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ASIA PACIFIC

China's Foreign Minister Castigates Canadian Reporter for Rights Question

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Sinosphere

By CHRIS BUCKLEY JUNE 2, 2016

BEIJING — Canadians, apart perhaps from hockey players, seem to pride themselves on being affable people averse to confrontation. But China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, clearly decided that being in Canada was no reason to hold his temper. Especially when it comes to questions on his country's human rights record.

A Canadian journalist learned that on Wednesday when she asked about the Chinese government's detention of human rights advocates and a Canadian couple accused of espionage. The question was directed at the Canadian foreign minister, Stéphane Dion, during a joint news conference in Ottawa. But Mr. Wang then stepped in with a withering lecture, delivered with operatic dudgeon, in which he called the journalist arrogant and prejudiced.

Chinese officials often bristle at questions about human rights and other contentious subjects. But their reactions vary. Sometimes they stick, coolly but adamantly, to the government's stock response that China respects the rule of law

and that the country's stability and economic growth have been a boon to citizens' rights.

But sometimes, like Mr. Wang this time, they strike back with their own accusations. In 2000, Jiang Zemin, who was China's president at the time, chastised a journalist from Hong Kong for what he considered an impertinent question.

"You go everywhere to follow the big news, but the questions you ask are too simple, sometimes naïve," Mr. Jiang said. "I feel the need to impart to you some real-life experience."

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Below is a transcript of the question from the Canadian journalist and Mr. Wang's answer. I've translated Mr. Wang's original Chinese response. The English-language translation given by the interpreter at the news conference was a little less blunt. The question partly concerned a Canadian couple, Kevin Garratt and Julia Dawn Garratt, who were detained in China in 2014. Mrs. Garratt was later released on bail, but last January, Mr. Garratt was charged with espionage and stealing state secrets while he lived near the border with North Korea — accusations that his family has rejected. The question also raised the issue of Hong Kong book publishers detained in mainland China.

Question: “There are no shortage of concerns about China’s treatment of human rights advocates, such as the Hong Kong booksellers and its detention of the Garratts, not to mention the destabilizing effects of its territorial ambitions in the South China Sea. Given these concerns, why is Canada pursuing closer ties with China, how do you plan to use that relationship to improve human rights and security in the region, and did you specifically raise the case of the Garratts during your discussions with the foreign minister today?”

Answer: “I want to make a response to the questions that the journalist has just raised concerning China. Your question was full of prejudice against China and an arrogance that comes from I don’t know where. This is totally unacceptable to me. Do you understand China? Have you been to China? Do you know that China has come from a poor and backward state and lifted more than 600 million people from poverty? Do you know that China is now the world’s second biggest economy with \$8,000 per capita? If we weren’t able to properly protect human rights, would China have achieved such great development? Do you know that China has incorporated protecting human rights into its Constitution? I want to tell you that it’s the Chinese people who most understand China’s human rights record — not you, but the Chinese people themselves. You have no right to speak on this. The Chinese people have the right to speak. So please don’t raise such irresponsible questions again. China welcomes all well-meaning suggestions, but we reject all groundless accusations.”

The Canadian Press news agency reported that the offending question, which was asked by a reporter for iPolitics, a news website, was devised through an agreement by several different news outlets, including itself.

Since becoming Canada’s prime minister last October, Justin Trudeau has made soothing relations with China a priority. That has brought criticism from human rights advocates and some members of Canada’s large population of Chinese immigrants. But others in the country have favorably compared the approach to the decision made by Pierre Trudeau, his father and a former Liberal prime minister, to formally recognize China and reestablish diplomatic relations in 1970.

In a series of Twitter posts, Tony Clement, the opposition Conservative Party's spokesman for foreign affairs, criticized both the stern remarks by Mr. Wang and what Mr. Clement viewed as a weak response from Mr. Dion.

“Absolutely outrageous that Chinese Foreign Minister berates a Canadian journalist,” Mr. Clement wrote. “His behavior is rude and unacceptable!”

In another post he added, “Mr. Dion should demand an apology!”

Mr. Wang's possible response to a demand for an apology can only be imagined.

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