduate student in a course I taught on Chinese strategic thought. He performed very well in the class, even surpassing a graduate student of mine. It quickly became apparent that he was a highly intelligent and passionately engaged man. He exuded enthusiasm about Korea and told me about his years of residence there and his fluency in the language, and I saw that in him I had

a real firecracker on my hands. He eventually spoke with me during office hours of his desire to go to North Korea for volunteer work with a Catholic organization, and I encouraged him in this but strongly cautioned him against any sort of religious proselytizing while there. (I needn't have bothered; Michael was not anything close to being outwardly religious in North Korea.)

I watched his career in fascination after he graduated. In 2009 he was working in South Korea when I was in Taiwan doing research, and he flew in for a few days to see me in Taipei. He was intensely curious the entire time, asked many questions, and even attempted to learn a bit of Mandarin. My son and I then reciprocated by flying from Taipei to Seoul to stay at his house and see Korea, a country we had never been to before. Our week there was certainly memorable. We slept at his house, and while he was out working in the daytime we roamed the streets of Seoul and saw what we could. He arranged for tours of the main military history museum in Seoul, sites of former prisons during the period of Japanese occupation, and all sorts of eateries. He even set us up with a trip to the DMZ, which for us was the highlight of the entire trip. He arranged for us to attend musical performances and academic presentations, and he even took us to a casino in Seoul one night! (Yes, there is at least one casino in Seoul in a swanky hotel, and you need a foreign passport to get in.) Michael didn't gamble much but did gently hit on a few pretty Japanese girls. When we left Korea I found that I had left my Tilley hat on the USO bus that took us to the DMZ. I thought it was gone forever, but he called the USO, tracked it down, and sent it back to me in Calgary. I still have it, and every time I wear it I think of him.

His house in Seoul where we stayed was a traditional Korean *hanok* slated for demolition in three years. But Michael didn't care; he rented it anyway and lovingly and painstakingly restored it, rewiring it electrically, varnishing it, and getting it into such good and liveable shape that Korean television stations visited it and interviewed him. It was indeed demolished after three years, but he enjoyed it while he could.

Every couple of years or so Michael would return to Calgary for a visit, usually in November or December, and when he did I was always certain to have him over to my house for dinner and discussion. He regaled my family and our guests with his tales of his famous trips to North Korea with Dennis Rodman (for which he was the fixer and facilitator), trips during which he saw and spoke at some length with Kim Jong Un

himself. On one visit home, he hosted a showing of the North Korean film *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* at the Eau Claire Theatre, and it was obvious once again that in this he was very much in his element, speaking and enthusing about North Korea. On one of his visits home, one December we had dinner at the Korean restaurant Bow Bulgogi on 17<sup>th</sup> Ave SW in Calgary, and on his arm was a drop-dead gorgeous North Korean woman. I still eat there once in a while, and every time I do I think of him and wish for his early return home. (I now thank God that these wishes of mine have been granted.) On his trips home he often had a little something for me to keep as a souvenir or trinket, one time a few notes of North Korean currency, another time a foil pouch of skin whitener for women, and still another time even a genuine Kim Jong-il loyalty badge. One Friday while he was home in Calgary I needed to pick up a small couch I had purchased at a university surplus sale, and when I told him about this he volunteered to go with me. I was glad he did because two people were needed to lash the couch to the top of my car for the ride home. While on our way he discovered that my car clock was one hour off (I am lazy about changing it every six months and don't know how to anyway), and he immediately adjusted it for me. When we got to my house he helped me lug the couch upstairs to my bedroom. We even had to take the legs off the couch and the door off its hinges for it to fit in, and he was a good sport and help about it all. That's just the kind of man Michael is.

During his visits home I also had him lecture to my course on modern East Asian history, and he was always a hit with the students – they just loved him, and they always had more questions to ask him than they ever did me. The last time he lectured to my class was in November of 2018, when he once again hit it off with the students. Then he returned to the ethnic Korean region of China at the end of the month, and that was the last I have ever seen of him. He was arrested the next month, on December 10.

Michael Spavor is multidimensional; he was and is many things, and over the rest of my life I may never get to the bottom of him. But there is one thing about him of which I am very certain: there is absolutely zero possibility that the man was ever any sort of spy. Period. He did not and does not have the angel-devil character and cynical, iron discipline, steadily focused dedication, and world-weary temperament necessary to succeed as any sort of intelligence operative. He was and is too gregarious, too outgoing, too full of love for all things Korean (South and North), and too suffused with



lust for life and learning to have worked against the national interests of the people he loved. Reckless, happy-go-lucky, and maybe even a bit naïve and heedless? Indubitably. I often worried about him and frequently thought with apprehension that his verve, drive, childlike innocence, and congenial temperament might someday blind him to harsh realities and get him into some sort of trouble. And alas, that is just what happened.

### **Possible Long-Term Consequences of the 3M Affair**

A very astute and well-read friend of mine from way back in undergraduate days, one who is now a hot-shot Crown Prosecutor somewhere in Canada, speculates that the 3M Affair may well become a watershed in Canadian history, the key moment when Canadians finally saw China under the CCP for what it really was (a coercive and hard authoritarian state) and began diligently seeking out ways to distance their country from it, economically and otherwise. He may be going too far in his speculation, and in any event, we do not yet know enough about the Michaels' treatment to make such a prognostication. But that a reasonable and even-keeled individual like him even sees this as a possibility suggests at the very least that Canada has found the 3M Affair deeply unsettling and will remember it for a long time to come.

I am on the board of directors of the Northwestern China Community Association of Alberta (*Xibei Tongxianghui*) and a member of the recently-established Chinese Canadian Association for Public Engagement. In these capacities, I have come to know and have much affection for significant numbers of Chinese Canadians, and they have been very cordial to me and regularly shoot the breeze with me on WeChat, mostly in Chinese. They have long been touchingly sympathetic with me because of my worry and concern over my student's welfare and wellbeing as he sat in jail in Dandong, China for a thousand days. When the Two Michaels were at long, long last released and on their way home to Canada on 24 September 2021, these friends immediately congratulated me enthusiastically. They also expressed heartfelt hopes and expectations that Canada-China relations would soon improve, and fairly dramatically.

I didn't know then, and still don't know now, quite how to tell these congenial and warm-hearted people that they are likely wrong about the prospects for a material



improvement in Canada-China relations any time soon. In the wake of the 3M Affair Canada is in no mood to make nice with China, and substantially improving Canada-China relations will likely take many years. Canadians have now (October 2021) been left with an increasingly bad taste in their mouth about the CCP leadership of China, and the 3M Affair has likely done long-term damage to Canadian perceptions and feelings about China. The extradition treaty with Canada that China has pushed for over many years, one that would “circumvent the Canadian legal system as they [the Chinese government] sought the return of people accused of corruption,”<sup>4</sup> is now DOA; for decades to come, no Canadian government will have the stomach to touch it.

### The 3M Affair and China’s International Image

As far as more immediate consequences of the 3M Affair are concerned, the very large majority of international public opinion is already squarely in Canada’s favour, not China’s. These consequences will only worsen what is already a very bad public image problem for China in the international community.<sup>5</sup> In 2020, twelve<sup>6</sup> of the world’s most advanced economies *all* had majority negative opinions towards China, the highest with Japan at 86 percent and the lowest with Italy, at 62 percent.<sup>7</sup> This year (2021), Pew data have indicated that of seventeen advanced economies in the world,<sup>8</sup> only two, Singapore and Greece, have higher views of China than of the United States.<sup>9</sup> As far as Canada-China relations themselves are concerned, public opinion polling in

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<sup>4</sup>“China pushed hard for a wide-ranging extradition treaty for years prior to Meng arrest,” *Globe and Mail*, 5 October 2020, accessed 1 October 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-china-pushed-hard-for-a-wide-ranging-extradition-treaty-for-years/>

<sup>5</sup>2020 National Opinion Poll: Canadian Views on Asia, 25 October 2020, accessed 1 October 2021, <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/2020-national-opinion-poll-canadian-views-asia>

<sup>6</sup> Japan, Sweden, Australia, South Korea, UK, Canada, Netherlands, U.S., Germany, France, Spain, and Italy

<sup>7</sup>Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries, 6 October 2020, accessed 1 October 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>

<sup>8</sup> US, Canada, Italy, France, UK, Greece, Spain, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand.

<sup>9</sup>China’s international image remains broadly negative as views of the U.S. rebound, accessed 1 October 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/30/chinas-international-image-remains-broadly-negative-as-views-of-the-u-s-rebound/>

Canada by the Asia Pacific Foundation (APF) of Canada in 2020 has found that “The past two years have seen growing animosity in Sino-Canadian relations. APF Canada’s 2020 National Opinion Poll shows that Canadians would like their government to stand up to China to protect their key national values. Polling indicates that public opinion towards China has reached an all-time low in all aspects – feelings, trade, FDI, and human rights.”<sup>10</sup>

**Pew Research Center international public opinion polling data on China, 2020<sup>11</sup>**

<u>Country</u>	<u>Percent negative impression of China</u>
Japan	86
Sweden	85
Australia	81
South Korea	75
UK	74
Canada	73
Netherlands	73
U.S.	73
Germany	71
France	70
Spain	63
Italy	62

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<sup>10</sup>2020 National Opinion Poll: Canadian Views on Asia, 25 November 2020, accessed 1 October 2021, <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/2020-national-opinion-poll-canadian-views-asia>

<sup>11</sup>Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries, 6 October 2020, accessed 1 October 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>

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**Pew Research Center international public opinion polling data on China, 2021<sup>12</sup>**

<u>Country</u>	<u>Percent negative impression of China</u>
Japan	88
Sweden	80
Australia	78
South Korea	77
United States	76
Canada	73
Netherlands	72
Germany	71
Taiwan	69
Belgium	67
New Zealand	67
France	66
UK	63
Italy	60
Spain	57
Greece	42
Singapore	34

Despite what China's bumptious media and government spokespersons say, the blame for negative opinions towards China does not lie squarely and solely with the foreign countries in question. China's obnoxiously assertive and abrasive *Wolf Warrior*

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<sup>12</sup>Large Majorities Say China Does Not Respect the Personal Freedoms of Its People, 30 June 2021, accessed 1 October 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/30/large-majorities-say-china-does-not-respect-the-personal-freedoms-of-its-people/>

diplomacy does nothing to help, and much to harm China's international image. That it annoys countries like the United States and Japan goes without saying, but it has even managed to alienate *Sweden*, of all countries.

### **For Canada, the 3M Affair is Not Over Yet, and the Worst of it May Be Yet to Come**

For Canadians, the 3M Affair is by no means over. Much of their perceptions and conclusions about it will hinge upon what the Two Michaels eventually reveal about their treatment during the time they spent sitting in Chinese communist prisons. (We already know, of course, that in captivity they were unable to live the life of Riley that Madame Meng did in her opulent Vancouver mansions, out on bail and free to paint the town from dawn until 11:00 p.m., and receiving a steady stream of visitors and well-wishers, both virtually and in person.) If against all odds the Canadian public ever learns that they were mistreated or tortured, the consequences for Canada-China relations will be exceedingly grave; only during the Korean War will relations between the two countries ever have been worse. But if it turns out that they were treated relatively well, or at least not mistreated, then the affair will likely arrive at some point to a constrained, if not exactly affable, conclusion.

Likewise, if Canada-China relations are to improve from the difficult impasse they are in now, both Ottawa and Beijing must realize and admit that "one hand cannot make a clapping sound," as a well-known apothegm in Chinese puts it. Or, as we might say in the West, "it takes two to tango." It also takes two to make amends and restore a friendship.