China and the American Dream
A Moral Inquiry

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Some of the most dramatic public events of the second half of the twentieth century have centered around the United States' tempestuous relationship with China. In the 1950s, a bitter debate about "who lost China" was the breeding ground for McCarthyism. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, anxiety about the spread of Chinese communism—often portrayed at the time as a more virulent and evil version than its Soviet counterpart—clouded the atmosphere in which Americans made tragic decisions about going to war in Vietnam. In the 1970s, Richard Nixon's reestablishment of relationships with China was widely hailed as a triumph of statecraft and a beacon of hope for Americans immersed in the gloom of the Vietnam War.

By the 1980s, normalization of U.S.-China relations opened the doors to an explosively expanding exchange of ideas, people, and material goods. The scope of this two-way traffic quickly exceeded initial expectations on both sides and thereby generated new expectations too lofty to be fulfilled. For many Chinese the opening to the West in general, and the United States in particular, promised rapid growth in wealth and power and exhilarating new opportunities for personal expression. For many Americans the opening of China was a harbinger of the liberalization of the whole Communist world: finally, "they" were becoming like "us." These mutual expectations came to a tragic climax in the spring of 1989, as the excitement and joy of a vast Chinese student movement for "science and democracy" turned into the terror and anger of a brutal government crackdown. Undoubtedly, by the end of
the 1990s, there will be new acts in this historical drama, and we may hope that they will have happier endings.

This book is specifically about the moral drama of the American relationship with China over the past quarter-century. It is not primarily about the purely political or economic dimensions of the relationship—although it tries to take them sufficiently into account—but rather about the way in which that relationship has become the stuff of public stories, on both the Chinese and American sides, about how each should understand its ideals in light of the other.

Dreams, Myths, and Master Narratives

As members of moral communities, we are the stuff that dreams are made of. We orient ourselves around common hopes and aspirations, expressed in stories about where we come from and where we are going. These are not the sober, analytic, prosaic accounts given by the social scientist but the visionary, poetic tales told by the dreamer, the mythmaker. The ever-evolving heritage of mythical stories—sometimes referred to in this book as “master narratives”—that convey American aspirations is known around the world as the “American Dream.”

It is a dream about individualistic independence in a land of opportunity, a dream of not being constrained by the past or bound to community by rigid ties of convention. It is conveyed through stories about pilgrims and pioneers and declamers of independence. These contrast sharply with the stories many Chinese tell about themselves. After a sumptuous dinner in his office’s private dining room, a Chinese general in Beijing tried to convince me of the validity of the PRC’s claims to Taiwan by invoking a narrative of unbreakable connection. “Americans who support Taiwan’s independence have no sense of history,” he said. “The people on Taiwan speak Chinese, their culture is Chinese, their ancestors came from mainland China. Therefore they are Chinese, and Taiwan should be a part of China.” To which my rejoinder is: “Although there may be good geopolitical reasons for considering Taiwan part of the PRC, your argument doesn’t correspond to basic American understandings of moral value. If our founding fathers truly agreed with such an argument, we would still be part of England.”

Societies need their dreams. Even though no two people in the

United States will define the content of the American Dream in exactly the same way, and even though everyone has different opinions about how this dream should be realized, the American Dream nevertheless provides a common reference point for an ongoing public conversation about what should be done to make American society into a good society. Without such a reference point, the public argument falls into confusion and incoherence. It is the same in China. As we shall see in Chapter 8, “Searching for a Dream” was the title of a segment of Death on the River, a 1988 Chinese television series that provided the most provocative and creative intellectual response to the sense of confusion and cultural crisis then facing Chinese society.

A society’s dreams remain alive only if they are constantly enriched to account for new realities. The American Dream of independence has to be revised to take into account the increasing interdependence of the modern world. Confrontation with China, a densely populated land with a distinctive ancient civilization, challenges the American Dream, even when—perhaps especially when—many Chinese seem to be eagerly embracing that dream by seeking to immigrate to the United States. And confrontation with the United States has stimulated and complicated the Chinese “search for a dream.” Through this book, I hope to stimulate the mutual search among members of both societies for richer, more effective ways of dreaming their social selves in face of the realities of the other.

Sources and Methods

In recent years, other scholars have published excellent histories of the past several decades of U.S.-China relationships. Such publications—especially Harry Harding’s A Fragile Relationship: The United States and China since 1972,1 which does an extremely thorough job of synthesizing the monographic literature in both English and Chinese on the subject—have provided indispensable foundations for this book. Although built upon these histories, this book does not try to compete with them; it does not add more detail to the already rich accounts they provide. Indeed, it steps back from much of the detail in an attempt to see a big picture from a particular point of view, the perspective of someone trained in the sociology of culture and moral philosophy.
Besides the scholarly literature, major sources for my meditations have been direct interviews and observations. I have formally interviewed about 150 people, half in the United States, half in China (in Chinese), who have been actively involved, mostly at a "middle-management" level, in developing diplomatic, academic, economic, and religious contacts between the two countries. As indicated in footnotes at appropriate places in the book, I also participated in meetings, discussions, and delegations of several American academic, cultural, and religious organizations aimed at building relations with China. And in 1988–1989, a time when my Chinese colleagues were being especially frank about their hopes and frustrations, I worked for five months under the sponsorship of the Institute of American Studies in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. These interviews and observations certainly did not provide a scientific random sample of the opinions of 250 million Americans and 1.2 billion Chinese, although I did take care to interview people who worked within a variety of institutional contexts and spanned a wide spectrum of opinion on major issues in U.S.-China relations. But the interviews and personal observations gave me a much richer sense than I could ever have gained from books of how members of those relatively small circles of Chinese and Americans who pay serious attention to U.S.-China relations talk to each other about the moral dilemmas inherent in those relationships and how this talk draws on widely shared assumptions from their cultures.

Finally, I have tried to reflect on my own life and commitments. I started my career in the late 1960s as a Maryknoll missionary to Taiwan; I subsequently became a sociologist and China scholar; and I am a member of various human rights organizations. I have drawn upon my own life experiences and tried to expose my own biases to many different critical perspectives.

Beyond Washington and Beijing

This study, then, is directed not to conventional political science or diplomatic history but to the sociology of culture and what my colleagues and I have called "public philosophy." My approach is distinguished by its focus on sociocultural processes rather than political elites and by its theoretical assumptions about how such processes can be studied.

Most studies of U.S.-China relations by political scientists or diplomatic historians characteristically focus on the calculations made by each country’s leading government officials as they formulated policies toward the other country’s government. David Shambaugh’s important book Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives America, 1972–1990 moves beyond the narrow circles of Chinese policymakers to study the professional “America watchers” who provide information and analysis. But, as is characteristic of studies by American political scientists, even this book confines itself to “influential elites” close to the center of power.

A symptom of this focus on power centers is the way in which specialists on foreign affairs commonly use “Washington and Beijing” as equivalents for “the United States and China.” Of course, Washington is not the same thing as the United States, nor is Beijing the same as China. But to many specialists in foreign affairs, it makes sense to use the name of the capital as a metonym for the whole society because the public usually does not participate directly in the making of foreign policy. In China, indeed, the public is excluded by the very structure of the political system, and in the United States the public largely excludes itself by its legendary ignorance and apathy about foreign affairs that do not directly and obviously affect domestic interests.

Yet underneath the deliberations of policymakers and the analyses of influential experts is a cultural fabric of common understandings about the goals and purposes of their work. What does it mean to be American or Chinese in the modern world? What are the ideals and interests of each society, and how should these interests and ideals be pursued? Often this fabric of understandings lies outside of the consciousness of policymakers—they are too busy to reflect on it explicitly. Some of these understandings are so thoroughly taken for granted that it is impossible to reflect upon them critically.

But this underlying fabric is changeable. It is constantly, quietly being rewoven in response to sociological processes, especially those engendered by new patterns of global communication and commerce. Sometimes major breaks in the fabric occur. Then policymakers and their expert advisers find themselves confused, conflicted, bewildered, uncertain. Sometimes, as a result, their policies become erratic, inconsistent, even incoherent. Such seems to have been happening in the past several years, especially since the crackdown on Tiananmen Square, with regard to Washington’s policy toward Beijing and Beijing’s policy toward Washington.

Washington and Beijing are uncertain because changes have occurred
in American and Chinese society and culture. In both the United States and China there is new, widespread questioning about what it means to be an American—for example, is there one American society or just a congeries of different ethnic communities competing for scarce resources on the same continent?—and what it means to be Chinese—is "real Chineseness" a political or a racial or a cultural matter? There also has been concomitant questioning about how Americans and Chinese ought to conceive of their relations with the outside world and what goals they ought to pursue across the globe. This questioning springs from a number of different sources, including changes in the global economy and the end of the cold war. In part it stems from sociocultural dilemmas faced by many members of Chinese and American society—ordinary citizens as well as influential elites—as their history drew them closer together during this past generation. This is what I want to explore in this book.

Theoretical Assumptions

This book extends my earlier studies of Chinese and American culture. My Morality and Power in a Chinese Village explored the moral universe of Chinese peasants during the upheavals of the Maoist era. Habits of the Heart and The Good Society, coauthored with Robert Bellah, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, explored the moral bases of social commitment in the United States and precipitated an extensive debate in American society about the meaning of its democratic traditions. I hope now to integrate and deepen these separate studies of Chinese and American culture by considering the interaction between the two.

Like my previous books, this one employs a theoretical perspective that denies the sharp distinction between subject and object characteristic of positive science. As social beings whose very identities and capacities for thought and action are constituted by the cultures within which we live, we can never completely study a culture from outside. If we learn deeply to understand another culture, we become changed; in some important sense, we become different persons than before our encounter. And our act of studying the culture, at least in some small way, changes the culture itself. For better or worse, the twenty-five years that I have spent studying China have made me a different person than I would have been had I never studied it; I think differently, I have different sympathies and antipathies, and I have become engaged with the lives of a variety of Chinese friends. For better or for worse, too, my research and writing about China have changed the lives of at least a few Chinese and even influenced how some of them think about their own society. I think most of my American colleagues in China studies will acknowledge similar experiences.

The process of studying our native culture entails an even deeper blending of subject and object. It is impossible to remain indifferent to the language and institutions that shape our lives within our native culture. As intellectuals, I believe we can and should be responsibly critical about many aspects of our own culture. But in the very act of exposing unquestioned aspects of our culture to critical scrutiny, we change it. Habits of the Heart and The Good Society were animated by a deep concern about the future of American democracy; and for better or for worse, they have aroused public controversies that have changed the way that some Americans understand themselves.

If one acknowledges this intimate interplay between subject and object, which I believe is inevitable in any serious study of society, one does not have to resign oneself to a radical subjectivism. When we make statements about either our own culture or someone else's, we invite responses from other people who are also concerned about that culture. The ensuing dialogue leads to collective judgments about the validity of what we have written or said. The truth about complex social matters that emerges from this process is not as fixed, immutable, and universal as truth claimed by nineteenth-century physical scientists, but neither is it the arbitrary projection of our mind or will. Good social science invites and provides a coherent focus for widespread public discussion. Good social science fulfills its purpose not by demonstrating timeless truths but by helping a society understand itself through such public discussion.

As advocated in Habits of the Heart and The Good Society, this piece of social science tries, then, to be a contribution to "public philosophy." It is written not just for policymakers (though I hope that it can be read by them with profit) and not just for professional social scientists (though I hope they will find in it contributions to a theory of cultural change) but for general educated publics. In short, it attempts to speak not just to "Washington" or "Beijing" but to people enmeshed in the wide variety of institutions that constitute "America" and "China." It aims to help concerned citizens, especially in the United States but per-
happens also in China, participate more actively and intelligently in giving purpose and direction to their societies’ global relationships. A work that would speak to such publics must be normative as well as analytic. It must help members of a society deliberate about how to respond to the challenges facing it in light of the collectively shared (but inevitably differently interpreted) values that constitute the society’s common good.

**Moral Dilemmas and Troubled Dreams**

I begin with an account of the moral dilemmas confronting American and Chinese societies in the present; then I trace a twenty-five-year historical path that led to our current dilemmas. In Chapter 1, I provide an interpretation of the Tiananmen massacre of 1989 and explicate the basic moral and political questions this incident poses for Americans and Chinese. This event, I argue, troubled Americans far out of proportion to its direct cost in human life and suffering. In recent years, things far more terrible and brutal than the Tiananmen massacre had happened in the world, but Americans were not troubled as deeply by them. The tragedy in China was so upsetting for many Americans because it contradicted widely cherished American understandings about the meanings of their democratic values—it challenged common interpretations of the American Dream.

In so doing, the Tiananmen massacre raised a host of new moral questions, especially about the relationship between American policies that foster capitalist economic development and those that promote democratic rights. Such questions cannot be answered within the spectrum of conventional American political discourse. To answer them, I believe, we must now reexamine the underlying assumptions of our culture. We must develop richer, more realistic interpretations of our common dreams. We must revise the myths, the master narratives, that help us understand our relationship to the rest of the world.

Usually, the myths that form the foundations of our social knowledge and action are too resilient to perish as a simple result of academic criticism. It takes widespread social change dramatized by scandalous historical events like the Tiananmen massacre to destroy a myth. Because myths insinuate themselves into our common sense, it paradoxically takes the destruction of a myth to make it fully visible to our critical scrutiny.

In my account, the Tiananmen massacre discredited an important American myth about China, but in the process it has brought that myth into critical awareness. That myth was, in my analysis, a liberal myth—a story about how American ideals of economic, intellectual, and political freedom would triumph over the world. After discussing the moral challenge of Tiananmen, I turn to the 1960s, when the myth slain by Tiananmen was born. That myth’s creation, I argue in Chapter 2, involved the interplay of various kinds of public conversation—aesthetic, political, and, importantly, religious—with public rituals during a time hot with controversy over the Vietnam War. In Chapter 3, I show how that myth came to dominate American public culture through the spectacle of Nixon’s visit to China.

Chapter 4 shows how, in the mid-1970s, the liberal myth about China entered into the fabric of different American institutions, especially academic, religious, and civic institutions. An institution, in the sense in which I use the term here, is a moral enterprise, a set of sanctioned norms giving direction and shape to the way we live.” The liberal myth about China helped reinvigorate American institutions with a new, hopeful justification, seeming to provide a new validating purpose for their practices: new worlds to discover, new people to convert, new markets to open. Besides being moral enterprises, though, institutions are also systems of wealth and power. Accordingly, I show how the liberal myth about China stimulated competition within American institutions for control of their money and power.

Chapters 5 and 6 trace the development of the liberal myth about China through the controversies over normalization of U.S.-Chinese diplomatic relations in the late 1970s and into the rapidly expanding relationships of the 1980s. I show how the liberal China myth helped sustain an American sense of hopefulness about its own democratic identity, even in spite of anomalous dilemmas that should have contradicted that hopefulness.

Chapters 7 and 8 highlight those dilemmas by describing how Chinese viewed American society during the 1980s. It shows the confusion, dissatisfaction, and the irresolvable moral and political dilemmas that afflicted even those who most warmly embraced the good things American consumer culture promised to give. It shows how China, partly as an unintended consequence of doing what many Americans matter-of-
factly thought it should do, not only failed to become a liberal democratic society but fell into the tragedy of Tiananmen.

The conclusion summarizes the theoretical and substantive lessons of this moral history. It outlines a new global institutional and cultural environment in which old myths no longer provide either Americans or Chinese with a viable framework for fruitful moral deliberation about their place in the world, and it suggests some of the ways in which new frameworks might develop.

Although most of my research was done before 1990, I have of course continued to gather information both from readings and personal observations while writing this book. I took two short trips to China in 1992, and after finishing the final draft I spent two months in Tianjin in the fall of 1993, working on a different project. On the basis of my recent visits, I conclude that the China of early 1994 is much like the China of early 1989—only more so. There has been an intensification of both the positive and negative trends discussed in this book. Market-driven economic development, especially along the southern coast, has surged forward. Standards of material consumption have risen markedly, and urban young people in particular have become increasingly intoxicated with Western popular culture.

But feelings of insecurity and grievance have deepened among many urban workers. They are losing their jobs in state-run enterprises and seeing their incomes diminish under the onslaught of a 20 percent inflation rate. They are increasingly jealous because of the rising inequalities within Chinese society. Those who are middle-aged and older are worried about the declining morals of the youth. Almost all are bitter at the ever more blatant and cynical corruption of their officials. As one recently laid-off woman worker told me in Tianjin in 1993, “If you just follow the rules and work hard and do the right thing, you get nowhere. . . . Those who get rich are those who cheat and use their power and privilege.”

The righteous anger and anguish felt by intellectuals in 1989 seem to have given way in many instances to numbness, which may cover over a deeply burning disappointment. Most of my friends from 1988 who have not emigrated have given up on intellectual pursuits. Unable to tolerate low salaries and political harassment, they have left their research institutes to go into business.

Meanwhile, the American press, awestruck over the pace of Chinese economic growth, expresses some concerns about persisting human rights violations but pays relatively little attention to the social tensions being generated by the economy.

The outlook at the beginning of 1994 is that the Chinese economy will continue to grow and that this trend will have increasingly important consequences for Americans. But this growth will be accompanied by periodic upheavals that will surprise many Americans who should have known better and will force continued rethinking of the global implications of the American Dream.
The Moral Challenge of Tiananmen

*Shattering a Liberal Myth*

In the late evening of June 3 and early morning of June 4, 1989, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army shot its way through the streets of Beijing, crushing the mass movement of students and workers that had arisen that spring to protest government corruption and demand a more open society. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of protestors died that night in and around Tiananmen Square, while international news media recorded the carnage. At the direction of Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese government arrested thousands of people who had helped to inspire, participated in, or simply been sympathetic to the protests. Some of those arrested were subsequently executed. In China, “June 4” now stands for the whole movement of repression surrounding the Tiananmen massacre. It is remembered as a crucial, tragic day in the drama of that country’s history.

It is also an important date in the drama of U.S. history. The Chinese, of course, must come to terms with the consequences of the June 4 massacre, but the burden is too great to be shouldered by China alone. The event is one of those whose reverberations have extended around the world, challenging the assumptions of many countries about how they should conduct foreign policy. It poses an especially deep challenge to Americans’ common understandings about the purposes of their foreign policy and their place in world history.

World leaders condemned the Chinese government’s violent crackdown against its citizens. Within a few days after June 4, at least twenty governments, including those of the United States and most of Western
Europe, issued statements expressing outrage at the massacre. But the international public outcry was even more intense. Although many Southeast Asian governments were afraid to antagonize Beijing and refused to officially condemn the massacre, people throughout the region staged massive protests against the PRC crackdown, especially overseas Chinese resident in those countries. Anxious to consolidate the improved diplomatic ties achieved with China earlier in 1989, the Soviet Union declined to criticize the Chinese government—thus exposing Mikhail Gorbachev to withering criticism from Andrei Sakharov and other deputies in the newly established Soviet Congress.4

Outside of Hong Kong (where the crackdown galvanized a population already fearful about the prospect of reunification with the People's Republic in 1997), perhaps nowhere else in the world did the massacre engender more popular outrage, anguish, soul searching, and just plain fascination than in the United States. It was one of the most memorable and disturbing news stories of the 1980s. Most people interviewed in a Los Angeles Times poll published a week after the crackdown said they were paying "a lot" of attention to the turmoil in China. NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw said that not since the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger had a story "so penetrated the American consciousness. People everywhere I went were talking about it. I was doing a story about street gangs in Los Angeles, and one member of the Crips wanted to talk to me about what was going on in China."5

The more attention Americans paid, the less they liked what they saw. Of those interviewed, 78 percent expressed an unfavorable opinion of the People's Republic of China, only 16 percent a favorable opinion. This was virtually a reversal of a Gallup poll taken three months before, when 72 percent had expressed a favorable opinion and only 13 percent an unfavorable one.6 Popular condemnation of China turned to confusion about U.S. foreign policy when President George Bush declined to level any severe economic or political sanctions against China and within a month of the massacre sent National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft to visit the Chinese leadership. The Bush administration's effort to maintain cooperative relations with the Chinese government gave rise to a persistent, emotional debate within Congress, a debate that continues under the Clinton administration to cut across customary divisions among Democrats and Republicans. Advocates of sanctions included the conservative Republican senator Jesse Helms as well as liberal Democrats such as congresswoman Nancy Pelosi and former con-
gressman Steven Solarz. Opponents of sanctions include both Republicans and Democrats. In the popular press as well as in specialized journals, a vigorous debate has continued among supporters of these various positions.7

Why did the events in China provoke such an intense reaction and such sharp debate around the world and especially in the United States? For one trusted Chinese friend of mine — a graduate student of political science at a distinguished American university — the outpouring of public concern about China in the United States seemed "irrational." On that fateful weekend of June 4, he noted, three other major events occurred. Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini died; Poland held its first free elections since the Communist Party had taken control of that country; and the Speaker of the House, Jim Wright, was forced to resign because of scandal. Each of these events, my Chinese friend observed, had potentially greater, more direct implications for the United States' self-interest than the China tragedy. Why then did Americans focus most of their attention on China?

One answer frequently given to such questions is that the events in China were made broadly accessible through television.8 This explanation, to be sure, is partially correct. But during the 1980s international news media regularly brought even greater tragedies onto American television screens without capturing the attention of such a broad range of the public. Political violence in the Middle East and Central America caused far greater loss of life — and impinged more directly on U.S. economic and political interests — than did the violence in China, and television networks broadcast plenty of dramatic footage of these tragedies. But was this coverage enough to make even members of Los Angeles street gangs take notice? Most Americans usually pay little attention to international relations. At the height of the crisis in Central America in the mid-1980s, close to half of the American public was unable to describe which parties to the conflict were on the side of the United States and which were against, even though newspapers and television focused heavily on those issues.9 Why did matters of such direct and immediate consequence for the United States fail to grip the American consciousness as firmly as the China crisis of June 4, 1989?

Perhaps the public had become numb to the protracted violence of the Middle East and Central America, so that one more outbreak of killing was simply taken for granted. But then why was the public shocked by the brutality in China? Compared with other episodes of
violence, upheaval, and oppression in the history of the People's Republic of China, the June 4 massacre was relatively mild. The numbers of dead were modest in comparison with the hundreds of thousands of landlords (by conservative estimates) killed during the land reform of the early 1950s, the 20 million (by conservative estimates) who died during the 1959–1961 famine that followed the Great Leap Forward, and the hundreds of thousands who lost their lives during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s. And although something on the order of ten thousand people were imprisoned for their political activities in the wake of the June 4 crackdown, this hardly compares with the hundreds of thousands of intellectuals sentenced to labor camps during the anti-rightist campaign directed by Deng Xiaoping during the late 1950s. Why did the Beijing crackdown inspire such anguish and soul searching outside of China? Why was it not simply discussed calmly, though bitterly, as another sad, reprehensible, but basically predictable calamity for an unfortunate people?

Tiananmen as Drama

The answer, I will argue throughout this book, is that the crackdown in China was for Americans a drama with an unexpected, incorrect ending. As such, it challenged the common meanings at the core of their major public institutions.

By “drama” here, I simply mean a moral story, a narrative in which the virtues and vices of the characters lead to a chain of actions culminating in a conclusion. A drama represents a moral vision, a set of concrete examples of good and bad conduct and a framework for illustrating the consequences of such conduct. In what we usually think of as a good drama, the relationships between virtue and vice are complicated, the ending ambiguous. But the ending is supposed to be consistent with the drama's distinctions between right and wrong. Vice is not supposed to be rewarded. A hero's demise is supposed to be due to a tragic flaw, not a virtue. In a satisfactory drama, the good guys may indeed suffer, but the bad guys shouldn't win. A good drama is not supposed to preach, but it most certainly is supposed to engage its audience. It is supposed to make members of its audience identify with its characters, to come to a deeper self-understanding in light of what happens to the drama's protagonists.

Most people want to see drama in history; they want to tell each other stories in which good or bad people impel themselves toward a fitting end. They want the type of history the Chinese used to write, wherein virtue or corruption leads to dynastic ascendancy or decline. Indeed, the kind of enlightened public that is the foundation of a democratic society needs to see history as drama. It is by debating the moral meaning of history that citizens in a democracy understand their responsibilities toward the future.10

Writers (particularly journalists) whose audience is the general public therefore usually represent history as drama, as a tale about good and evil told from the point of view of actors struggling to do the right or yielding to do the wrong thing.11 People who write for religious communities—for example, theologians—are even more certain to depict history as a moral drama, as a part of “salvation history.”

For Americans, there is a rich tradition of recounting the chronicle of U.S.-China relations within a dramatic context. In the first part of this century, American missionaries wrote extensively about China in such terms.12 So did journalists.13 Moreover, there developed in the twentieth century a substantial body of fiction set in China, of which the novels of Pearl Buck are the most famous. These writings created a tradition of dramatic discourse, a copious legacy that was interrupted by the rupture of U.S.-China relations in 1949 but was available to be revived when contacts were resumed in the 1970s. This legacy helped create and sustain an American habit of talking about China in dramatic terms—terms that are not so widely applied to societies that Americans know mainly through the research of professional social scientists.14

Although professionally trained to be dispassionate and analytical, American social scientists were by no means immune to taking a dramatic view of China. Many of the senior generation of scholars had gotten into China studies because they were children of missionary parents, and they tended to have absorbed some of the moralism of their families. (Before the development of modern language programs for the teaching of Chinese at the university level, which mainly took place after World War II, there was little opportunity for anyone to take up a purely academic study of China without having been exposed to Chinese language and society in some nonacademic capacity, the most common of which was being a member of a missionary family.)15 An even more
important factor was the influence of the cold war. U.S. political leaders cast Communist China in the most dramatic light possible: It was a threat to everything Americans held dear; the most menacing of evils in an epic battle between good and bad. American scholars did not have to fully accept this view to be deeply influenced by it; they had to engage themselves with it even if they disagreed with it. China could not be seen as a neutral object of investigation. If it did not represent a story of evil, then it had to be depicted as a story about good—or at least about an ongoing battle between the two. As I will argue more fully later in this book, this academic tradition of creating dramatic renditions of Chinese history has persisted down to the present day.

Thus, when the student demonstrations of the 1989 Beijing Spring began to occur, American writers of all kinds were accustomed to depicting such events in dramatic terms. The peculiar circumstances of early 1989 enhanced this tendency. Television news outlets had prepared to be in Beijing to cover the visit of Mikhail Gorbachev, so much of the unfolding student movement was captured live on television, a medium that thrives on dramatizing events. The student protesters, moreover, developed a very sophisticated sense of how to utilize the media to dramatize their case to the world. Because of the burgeoning of academic exchange programs with China, hundreds of American students and scholars were in Beijing, and each had a personal story to tell about how the events had touched him or her. Finally, tens of thousands of Chinese students had come to study in the United States, and they poured out their hopes and fears for China to American friends and colleagues—and, not infrequently, the news media. With the stage thus set, the events of the Beijing Spring were presented as a spectacular drama.

People can agree that an event is a drama—a story that signifies something—without agreeing on what exactly it means. In literature, what we usually think of as a good story is one that allows for a multiplicity of interpretations. Interpretations link the story portrayed in the drama with the interpreters’ understanding of the basic values and purposes guiding their lives and their society. A challenging drama inspires the audience not merely to reaffirm its basic values but also to see them as more complex or more contingent than imagined. For most Americans, perhaps, the 1989 drama of Tiananmen Square was a challenging one. It was hard to reconcile the outcome with the common understandings around which American institutions are oriented. Almost none of its possible interpretations were reassuring.

Freedom Complicated

The central common value for Americans is freedom. All major institutions of this society—economic, political, and cultural—aspire ideally to enhance the freedom of individuals. This very commitment to freedom means, of course, that all members ought to define freedom in their own way. Freedom is a common value that encourages a vast diversity of values. American society perpetually simmers with controversy over the meanings and relative importance of its basic values, and Americans usually think such controversy is proof of the vitality of their freedom. Most of the controversies ultimately center around whether or how our major institutions can adequately protect or enhance the freedom of individuals. There is less discussion about the meaning of freedom itself. Freedom generally means independence: individual autonomy, privacy, the right to be left alone. It means being able to do whatever one wants, as long as one does not thereby restrict the ability of others to do whatever they want. Thus conceived, freedom is held to be a universal value, good for everybody at all times. China’s recent history disturbs us because it challenges certain aspects of this conception of freedom. It forces us to think more deeply about what freedom really means and what its future will be.

Let us consider the main story line of the drama of Tiananmen Square, at least as presented by the major American news media. The heroes are Chinese students, who are calling for “democracy.” What they are demanding is precisely what is most precious to us. Indeed, they seem to have learned about this value from us, mostly by reading the multitude of books on Western (especially American) philosophy and social science that have become available in China since its opening to the West under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. “Freedom,” in the words of NSC 68, the 1950 State Department document that presented a comprehensive rationale for the cold war, “is the most contagious idea in history.” The movement for democracy in China is proof that the country’s young people have been exposed to the idea and succumbed to its contagion. Arrayed against the students are some old, hard-line Communists who do not believe in freedom. This is the most compelling sort of historical drama, one that resonates richly with America’s central myths.

If there were nothing more to the drama, it might have been intellectually satisfying even though it had an unhappy ending, even though
the hard-liners' tanks rolled in and crushed the heroic students. The meaning would be that freedom must be heroically struggled for against implacable foes, that there will be tragic setbacks in the struggle, but that freedom will eventually triumph. However, there was more to the Tiananmen story, inconsistencies that have begun to render its meaning opaque.

First of all, the chief hard-line foe of the students was the person who, according to the American media, had made it possible for them to dream their dreams of freedom in the first place—China's formally retired but still "paramount" leader, Deng Xiaoping. Twice named "Man of the Year" by Time magazine, Deng had been credited with repudiating much of the legacy of Maoism, decollectivizing agriculture, encouraging experiments in instituting a market economy, and opening China's doors to foreign investment and academic exchange with the West. Americans had been led to believe that Deng had caught the contagion of freedom. Why, then, was his heart not moved by the young people asking him to realize and act upon the full implications of the freedom he had introduced to China? Why did he turn out to be an enemy of freedom?

Why, for that matter, were the students so angry at Deng Xiaoping and his associates—even against some of those high officials who were identified as "reformers"? The students claimed that the reformers had become corrupt, had made vast profits by, among other things, being gatekeepers for trade with foreign companies. How could reformers, who had brought a better life with the promise of increasing freedom to hundreds of millions of the Chinese people, become smothered in corruption and objects of hatred to the people? The path to freedom seemed more complicated than Americans liked to think it. Could it be, then, that the meaning of freedom was more complicated than most Americans wished to believe?

The Tiananmen massacre challenged several of the assumptions behind common American understandings of freedom. The first is the assumption that economic, political, and sociocultural freedom are so intimately interconnected as to imply and inevitably lead to one another. Deng Xiaoping had undoubtedly pushed China down the path to greater economic freedom. The predominant impression conveyed by the news media and, for that matter, most academic experts was that greater economic freedom would lead to greater political freedom and greater freedom for self-expression by artists and intellectuals. There were, to be sure, academics and journalists who had reported on the dark side of Deng's China: the "spiritual pollution" campaigns against intellectuals, the imprisonment of political dissidents, the corruption of government officials. But these reports did not make a deep impression on the American public. They were apparently not what most Americans wanted to hear, incongruent with the worldview that had developed among the 72 percent of the population holding a "favorable view" of China. Few experts on American public opinion would disagree with the sketch of that worldview outlined in an article in the New York Times published a few weeks after the massacre: "For some years this view of China has been emerging: that it was becoming a pro-Western semi-democracy, a place that almost inevitably with the passage of time, increase in contacts, and greater prosperity, has become more relaxed, open, and even free. The country had improved so much since the Maoist years."

China had certainly changed vastly since the Maoist years. To say that the changes were an "improvement" is of course to place the changes in a moral narrative about historical progress, wherein the improvement was a matter not simply of fact but of common moral judgment. In this respect, some dimensions of the improvement were ambiguous. Least ambiguous were improvements in the economic realm: Rates of economic growth had risen dramatically, although they had begun to stagnate in the second half of the 1980s. In most parts of China, the quantity and quality of consumer goods had risen remarkably: Televisions, cassette recorders, washing machines, a variety of colorful clothing, and a marked improvement in diet were widespread manifestations of a prosperity that benefited most Chinese. But these undeniable quantitative improvements had not necessarily led to a more satisfactory quality of life. They increased the sense of frustration among parts of the population—a frustration that had made at least some people unhappy enough to risk their lives in a desperate confrontation with the political system. Many of the Chinese people wanted and needed more than economic development. But they weren't going to get it, for now at least. How should the United States respond?

For a few days, the crackdown at Tiananmen united almost all sectors of the American public in a chorus of shock and revulsion. But there soon emerged significant differences in response, differences that can be explained in the light of tensions within and among major American institutions. The most basic of the tensions is one found within all institutional spheres: the tension between the commitment to freedom and the need for order.
When Americans debated how they should respond to the Tiananmen massacre, they divided into those preoccupied with punishing the hard-liners and those who balanced such urging with a concern for the stability of the Chinese social order. The uncompromising advocates of freedom demanded harsh economic and political sanctions against the Chinese regime. Calls for punitive action came from both the left and the right. Consider, for instance, the column that Pat Buchanan, widely read voice of the “new right,” wrote in the Washington Times soon after the crackdown.

Neutrality, evenhandedness, calls for “restraint on both sides” are no long enough. Now we must choose — between the people of China and their now naked enemy, the Stalinist regime of Deng Xiaoping. That choice has been forced upon us by the heroism of the Beijing students; President George Bush should not hesitate to confront it openly and forcibly.

The time for realpolitik is past; the issue is over . . . Mr. Deng and his comrades have declared war on the Chinese people; and America must stand with the people as allies against Mr. Deng.”

While Buchanan was publishing his column, a group of China scholars at Harvard’s Fairbank Center for East Asian Research were drafting a statement that was remarkably similar in tone to Buchanan’s, even though most of the signatories would have placed themselves in the middle or slightly on the left of the American political spectrum: “The events surrounding the Tiananmen massacre have aroused a storm of international condemnation and moral outrage. The perpetrators of this massacre will go down in Chinese history as evil men and as belonging to the list of those who have defied human rights and human dignity. We urge you not to forget the brave martyrs of Tiananmen . . . or to give succor to the perpetrators of the massacre.”

In first drafts of this document, the scholars called for “complete non-cooperation in PRC state-sponsored cultural, scientific and educational exchanges. As these exchanges represent official expressions of support for the state apparatus that primarily organizes, supports and profits from them . . . we wish to do nothing to give credence to the current regime’s hegemony over cultural exchange while it denies responsibility for the intellectual, social, political and physical suppression of its own people.” The Harvard scholars also called for an end to any tourism sponsored through the state-owned China International Travel Service and for a continuation of the freeze imposed by President Bush on military sales to the People’s Liberation Army “until the leadership responsible for the massacre — Deng Xiaoping, Li Peng, and Yang Shangkun — are removed and the officers who carried out the massacre are arrested and tried in a court of law.” Finally, they advocated a package of economic sanctions: rejection of China’s proposed entry into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a suspension of loans, a temporary freeze on China’s status as a “most favored nation,” harsh duties on all textile imports, and an end to all grain sales to the PRC “except for emergency relief and famine conditions.”

Both Buchanan and the Harvard scholars were giving obstreperous voice to a central value uniting both ends of the American political spectrum: respect for the human rights and human dignity of all people, a respect that finds fulfillment in each individual’s freedom of self-expression. During the height of the cold war, right-wingers like Buchanan urged a crusade to destroy communism so that this vision of freedom might be spread around the world. Those in the center or left-center, like the scholars at Harvard, argued that the idea of freedom might best be implanted through peaceful trade and cultural exchange with Communist countries. But both affirmed that the energetic spread of freedom around the world was the proper goal of the U.S. government. Now the scholars were admitting that the hope of implanting freedom through trade and cultural exchange had been misplaced, and Buchanan was saying, in effect, “I told you so.” All agreed that the promotion of freedom, American style, was the central goal of the American policy, one that ought to take precedence over everything else.

In the United States, an effective framework of laws and mores generally enables the pursuit of freedom to be consistent with a high degree of political order. Suppose, though, that the pursuit of freedom threatens to lead to disorder, to anarchy, in a culture that does not have such a framework of laws and mores. This scenario would be bad not only for international business but also for U.S. national security. Such was the concern of the American who had made the great breakthrough in undertaking a rapprochement between the United States and the People’s Republic of China — Richard Nixon. He wrote:

In view of the cruelty and stupidity that led the Chinese government to resort to repression, lashing back with punitive policy would be politically popular and emotionally satisfying for the great majority of the American people . . . .

President Bush will be pressured to take harsher action by a strange coalition of China-bashers. Those on the far right who oppose any relations with China
will demand economic and diplomatic sanctions. So will the human rights lobby, which calls for punishing every regime that does not live up to our standards, regardless of our interests or the millions living under those regimes whom sanctions would hurt the most. The Bush administration should continue to ignore these extremist voices and stay the prudent course it has already set.

The main reason for maintaining this prudent stance, Nixon argued, was "so that the United States can help maintain the balance among China, Japan and the Soviet Union." From his perspective, the preservation of order took precedence over the promotion of individual freedom.

Henry Kissinger, Nixon's collaborator in the historic diplomatic breakthrough with China, even managed to express a note of sympathy for the predicament of China's leaders. In his op-ed pieces written around the time of the crackdown, he observed the events in China "with the pain of a spectator watching the disintegration of a family to whom one has a special attachment..." Kissinger went out of his way to say kind words about Deng Xiaoping: "A sense of proportion requires us to remember that had Deng retired a year ago, history would record him as one of China's great reformers." He even skirted close to expressing sympathy with Deng:

To Deng Xiaoping the demonstrations recall the Cultural Revolution, when throngs of students sought to purify Communist ideology by means that led to loss of his liberty, made his son a paraplegic and disrupted the lives of tens of millions. In the end the Cultural Revolution produced so many diverse factions that China was at the edge of chaos. And chaos is the nightmare of a leadership that grew out of the civil wars and still remembers colonialism and Japanese domination, which it believes was facilitated by China's internal weakness. Hence Deng thought the new groups [created through modernization] should be satisfied with economic progress and be willing to forgo political change, at least until the economy was further along.

For Kissinger, the U.S. national interest required not only a China friendly to the United States but also a stable China. Kissinger was sympathetic to rulers who merely did what it took to maintain stability. "No government in the world," he wrote in another op-ed piece, "would have tolerated having the main square of its capital occupied for eight weeks by tens of thousands of demonstrators who blocked the authorities from approaching the area in front of the main government building. [What would Nixon or Kissinger have done in the early 1970s if a mob of antiwar protesters had surrounded the White House for two months and erected a big statue of Ho Chi Minh in Lafayette Park?] A crackdown was therefore inevitable. But its brutality was shocking."

Many American business leaders and their advisers were similarly cautious about disrupting the forces of order in China. In the fall 1989 edition of its newsletter, China Business: Current Regulation and Practice, the law firm of Thelen, Marrin, Johnson and Bridges, which helps corporations negotiate contracts in China, argued against basing economic sanctions on moral outrage.

Although the writers [of this newsletter] agree on the appropriateness of expressing foreign reactions to features of domestic Chinese policies that are repugnant, and on the desirability of supporting domestic economic and political reform in China, we note also what seems to escape some of the strongest critics of the Chinese government: the power of foreign governments to influence events in China is limited, and moralizing does not constitute a policy.

Our concerns are all the stronger because the problems presented by the sudden setback to reform are not likely to be limited to China. Reform of centrally-planned economies and totalitarian political systems is sweeping the Communist world. Yet the goals of reform are not well-defined and the processes of reform are agonizing and uncertain. The interactions among Communist political and economic institutions and the societies on which they have been imposed are sure to be complex, and will not be explainable by easy formulas. For example, although reforming Communist societies may become relatively more open and pluralistic, there is no reason to assume that they will become Western-type democracies. For these reasons, Western judgments on developments in China, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, even while criticizing political repression, could also benefit from restraint.

This is an articulate example of the kind of thinking common among corporations doing business with China: It's all right ("appropriate") to express our dislike for the way the Chinese government is repressing its critics; but there's nothing we can really do about it, and we shouldn't hurt ourselves by cutting off profitable business relations. This stance is consistent with the practical policy of most American corporations in the Third World.

According to the evidence presented by many comparative political sociologists over the past generation, authoritarian governments do not necessarily hinder economic growth. On the contrary, they often help developing countries achieve high growth rates through a market economy, at least during the early stages of development, by ensuring stability. The introduction of market relations produces insecurities, resentments, uncertainties, hatreds—in short, a threat to public order. Most
of the newly industrializing countries of East Asia have strong, authoritarian governments that coercively establish the order needed to provide a safe climate for foreign investment. In some places (for instance, Taiwan and South Korea), an emerging middle class—engendered through economic growth made possible by decades of authoritarian rule—has begun to successfully push for democratic reforms (although the governments of these countries are still far more authoritarian than most Americans would tolerate). But the most optimistic view this evidence can sustain is that, in a poor country, economic development driven by the dictates of the global market economy may lead to democracy only after several generations of coercive politics.33

In 1980, South Korean paratroopers massacred between one and two thousand demonstrators in the city of Kwangju and imprisoned democratic leaders such as Kim Dae Jung.34 Some scholars have even speculated that the Chinese leaders were consciously following the "Kwangju model" when they suppressed the 1989 demonstrations. Perhaps they calculated that foreign reaction to their crackdown would be as indifferent as it had been to the earlier crackdown in Korea. For most of those (relatively few) Americans who paid attention to it, the Kwangju massacre was tragic and unfortunate but not a cause for shaking the foundations of the U.S.–South Korean relationship and certainly no reason to impose economic sanctions. Today, foreigners who praise the South Korean economic miracle and applaud its recent steps toward democratization do not think much about Kwangju.

One of the main differences between the Beijing and Kwangju massacres, though, was that television cameras were present at the former and helped make it into a powerful drama with a worldwide audience. The drama focused attention on moral dilemmas that had usually been presented in abstract theoretical terms. Implicit in the institutions of a market economy is a vision of individual autonomy in which everyone is free to pursue his or her own self-interest. But in an interdependent modern economy, economic freedom must submit to the demands of large-scale organization. To flourish, a modern corporation requires social order and stability. Deng Xiaoping justified the Tiananmen crackdown by contending that the popular protest movements were leading to chaos, which would undo the great progress toward economic development that China had made during the 1980s. He may have been right. Since the crackdown, the Chinese economy has grown very rapidly (in 1992 and 1993, its growth rate was about 13 percent, among the highest in Asia). American corporations maintaining factories to produce export goods (toys, apparel, footwear, and electronics) in China have made healthy profits.

Most of the growth has come from enterprises allowed to operate outside the state sector—and therefore freer to "break the iron rice bowl" of job security and health and welfare benefits for employees. Worker docility is guaranteed by a government that will not allow the formation of any independent labor unions and will swiftly punish anything that looks like political protest. Post-Tiananmen China is a triumphant combination of market economics and authoritarian politics. This successful pairing challenges the common American view that market freedom and democratic political freedom are so closely intertwined as to be virtually one and the same thing.

The drama of Tiananmen, then, challenged common understandings of freedom that lay at the center of American political and economic institutions. It pressed home the moral point that a modern government and a modern economy must balance freedom with social order. Capitalist economic development, especially in societies whose major resource is cheap, semiskilled labor, does not necessarily imply democracy, because it requires a kind of large-scale organization and social control that can be inconsistent with the desire for individual freedom. And modern governments must do more than enhance the freedom of their citizens; they must regulate the activities of millions of people in an efficient, predictable way. If citizens are divided by mistrust and lack traditions of voluntary self-discipline, an insistence on democracy may be inconsistent with the need for administrative order.

The United States itself is having a difficult enough time realizing the promise of freedom, as the initiative of citizens is increasingly smothered by the bureaucracies of huge corporations and the administrative state. But the United States retains enough traditions of self-government, cushioned by a general economic abundance (at least compared with much of the rest of the world), to enable a celebration of independence to coexist with a reasonable degree of social order. China has no such traditions of self-governance, and in spite of its recent economic development its per capita income is still low by world standards.35 In such a country the requirements of freedom and order are going to produce much more tension than in the United States. The Tiananmen tragedy dramatizes this tension and has forced many Chinese to make a choice between freedom and order that most Ameri-
The Meaning of Freedom

The further we deepen our scrutiny of the Tiananmen drama, the more basic the challenges to our self-understanding. The U.S. Constitution is based on a Lockeian political philosophy that presumes the existence of certain universal political rights, good for all people everywhere. As Tom Paine put it, "the Independence of America was accompanied by a Revolution in the principles and practice of Governments. . . . Government founded on a moral theory . . . on the indefeasible hereditary Rights of Man, is now revolving from west to east." From the surface, it looks as though the "democracy movement" in China confirms the universal validity of American understandings of freedom. But the events at Tiananmen really call that assumption of universal validity into question.

Consider the relation between the American media's dramatic rendering of Tiananmen and what is now known about the episode. In the widely disseminated version of the events cited above, the heroes of Tiananmen were mainly students, the best and brightest of China's youth. They had developed a hunger for democracy by reading about the moral theory at the basis of Western liberal democracies, risked their lives for democratic ideals, and been martyred by a reactionary Communist old guard. A careful look at eyewitness accounts of the Tiananmen massacre, however, turns up important details ignored by the standard American coverage.

A common response of American TV viewers to questions about the goals of the Chinese protesters was, in the words of a woman polled in New York, "They want just what we have." It now seems clear, however, that they did not want just what we have. Indeed, many of them were not at all clear about what they wanted. As Orville Schell noted, on the basis of firsthand observations, "Although the students tried to make their demands specific by calling, for instance, for dialogue with government leaders . . . when pressed to be more precise about their vision of reform or their notions of how democracy might work in China, they tended to become vague and even flustered. . . . As one student only half-facetiously said, 'I don't know exactly what we want, but we want more of it.'"

If the content of the students' demands was vague, the form in which they expressed those demands suggested commitment to values inconsistent with common American understandings of democracy. As Sarah
Lubman wrote in a *Washington Post* article, "In the May 4 issue of Beijing University's independent student newspaper, one student wrote, 'The tide of democracy allows no obstruction; all must comply with this trend. If not, they will be condemned by history.' One word has been changed, but the rhetoric is the same as that of Marxist arguments for the historical inevitability of socialism. Propaganda leaflets used similar language." 40

The students' behavior as well as their language expressed undemocratic values. As described by Lubman:

Left to their own devices, the students created an overly bureaucratic, highly policed system which, like the old, operated on personal credentials, or guanxi.... What began as an efficient and necessary security system degenerated into a petty abuse of authority. Security guards, originally posted to protect the hunger strikers from infiltrators as well as the hordes of foreign press in town for Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's visit, multiplied and became increasingly aggressive.... One security guard.... asked who his superior was, replied in the manner familiar to anyone who has had the frustrating experience of dealing with the Chinese bureaucracy, "I don't know. I'm only responsible for this step."

The students' makeshift society resembled the communist state in structure as well as operation. The Self-Governing Association had a standing committee, liaison offices with provincial students' organizations and the foreign press, and a tireless propaganda department. The movement undoubtedly needed organization, but the form that it took grew as bureaucratic as the adversary itself. 41

Lubman's article was one of the very few in the mainstream press that suggested that the students might not really want "just what we have." One reason Lubman arrived at this conclusion may have been that she was not a seasoned, well-known journalist. She was a University of California graduate student taking part in that institution's Education Abroad program in Beijing; when the crisis broke out, she got a part-time job helping the main *Washington Post* correspondent in the capital. The best-known American reporters from the most prestigious newspapers and television networks were eagerly sought out by Chinese student leaders. They all recognized Dan Rather and flocked to be interviewed by him when they saw him on Tiananmen Square. Thus, a prominent reporter might not have had to endure the quasibureaucratic officiousness of student leaders, as Sarah Lubman did. But junior reporters with experiences such as hers didn't get to contribute many articles to the mainstream press.

Another cause for the media's reticence about the motives of the protesters, though, was the pressure of having to create a vivid story cen-tered around an easily understandable conflict between good people and bad people. According to media critic Mark Hertsgaard, "I watched dozens of hours of broadcast coverage and read every article published about the events in China in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* without finding a single story about the ideology and political goals of the protest movement. It was as if journalists had become so enthralled by what the protestors were *against* — an authoritarian regime that called itself communist — that it didn't matter what they were for." 42 To American reporters, expending a lot of effort trying to understand what the protestors were for would only detract from a very good story. Better to spend one's time on things that amplified rather than dampened that dramatic story. 43

It doesn't — or shouldn't — detract from the justice of the students' cause to say that many of them wanted something different from our kind of democracy. But if we admit that they did want something different, we may have to think more deeply about what we mean by freedom and democracy. Embedded in all of our major institutions is a notion that freedom is a universal value, as desirable to all rational people everywhere as it is in the United States. Inspected closely, the 1989 protest movement in China does not deny the universality of freedom, but it does force middle-class Americans to think of freedom in more of an ecumenical fashion. It forces us to consider that freedom must be taken in context, that different understandings of freedom are possible in different cultures, and that we might profitably learn something from them.

A still closer scrutiny of the Tiananmen event forces yet another revision to the original dramatic American interpretation and further deepens the challenge to our common assumptions about the universality of our values. The victims of the crackdown were not mainly students peacefully seeking political freedom but workers boisterously seeking economic security.

The first newspaper and television reports of the massacre, usually based on eyewitness accounts by foreign reporters, spoke of "scores" of people having been killed as the army indiscriminately fired into crowds blocking its way along the roads that lead toward Tiananmen Square. Within the next several days, however, newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* were reporting the accounts of unnamed witnesses describing thousands of deaths. About three hundred students were said to have been shot, bayoneted, beaten, and trampled to death when they tried to escape at the Monument to the People's
Heroes in the center of Tiananmen Square. The reports spoke of students being crushed by tanks and bodies of protesters being burned in Tiananmen Square. “Immortality will give us democracy,” one of these students supposedly said to a witness before being killed. “We’re not afraid to give our young blood for the future of the republic.” The Chinese Red Cross was quoted as saying that at least 2,600 people were dead.

Within two days, the Chinese government was issuing a very different story. In a televised news conference, Yuan Mu, chief spokesperson for the Chinese government, declared that there had been a “counterrevolutionary rebellion” incited by a handful of “thugs and hooligans.” These hoodlums threatened to throw Beijing into chaos. Soldiers bravely confronted them to reestablish order and protect the people. The insurgents used a variety of deadly weapons, including Molotov cocktails, to burn military vehicles and kill soldiers. The soldiers fought back in self-defense. Inevitably, some innocent bystanders were killed. When the soldiers got to Tiananmen Square before the dawn of June 4, they called on the protesting students to leave the square. This the students did. With a bit of a nervous laugh, Yuan Mu said flatly that no students were killed in Tiananmen Square. About three hundred people were killed in Beijing during the operation, he said, about twenty-three of them students. Yuan Mu strongly suggested that about half of the rest were soldiers.

Chinese television broadcast a report illustrating these points. Citizens were shown immobilizing military vehicles, pelting their occupants with rocks, and setting the vehicles on fire—in some cases with the occupants still inside. There was grisly footage of soldiers who had been strangled, burned, and mutilated. A long line of students was shown peacefully, under military supervision, leaving Tiananmen Square.

Later in the week, Yuan Mu, the government spokesman, repeated this version of events in an interview with Tom Brokaw of NBC News. None of the students in Tiananmen Square had been killed, he said. American television networks had tampered with videotapes to make it appear that there had been murders. Brokaw’s demeanor upon being told this story doubtlessly reflected the sentiments of most Americans who viewed the interview. As Orville Schell described it, “I thought Tom was going to leap from his chair and eat this guy from the feet up. He was clearly incensed by what this man was saying...” For American viewers, the interview was a visual representation of democracy against dictatorship, of Truth against the Big Lie.

Evidence gathered and analyzed by a variety of independent foreign observers in the weeks and months following the massacre, however, corroborates some of Yuan Mu’s account. Nicholas Kristof, in the June 21 edition of the New York Times, noted, “There are many witness accounts of a mass killing around the Monument to the People’s Heroes at the center of [Tiananmen] square. But most of these accounts began to appear after several days had passed, rather than immediately, and they directly contradict the accounts of other Chinese and foreigners who were on the square all night.” Based on information such as that cited by Kristof, most foreign China experts now think the majority of the students did vacate Tiananmen Square and that few if any killings took place in the central part of the square, around the Monument to the People’s Heroes. In this sense Yuan Mu was right.

In the same article, Kristof wrote that “based on the evidence that is now available, it seems plausible that about a dozen policemen and soldiers were killed, along with 400 to 800 civilians.” The low end of this estimate is not far from Yuan Mu’s estimate of three hundred deaths, although, unlike Yuan Mu, it suggests that many more civilians than soldiers were killed.

Thus, the Chinese government’s official account may not be factually correct, but neither were the most widely publicized accounts of the major American news organizations in the immediate aftermath of the massacre. But what about moral correctness? In the American media’s dramatic depiction of Tiananmen, innocent, idealistic students were gunned down at the command of cynical, corrupt old Communists. In the Chinese government’s version, a rebellious rabble was held in check by guardians of essential social order. I have talked to some trusted Chinese intellectual friends, strong advocates of political and economic reform who have suffered in various ways because of their support of the protesters. To my initial astonishment, these individuals agreed with much of the Chinese government’s official story. They dispute that version in that they believe the Chinese government acted irresponsibly in refusing to enter into any dialogue with the students, thus laying the groundwork for a violent confrontation. But they feel the students also were “irresponsible”—that, although many of their complaints were valid, the students should have backed off before precipitating the threat of chaos that invited the military crackdown. And they think many American reporters and academic commentators also acted irresponsibly in giving excessive credence to the most extreme voices in the protest movement.
There do not exist, of course, any public opinion polls on Chinese reaction to the crackdown. But in the minds of the many Chinese I have talked with about this event, there is much more of a worry about the kind of disorder that might have been unleashed by the protests than is found in popular, dramatic American accounts. "Despite seeing all the footage of the Beijing massacre on Hong Kong television," says a resident of Chen Village in Guangdong province, "the older men in the village argued that the demonstrators had gone too far, and that they deserved what they got." The response of the members of the older generation in Chen Village—which is near the border with Hong Kong, more prosperous and more open to the outside world than most communities in China's interior—suggests that many more people in China than in the United States are afraid of the anarchy that can result from the overthrow of established authority.

If we look more closely at what happened on June 4 and further revise the dramatic story initially told by the American media, we will notice good reasons for many Chinese citizens to have feared anarchy. As we have seen, most of the student demonstrators left the square peacefully. Relatively few students died. It turns out that the bloody confrontations of June 4 were not primarily between disciplined, peacefully protesting students and a fanatical army (the soldiers of which were injected with amphetamines before being sent out to kill the students, according to some published but unconfirmed news reports). The confrontations were mainly between the army and masses of enraged Beijing residents, mostly workers but also some unemployed members of the "floating population" of peasants that flooded into the city illegally with the relaxation of political controls in the late 1980s. Most of the killing took place on access roads leading toward Tiananmen Square. Some was the result of pitched battles between soldiers and citizens armed with Molotov cocktails. The forces of order were confronted with a vast insurrection of the urban working class.

This version of the Beijing massacre does not justify the government's use of lethal force. It still seems clear that the military suppression was crude, indiscriminate, and brutal. Many eyewitnesses testify that Beijing citizens used violent means only after the soldiers themselves had begun to use deadly force. There are also plenty of firsthand reports by foreign journalists of soldiers firing not in self-defense but randomly at citizens, even as the latter were fleeing. Nor does this revised account absolve the government of responsibility for the obtuse arrogance that precipitated the crisis in the first place. But it does make Chinese fears about anarchy seem more rational and less paranoid than in the dramatic account narrated by most of the mainstream American media.

It also casts further doubt on the idea that the Chinese protesters "want just what we have." The insurgent citizens were venting a generalized rage against the corruption, arbitrariness, and unfairness of the Chinese system, not voicing a positive desire for democracy, at least not in an American-style democracy. The Chinese workers, who sustained most of the casualties of June 4, seem to have been much more concerned about issues of practical livelihood than freedom of expression. Henry Rosemont nicely summarized the differences between students' and workers' aspirations:

The workers were no less unhappy than the students in the Square, but the two groups were unhappy about different things. In addition to wages proportional to their services (i.e., higher than worker's wages) young Chinese intellectuals wanted freedom to live and work where they chose, and freedom from the endless papers, permits, and interference in their private affairs insisted upon by petty bureaucrats. Workers on the other hand wanted freedom from a murderous inflation, and from the increasing threats to their job security stemming from the search for profits under the "individual responsibility" system that underlies the economic reforms.

The insurgent workers wanted the wealth that some American capitalists have, but they did not want the insecurity many American workers now face. They were protesting inflation and loss of job security, which were by-products of the introduction of a market economy. By mismanaging the economy, the government may have exacerbated these dislocations, but market reforms would have eroded the salaries of workers and threatened their job security no matter what the government did. The market reforms were only partial, and most American economists urged the Chinese government to move more rapidly toward full marketization. If anything, though, more rapid change would likely have increased the dislocations of workers in the short term and probably intensified their anger, although if Western economists are to be believed, complete market reform might eventually lead to better living standards for all.

But the Beijing workers' reaction to the insecurities and inequalities of an incipient market economy threatens common American understandings about the intimate link, indeed the virtual equivalence, between a market economy and democratic forms of government and about the universal appeal of both. Insofar as the Beijing uprising was worker- rather than student-driven, it may have been not a social move-
ment in favor of democracy but a rebellion against the market, a demand for some form of protection from the insecurities of a market economy rather than simply an appeal for a quicker transition to it.

If we take all of these new considerations into account, the revised Tiananmen drama becomes more challenging than ever. It continues to be about the forces of freedom versus the forces of reaction, but it becomes less clear that what the Chinese protesters meant by freedom is what most Americans mean by it. It also becomes less clear whose side we are on, because the Chinese no longer appear as a great mass of freedom fighters pitted against a small but entrenched old guard. It turns out that there are many different kinds of Chinese divided along many different lines. In this chapter I have focused on one of the most obvious and important divisions in Beijing during the June 4 movement, that between workers and intellectuals, but I could have refined my analysis by considering other rifts, such as those defined by urban versus rural residence or by region, dialect, and generation. It seems that freedom means different things to Chinese in different situations in a rapidly changing society.

These differences challenge us to think of differences among ourselves. Whose side are we on in China? Are we on the side of those who would disrupt social order for increased personal freedom of expression? Are we on the side of those who wish to maintain enough order and stability to allow the flourishing of export-oriented industries producing commodities with cheap labor for the world market? To answer these questions, we need to think more carefully about who "we" are. If we are businesspeople engaged in trade with China we might think differently about the meaning of freedom in China than if we are human rights activists. Tiananmen forces us to see ourselves as a divided "we" interacting with a multiplex "they."

Tiananmen also makes us feel some of the tensions among the meanings of freedom embodied in American economic, political, and cultural institutions. Is the economic freedom of the market really compatible under all circumstances with the political freedom of the democratic polity? And is the responsible pursuit of political freedom really compatible with the hedonistic self-absorption encouraged in the name of freedom by an advanced consumer society?

The travails of China further show that the way we manage these tensions in our own society may not be possible in another society. The United States, like China or, for that matter, any large, complex, modern society, is intricately divided. But our divisions are not as stark as those in China. We generally speak a common language. We are a middle-class society, where members of the lower classes still have a more realistic hope of moving into the upper classes than almost anywhere else in the world and where all except the underclass enjoy what is by global norms a comfortable standard of living. Increasingly we are an administered society dominated by huge bureaucratic organizations, but leaders and subordinates within these organizations are united by bonds of trust that, though eroding, are nowhere nearly as attenuated as those in China. Lacking most of these social goods—we which we far too easily take for granted in the United States—Chinese society is inevitably going to experience pain and tragedy as it adapts to a world dominated by a triumphant market economy and new globe-spanning networks of communication. If we are to be committed to the forces of freedom in China, we have to listen more carefully to Chinese views about what freedom would mean in that nation’s social context; and to do this we have to reflect more subtly on what freedom can and should mean for us in an interdependent modern society. China challenges us to know ourselves more deeply. Unsettling as it can be, such deepened self-knowledge is a vital necessity in a world bound together by modern mass media.

The final challenge presented to our common understandings by the drama of June 4 is our growing awareness that the story told by the media was not the full story, not the only story, but simply a story framed in terms of American cultural conventions. Yet the technology of the modern media disturbs those conventions and forces us beyond them.

To an unprecedented degree, modern technology—especially television, with its instantaneous satellite transmission and its versatile, portable cameras—made people around the world participate vicariously in the events of Tiananmen. The media provided something never before achieved in the history of the West’s relationship with China: a wrenching experiential connection to China’s sufferings, not only the agony experienced in the terror of June 4 but also the indignities implicit in everyday life. Some of the most memorable moments in the media’s coverage of the China crisis were those that engaged foreigners in a collective experience of culture shock. For instance, after the imposition of martial law in May, an officious bureaucrat entered CNN’s office in Beijing and demanded that the network cease broadcasting. When CNN’s directors protested that they had a contract allowing them to broadcast, the bureaucrat got out a piece of paper and wrote an “official”
announcement that the contract was terminated. All of this took place live on CNN; after the official scribbled out his order, the broadcast abruptly ended. This incident made such an impact on the American viewing public—and was so good for CNN's ratings—that several days later CBS tried to arrange a live television broadcast during its nightly news program, hoping it would be similarly cut off in mid-broadcast by the Chinese authorities. (To the network's disappointment, it was not.)

Practically any American who has worked for any significant amount of time in China has faced similar arbitrary frustrations from officious bureaucrats. After a while veteran "China hands" get used to this and, like most Chinese citizens, devise ways to work partially around it. But the termination of the CNN broadcast enabled millions of Americans to feel for themselves what it is like to experience such bureaucratic harassment. The media powerfully conveyed what it is like to be powerless in China.

Vicarious participation is not the same thing as understanding. The public that participated in the Tiananmen events through the media was all too often a poorly informed, confused public rather than an enlightened, reflective one. As we have seen, the story of Tiananmen was framed in a way that confirmed rather than challenged common assumptions. Nonetheless, the vicarious experience was rich enough and powerful enough to push beyond the boundaries of conventional thinking.

The public may resist the push, may fail to respond. But it cannot escape the challenge. Knowledge of China is not "optional" for Americans in the age of global telecommunication and commerce. We will increasingly be forced to make important decisions about how our economic, political, and cultural institutions should relate to China. But if we do not understand the meaning of the relationships, we will be at their mercy.

**Situated Freedom**

Such an understanding of China—which implies a deeper understanding of ourselves—must be situated in history. It must constantly change in response to new challenges, and it is inevitably both limited and strengthened by the heritage of attempts at mutual under-
Three decades ago, however, the liberal myth of China as troubled modernizer had to contend with two other powerful impulses within American public opinion. The first was a story about China as Red menace. This story was vividly evoked for me by a memorable conversation I had in 1967 with an unemployed worker named Wesley as we sat together during a hot summer night on a stoop in Harlem. “The people I'm most scared of in all the world,” said Wesley, “are the Chinese. They're crazy! Like in the Korean War, when they would fight you, nothing would stop them. They would just come at you, wave after wave. They didn't care 'cause they were all hopped up with that opium shit.” Different versions of the same story were widespread among the middle class. When he was in high school, recalls Kenneth Prewitt, who later became head of the Social Science Research Council, China was part of a “map with a big red blob, representing the expansion of communism.” As Red menace, China could not be edged toward the path of modernization but had to be fought in a protracted cold war.

The other challenger to the troubled modernizer myth was the myth of China as revolutionary redeemer. This story was told mostly by the kinds of middle-class university students who decorated their apartments with posters of heroic workers and peasants and big pictures of Mao Zedong. In it, China — especially the Maoist China of the Cultural Revolution — represented a noble experiment that gave hope to all people in the world. For Americans reveling in defiant alienation, China provided hope for escape from the nightmare that the American Dream had become for them.

During the turbulent 1960s, these three master narratives contended for hegemony in American public opinion. By the early 1970s, the troubled modernizer story had won. How was that story created, and how did it eventually gain a central place in public discussion of China?

Religious Foundations

Proponents of the troubled modernizer story would say that its public acceptance was simply a triumph of social scientific reason over the irrational forces of ignorance and illusion. But the matter is not so simple. As with all master narratives, a strong nonrational component of belief and ritual went into its construction. In fact, an important force in its creation was religious.
This may come as a surprise, because in more recent years American public conversation about China has largely become secularized. The churches are only marginally involved in public discussion of U.S. foreign policy in East Asia. National debates about China today stress calculations of U.S. self-interest and perhaps promotion of "democratic values." Why was religion more central to the debate on China in the 1960s?

Part of the answer lies in the history of missionary activity by American Protestant churches in China. During the first half of the twentieth century, China had been a major focus of missionary work by the American churches, at a time when they were more central to public life than they are now. Some of the United States' most powerful elite families, including the Rockefellers and the LuceS, were deeply involved in the missionary effort. This effort was not devoted exclusively to religious faith; much of it aimed to cultivate in the Chinese an appreciation of the liberal values of science and democracy through the establishment of modern universities and hospitals. Many of the key diplomats who played roles in U.S.-China relations during the fateful decades preceding the establishment of the PRC (such as Leighton Stuart and John Service) were from missionary backgrounds, as were many of the journalists and scholars (Pearl Buck, Henry Luce, A. Doak Barnett, John Lindbeck) who played prominent roles in interpreting the Chinese experience for the American public.2

This history of missionary activity did not decisively influence views about what policies the United States should take toward China. The missionary legacy was one of profound ambivalence. The daily prayer book used by the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America (the Maryknoll Fathers) in the early 1960s included prayers that suggested the Chinese people were "sitting in darkness and the shadow of death" but also prayers casting China as a "field ripe for the harvest." In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the missionary movement had alternated between rosy predictions that China would before long "become like us" and bouts of angry damnation against a society that rejected Western beliefs. The liberal myth of China as troubled modernizer and the myth of China as Red menace were secularized versions of these optimistic and pessimistic missionary views.

People associated with the missionary cause could thus be found on all sides of the policy debate. On the right, one could find figures such as Walter Judd, the congressman from Minnesota who had started his career as a medical missionary and was the key figure in the "Committee of One Million" devoted to keeping Red China out of the United Nations. In the middle were figures such as Leighton Stuart, the former president of Yanjing University (the famous missionary institution in Beijing) and subsequently the U.S. ambassador to China during the Chinese civil war, who had championed a role for the noncommunist, non-nationalist middle class of liberals in China. Somewhat to the left were people such as John Stewart Service, foreign service officer and son of China missionaries, who, for his honest assessments of Communists' popularity in China in the 1940s, was denounced as a traitor by the McCarthyites during the 1950s.

A missionary background by no means led all people to similar conclusions, but it did impart a particular tone to the debate. It made the debate about China more emotional and more charged with moral concern than, say, the debate over political conflicts in Indonesia, where few American missionaries had served.3 Key participants in the discussion viewed China as a familiar place, where their fathers and mothers had invested enormous personal effort, where they themselves had grown up, where they had personal friends. Now China was led by people who had expelled the foreign missionaries and often cruelly persecuted many of those who had worked with them. Missionary organizations published books with titles such as Calvary in China.4

Such perspectives were shared by Americans not directly involved in the missionary effort. Their churches had taught them to care about China; it was not simply a place that had strategic significance. The debate about China was infused with sadness, anger, and dread. American effort seemed to have been wasted, American ideals rejected. Because of the legacy of religious contact, it was difficult for many Americans to argue dispassionately about China.

In fact, because of the legacy of the McCarthy era, it was difficult for them to argue publicly at all. Key targets of the McCarthy witch-hunts had been China experts, both in the State Department and in academic life. Brandishing the slogan "Who lost China?" McCarthy's followers destroyed the careers of diplomats such as Service and John Paton Davies and academicians such as historian Owen Lattimore. They harassed many other distinguished "China hands," notably John K. Fairbank, the Harvard historian who perhaps more than any other single individual shaped the field of academic China studies. Such people, it was alleged, had been sympathetic to Chinese communism and had used their influence to make the Communist victory possible.5

The effects of the McCarthy era lingered long after McCarthy's de-
mise. The Committee of One Million Against Admission of Red China into the United Nations, a powerful, well-funded (partially with money from Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government on Taiwan), and very effectively organized lobbying group, threatened the political lives of congressmen who opposed it and intimidated nonofficeholders by orchestrating a barrage of negative publicity against them. Any American who publicly struck anything even resembling an accommodating attitude toward the PRC risked his or her career.5

It was possible to advocate a more flexible policy toward China if one were an academic with tenure and did not aspire to having any influence on public policy. But for economic, political, and cultural elites to talk about China in a public forum with any hope of influencing U.S. foreign policy, a vehicle for collective action was needed. Someone who was respected yet did not have a lot to lose would have to take the lead in forming a broad-based coalition of citizens wishing to talk openly about U.S.-China policy. A group representing diverse interests would have to be united around broad moral concerns. The mainline churches were ideally suited for the role of establishing such a group.

Yet because of their missionary ties with China, many of the churches themselves were caught up in the partisan passions of the China debate. One religious body that was not so afflicted, however, was the Quakers. They had not been involved in seeking converts in China. They were centrally committed to promoting world peace and dedicated to reforming political systems. They were by and large accepted by the American establishment. Their small, quiet voice urging an end to conflict might not be heeded, but they were respected for making that voice heard. Though not of the establishment, like the Episcopalian or Presbyterian churches, they were hardly regarded as a sect on the fringes of American life. They were part of the mainstream—to an important extent in the establishment.7

Through their social action organization, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the Quakers became the catalyst for a new national dialogue on U.S.-China relations. As recounted in an unpublished history written by Robert Mang, a Quaker closely connected to the events, “In the spring of 1964, the American Friends Service Committee, through its national and regional Peace Committees, sought to establish a new set of program priorities for the coming two or three years. From these discussions and communications came two programs related to China. The national AFSC in Philadelphia convened a Work-

ing Party in September 1964 to analyze U.S.-China policy and recommend a set of proposals.”8

Around the same time, the Friends Committee on National Legislation invited Eugene Boardman, a China scholar from the University of Wisconsin, to come to Washington, D.C., to “stimulate interest in China and U.S. policy among members of Congress.”9 And the San Francisco AFSC asked Cecil Thomas, the associate peace secretary there, to develop a regional conference on China.

Academic Articulations

Entitled “An Institute on China Today,” the one-day conference was held in December 1964 in Sproul Hall at the University of California at Berkeley. It was jointly sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee, the World Affairs Council, and the UC Berkeley political science department. Speakers ranged from the fervently pro-PRC British journalist Felix Greene to Clare Booth Luce and Henry Luce, hostile critics of the People's Republic. A thousand people filled the hall to capacity, and another five hundred had to be turned away. Two northern California public television stations broadcast the conference, and the proceedings were widely reported in the press. The first large public dialogue on U.S. policy toward China was a huge success.10 Thus began a citizens movement to rethink that policy. Even though the conference took place in Berkeley, reported the London Economist, “its movers were not the ‘Vietnicks’ for which that university is notorious. Almost all were middle-class and middle-aged.”11

The chief organizers of the conference were a study in contrast. The instigator of the event was Cecil Thomas, the associate peace secretary of the AFSC and director of the Berkeley YMCA. The person who set the conference’s intellectual agenda was Robert Scalapino, a professor in the UC Berkeley political science department. An energetic, sophisticated scholar of East Asian politics, Scalapino played the worldly realist to Thomas's idealist. “Cecil,” Scalapino told me, “was one of those persons who loved to go around doing good. If I have a soft spot in my heart, it was for Cecil. . . . Over the years Cecil would call me about doing good for something and I would usually respond.” He continued, “Cecil and I really had very little in common. But I had general
sympathy with people who have no ax to grind yet who are involved in trying to make the world better. Cecil and I had very little in common other than the desire to do good."

The contrast between the two men, though, was a matter not only of personalities but also of institutional contexts. Scalapino was a professor of political science at a leading research university, one that was rapidly expanding into a prototype of the modern technocratically oriented "multiversity," a supplier of specialized information and expertise to industry and government. As the director of the Berkeley YMCA, Thomas was ministering to the moral and social needs of people connected with the university, needs the university itself no longer pretended to fulfill. The university provided knowledge; the surrounding community, through its families, churches, and voluntary associations, was somehow to take care of goodness. The kinds of people most successful in such a university were going to be different from those most successful in the YMCA and the AFSC.12

Yet the connection between the two kinds of institutions was closer in the mid-1960s than it is today. The connection was made not through any formal articulation of institutions but through personal affinities—affinities grounded in common moral understandings among those who were "middle-class and middle-aged." Three decades ago in the social science departments of leading research universities there were perhaps more professors like Scalapino who combined a broad general knowledge with a deep engagement in public affairs. Now, though such people are still found in universities, leading social science departments tend to privilege those swift in formulating theoretically elegant papers rather than those engaged in current public issues. (More hospitable environments for the latter are to be found in professional schools of public policy or in independent think tanks.)

At the same time, it is perhaps less common for individuals such as Cecil Thomas involved in "campus ministries" to productively collaborate with leading social science professors. Representatives of religious institutions tend either to be wholly concerned with the moral issues surrounding private life or, when concerned with public affairs, to take highly partisan approaches to them.13

Buoyed by the success of the Berkeley conference, Thomas and Scalapino undertook to organize a similar conference in Washington, D.C. Now on leave from his YMCA job and supported full-time by the AFSC, Thomas did most of the practical organizing for the event. According to Robert Mang, "Aided by numerous letters and telephone introductions to China scholars at various other universities and by an old friend and China scholar, Harry Kingman, Thomas set out for the East Coast in January 1965. Funded now by the national office of the AFSC, he travelled up and down the Atlantic seaboard, from Washington to New York to Boston to Philadelphia, meeting with scholars, potential sponsors, always willing advisors, and well-wishers, for a solid three months."14

The result of all this effort was more than an academic conference, more than an exchange of information and a debate among theories. It was a political ritual. In the words of Mang, it "was truly a political demonstration of the first order; yet no one took to the streets for longer than it took to walk from a cab to the front door of the Washington International Inn, where the National Conference on United States and China was held on April 28, 29, and 30, 1965."15

A ritual symbolically expresses and reaffirms an ideal pattern of social relations and helps impart a moral gravity to such relations. What was important about the 1965 National Conference on China was not so much what the participants said about Chinese politics as what American political values they expressed and reaffirmed by the very act of participating.

As ritual, the conference was decidedly "high church." Most of the other great political rituals of the time—the demonstrations of the civil rights movement, the "love-ins" of the hippie movement, or the angry marches of the antiwar movement—were "low church," condemning hierarchy, celebrating spontaneity, drawing sharp boundaries between themselves and a society rejected as corrupt. The National Conference on China, conversely, was a grand affirmation of the hierarchies of American life. In a letter written at the time to Edgar Snow, Cecil Thomas named some of the groups he tried to involve in the conference, including "the United Nations Association in New York City, the Council on Foreign Relations, members of the State Department, business leaders in the East, Dr. Andrew Corder, Dean of the School of International Affairs at Columbia University and former executive assistant to Trygve Lie and Dag Hammarskjöld, Professor Roger Hilsman at Columbia and former head of the Far Eastern Affairs Office at the State Department. . . ."16

Thomas secured a long list of participating organizations associated with business, labor, academia, and, not least, religion (including the Protestant National Council of Churches, the Catholic Association of International Peace, and the Union of American Hebrew Congrega-
tions). He established an advisory council that included prestigious leaders from each of these kinds of organizations: for instance, Jack Gomperts, president of the San Francisco World Trade Association; Victor Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers; Rabbi Hirsch of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. These advisory committee members were important as much for who they were as for what they could substantively contribute. As Mang put it, “Some of the advisory committee members . . . were quite active in the Conference planning; others such as Victor Reuther helped by allowing use of their names.”

The official sponsors of the conference were the American Friends Service Committee, Georgetown University, and American University’s School of International Service. Cecil Thomas called the representation of Georgetown “very significant because Georgetown is a very well-known Catholic University and considered very respectable, and some would even say conservative.”

Like an Episcopalian conference of bishops, the National Conference on China represented a corporate social world consisting of interlocking social orders organically connected at the top by duly ordained elites.

Thomas and his advisory committee took pains to assure that the diversity of the American public would be represented. Observes Mang:

The program brought together an extensive and wide range of expertise and viewpoints. Senators George McGovern and Peter H. Dominick, opposites in party affiliation and political stance on China, co-signed a letter of invitation to the Conference to their ninety-eight other colleagues in the U.S. Senate. The two Senators also shared a luncheon platform at the conference where they debated their disagreement about U.S.-China policy. China scholars from Harvard, U.C. Berkeley, the University of South Carolina, Cornell University and from the sponsoring universities, spoke from a variety of perspectives and opinions. The State Department sent Assistant Secretary of State, Harlan Cleveland, to participate in a colloquy on China and the U.N. with the Ambassador from the Republic of China on Taiwan. Any difference in their views was imperceptible. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Robert W. Barnett, joined in a discussion on travel and cultural exchanges with Mainland China. Several U.S. businessmen explored trade with Mainland China on a panel with Canadian businessmen who had firsthand experience.

What this gathering represented was a commitment to the principle of diversity itself, a belief in a free marketplace of ideas. Unlike the McCarthyites, the conference participants affirmed that diversity was safe, not something that threatened to fragment the liberal republic. It was safe because it was rational, comprising nothing more than the different opinions of professional experts; because it was deferential to the presti-

igious elites who had lent their names to the gathering; and because it was blessed by an assemblage of religious and civic bodies whose patriotism had been demonstrated for a long period of time. It was safe, in short, because it was not really too diverse. It was an affirmation of the social commitments of its generation’s middle-class and middle-aged.

Unlike the more unruly, Dionysian political rituals of the counterculture during the 1960s, the National Conference on China enjoyed the mass media’s blessing. The media were not just spectators of the event but concelebrants with it, helping to determine the nature of the event itself. Cecil Thomas made a major effort to ensure that the conference would attract wide press coverage. One ultimately unsuccessful strategy was to get the journalist Edgar Snow to address the conference. In his invitation to Snow, Thomas was very explicit about his objectives: “Our experts here tell us that if the kind of meeting can be held which makes a good story in the New York Times or the Washington Post then it is read by the members of Congress, their assistants, and by the leaders in the Administration. . . . [T]he combination of Edgar Snow and a variety of academic and business leaders from Canada and the United States makes for a total program that the press and other mass media will not ignore.”

The attempt to get Snow revealed one of the tensions implicit in the process of initiating a public dialogue about China. Snow would have been important to have at the conference because he was attractive to the media. He was one of the few Americans who had actually been to the People’s Republic of China, and he had firsthand knowledge of its leaders. But in the later part of his life, Edgar Snow had adopted a rather uncritical view of support for the Communist regime in China. Cecil Thomas seems generally to have agreed with many of Snow’s views. “It has not been my pleasure to meet you yet,” he wrote, “but I feel that I almost know you since we have sold many of your books over the years in California at our American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) conferences. Many times we wished you could be with us to be able to directly answer many of the misstatements we hear from the platform about the People’s Republic of China.” Yet academics who, like Robert Scalapino, considered themselves “centrist” were critical of Snow’s perspective. Scalapino and Thomas wanted a “balanced” conference—which meant one that would balance out to the centrist position. Scalapino’s self-described centrist speech was the last event of the conference. But the organizers also wanted a conference that would catch media attention, and that called for a keynote speaker like Edgar Snow with
strong opinions and fascinating personal experiences in China. Such a person might tilt the balance.

In the end, Snow was unable to attend (though he sent a written statement, mainly criticizing U.S. involvement in Vietnam rather than discussing U.S.-China relations). Even without him, the conference was widely reported on all over the nation. "The conference's objective," reported the New Republic, "was to stimulate attention on the problem, rather than to promote any particular viewpoint." 22 In this, it was indeed successful. The Nation reported that "the two days belonged to individuals and groups advocating some accommodation with Communist China" and closed its article by quoting from the mimeographed statement that Edgar Snow had sent from Switzerland. 23 However, most newspapers emphasized that the conference presented both sides of the argument about China, and several quoted Scalapino's centrist closing remarks:

Containment by isolation has not been successful and never can be successful. It only serves the cause of fanaticism in China. We ought to complicate decision making for the Chinese Communist leaders, as it would be complicated if they had multiple contacts with the international community.

It is time for us to say, "We will exchange scholars with you, we are interested in trade, we will accept you in the United Nations under certain circumstances." 24

Another theme in the newspaper reports was that the conference demonstrated "the need for far greater knowledge of the basic facts about China and all its ramifications." 25 Some papers bolstered this contention by reporting on a survey that had been taken, with AFSC support, the previous winter. The survey found that 28 percent of Americans did not know that mainland China was ruled by Communists. 26

The stated purposes of the national conference had been achieved: "to focus nationwide attention upon the problem of U.S.A.-China relations...to provide information on the subject and to stimulate thought so as to prepare the public for a more intelligent grasp of the problems that divide the two nations." 27 The conference had indeed started a public dialogue. Now, as Robert Mang put it, "China was an issue to be addressed out loud, not whispered with a glance over the shoulder." 28

In a letter to Edgar Snow, Cecil Thomas pointed out the enormous importance of initiating such a dialogue:

[1] If we do not have hearings to open up this dialogue we simply will keep on having more than 350 members of Congress signing these ridiculous Committee of One Million statements opposing the admission of China to the UN and opposing opening up any kind of relationship with China. We have talked to many of the Congressmen who have signed these statements and they say that until there is some public demonstration of real concern about re-examining and perhaps changing our relationships with China, it is political suicide for many of them not to let their names be used by the Committee of One Million. Obviously then, they feel that they cannot afford to do the more visible thing of making a major speech on U.S.-China relationships. 29

Constitution of a Liberal Center

The last sentence of Thomas's letter gives some sense of who the important parties were in the dialogue. They were not the 28 percent who did not know that China was ruled by Communists, nor were they "Vietniks." They were well-established, responsible leaders of major American institutions, "an assorted group of scholars, bureaucrats, ministers, Congressmen, newsmen, ladies and old China hands," as The Nation described the conference participants. 30 They were people who strove for orderly, balanced discussions based on reason and on the facts; who gave great deference to professional experts but could be a little swept away by celebrities, too; who respected religious convictions as long as they were not fanatical; and who were used to having their convictions make some difference in the world of public affairs. They represented the cultural center of American society.

It was a center constituted not so much by common economic and political interests as by common moral values, common conceptions of the good life. Although the material self-interests of the business leaders, labor leaders, academics, clergy, and government bureaucrats attending the conference might have differed, all shared an interest in maintaining a particular kind of life based upon the multidimensional value of freedom—freedom of enterprise, of conscience, of speech. This is the syndrome of values that constitutes liberalism, which I define broadly, in the words of William Sullivan, as "the philosophy of government that has dominated political discourse in modern America" and the "general cast of mind found throughout the society and typical of much of American culture." Shared not only by most "liberal" Democrats but also by
most self-styled "conservative" Republicans, liberalism so defined is a way of thinking that sees the American Dream as individual success and personal self-expression within a competitive economy. This central way of life was now under assault, perhaps even in danger of crumbling. And one occasion for the assaults was what had happened in faraway China—Communist China, as nearly everyone called it in those days.

The United States was locked in a cold war to defend the "free world" against communism. There was extremely broad consensus within the United States that this cold war was necessary because communism was a mortal enemy of freedom. Almost all of the "middle-class and middle-aged" Americans who attended the Institute on China Today and the National Conference on China would have agreed with that proposition. But they were concerned about some of the means being used to combat communism.

Their chief concern sprang from the domestic terrors of the McCarthy era. Did the fight against communism in the name of freedom require the destruction of freedom in the United States? Would fear of communism engender a collective paranoia that would lead to witch-hunts against innocent people? Would that not endanger the freedom of self-expression that American elites had claimed was central to their way of life? The common goal of the diverse people who organized and participated in the National Conference on China and similar dialogues in the 1960s was not to accept the validity of Chinese communism but to contain and ultimately defeat it. However, they wanted to do so in ways that were better rooted in the American commitment to freedom, as they saw it.

Their hopes of defeating communism in a way consistent with the liberties of an open society were threatened not only by the dying embers of McCarthyism but by the rising flames of controversy about the Vietnam War. The new dialogue on China included many people, like Robert Scalapino, who recommended an escalation of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964. For much that they believed in, that involvement was starting to turn into a disaster—not in the jungles of Indochina but in the streets of the United States. Domestic controversy over Vietnam was starting to destroy the foundations of civil discourse. The opportunity for a new dialogue on China gave them a glimmer of hope that rational, factually based discussion about Asian affairs among responsible, self-disciplined people could still overcome the confusion created by bitter polarization.

Perhaps this hope explains the tremendous response from individuals across the country to the opportunity to talk about China. In the words of Robert Mang, "the sparks from the 800 people who attended the National Conference continued to show up here and there across the nation even after the press died down, and these sparks grew into campfire-size discussions needing more information and speakers." The League of Women Voters and the American Association of University Women produced reading lists for their study projects on modern China. A series of conferences was held in the Midwest. Many requests for help in setting up local conferences came to Cecil Thomas, who had returned to his work with the AFSC in San Francisco.

This intellectual effervescence popularized the story of China as troubled modernizer. Of course, the speakers who lectured at the various conferences and wrote the books and articles that ended up on the burgeoning reading lists differed widely in their views. But their presentations generally fell within a common narrative framework, a framework nicely laid out by leading academic experts on Chinese affairs in testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, chaired by Senator J. William Fulbright, in 1966.

In that story line, China was a complicated society driven by several different impulses. First of all, it was a revolutionary society—this indeed was what was wrong with it. As a revolutionary society, it featured a totalitarian social order led by radical ideologues who practiced unremitting class warfare, favored equality over efficiency in economic matters, wanted to impose a uniform set of revolutionary values on the population through propaganda, pursued grandiose but eventually futile social experiments such as the Great Leap Forward, and dreamt of exporting their brand of revolution around the world.

But viewing China solely as a Red menace that threatened the free world was too simplistic. China was basically a modernizing society, and successful modernization eventually would mean the abandonment of revolutionary values. Robert Scalapino testified before the Fulbright Committee that "there is a growing struggle which in its essence poses the primitivism implicit in Maoist political-military doctrines against the professionalism that is implicit in the whole modernization program." If China were not excessively forced on the defensive by outside pressure, this moderate, pragmatic element would come to the fore. Chinese society would then become more orderly, predictable, and humane than it was at present.

Another set of impulses came from Chinese cultural traditions. China was accustomed to seeing itself as the Middle Kingdom, cultural center
of Asia and indeed of the world. Its pride had been grievously injured by the aggression of imperialist powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and this wounded pride, combined with a traditional sense of cultural superiority, had produced a potent nationalism. It was in China’s national interest to protect itself from external threats and to trumpet the glories of its way of life around the world. But it was not in its national interest to engage in military adventures far from its borders. China’s traditional culture, moreover, gave it a repertoire of behavioral styles that differed from those of the West and were easy for the West to misunderstand. For instance, Lin Biao’s talk about spreading “people’s war” around the world did not mean the same thing it would mean if uttered by a Westerner. As John Fairbank put it in his testimony, “in the Chinese cultural scene, there is a different function performed by words”; words such as Lin Biao’s were more like a ritual expression of doctrine than a real predictor of future conduct.35

In such a rendition, the China story was not simply about the rise of a mighty enemy that challenged the United States in the Pacific but also about a nation with many contradictory impulses trying to find its way to a better future. The Chinese Communists represented these diverse popular impulses, a mixture of good and bad. The revolution had not simply been an unrelieved disaster for the Chinese people; it had produced some genuine benefits along with human tragedies (the balance between the two was, of course, a matter of great debate). If the United States opened economic, cultural, and even diplomatic relationships with China, some of the better impulses would come to the fore. The United States had to contain Chinese communism by the threat of military force, but such pressure might have the self-defeating effect of inflaming some of the most fanatical, nationalistic passions among the Chinese people. If Americans balanced military containment with renewed communication, the better angels of Chinese nature might prevail.

If China were to become integrated through diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchange with the world system, testified Doak Barnett, the “technical bureaucrats” would be strengthened.36 The process would also, as John Fairbank put it, be “therapeutic” for the Chinese leadership:

How to get the Peking leadership into the international order, instead of their trying to destroy it according to their revolutionary vision, is primarily a psychological problem. Therapy for Peking’s present, almost paranoid, state of mind must follow the usual lines of therapy: it must lead the rulers of China gradually into different channels of experience until by degrees they reshape their picture of the world and their place in it.

The remolding of Chairman Mao, the greatest remolder of others in history, is not something I would advocate as feasible. But I think it is high time we got ourselves ready to deal with his successors and their successors in years ahead.

In practice this means getting Peking into a multitude of activities abroad. China should be included in all international conferences, as on disarmament, and in international associations, both professional and functional, in international sports, not just ping-pong, and in trade with everyone, including ourselves, except for strategic goods. One thinks naturally of the U.N. agencies and participation in the Security Council as well as the Assembly. Yet all this can come only step by step, with alteration all the way—not an easy process but a lot more constructive than warfare.37

What would a better future for a place like China be? What would be a happy ending to the emerging new China story? China would become a society governed by “technical bureaucrats” who acted “pragmatically” rather than “ideologically.” Ideology told them that salvation lay in “continuous revolution” and in confrontation with the power of American imperialism. Pragmatism was founded in reason rather than belief; it simply entailed facing facts. There were laws of economic development and political survival to which every society had to conform if it was to prosper. These laws required accepting the rules of a market economy and cooperating with the structures of power established by the United States. As long as the Chinese leaders someday faced facts, their political economy would become like ours, only a little poorer. China’s culture, however, would remain distinctively Chinese.

Such is a sketchy but I think basically accurate overview of the testimony of Barnett, Fairbank, Scalapino, Benjamin I. Schwartz, John M. H. Lindbeck, and Alexander Eckstein before the Fulbright Committee. The views of these scholars were central to the new national public dialogue that had been sparked by the work of Scalapino and Cecil Thomas. At the Fulbright hearings, however, there were several other prominent figures—Walter Judd and George Taylor among them—who represented the Red menace view of China, which these mainstream liberal scholars were trying to supplant. Taylor ridiculed Fairbank’s notion that the Chinese leadership might be changed by the “therapy” of induction into a world community. According to Taylor, there was no world community... into which we can induce the Chinese to enter. Unfortunately we live in a world in which there are at least two violently opposed concepts of international relations, of political and social organization, and of
world order. The dialog between them is still minimal. . . . The agrarian reformers of the forties are now the aging paranoids of the sixties, to be handled, it would seem, by group therapy. If they were really nationalists masquerading as Communists, then their tradition as well as the humiliations of nineteenth-century imperialism would be relevant to their mood, but in my view the Communists represent a complete break with the past. Their world view is not conditioned by the imperial past, although they are willing to exploit it. . . . There is nothing about Chinese nationalism that calls for the hate campaign of the Chinese Communists against the United States, for the militarization of a quarter of the people of the earth, for the racial invective that pervades so much of their propaganda . . . or for the support of revolutionary movements in southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America.  

For Judd, the worst thing about the Chinese Communists was their attempt to destroy the "civilized" character of the Chinese people:

[I] have a great respect and affection for the Chinese people because they are a highly civilized people. They have good manners, they are mature, and have a rich mellow culture. They have been trained that way for centuries. But you know . . . that people are what they are taught to be, and the Communists are perfectly sure that, given time, they can change these qualities of the Chinese. . . . So my concern about the Chinese is primarily for our own country. If the Chinese are free and friendly, as they would be if they were free, there is no insoluble problem in Asia.  

By the early 1970s, the views of people such as Taylor and Judd, definitely a minority position in the 1966 Senate hearings, were destined to fall to the margins of influential public discourse. But in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, it has again become fashionable to argue that Taylor and Judd were in fact correct and that the views of the liberal center were tragically misguided. As Miriam London put it in an article written after the Tiananmen massacre, the China portrayed by the center was a fantasy created mainly by credulous, opportunistic scholars:

The fictional land created by these China experts cannot be blamed on insufficient information at the time. The so-called bamboo curtain made information about the real China difficult but not at all impossible to obtain. For all their bristling academic credentials, the fact is that the China experts did not wish to know — but to believe. Like some Soviet experts before them, on whom they cast no backward glance, they were practitioners of the intellectual pseudo-faith of the century, dreaming up the City of Perfect Justice on earth. The bamboo curtain was indeed essential to the believing Sinologists, freeing them to elaborate their fantasies (in their esoteric way, with footnotes) unconcerned by the intrusion of messy reality or the possibility of verification on the scene.  

Are London and critics like her correct? I agree that the story told over the past quarter-century by those she calls the "China experts" was a fiction. But every story about any complex society is to some degree a fiction. Our knowledge of history is gathered within history. In the human sciences, we can never attain the total objectivity claimed by natural scientists because we can never completely stand apart either from our own society or the world we are studying. The stories told by Judd, Taylor, and Miriam London and her colleagues are fictions, too. But some fictions are truer than others. In the context of the late 1960s, the stories told by the leading China experts who appeared before the Fulbright Committee were truer than those of their rivals. 

The story told by what I have called the liberal center was truer because it led American society to a better self-understanding, a better grasp of the moral dilemmas implicit in its relationship to China. Scholars of the liberal center were not just sitting in ivory towers and absorbing as much information as possible about China. They were engaged in debate with fellow Americans who portrayed the brutalities of Chinese communism to increase American self-righteousness and paranoia in the cold war. The right wing exaggerated the unity of the Chinese Communist leaders and the gulf between the Communist Party and society. In correcting these exaggerations, the liberal center was pushed into exaggerations of its own. In its rhetoric, it underemphasized the tragic depths of cruelty the Chinese revolution had brought upon the Chinese people, and it overestimated the potential of technical reason to bring peace and prosperity to China. 

Still, the story told by the liberal center paved the way for a more constructive relationship between the United States and China than that advocated by the right wing — a relationship based not purely on hostility and fear but also on a modicum of cooperation and mutual understanding. Yet precisely because of its success in allowing the United States to achieve a more relaxed, less bellicose, and more mutually beneficial relationship with China, the story about China told by the liberal center took on a life of its own. It failed to change in accordance with a changing reality. After a quarter-century it has become a hindrance rather than a help in achieving a deeper understanding of China and a deeper understanding of ourselves.

The liberal center's China story did not grow out of the credulity or opportunism of individual China scholars, as Miriam London would have it. It grew out of the commitment of certain scholars, journalists, policymakers, and concerned citizens to maintain the peculiar mix of
liberty and order that constituted their major institutions. One can
discern their vision of the United States and the nature of their commit-
ment not only in the books and articles they wrote and the speeches
they gave but also in the organizations they created to disseminate and
implement their views. By the late 1960s and early 1970s there had
formed three major national organizations aimed at preparing the way
for economic, cultural, and political ties with China: the National Com-
mittee on U.S.-China Relations; the Committee on Scholarly Commu-
nication with Mainland China (later renamed the Committee on Schol-
arly Communication with the People's Republic of China); and the
National Council on U.S.-China Trade. Each of these had a somewhat
different mission and emphasized different interests, but all justified
their work on the basis of the story of China as troubled modernizer. Let
us take for example the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations.

The National Committee on
U.S.-China Relations

To continue the momentum begun by the National Con-
ference on China, to provide resource materials for continuing confer-
ences, and to keep the China issue before the press, there was a need for
an ongoing organization. The San Francisco regional office of the AFSC
gave Cecil Thomas a mandate to develop such an organization, which
came to be called the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations.
Once again, Thomas called upon Scalapino to help him. Scalapino re-
ruited old friends Doak Barnett and Lucien Pye, both of whom had
spent their youth in China in missionary families and become political
scientists specializing in China. Thomas lined up several supporters
from the San Francisco business establishment, such as the president of
the San Francisco Trade Association and the chairman of Levi Strauss.

A national committee on an issue as important as U.S.-China rela-
tions would have to be in close touch with the centers of culture, wealth,
and power in the United States—which at that time meant it had to
have close ties with the elites of the East Coast. Thomas went east look-
ing for such support and found it in people such as Joseph E. Johnson,
president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and
chairman of the National Policy Panel of the United Nations Associa-
tion; Everett Case, president of the Sloan Foundation; Benjamin But-
tenweiser; limited partner of Kuhn, Loeb and Co.; David Hunter, de-
puty general secretary of the National Council of Churches; Robert
Gilmore, a Quaker who was president of the Center for War/Peace
Studies; Eustace Seligman, partner of Sullivan and Cromwell; and Carl
Stover—all representatives of "substantial business, foundation and or-
ganizational communities on the Atlantic Seaboard." There was
sufficient support from this eastern establishment to justify locating the
headquarters of the proposed national committee not in San Francisco
but in New York.

Together with a steering committee and considerable help from Scal-
apino, Thomas drafted a statement of purpose for the committee and a
list of persons to be invited to founding membership. The statement
went through multiple revisions before attaining its final form:

The National Committee on United States China Relations believes that we
urgently need a public discussion of our current China policy: the basic issues,
present problems, and possible alternatives. Such a discussion is essential in
terms of our national interest and the peace and security of the world. . . .

The Committee—representing a wide variety of Americans in public life
from business, labor, religious, academic and nongovernmental organizations—
exists to encourage and facilitate a nationwide educational program on United
States China relations. The Committee where proper and feasible will assist con-
cerned organizations and individuals in such an educational effort.

We do not intend to advocate any policy proposals, but are hopeful that out
of a national dialogue on the subject there will emerge a consensus as to whether
any modifications in our existing policies are desirable.

We urge all Americans, who share our belief that public discussion and in-
creased knowledge and understanding of U.S. China [sic] relations are needed,
to join with us in this effort.

The response to the letter of invitation came more quickly than ex-
pected. By June 1966, sixty people from the list of about a hundred
invitees had accepted. On June 9, the inaugural membership meeting of
the national committee took place in the directors' room of the Sloan
Foundation in Manhattan. Scalapino was appointed chairman, David
Hunter of the National Council of Churches was named vice chairman,
and Cecil Thomas became executive director. That afternoon, at an in-
ternational press conference, the founders announced the formation of
the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations to the world.

In the rules through which it chose its members and conducted its
business, the National Committee embodied a liberal vision of the
American politics. Only one class of Americans was formally excluded:
officials of the federal government. They were barred, it was explained,
so that the committee could “function as a completely private institution.” Yet in its initial statement of purpose, the committee described itself as “representing a wide variety of Americans in public life.” It was a “completely private” institution insofar as it did not represent the interests of political officeholders, but it was public in that it represented the voices of independent citizens. It was the embodiment of an ideal liberal image of the American polity: a diverse, democratic society in which citizens governed themselves by deliberating about public affairs and making their views known to the state.

Even as it represented itself as inclusive, though, the National Committee was set up as an exclusive organization. Membership was at first limited to only about sixty people. The size was kept small to facilitate the active participation of members. According to an early brochure, this small body of participants, consisting of a “group of prominent Americans, representative of industry, the academic world, the professions, labor, the churches, and of the nation’s major geographic areas,” was supposed to represent the United States as a whole. These categories manifested the multidimensional nature of American pluralism. The United States was portrayed as divided into functional sectors (industry, education, religion), social classes (the professions, management, and labor), and geographic regions. There could, of course, have been other ways of cataloging the diversity of American society—for instance, according to ethnic divisions. The committee might have explicitly said that it was going to include prominent Americans representing the Asian-American community as well as whites, blacks, and Hispanics. In internal memos among the committee’s leaders at various times, there was some concern that Chinese-American members be included. (The original list of members included one: Professor Tsou Tang of the University of Chicago.) The general stance suggested by the committee’s public characterization of itself, however, was that such racial divisions did not represent the United States, or for that matter the world.

The committee also characterized itself as strictly nonpartisan. It was not to be a lobbying group advocating one particular point of view but rather a forum for the expression of a full range of views. “Nonpartisan” did not simply mean “bipartisan.” (I once referred to the committee as “bipartisan” to a member of its staff and was quickly corrected.) “Nonpartisan” meant being above politics, above the struggles and unprincipled compromises of organized interest groups. Instead, the National Committee was to reach for a general consensus about national purpose.43

How could such a small group of unelected persons formulate an expression of the national interest? The process of active deliberation among well-informed, prestigious citizens representing a full spectrum of views was supposed to lead to an objective understanding of a controversial issue, which would commend itself on its own merits to opinion makers and decisionmakers for the society as a whole. As Robert Mang put it: “The Committee’s major, if not only claim to legitimacy, as a new organization in a highly controversial field, was the respectability and the widely representative nature of its membership list. Without a roster that included a credible political spectrum, the Committee’s claims to neutrality were open to challenge; without a position of non-advocacy, such a spectrum was unlikely to be obtained.”44

The National Committee, then, was officially constituted in such a way as to represent the American body politic. It was to be a community of diverse individuals who came together to seek an objective understanding of the facts about China through open discussion in a neutral forum. In reality, though, this formally inclusive polity of rational, free, diverse individuals was made possible because of informal rules for limiting diversity and constraining uninhibited free expression. Mang’s history of the National Committee was candid about this point.

It should be noted that “broad political spectrum” was never meant to include those on the extreme right or left. (As can be imagined, some interesting discussions took place on where one draws the line.) This was dictated by the conclusion that neither the Committee’s proposed audience of opinion and policy makers, nor its proposed list of prestigious members, would be comfortable with members of either political extreme. It was felt that to ask people who were jealous of their reputations to stand out on a controversial issue was the limit of what could be asked successfully. The fact that membership was invitational provided control.45

A society of free people, by this admission, is coherent and effective only if it does not contain people who are immoderate, who are too bound up with moral (“emotional,” in the parlance of the academics connected with the National Committee) considerations to carry out reasonable discussions on the basis of the facts. This commitment to moderation, however, is a commitment to particular social circles, particular kinds of friends sharing a particular lifestyle. It entails an ability to discern through “interesting discussions” who fits and who does not.

In this centrist understanding of American society, the open discussion of public issues upon which a democratic government is supposed to be based also depends on a commitment not to speak about every-
thing, to bracket issues upon which agreement cannot be reached. In the early period of the National Committee, such an issue was Vietnam. Wrote Robert Mang:

Perhaps because the staff [i.e., the Mangs and Cecil Thomas] and Scalapino were, from before their Committee association, on opposite sides of the Vietnam issue, it was clear from early on that a “gentleman’s agreement” not to use China to argue about Vietnam was essential. This also led to the exclusion from potential membership of any non-specialist who had become too publically tied to a strong position on Vietnam (Dr. Spock being one example).

The importance here was not the issue of Vietnam—it could have been Republican Spain or the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, depending on the era—but that it was seen as essential to steer as clear as possible of any extraneous controversial issues that could cloud the focus and cause disharmony within the Committee ranks. The organizers agreed to this unanimously, and successfully maintained the discipline of it throughout.46

“Discipline” was an important theme in Robert Mang’s history of the early days of the National Committee. Discipline was needed not only to keep the committee from getting sucked into the swirling passions of the Vietnam debate but also to steer it clear of the destructive remnants of the McCarthy debate. “It must not be forgotten,” Mang wrote, that for all the men and women who signed the committee roster, but particularly for those in the China field, the blight of the McCarthy years was a vivid memory. Though rarely, if ever, mentioned openly, it is difficult to believe that some thought of what such a list would have meant to their careers fifteen years before did not cross their minds as they each made their decision to join. If, at times, a certain paranoia seemed to creep into the evaluation and re-evaluation of every name proposed for membership, of every statement and publication going out in the Committee’s name, it was understandable in light of this unhappy heritage. On the positive side, however, this extra caution, which might otherwise not have existed to such a degree, was an important daily discipline for maintaining an unassailable neutral posture.47

Where did this discipline come from? It was not based on a simple consensus on values. Key members of the organizing group differed sharply on important national issues and in their professional commitments and religious affiliations. What they shared were character traits common among the “middle-class and middle-aged” of the time: self-discipline, a preference for rational argument rather than emotional confrontation, a desire to improve the world through moderate reform rather than radical upheaval.

These shared character traits were necessary but not sufficient for the effective cooperation of the founders of the National Committee. Also important were the trust and mutual understanding built up by the organizers through years of personal acquaintanceship. By the time they had established the National Committee, they had already been working together for several years on the China question. As Robert Mang put it, “There was a basis of trust based on the kind of judgment each had displayed to the other over the years... Until the Committee took on a publicly defined shape, a mutual confidence and trust among organizing members and staff that each knew what needed to be done and how to do it, was almost essential.”48

At its inception, then, the National Committee was grounded in a particular set of unspoken moral assumptions and practices, which in turn facilitated and were enhanced by bonds of trust among the group of friends who founded it. These particular assumptions contradicted the committee’s public assertions of absolute neutrality, total inclusiveness, and openness to all points of view. There were definite limits (though unwritten and often unspoken) on who could become a member of the National Committee and who could participate in its forums.

The existence of limits did not appear to the founders of the National Committee as hypocritical. It was simply a commonsensical, realistic condition for carrying out a dialogue on China free of “emotionalism,” the horizon of taken-for-granted, nonrational faith that typically encloses American assertions about the power of reason. This open-ended commitment to rational discussion was consistent with the committee founders’ own particular convictions about what the truth actually was. Although the formal purpose of the committee was to discuss different viewpoints about China, observed Mang, “the founding staff members, without exception, and most of the original organizing group, favored a change in policy leading to a ‘normalization’ of relations with the People’s Republic of China.” They believed that “the truth will out, if only the truth can be exposed and heard.”49

This analysis of the structure and operating practices of the National Committee suggests that the story it told was as much about the United States as about China.46 The idea that China was a complicated society full of diverse individuals is the centrist perception of American society, in contrast to the right-wing perception that there was a conflict between a large mass of red-blooded, patriotic citizens and a small but dangerous minority of crypto-Communists. The idea that China would make progress if it followed the laws of economic and political development corresponded to the idea that the United States had advanced by
following just such laws under the guidance of reasonable, scientifically trained experts.

Corresponding to the values of most of those near the top of major American institutions — universities, mainline churches, major corporations, government bureaucracies — this liberal master story about China had a powerful chance of dominating American discourse about China, as long as Chinese society acted in a way that would seem to corroborate it. But in the late 1960s, China was in the throes of the Cultural Revolution, which seemed to contradict everything the liberal center wanted to believe. Revolutionary Redness, not reformist expertise, was the order of the day in China. This contradiction between the story the American liberal center wanted to tell and the realities of China helped make the liberal center vulnerable to a new attack, this time from the left.

China as Revolutionary Redeemer

The story that developed in the late 1960s on the left was that China was, as one advocate recalls, "the redeemer revolution. There was a profound impulse to idealize it, to say that everything about it was progressive and perfect." This revolutionary redeemer nation was the leader in the struggles of the world's poor and oppressed against U.S. imperialism and monopoly capitalism. The Cultural Revolution was a grand experiment in creating a more just society, one that eliminated inequality and achieved authentic participatory democracy, a society in which the aspirations of masses and leaders were unified under the charismatic leadership of Mao Zedong, a society that overcame divisions between mental and manual labor, between moral Redness and technical expertise. This was a China that was rewriting the laws of economic and political development and showing the United States and the West the way toward a more humane future.

Today, no Americans believe this story except small political sects — the Revolutionary Spartacus League, perhaps. But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this view was widespread among university-educated Americans who identified themselves with "progressive causes," especially with the anti-Vietnam War movement. Like the story about China told by the liberal center, the left's story about China was also a story about America, and it gained its popularity from its resonance with widespread concerns with the moral dilemmas of American institutions.

The most visible new national organization advocating a radical rethinking of East Asian policy was the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS), founded in 1968. Most of its core members were graduate students in East Asian studies who were also caught up in the antiwar movement.

"CCAS was post-Port Huron, post-SDS," says Marilyn Young, who was an early active member of the organization and eventually an editor of its bulletin. "SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] was basically focused on American domestic issues; CCAS was concerned with anti-imperialism." Like the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, the CCAS had its origins in a conference — in this case, a "Vietnam caucus" held during the 1968 annual convention of the Association of Asian Studies in Philadelphia. The immediate purpose of the Vietnam caucus was to provide a forum for Asian scholars to speak out en masse against the war, but it ended up launching an evaluation of the professional "conscience" of Asian scholars. The CCAS was formed as a vehicle for this purpose.

Its primary stated objective, like the National Committee's, was educational: "The CCAS seeks to develop a humane and knowledgeable understanding of Asian societies and their efforts to maintain cultural integrity and to confront such problems as poverty, oppression, and imperialism. We realize that to be students of other peoples, we must first understand our relations to them." 61 However, the form of education the CCAS espoused was different from that attempted by the National Committee. In many respects, its ways of envisioning public education, China, and U.S. foreign policy were the exact opposite of the National Committee's. As with the National Committee, the CCAS's visions of U.S.-Asian relationships were expressed in the very form of the organization.

The National Committee was avowedly elitist, a group of prominent Americans chosen by invitation. By contrast, membership in the CCAS was open to everyone willing to pay the $5 annual dues ("$10 for those with greater resources") and to agree to the statement of purpose. Prospective members did not have to be professional Asian scholars (although unless they had some commitment to teaching and writing about East Asia, they would not have subscribed to its purposes). Most of the founding members were graduate students or junior faculty members at major research universities such as Harvard, Columbia, Michigan, Berkeley, and Stanford; but many later members were "independent scholars" who had dropped out of graduate school or failed to
get tenure. The most important qualification for membership was not a socially conferred distinction but a voluntary commitment to a common statement of purpose.

Unlike the National Committee, the CCAS thus made no pretension at all of political neutrality. By its own description, it was a "scholarly/political organization." Its statement of purpose began: "We first came together in opposition to the brutal aggression of the United States in Vietnam and to the complicity or silence of our profession with regard to that policy. We are concerned about the present unwillingness of specialists to speak out against the implications of an Asian policy committed to ensuring American domination of much of Asia. We reject the legitimacy of this aim, and attempt to change this policy."73

Whereas the National Committee made an effort to isolate discussion of U.S.-China policy from discussion of Vietnam, the whole purpose of the CCAS was predicated on a conviction that U.S. relations with East Asia had to be seen as a whole, of which the most morally illuminating part was U.S. policy toward Vietnam. The National Committee sought to carry out an objective debate based on expert knowledge and thus "devoid of emotionalism"; the CCAS embraced moral passion, the passion of young people who faced the real possibility of being sent to fight in a war they did not believe in.

Whereas the National Committee attempted to represent all major segments of American society, the CCAS claimed to speak for only one segment: the victims of poverty and oppression. "Like so many white groups in the anti-war movement," wrote Jim Peck, one of the most articulate voices in the organization, "we came to political awareness on the backs of the Vietnamese and the blacks. Without their success in beginning our liberation, CCAS would have little prospect of being anything else than an intellectual ornament, a gadfly and a way station for those on their way to fulfilling more important 'professional' obligations."74 The National Committee described itself as national, but the CCAS described itself as international. It aimed to bring together Americans involved in anti-imperialist struggle with those oppressed by imperialism around the world.

The National Committee claimed to be "completely private" and above politics because it included no officeholders in its membership and received no money from the government. Conversely, the CCAS boasted of being engaged in politics despite including no officeholders and receiving no government money. The "Statement of Directions" published in the first issue of the CCAS Newsletter (later called the CCAS Bulletin) declared: "Politically, we submit that Asian scholars are, in fact, involved in politics, that we acknowledge this, and that we address ourselves to the issues of how we are going to be political."75

The liberal ideals enshrined in the National Committee's constitutive documents rested on unspoken moral understandings, which set practical limits on the realization of those ideals. The same was true for the CCAS. However, these unspoken understandings worked in opposite directions in the two cases. The National Committee stressed pluralism but in fact limited the diversity of its members; the CCAS stressed commitment to a common objective, but its membership was in fact more diverse than the organization's statement of purpose might have indicated. Although most students of contemporary Asian studies at the nation's major campuses joined, they varied in how thoroughly they believed in the part of the statement of purpose that read: "We recognize that the present structure of the profession has often perverted scholarship and alienated many people in the field."76 Many of them in fact would eventually go into established positions in that profession.

As time went on, there were sharp debates within the CCAS on many issues, including how to evaluate the Chinese revolution and what kind of policy toward China to advocate. As with most leftist organizations during the 1960s, these debates were much harsher, more emotional, and more overtly moralistic than those carried out in associations such as the National Committee. Yet the CCAS did not break apart.

What held it together was a kind of bonding resembling that found in the National Committee: bonds of trust and understanding built up through close interaction among people of a common social class and generation. However, whereas the National Committee was mainly an organization of the "middle-class and middle-aged," the CCAS was mainly an organization of the middle-class and the young. Remembers Marilyn Young, "We talked about how old people were, the music they listened to, whether they smoked dope or not."

The main experience they shared was a sense of alienation from their faculty mentors. Part of this was due to graduate students' dependence on their mentors throughout the American academic system. In the field of contemporary Asian studies in the 1960s, that dependency was even greater than it is now. The field of contemporary Chinese studies was relatively new; it had only recently begun to expand rapidly because of funding from the Ford Foundation and the National Defense Education Act (which provided scholarships for study of languages, such as Chinese and Vietnamese, that were considered important for American
national security). Most of the research money was funneled through a handful of senior professors, including John Fairbank at Harvard, Doak Barnett of Columbia, and Robert Scalapino at Berkeley, all of whom knew each other and cooperated closely. If a certain mentor had a low opinion of a particular student, word would travel quickly among the small circle of senior figures, and the student might have a hard time getting a job. (In its early years the National Committee maintained a speakers’ bureau on Chinese affairs. In connection with this purpose, it created a central file of almost all China scholars, including graduate students, who might be potential speakers. The entries for graduate students and junior scholars included comments by their senior mentors on their academic promise and political judiciousness.) Experiences of dependency are usually powerful incubators for the seeds of resentment.

To this resentment must be added the general anger felt by 1960s youth against their elders, intensified especially by the fear that the youth were being asked to die in a war the elders had started. The specific dependency of graduate school resonated with a more general feeling of being dependent on a dangerous political system created by the earlier generation. The revolt against such dependency was carried out in the name of the freedom that America was supposedly all about.

The notion that China was a revolutionary redeemer seemed to make sense in terms of the moral experience of young Americans in this situation. It helped them give voice to some of the contradictions they perceived in their country. American institutions promised freedom but demanded discipline, and the rules of discipline worked to the advantage of those at the top of the hierarchies rather than those at the bottom. In the Cultural Revolution, China seemed to be promising liberation from such oppressive institutional constraints. It seemed to give American youth something to hope for.

From what we now know about life in China during the Cultural Revolution, it is clear that the China story told by the American new left in the 1960s was a fiction, even further removed from reality than the stories told by the right and the liberal center. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, though, the left’s story could seem very plausible to intelligent, serious young people who prided themselves on being well informed and critically rational, subjecting what they wanted to believe to tests of the facts. Information coming out of China was very meager and hard to interpret. If one read the available documents, one would receive a huge dose of propaganda about the Cultural Revolution. To get an inkling of what was happening to ordinary people in China, one had to search out tiny scraps of information buried within the propaganda, a task requiring cultural and linguistic skills beyond the reach of the vast majority of Western scholars. Even when it was within their reach, any conclusions drawn from such shards were bound to be speculative and tentative. In the anti-authoritarian climate of the 1960s, younger scholars mistrusted senior scholars who might have been able to extract such information. Indeed, the polarization of the era sometimes pushed them to believe just the opposite of what their mentors told them. The young scholars ingested huge quantities of propaganda, which they wanted to believe anyway and against which they were defenseless. They accused more experienced China experts of building out of extremely ambiguous evidence a speculative picture of the possibilities of China’s modernization while ignoring vivid tales of revolutionary aspiration staring them in the face.

Social Fictions and the Limits of Understanding

By the end of the 1960s, then, Americans were faced with three main competing master narratives about the direction of Chinese history, stories grounded in different understandings Americans had about the crisis within their own institutions.

For all their differences, though, the stories shared certain common limitations grounded in the structure of American society itself. They all postulated that both China and the United States, as different as they were, could fit into a universal model of the good society. Right-wing spokesmen such as Walter Judd assumed that most Chinese were “free and friendly people,” presumably like Americans, and that they would manifest these virtues once they were liberated from the wicked Communists. Left-wing utopians like those associated with the early days of the CCAS believed that the Chinese had developed a universal model for revolution that was applicable to all countries, even one as different from China as the United States. And the liberal center assumed that there were universal laws of economic and political development that China would have to follow eventually.

These were the assumptions of a superpower culture, of a society that aspired to unite the whole world under its leadership and saw itself locked in deadly competition with a Communist rival that claimed to
do the same. As U.S. hegemony has waned in the past generation, these axioms are starting to be questioned. Now that nobody believes that Leninist communism is a path to the good society, perhaps we can entertain the idea that American-style liberalism isn't for everybody, either. Perhaps there are different paths to a good society.

The three stories of China also took for granted a high degree of national unity, not only for China but also for the United States. They assumed that the same political culture could be found everywhere in China. Politics were defined in terms of clashes between some unitary traditional Chinese culture and Communist ideology, between revolutionary rebels and capitalist readers, or between ideologues and pragmatists. They did not imagine China in terms of clashes between ethnic groups or even between regions, reflecting a tendency to view American culture as all of a piece. None of the three main stories of China considered the perspective of Chinese-Americans relevant to the debate about China, which was dominated by the white middle class. By the 1980s, these assumptions, too, would begin to be challenged, especially by the ascendancy of Asian Americans but also by the general interpenetration of economies and cultures in the Pacific Rim. There would arise a need for new public stories about how the United States—or different parts of a multifaceted United States—could relate to a multifaceted China.

The three major stories about China that shared the public forum in the late 1960s were all fictions, all socially constructed. They all accounted for enough observable facts about China that each could be considered plausible by reasonable people. But the story told by the liberal center was destined to gain hegemony in American public discourse. As we shall see in the next two chapters, it did so partly because it better stood the test of the facts as they increasingly became available in the 1970s. But it was also because, for a time at least, it fulfilled the moral aspirations of at least one of its rivals—the left—better than that rival's own story could.