

Interview with Tohunga Riwai (postgraduate student in Politics)

Omotola Amusan (South Africa) is a PhD candidate under the Politics/Tōrākapū programme at the University of Otago. His interests in International Relations and Economics have strongly shaped his thesis topic, which focuses primarily on analysing the geo-economic grand strategy of China. After finishing his PhD studies, he aspires to continue working as an academic in the future. Omotola graduated from North-West University in South Africa, where he studied International Relations. He began postgraduate study at the University of Otago in 2018, before then beginning PhD study in 2020.

Interviewer: *How long have you lived in Dunedin and what are some of your favourite features of life in this town?*

Omotola: I did my Masters in 2018, so I arrived that year. I went home in 2019 before coming back in 2020 to do my PhD. As for my favourite features of Dunedin: It is safe. You can walk around at night without feeling threatened in any shape or form. I also like the quiet during the weekdays. It can be quite noisy during the weekends, but the people here are kind, and are willing to help in most situations. What I miss from home are my family, as well as the food. A lot of what I have been used to eating throughout my life cannot be found here, and it is hard to bring these foods over. Although, I do not think that the food is quite as bad here as many say.

Interviewer: *What are some of your favourite interests outside of study?*

Omotola: Outside of study, I love to read books! I am a massive fan of the Lord of the Rings franchise. I started playing tennis last November, and it has been amazing so far. I like to take nightly walks over long distances, especially during the later hours when the streets are calm. I do not really like crowds and things like that, and I much prefer to be in solitude in my room. When lockdowns and isolations became mandatory, I was as happy as could be given the circumstances.

I also like to play PS4 occasionally, and am currently playing Battlefield, God of War, and Fifa. I am also an avid Manchester United supporter, though supporting this team lately has been really stressful.

Interviewer: *What did you study at the undergraduate level and where? How have these experiences differed from your PhD study so far?*

Omotola: I studied International Relations at North-West University in South Africa. In terms of differing experiences, it is hard to directly compare between undergraduate and postgraduate experiences. The main difference is probably that the lecturers at Otago have been more caring of the mental wellbeing of students and are more forthcoming in helping students access different sources of information for research. This was less so during my undergraduate years, and I had to figure out early about how to gather information independently. In hindsight, I think these experiences have helped me in my postgraduate years.

Interviewer: *What are the factors that inspired you to study the topic of China's geo-economic strategy?*

Omotola: I have always been interested in economics. In my opinion, for a country to achieve power in the international system, they must first focus on their own economic foundations. China is particularly interesting here, as from 1978 and onwards, the Chinese Communist Party realised that they had to achieve some sort of economic development to maintain power (internal state-building) and enhancing their position in the international system.

My research primarily investigates China's geo-economic grand strategy. This involved ironing out Edward Luttwak's 'geo-economics' concept, as well as the pre-existing idea of economic statecraft. No scholar has previously examined the differences between these concepts, so I would say that I am the first to do so. I would argue that geo-economics refers to the economic components of a country's grand strategy, while economic statecraft denotes the tools that are used to achieve a country's grand strategy. It is also important to define 'Grand Strategy', which is basically the various means used to achieve a state's national interests. In short, I am investigating China's using of economic power to create an environment conducive to its great national rejuvenation. Here China's Belt and Road Initiative is seen as a representation of an economic grand strategy.

Geo-economics is also a way of seeing the world, as most Great Powers use economic influence to achieve their goals in the modern world, which indicates the prevalence of economic influence within the international system today.

Interviewer: *What have been some of the biggest challenges since you began your PhD study?*

Omotola: The biggest challenge for me is dealing with impostor syndrome. There are days whereby you get anxious or anxiety attacks feeling that what you are doing is not good enough to be qualified as a PhD Thesis. I feel like this is one of the most common challenges that are faced by PhD students, and its mostly an internal challenge. We often internally compare our work to that of other students and think that our work is not as good as theirs. Getting others to feedback on your work can show you that your work is great. All in all, those feelings of self-doubt can really get the best of us I feel.

Being away from family and home can also be tough, as it feels like you are missing a lot. I remember when I left South Africa, my brother was in Grade 5. Next year he is starting high school, and I likely won't be there. These things do get the best of you sometimes. I talk to my parents almost daily though, which gives me that assurance that everything is okay. One of my favourite sayings is "It is, what it is", as this has helped me a lot during tough times.

Interviewer: *What would you ideally like to do in life after you finish your PhD?*

Omotola: Immediately? To nap a lot more.

I want to return to South Africa for a year to work on some upcoming projects. In the long-term, I want to become a professor at a university in Canada. I am also open to post-doctoral study, or maybe undertaking a post-PhD writing scholarship. I think that in the current global job market, a PhD helps to separate oneself from the pack. We are all stressed about the future, especially given rising living and housing costs. But the best thing we can do in the present is to work hard, and plant seeds so that our trees may grow in the future.