Big Bad China and the Good Chinese:  

An American Fairy Tale  

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In the long history of our associations with China, these two sets of images [of a wondrously civilized and brutally barbaric place] rise and fall, move in and out of the center of people’s minds over time, never wholly displacing each other, always coexisting, each ready to emerge at the fresh call of circumstance [evoking in turn] emotions about the Chinese [that] have ranged between sympathy and rejection, parental benevolence and parental exasperation, affection and hostility, love and a fear close to hate.

—Harold Isaacs, Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India, 1958

In many countries, public debates on diplomatic policy are routinely distorted by factors that have little or nothing to do with the foreign nations involved. The United States is no exception. Political struggles in Washington between Democrats and Republicans often spill over into the international arena, coloring arguments about the best way to treat a foreign power. More generally, praise or criticism of a distant government is frequently inspired by dreams and nightmares rooted in visions we have of our country’s place in the world. This can lead to the promotion of the notion that residents of a foreign land yearn to be just like us—or to darker imaginings, in which the same people or their leaders come to stand for all we abhor.

It is the interplay between these sorts of China-related fantasies that Harold Isaacs analyzed so skillfully in the work from which my epigraph is taken—a work written more than four decades ago that, regrettably, remains all too relevant today. I say this because in the spring and summer
of 1999, U.S. citizens once again had dreams and nightmares about China, which tell us more about ourselves than about the Chinese, coloring policy and shaping headlines in the United States. This, at least, is my reading of the media commentary and public debates that accompanied the April 1999 visit to Washington of Premier Zhu Rongji and have continued in the aftermath of his meeting with President Clinton, growing more aggressive in coverage of the Cox report on Chinese theft of nuclear secrets. Again and again, the word China appears in news stories, editorials, and political speeches, paired with highly charged negative phrases (such as "nuclear espionage"), in a way that is meant to suggest that the greatest concern of Beijing is to undermine our way of life. Simultaneously, however, we are presented by the media and some politicians with an image of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as a country filled with good people (including some “reformist” leaders) determined to steer it in the right direction—that is, “Americanize” it. There is now, in sum, as there has often been before, a tension between two radically different kinds of morality tales about China, one of which demonizes the other of which romanticizes the Chinese people.

It is worth noting, of course, that neither the kind of tension nor types of stories alluded to here are unique to the Sino-U.S. context. U.S. tales about China have analogues within other lands, where people also have been known to swing between admiring and despising the Chinese. Moreover, the tales people of the United States tell about China are similar in many ways to those we have told in the past or continue to repeat about different countries. It is not enough, however, to treat the phenomenon as just one more case of "Orientalism" and then move on—even if one is impressed, as I certainly am, by how much Edward Said’s controversial analysis of that topic has to offer. The problem is that, while Said’s critique of Western presumptions about Asian “others” works very well at a high level of generalization, it misses some of the nuances of specific cases—including this one. This is because there is something distinctive as well as generic about the misconceptions that have continually shaped and distorted the way people of the United States (a particular group of Westerners) have thought about the Chinese (residents of a specific Asian country). There is more than a generic form of “Orientalism” at work in the interplay of what, borrowing from a useful terminology developed by urban theorist Mike Davis, I sometimes refer to as the “sunshine” and “noir” versions of the U.S. story-line about China. The tension between these two variations on the common theme of U.S. fantasies about Chinese

difference is, moreover, one that may have many parallels but is not quite like any other.

SUNSHINE AND NOIR IN 1999

Returning to these specifics, the latest manifestation of the tension I have in mind came through clearly in a speech given by President Clinton in April 1999 and Republicans’ reactions to Zhu Rongji’s visit. Speaking on the eve of his first face-to-face meeting with the Chinese premier in Washington, Clinton referred to the recent promotion within this nation of the idea “that China is a country to be feared.” He mentioned that a “growing number of people say it is the next great threat to our security and well-being.” Clinton then distanced himself from such noir visions, with their undertones of menace and paranoia, warning that they were fostering a “climate of distrust” that could damage Sino-U.S. relations for years to come. More specifically, he said, invoking a favorite sunshine theme—namely, that exposure to our ways will inevitably convey the attractiveness of “Americanization” to the Chinese—this climate was counteracting the positive influence of “the exchanges that are opening China to the world.” Steve Forbes, one of those campaigning to be the Republican Party’s next presidential candidate, countered immediately by saying Clinton seemed ready to “kow-tow” again to China—a loaded term suggesting obeisance to an unjust and tradition-bound ruler—in a “distasteful” manner. Editorials and political cartoons echoed these themes. So it goes. And so it has gone, albeit always with minor variations and shifts of emphasis, for many decades.

Why have sunshine and noir stories about China remained so popular for so long in the United States? What gives each the ability to remain, as Isaac’s put it in 1958, potent protean forces ever “ready to emerge at the fresh call of circumstance” in a new yet familiar guise? One reason is that, although they may originally be based on fantasies, widely accepted fairy tales about foreign lands can become so deeply embedded in a culture as to assume a real presence and substance—lives of their own. This is because pundits, journalists, policy makers, the creators of works of popular culture, and even scholars, caught up in a particular fantasy, can end up working together (albeit in most cases unconsciously) not just to create but also to bolster the hold of illusory utopian or dystopian visions. The process works especially well (or, rather, particularly badly, in that it
always distorts reality) when the foreign country in question is located at a great cultural as well as physical distance from the United States. In such cases, the creators and consumers of these sunshine or noir morality tales can end up thinking that unnuanced pictures of an “Other” stand for reality. That is, they can end up treating them as apt representations of the outside world, not just chimeras conjured into being from within our own psyches and our own culture.

A different way of saying all this is simply that we should always remember that tracking U.S. foreign policy debates may tell us more about our own country than about the other nations involved, but that this is especially true in certain cases. It is especially true when the foreign country in question is not just far-off in physical or symbolic terms but is also one that U.S. citizens have a long tradition of admiring or despising with particular passion. It is especially true in the case of countries whose relations with the United States are typically seen as centrally important due to concerns associated with trade or security. And it is especially true as well in the case of countries that tend to be thought of as among the largest or strongest in the world. China is one of the relatively few countries that registers as significant on all three of these different scales. It is hardly surprising, then, that debates over U.S. relations with China are particularly prone to distortion and oversimplification.

China is, after all, a large and strategically important country with which U.S. citizens have had a complex ongoing love-hate relationship. A landmark early study of this phenomenon was, as already suggested, Scratches on Our Minds, a work based largely on a series of interviews about images of the Chinese and the people of India that its author, a journalist and former resident of China, conducted with 181 relatively well-educated individuals in the United States. The author’s main conclusion regarding the Chinese of the U.S. imagination has already been summarized earlier as the creation of the interplay of two sets of images. One set, according to Isaacs, was linked to a “cluster of admirable qualities,” which included such things as “high intelligence, persistent industry, filial piety, peaceableness, stoicism,” and courageousness in the face of adversity. The other set was tied to an equally evocative vision of “cruelty, barbarism, inhumanity; a faceless, impenetrable, overwhelming mass” that had the potential to create, not stand proud in the face of, disaster.

A number of more recent works have picked up on the themes Isaacs introduced, noting continuities well beyond the 1950s of the process he described four decades ago. Isaacs himself wrote several such works, including the special introductions he provided to the various new editions of his 1958 classic that were periodically issued in the 1960s and 1970s. The fact that there never seemed a compelling reason to rework the main body of that text is, I think, a telling sign in and of itself.

There are a variety of other works in this vein that could be discussed, but here I will just note two particularly interesting ones from the early 1970s and early 1990s, respectively, which take forms quite different from Scratches on Our Minds but add weight to its basic argument. One of these is a fascinating CBS documentary, “Misunderstanding China,” which was made at the time of President Nixon’s famous first visit to the PRC in 1972. This documentary makes a particularly memorable case for the interplay-of-images idea developed by Isaacs, since the medium of film allows it to combine commentary with visual texts. Particularly noteworthy is the effective use made of footage from Hollywood movies from the 1920s-1960s that presented U.S. audiences (and those in other countries) with demonized or romanticized images of China.

The second text worth special mention is sociologist Richard Madsen’s China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry. This study, written in the immediate aftermath of the protests of 1989 and the June 4th Massacre of that same year but published in 1995, argues clearly and convincingly for the continued relevance of familiar dreams and nightmares about China in the post–Cold War era. It shows that the struggles of 1989 were, like various previous Chinese phenomena, viewed by many in the United States through a strange distorting prism, which reduced complex confrontations to simple stand-offs between forces of pure good and unadulterated evil. Though he uses different terms, Madsen demonstrates that the basic contours of the sunshine and noir story-lines remained essentially intact despite the various transformations that affected China in the first the Maoist and then the early post-Maoist periods. His study is also particularly effective at mapping the changing contours of missionary dreams of transforming China through some kind of conversion—either to foreign religions or to secular ideologies.

The tension between demonizing and romanticizing impulses that these and many other works describe can be traced back as far as the opening decades of the nineteenth century. This was when some U.S. citizens first became entranced with visions of a time when the “oldest” and “youngest” of countries would find common ground. It was also then, however, that some of these dreamers’ compatriots began to worry that when the “dragon woke,” the shock waves would reach across the Pacific.
New technologies and the rise and fall of regimes in China have added novel glosses to these hopes and fears, but the basic contours of the sunshine and noir tales have remained essentially the same.7

Giving added power to these fantasies has been the tendency of U.S. politicians and pundits to single out China as a key real or potential trading partner, as well as an important real or potential strategic ally. So, too, has the fact that, due in part to the sheer size of its population and in part to its periodic efforts to assert its claim to be taken seriously as a military power, China has long been viewed as a land with which all major countries must reckon. To sum up, for many reasons, it is just the type of country that is most likely to be misrepresented in the U.S. media and handled badly in U.S. political discourse. And this is just what has happened and continues to happen today.

How can we best go about thinking through and placing into context this general phenomenon and the specific ways that recent U.S. debates about and coverage of Washington’s China policy and Chinese internal affairs have been distorted? Here, I think, three interrelated developments are particularly worth singling out as sources of concern. The first is attempts by some of the most vocal supporters and critics of President Clinton’s approach to the PRC, as well as the mainstream media covering their exchanges, to reduce complex policy choices to simple binary oppositions. A related tendency has been for commentators to divide China specialists into just two camps as well, on the basis of how they stand on the supposed dichotomy between “engagement” and “containment” strategies. The assumption operating here seems to be that there are only two ways to answer questions such as that posed in the title of the lead article of a special issue of Time magazine, issued just before Clinton set off for Beijing in June 1998: “How Bad Is China?” One can choose “really awful” (hence, it must be contained) or “not so terrible” (hence, engagement is desirable). Or, to borrow from the stark terminology Steve Forbes recently employed, one can either “kow-tow” or refuse to do obeisance to Beijing and its representatives.

The second worrisome development is the emergence as a major force of a new sort of China-bashing that defies familiar political categories and in this sense is a distinctive product of the post-Cold War era. There have been ongoing moves during the past several years by a peculiar alliance of different sorts of demonizers. Some of the current bashers are former Cold War hawks (like U.S. Senator Jesse Helms, R-NC) but others are people whose political affiliations are much harder to categorize (indeed, some tend to take positions on the left on many issues). The goal of this loosely configured alliance seems to be to convince policy makers and the public that the current Chinese regime is as bad as any that has ever existed—not just in China but in any part of the world. As a result, according to members of this group, anything short of an unqualified hard line toward the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) amounts to “coddling” tyrants.

The third noteworthy development, which sometimes takes the form of a backlash against the second, involves moves to breathe new life into the enduring fantasy of a China that is about to undergo or is already undergoing rapid “Americanization.” Here, opponents of demonization tap into the same rich sunshine tradition that once inspired religious missionaries. The only difference is that now it is conversion to free markets and open elections as opposed to Christianity that is thought of as what is needed to allow China to fulfill its destiny—always presumed to be that of becoming a land just like our own. The assumption is that China’s people, when left to their own devices and shown the light, will spontaneously exhibit a strong desire to see this sort of change take place. The only things that are imagined to have held them back have been a combination of stultifying traditions (be they “Confucian” or Communist) and hostile regimes (be they housed in the Forbidden City or the CCP’s Zhongnanhai complex).

Fantasies of an “Americanizing” China pick up steam whenever commentators can find signs on the horizon of traditions losing their hold or when leaders emerge who seem to be interested in pushing the country in a bold new direction. In its most recent form, which crystallized during Clinton’s 1998 trip to the PRC, the signs of imminent “Americanization” that have fascinated the U.S. media have included everything from the increase in Chinese access to the Internet to the growing importance of stock markets in China. Reports about the proliferation of McDonald’s restaurants in the PRC and the rising popularity of bowling as a form of recreation were among the favorite sound bites of television news crews covering Clinton’s trip.

Jiang Zemin’s calls for privatization of state industries in 1997 and then agreement to hold a joint televised press conference with Clinton in 1998 made him a perfect candidate, in some eyes, to lead the PRC through a period of “Americanization.” Such a period is thought to have begun already, with burgers, bowling, and village elections as the key symbols. The idea seems to be that now the way is clear for the Chinese to move steadily from there toward demanding and getting televised multi-party campaigns for president. Zhu Rongji has sometimes shared the spotlight
with Jiang as the "reformer" who can make all this possible, but it is mainly
the spontaneous desire to become more like us, which is imagined to be
strong among ordinary Chinese people, that is seen as fueling the drive for
"Americanization."

All three of the interrelated trends outlined previously should be a cause
for concern for the same reasons. First, because they hinder public under-
standing of a major foreign power. Second, because they make it harder
than it already was (and it has never been easy) for socially concerned cit-
zizens of this country to figure out how best to respond to a changing China.
Third, because they make it more difficult to design effective government
approaches to the PRC.

PARALYZING POLARITIES

To understand how the process of mystification sketched out previously
works, let us begin with the issue of binary oppositions, the notion that
there are only two possible positions to take on China, a hard one and a
soft one, and only two sorts of China specialists. It is foolish to imagine that
the only way to view Sino-U.S. policy is either to embrace the particular
sort of soft line that has been pursued by the Clinton administration (and
has sometimes been supported as well by certain Republican luminaries,
including Henry Kissinger and Newt Gingrich) or to advocate the much
harder one that has been supported by the White House's most virulent
critics (including the New York Times "liberal" columnist Abe Rosenthal
and syndicated conservative pundit George Will). After all, it is possible
to view favorably some things Bill Clinton has done (like his moving
toward a resumption in the late 1990s of the sorts of high-level exchanges
suspended after the June 4th Massacre) while remaining critical of others
(such as his willingness to greet Jiang enthusiastically in Manila in 1997
and then pull out all stops in honoring the Chinese leader during his first
summit meeting in Washington, even before a single major concession on
human rights had been made by Beijing). One can say that the time was
right for the president of the United States to have direct meetings again
with his Chinese counterpart but that the first of these should have been
handled in a more tentative and less enthusiastic manner. Similarly, one
can say that Clinton did many of the right things when he was in Beijing
in 1998, including speaking out forcefully about human rights issues, but
has generally failed at setting an appropriate tone for high-level meetings
in the United States. Here, one can argue, he has too often allowed a con-
cern for photo opportunities to overshadow a concern with moving for-
ward on contentious but essential issues.

When it comes to experts, it is equally foolish to imagine that there are
only two types. There are certainly some who think economic develop-
ment will magically turn the PRC into a liberal democracy. There are def-
itively others who view China as an increasingly powerful but otherwise
unchanging totalitarian state, shaped by the same dangerous mixture of
indigenous despotic traditions, imported Marxist-Leninist ideas, and
nationalistic dreams that fueled high Maoism. There are, however, many
academic China specialists in the United States (such as many of the con-
tributors to this book—myself very much included) who are deeply skep-
tical of both these positions. The people I have in mind, as well as our coun-
terparts in Europe and Australia and other parts of the world, are not a
clearly defined group with an unambiguous agenda, and we often dis-
agree with each other on many things about China. What we share are seri-
ous doubts about the business lobby's claims concerning the "naturalness"
of the link between free trade and democratization, as well as a sense that
the PRC is currently weaker, its future more uncertain, than those who
warn of a mounting "China Threat" insist.

We see problems, in other words, with both the noir vision of a vicious
and monolithic CCP impervious to real change and the patronizing sun-
shine fantasy of a simple road leading from burgers and bowling to a fully
"Americanized" China. We see little point in continually reposing ques-
tions such as "How Bad Is China?" and "When Will the Good Chinese Peo-
ple Get to Live Just As We Do?" And those of us who are interested in
Sino-U.S. relations tend to try to stake out positions on this subject that are
neither completely in accord with nor diametrically opposed to those of
the Clinton administration.

Unfortunately, you would never know that in-between positions, com-
plex questions, or ambiguous feelings about the accomplishments and real
costs of revolution and reform could even exist, if you only paid attention
to the voices shouting loudest and being amplified most effectively in the
mainstream U.S. media. The press has been busy dividing up policies and
experts into neat piles, and it now seems incapable of considering the bor-
der areas lying betwixt and between—even though it is in these areas that
many scholars who spend their careers studying China feel at home.
DREAMS, NIGHTMARES, AND POPULAR PERCEPTIONS

The other two worrisome tendencies alluded to previously are what, along with partisan politics, have obviously been driving the binary framing of the China debate. What gives this polarization its punch is that positively and negatively charged images of China and the Chinese have such a well-established place within U.S. political discourse and popular culture. It is important to resist both the vilification and the "Americanization" paradigms, as each inhibits understanding of what is going on in China. This is, moreover, a moment when it seems that news stories custom-made to reinforce demonizing trends (such as, most recently, reports of spies leaking nuclear secrets to Beijing and illegal campaign contributions making their way into Democratic Party coffers) are continually emerging and vying for our attention. And so, too, are ones well suited to serve the purposes of romanticizers (such as, again most recently, reports of Zhu and Jiang's recent visits to the United States that stress their credentials as open-minded pragmatic reformers determined to "Americanize" China's economy).

A case could certainly be made for the idea that neither the demonizing nor romanticizing paradigms is as clearly in vogue just now as one or the other has tended to be during many previous moments in the history of Sino-U.S. relations. It was easy in the mid-1980s, when Deng Xiaoping was being hailed as "Man of the Year" by Time magazine and otherwise glorified in the U.S. media, to say that the sunshine approach to China was dominant. Conversely, in the immediate aftermath of the June 4th Massacre, for obvious reasons, stories that put forth a noir vision of China were most prevalent. The current moment is a more ambiguous one. Nonetheless, looking back over the last five years or so as a whole, the darker imaginings seem on balance to have been more pervasive. They seem at least to have tended to provide the more dangerous of the two types of illusions, where the framing of sensible approaches to Sino-U.S. relations are concerned, and also to have made a deeper imprint on the U.S. popular imagination. For this reason, in the pages that follow, noir fantasies as opposed to sunshine ones will receive the lion's share of attention; demonization will be the focus, romanticization will be dealt with only in passing.

It is crucial to note, where demonization is concerned, that there are always more and less restrained types of it with which the analyst must reckon. When taking a relatively moderate form, as in The Coming Conflict with China—a book discussed in more detail later in this chapter and in Tong Lam's contribution to this volume— attempts to play up the Chinese threat simply distort our understanding of an important issue. In its more unbridled manifestations, such as sensationalist magazine covers that use graphics and text to try to convince us of the magnitude of the Chinese menace, the latest noir discussions of China do much more than this. In such works, the proliferation of which reached a peak recently early in 1997, visions of the China Threat breathe new life into old stereotypes of the Yellow Peril and the Red Menace that should by now be long dead and well buried. The sensationalist cover of the March 10, 1997, issue of The New Republic, which showed a fierce dragon crushing people beneath its talons while being supplicated by Uncle Sam, was bad enough. Still more disturbing was the March 24, 1997, cover of The National Review, which dubbed the president a "Manchurian Candidate" and included racist caricatures of Al Gore and both the Clintons, complete with slanted eyes, buck teeth, and stereotypically Asian garb.

The trend toward demonization slowed a bit toward the end of 1997, as news of the CCP's privatization plans sparked a round of comments celebrating the fact that Jiang and company were "changing course" and "embracing capitalism," but it picked up steam again at the very end of that year. One thing contributing to its renewal was the release of three Hollywood movies that cast the PRC in a negative light. These were Seven Years in Tibet (starring Brad Pitt), Kundun (a film about the Dalai Lama's childhood), and Red Corner (which presented Richard Gere as a U.S. lawyer imprisoned on false charges in Beijing).

Movies provide a fanciful, but nonetheless effective, point of departure for taking up the general issue of demonizing trends. In particular, I am not thinking of the release of the films just mentioned—though that was certainly an interesting event in the history of U.S. popular culture relating to China. Instead, what I have in mind as a framing device for discussion is the early 1997 re-release of a quite different trio of movies. These are films that actually have nothing to do with Asia at all but rather are set long ago in a galaxy far, far away.

I should note, before proceeding, that there is a long and venerable tradition among commentators on Sino-U.S. affairs to use Hollywood movies to probe popular understanding or misunderstanding of the Chinese. InScratches on Our Minds, for example, the contrast between positive and negative cinematic portrayals of the Chinese, in romanticized films such as The Good Earth and demonizing movies such as the Fu Manchu serials, is used to drive home the book's argument about the bipolar nature of U.S.
opinions. Many films besides *The Good Earth* contributed to the romantic image, including such influential ones as Frank Capra's *Battle for China* segment in the *Why We Fight* World War II propaganda series. In some of these, in fact, the Chinese people are presented as being superior to the people of the United States, at least in certain specific ways, such as the developed nature of their spirituality. This theme re-emerges in a sense in *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun*, though obviously with Tibetans being celebrated as more in touch than are European or American citizens with the truly sacred. Many films without “Fu Manchu” in their title, meanwhile, as the documentary *Misunderstanding China* shows so effectively, contributed to the demonization motif. There were, for example, Cold War period pieces such as *Fifty-Five Days in Peking*, in which audiences were expected to cheer as Charlton Heston led the U.S. cavalry and other foreign troops against Chinese Boxers who looked and acted suspiciously like the “savage” Indians in John Wayne movies.

In light of all this, it is tempting to simply update here the cinematic framework developed in works such as *Scratches on Our Minds* and *Misunderstanding China* and use it to analyze all the recent Hollywood China films. This could help us place into a familiar context not just *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun* but also *Red Corner*, and maybe even the animated Disney film *Mulan*. This is because Richard Gere’s character in *Red Corner* is shown fighting against great odds, much as Heston was in *Fifty-Five Days*, to put an end to a form of madness in Beijing. And there are scenes in *Mulan* that present the hold of “tradition” as all that is keeping the Chinese from behaving just as we would like them to act.

As tempting as such an updating of the framework developed by Isaacs and *Misunderstanding China* might be, my use of cinematic allusions here will follow a different path. This is one that will seek to place recent China-bashing movies into a distinctively post–Cold War framework. This is why the specific films that I will use as a starting point are, as already indicated, not ones that are about any part of Asia but are instead the first three installments of the *Star Wars* saga released to theaters.

**DARTH VADER AND THE DEMONIZATION OF CHINA**

It is worth remembering that, when the original series of three *Star Wars* movies presented theatergoers of two decades ago with a cinematically ambitious vision of an epic struggle between good and evil, the U.S. audi-
ment" strategies to neutralize the supposedly unbounded territorial ambitions of Beijing.

Even though it was not, even at that point, a novel part of the political landscape by any means, the demonizing trend definitely intensified early in 1997, as noted earlier. Not only did prominent pundits such as George Will jump on the bandwagon, but contributors to special "China Threat" issues of periodicals, such as the February 24 edition of The Weekly Standard, even began making explicit references to the PRC as a new "Evil Empire" to be feared and resisted. Growing concern about the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong and domestic scandals associated with Asian and Asian-American campaign contributions—these were but two of many factors that have added new polemical force in 1997 to the demonization of China and the reproduction of the old polar opposition.

Take, for example, the China issue of The Weekly Standard mentioned previously. In it we find Congressman Chris Smith characterizing the "fundamental basis of the disagreement" in the United States on Sino-U.S. relations as a simple division between those foolish enough to think that "the men who rule China are more like businessmen" and those sensible enough to realize that "they are more like Nazis." Others draw lines between those who do and do not take seriously the rising tide of Chinese nationalism, and those who are and are not willing to "sell out" the cause of dissidents "in order to sell a few more Big Macs." Contributors to 1997 issues of The New Republic also invoked related binary oppositions. In the issue of March 10, 1997, one contributor claimed that Chinese-Americans fell into two basic camps: some care about human rights and side with dissident Harry Wu, who wants a "Holocaust museum-style memorial" built to honor those incarcerated in PRC labor camps; others focus only on business and call for a soft line toward Beijing. The April 21, 1997, issue suggested in its cover story that there are only two types of experts: a majority who mistakenly claim that "China is marching toward democracy" and a minority who realize it remains in the grips of a crippling form of totalitarianism.

One of the most interesting illustrations of how complexities have at times been reduced to simple oppositions by the new demonizers, as well as of how familiar divisions between the "left" and the "right" have become muddied in the process, is provided by the aforementioned The Coming Conflict with China. Written by a pair of journalists and longtime China watchers, Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, who were represented in the February 24, 1997, issue of The Weekly Standard by an essay entitled "PLA Incorporated," this book is a mixture of careful and even at times insightful commentary, interesting but sensationalized detail, and alarmist analysis. For our purposes here, what is most interesting about it is the claim by Bernstein and Munro that China experts can be divided up into two groups.

The first type of specialists, they class as belonging to the New China Lobby, a catch-all for academics and nonacademics who minimize the threat to U.S. interests of the PRC and downplay the value of pushing hard on human rights issues. Some of the people in this group are so naive as to believe economic development always leads to democracy and freedom. Others, such as the Democratic and Republican former policy makers turned businessmen and consultants belonging to the Kissinger Associates firm, who have large investments in China to protect and clients with even larger stakes in the Chinese market, are motivated by a less naive belief: namely, that engagement means profits. Still others are part of a small band of unnamed "senior scholars of China" who "write useful articles on Chinese politics," in part because they are able to "maintain excellent contacts" with top leaders, but who know that in order to gain the access on which they depend they must "remain silent" or "flatter" the regime on "certain subjects," such as human rights and Tibet.

The specialists described by Bernstein and Munro as being on the opposite side of the fence from the New China Lobby are the small handful of journalists and academics who have been denied permission to go to or at least had trouble getting visas for the PRC. The Coming Conflict suggests that, if we want to find people whose opinions about Beijing can be trusted, we should look to the members of this politically eclectic group. It includes both Ross Terrill (who had an article on Deng's death in The National Review issue with the racist cover) and Orville Schell (whose pieces appear in The Nation from time to time). Interestingly, in a New York Review of Books essay on The Coming Conflict with China, Jonathan Mirsky (a U.S. journalist who is now based in London and who has had some trouble of his own getting into China lately) used a similar criteria for supporting his claim that Bernstein and Munro deserve to be believed. He cited, as evidence that their arguments about the PRC had struck home, the fact that the official Xinhua (New China) news agency had denounced their writings as "racist" scribblings that support the reassertion of American "hegemony" in Asia. Mirsky's comment hints at a very important aspect of the Sino-U.S. relations equation that is beyond the scope of this chapter but is taken up elsewhere in this book by Tong Lam. This is that, on the Chinese side, there are also intense positive and negative images of the other country involved that
need to be taken into account, since they often end up distorting and oversimplifying discussion of major issues. Regardless of this, Mirsky's comments do not prove the validity of The Coming Conflict's main arguments.  

BEYOND THE POLARITIES

There are all sorts of problems with the China-bashing trend sketched out previously, the "Americanization" fantasy counter-trend alluded to in passing, and the dichotomous references to experts that fill so many U.S. commentaries on Chinese affairs. Most generally, these trends work together to create yet another situation in which U.S. foreign policy is being tossed between the Scylla of condescending romanticization and the Charybdis of dehumanizing demonization—perils that Isaacs described so well in his discussion of The Good Earth and "Fu Manchu" imagery and perils that are made all the more treacherous because of the various ways that Chinese domestic politics can distort the view of the United States of those looking across the Pacific from Beijing. One result of all this is that, as in the past, the option of treating China as an equal power, with which the United States has very serious areas of disagreement and also common interests, ends up getting short shrift.

It is very difficult for the many academic China specialists who have neither business investments nor top-level contacts in the PRC, yet who have also not had trouble getting visas despite speaking out as their consciences direct them against things the Beijing regime has done, to be heard in the current debate or even to find a place from which to speak. We are not included when commentators divide the experts into just two groups, since many of us have been bitterly disappointed by some of Beijing's actions and feel that the U.S. government should look for more effective ways to express anger over human rights abuses, but we also feel that it is misleading to describe the current Chinese regime as analogous to that of the Nazis or Stalin.

Many in this in-between camp, who are trying to stake out various sorts of intermediary positions between the demonizing and romanticizing wings in the China debate, are convinced that the PRC has changed and continues to change in fundamental ways and that the quality of life of many ordinary Chinese was improved in the Maoist and Dengist eras—yet we still find much to criticize about how the country was run in both periods. We are concerned as well about how it is governed today, in part because of the current regime's continuing failure to make good on the CCP's long-standing promises of pursuing gender equality and putting an end to official corruption—issues discussed in more detail in the chapters by Harriet Evans and Lionel Jensen. Many of us in this loosely defined group feel that it is imperative for the Communist Party to make bold moves toward opening up cultural and political life and yet were not optimistic about the plans Jiang announced in 1997 to begin transforming all state enterprises into private ones. This was due in part to our awareness of the side-effects these moves were likely to have on those who would end up with neither secure jobs nor a developed social welfare safety net.

On the one hand, many of us do not feel that the business lobbyists and romanticizers are right when they insist that investment and industrialization always leads to a pure form of freedom—Singapore and other cases suggest that authoritarianism and development can and often do go hand-in-hand. In fact, one thing that worries us about contemporary China is the suffering produced by the increasing inequalities of wealth that are in part results of economic growth—a phenomenon described well by both Tim Oakes and Timothy Weston in their contributions to this volume. Another is the reconfiguration of patriarchy that has come in the wake of marketization, which is discussed insightfully in Harriet Evans's chapter. We do not think it makes sense to present China as an unchanging despotism, in short, since much has in fact been changing in the PRC, for the better as well as for the worse.

Another basic factual problem with the polar oppositions is that they minimize the sense people in the United States have of the range of opinions that are being expressed by the Chinese themselves and the complexity of the developments occurring in China these days. How can one speak blithely of being for or against "the dissidents," when there are important divisions among those considered part of this ill-defined group? Harry Wu, a former resident of the gulag, may call for both a hard line and consumer boycotts of goods produced by prison labor, but Wang Dan, a history student at Beijing University and one of the leaders of the 1989 protests, has argued strongly for the desirability of foreign powers engaging with, rather than trying to isolate, the Beijing authorities. The latter even expressed approval of Clinton's controversial decision to take part in a state ceremony at Tian'anmen Square in 1998. There are doubtless some within the dissident community who are in favor of consumer boycotts yet approve of the Clinton line toward China, as well as some who objected to
the president going to Tian'anmen but do not think consumer boycotts appropriate. When it comes to nationalism, there are dissidents who have continued to try to use and dissidents who have sought to distance themselves from the symbolism of jiuguo (national salvation). Such symbolism played a key role in the protests of 1989 but was also invoked by the government to defend the massacres that put an end to that struggle. Some statements by the Dalai Lama, meanwhile, indicate that, in contrast to the new demonizers, he views the current CCP regime as one that is undergoing important changes that could even lead in the not-too-distant future to a breakthrough on Tibet. Xiao Qiang, finally, while making a thoughtful and powerful case for one important vision of the current state of human rights in China in his chapter for this volume, says some things with which a variety of dissidents would disagree.

Clearly, the main thing we should do in order to “side with the dissidents” is to start listening more carefully to the range of their opinions, as well as to those of people in China who have taken independent stands on certain issues, while refusing at the same time to sever completely their ties to the regime (something also recommended by Timothy Cheek in his essay on intellectuals). One key theme that some independent-minded establishment intellectuals and dissidents alike have focused on in recent years is that the current leaders in Beijing are more sensitive to outside influence on some issues than on others. For example, though they remain determined that no political parties able to compete with the Communists should be allowed and are unwilling to entertain any thoughts of freeing Tibet or giving up on dreams of reunification with Taiwan, many within the current leadership do seem to care about (at least being perceived as) moving their country toward the rule of law. This has even allowed some ordinary people (and intellectuals) to sue the government for mistreating them (as the controversial muckraking journalist Dai Qing did at one point), without being thrown in jail or killed, as one would imagine happening in a PRC ruled by Darth Vader.9

Developments such as these have important implications when it comes to strategies for bringing pressure on Beijing to improve its human rights record. Rather than alternating between presenting the Chinese authorities with laundry lists of abuses and simply being silent on human rights, as recent U.S. administrations have tended to do, it might be helpful for policy makers to draw a distinction between general practices that are part of PRC state policy but with which the U.S. government disagrees (such as the occupation of Tibet), on the one hand, and things that the regime has done that violate China’s constitution (which guarantees a certain amount of free expression, for example) or that break promises that were made to foreigners or Chinese citizens. By concentrating most of their attention on the latter type of abuses, while not necessarily ignoring completely the former, U.S. officials might be able to bring some much needed consistency to the human rights dimension of our relations with Beijing. Retroactively, this would have meant being more assertive when Wang Dan and Liu Xiaobo were re-imprisoned in 1996 for engaging in activities that are supposed to be legally protected in the PRC but being less energetic when Harry Wu was detained for doing things that may have been admirable but that even he admits involved breaking laws.

With Beijing’s ongoing interest in using high-level summits to legitimate the power of leaders such as Jiang and Zhu, we continually have appropriate moments to make the same basic point: in order for the United States to take a foreign power seriously in issues of trade or diplomacy, it needs to know that the regime can keep its word. The president could make it very clear that the continuing upturn in Sino-U.S. relations needs to be held hostage, not to vague and shifting criteria or even (as good as it was that Wei Jing-sheng and Wang Dan were both released) to the occasional granting of asylum to a high-profile dissident in a noble but oblige fashion, but rather to the Chinese regime’s ability to establish a pattern of keeping promises, both to the United States and to residents of the PRC. By doing this, the U.S. government would make the point that it prefers to deal with foreign powers on a basis of equality and is ready to try to move beyond condescending to or demonizing the PRC, but it can do so only if Beijing begins to demonstrate more effectively that it can abide by the rules it makes for itself.

Perhaps the largest overarching problem with the trend toward framing the debate on China in polarizing terms is that we are prevented from focusing on the main challenge that lies before all people who want to understand the PRC—the challenge of making sense of a regime that is not quite like any that has ever existed before, either in China or elsewhere, and that is undergoing a strange mixture of unprecedented and in many ways contradictory changes. It is difficult but important to figure out how best to think about a Chinese ruling party that is still powerful but battle-scarred, internally divided but unlikely to fall as long as there is no organized opposition to challenge it. We are just not used to thinking realistically about a regime with the following characteristics:
1. It is based on a Leninist organization that has managed to maintain its monopoly on power despite being beholden to an official ideology that is discredited in the eyes of many, including more than a few top members of the governing elite itself.

2. It retains its Leninist cast in many matters yet is quite ready to experiment with market reforms and even allow some room for local innovation and experimentation in the political realm, including village elections in which independent candidates more than occasionally win.

3. It clings to symbols and rituals developed by earlier charismatic revolutionary leaders and yet is now headed by very different sorts of people, including some who believe quite sincerely (though often as much for pragmatic as moral reasons) that it is important for China to move toward the rule of law.

4. It runs an enormous country that is rapidly becoming less cohesive and more decentralized, yet at the very same time is also more fervently nationalistic than ever in certain ways.

What all this means is that, if we want to make sense of China today, we need new modes of thinking about a country that is transforming itself and being transformed in novel ways. The Chinese regime is not a “Red Dynasty” just like an imperial ruling house of old, if for no other reason than that successional issues are settled in radically different ways. It is not just like that which ran Nazi Germany, if for no other reasons than that Beijing’s current leaders are much less popular with the citizens of the PRC than Hitler was with ordinary Germans in the late 1930s and the CCP is not trying to exterminate any ethnic group. The regime is not just like that which held power in Moscow in the days of Stalin, if for no other reason than that there is a great deal more individual freedom in many aspects of private and public life in the PRC now than ever existed in the Soviet Union, at least before Gorbachev’s day. The current regime is not just like that which ran China during the period of high Maoism, if for no other reason than that it is less committed to ideals of economic equality. In addition, when today’s leadership singles out a person for political persecution, it is usually because they claim that this individual has done something inappropriate, not just that he or she was born into the wrong class or is related to the wrong person. The present regime is not even just like that which ran China in the mid-1980s, if for no other reason than that the role of state-run industries in national economic life is much different than it was before. This is a phenomenon with complex ramifications for workers and the government, some of which Timothy Weston sheds light on in his contribution to this volume.

The present moment is a potentially dangerous time in many areas of world politics, including that of Sino-U.S. affairs, and our failure to have a ready-made cognitive slot into which to place the current CCP regime makes the situation all the more difficult to address thoughtfully. In such a time of uncertainty, there is a pressing need to find new ways of thinking and of crafting policy toward a major world power. Clearly, we need something better, at least, than the scatter-shot approach to China that has characterized the policies of both of the last two administrations, each of which has sent Beijing erratic signals and chosen strange times to make or withhold gestures of conciliation. When a new approach is needed, as any Hollywood director knows, doctoring old scripts and clinging to the favored imagery of an earlier generation of scriptwriters is not the thing to do. It is not enough to update the “Americanizing” imagery of Frank Capra’s World War II propaganda films, substituting visions of Jiang Zemin and Bill Clinton at the stock market for Chiang Kai-shek and Franklin D. Roosevelt calling for joint military efforts against Japan. The world of Star Wars, meanwhile, may be a wonderful one to revisit in the theaters, but it is a dangerous and disturbing one to try to recreate in the real world, no matter which foreign leader is cast in the Darth Vader role.

NOTES

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1. For an idiosyncratic, but often insightful and always elegantly written, recent overview of some of the varied images of China that have captured the imaginations of Westerners living in differing lands in varied periods, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998).

2. Of particular relevance here is the case of U.S. visions of Japan. This is not just because there are many similarities as well as some differences between U.S. images of China and Japan, but also because there is a complex relationship between the two. The subject is far too big to explore here, but suffice it to say that it has often been the case that when China is being most intensely romanticized in the United States (e.g., during World War II), Japan is being demonized. The reverse is frequently true as well: e.g., the U.S. media’s glorification of Deng Xiaoping as an “Americanizing” reformer in the mid-1980s coincided with an intense wave of the Japan-bashing. For a lively introduction to U.S. images of Japan, which is particularly good on issues associated with popular culture, see Sheila K. Johnson, *The Japanese through American Eyes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

3. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Viking, 1979). The principal and enduring argument of the book is that the “Orient” was a product of the European colonial imagination, specifically the imagination coexistent with the conquest of the Middle East by the British and the French. Said argues that it was this imagination that belittled the native culture as quaint and exotic while valorizing the dominant white other responsible for its domination and misrepresentation.

4. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1991). Davis uses “sunshine” and “noir” to refer to the competing positive and negative “city myths” associated with L.A., but the optimistic connotations of the former term and sinister overtones of the latter seem evocative and appropriate here as well.


7. An excellent survey of recent trends in U.S. press coverage is Carolyn Wake-


9. One useful place to turn for recent discussions of some relevant issues by a range of different sorts of Chinese dissidents and critical voices within the non-dissident community, is *Hong Kong Goes Back*, a special issue of *INDEX on Censorship* (January 1997). An excellent up-to-date account of some of the main fissures within communities of Chinese intellectuals and artists is Geremie R. Barmé, “The Revolution of Resistance,” in *Conflict and Resistance in Contemporary China*, Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds. (London: Routledge, 1999).

**SUGGESTED READINGS**


*Hong Kong Goes Back*, a special issue of *INDEX on Censorship* (January 1997).


