

# Beauty—and Beast

by Wang Jisi

In a recent survey of Chinese attitudes toward America, the respondents—a cross-section of Chinese society—were asked to give the first words that came to mind at the mention of the United States. Thirty-four percent of them answered “modernization,” “affluence,” or “high-tech”; 11.6 percent said “democracy” or “freedom”; and 29 percent responded “overbearing,” “hegemonic,” “arrogant,” or “the world’s policeman.”

The sum of those responses is a fair representation of China’s ambivalent sentiments about America, a nation whose name translates literally into Chinese as “Beautiful Country” (*Meiguo*). When the Chinese focus on America within its own boundaries, they see a nation that is beautifully developed, governed, and maintained. But when they view the United States as a player on the international scene, most Chinese see an unattractive and malign presence. The Chinese are similarly ambivalent about what they assume to be America’s attitude toward China. Sixty percent of the respondents in the survey said they thought that America supports the process of reform and opening that is taking place in China, but an equal number said that the United States wants to prevent China from becoming a great power. They believe that Americans will accept only a China that goes the American way—and will hinder the nation’s development if it does not.

Not all Chinese hold similar views of the United States. Chinese society today is increasingly pluralized, and the China-U.S. relationship is increasingly multifaceted. Yet to most Chinese—the general public and the political elites—American condescension toward China and the contrast between America’s internal achievements and its external mischief are striking and puzzling.

At a closed-door meeting in Beijing, the editor of a leading Chinese newspaper expressed his feelings this way: “So far as its domestic conditions are concerned, the United States is a very good country. It is prosperous, powerful, and rich, and its living conditions are comfortable and humane. Americans have managed their country successfully. So why do we not want them to meddle in international affairs? Why are we so reluctant to learn from their experiences in running the country? Because they are too arrogant and too highhanded to be tolerated.”

To be sure, the editor’s comments were not entirely “politically correct.” Since the founding of the People’s Republic, the textbook definition of the United States has been that it is a capitalist country where the bourgeoisie exploits and oppresses the proletariat and where racial tensions reflect that class struggle. But because countless numbers of Chinese have recently made their way onto American soil as tourists, and many more have gotten ideas about America through publications, films and television, and the Internet, the official ideological line may or may not be relevant.

The Chinese debate among themselves as to whether the confusing outcome of the American presidential election in 2000 reflected a dirty power game

in a pseudo-democracy or a fair competition based on the rule of law and self-government. Many Chinese youngsters are fascinated by Bill Gates, Mariah Carey, Harrison Ford, and Michael Jordan. At the same time, serious observers point to school shootings, drug addiction, police brutality, and the disparity between rich and poor as evidence of what they call the “American disease.”

**B**ut if the Chinese people view U.S. domestic affairs with favorable or mixed feelings, they take a quite negative view of the role and behavior of the United States in global affairs. They do not accept America’s assertion that it acts in the world only on moral principles. They believe that self-interest drives U.S. foreign policy no less than it drives the foreign policy of any other nation. They point out that even American leaders justify U.S. international actions by invoking the national interest, as when President Richard Nixon said during his historic visit in 1972 that he had come to China in the interests of the United States. In 1991, President George Bush launched the Persian Gulf War to safeguard the Middle East oil supply, and not, as he asserted, to create a “new world order.” In Rwanda and other strife-torn countries, Washington has taken few steps to help because it sees little to gain.

It is especially difficult for the Chinese to accept the notion Americans have of their “manifest destiny” — that they are the people chosen by God to save the rest of the world for democracy and freedom. In China’s largely atheist society, the American propensity to interfere on the international stage seems no more than a camouflaged ambition to acquire fortune and power. The 1999 military action in Kosovo by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), for example, was widely perceived in China as an American scheme — under the guise of protecting human rights — to conquer Yugoslavia, isolate Russia, weaken the European Union, warn China, and, ultimately, keep the United States in a dominant position.

Some Chinese with a liberal, cosmopolitan outlook, who may not be so critical of America’s motivation or its alleged greediness for power, are nonetheless disturbed by America’s attitude. The Confucian tradition regards modesty as a virtue and presumption as a sin. The United States, in their eyes, is guilty of assuming too much. They particularly resent members of the U.S. Congress who know little about international issues yet attempt to impose sanctions on other nations.

The vast majority of Chinese observers reject the U.S. notion that America should “play a leadership role” in the world — both because they see that role as self-assumed and because the word *leadership* in the Chinese language connotes a hierarchical order in which many are subordinated to one. In their view, the United States should “mind its own business” — and remedy the various manifestations of social and moral decay at home before it denounces others.

Books and Hollywood movies are windows on America for the Chinese, and, for better or worse, they effectively shape America’s image in China. A lot of American movies reveal the dirty side of U.S. politics and society, even as they extol the virtuous side. But when the plots involve the international scene or imaginary star wars, Americans as a group are heroes and saviors, while the peoples of

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Great Castigation Series: Coca Cola (1993), by Wang Guangyi

other nations are either followers of Americans (in which case, they must be “good guys”) or anti-American devils (who have to be eliminated). The U.S. news media tend to make judgments along the same lines: the lives and well-being of U.S. citizens are by definition more valuable than those of foreigners—friends and foes alike. Americans have a system of values; others have ideologies. Loyalty to America is “patriotism,” loyalty in other countries is merely “nationalism.”

Chinese commentators on international security issues observe that the United States possesses by far the most formidable armed forces in the world. Yet at a time when the world is basically at peace, America is increasing its military budget. The commentators refuse to buy the argument that a missile defense system, if developed by Americans, would not be threatening to other nations. The ostensibly defensive system, they believe, would embolden policymakers in Washington to take the offensive against potential rivals and deprive them of their defense capabilities. In other words, Americans want the luxury of “absolute security,” and they are prepared to achieve it by making other nations even more vulnerable.

In Chinese eyes, the world would be a safer and fairer place if the United States, China, Russia, the European states, Japan, and many other countries shared responsibility for dealing with global and regional issues through multi-lateral consultations in settings such as the United Nations. Unfortunately,

the world today is becoming increasingly unbalanced because international norms and institutions seem so much to favor the United States.

**E**conomic globalization has clearly benefited China. Millions of Chinese welcome the presence of Coke, McDonald's, Motorola, Microsoft, Disney, Reebok, and companies like them, and they earn good salaries working on the production lines of Western companies. But millions of other Chinese, particularly those working in state-owned enterprises that face fierce competition from American industrial giants, may lose their jobs. Because Americans are in China to make money, and not out of a sense of charity, few Chinese feel grateful to the United States for the improvement in U.S.-China economic relations.

For the Chinese, the United States is, at once, their greatest economic partner and their gravest external threat. It does not much matter to them how the United States is governed, or even how it conducts its global affairs generally. What does matter is America's attitude specifically toward the growth of China's national power.

The official Chinese line is that U.S. strategy is designed to Westernize, divide, and weaken China. Despite the obvious political motivation for such an allegation, the belief is widespread in China that the United States does indeed want to keep the country down for strategic purposes—and is not hostile merely to the communist leadership in Beijing. As one Chinese student of international relations has remarked, "I am puzzled by what the Americans have done to China. They say they do not like the Chinese government but are friendly to the Chinese

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people. That is understandable from a political perspective. But they have obstructed the Chinese bid for holding the Olympics in Beijing, threatened to revoke normal trade relations between the two countries, and shown little concern about the suffering in China from devastating floods. They try to dissuade China from selling weapons to the countries

they dislike, even as they sell advanced weapons to Taiwan to strengthen its position against China's reunification. So do they really want to hurt the Chinese government only, or do they want to harm the Chinese nation as a whole?"

The Taiwan issue feeds the Chinese suspicion that the United States is pursuing a strategy of "divide and rule." It evokes the collective memory of China's being bullied and dismembered by Japan and the Western powers for more than a century after the Opium War. In 1950, at the outbreak of the Korean War, the Truman administration dispatched the U.S. Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait. In the Chinese interpretation, that act and the subsequent U.S. support of Taiwan have kept the island separated from the mainland for more than 50 years.

Perpetuating the separation may serve several U.S. interests. First, by keeping China's territory divided and its sovereignty violated, the United States may ham-

per China's drive to achieve the dignity of a great power. Second, Taiwan's ongoing acquisition of U.S. weaponry is good business for U.S. military industries. Third, continued tensions across the Taiwan Strait provide an excuse for Americans to maintain a military presence in the Asian Pacific and to develop their missile projects. Finally, by endorsing Taiwan's democratization, Washington may exert more pressure on Beijing for political change. All these Chinese fears and interpretations of events persist in the face of assurances from the United States that its commitment to the security of Taiwan is morally motivated and intended to do nothing more than maintain peace in the area.

In the wake of the NATO bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade on May 8, 1999, Chinese policy analysts and scholars heatedly debated the status of China-U.S. relations and how China should respond to America's neo-interventionism. Although pragmatic considerations in favor of stabilizing relations with Washington have thus far prevailed in Beijing, the bombing had a devastating effect. Government officials joined the general public in expressing their indignation—along with their perplexity as to why the bombing had occurred. In the survey cited at the start of this essay, 85 percent of the respondents said they were convinced that the bombing had been deliberate.

**M**any Chinese are likewise disturbed by the condescending and overbearing tone of American criticism of China's human rights record. They are ready to concede, at least privately, that the human rights situation in China is far from satisfactory. But they suspect that the criticisms are politically motivated. Some Chinese point out that Americans were virtually silent when the human rights situation in China was at its worst, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), whereas they vigorously reproach China today, when the situation has improved remarkably. One explanation for the odd behavior is that the United States needed China in the past to counter the Soviet Union—and needs a new enemy today to continue the Cold War.

In any case, China's ambivalence about the "Beautiful Country" will linger. Deep in the Chinese mind lurks a strange combination of images of America—a repressive hegemon, a sentimental imperialist, a grave threat, a hypocritical crusader, a contagious disease, a successful polity, a gorgeous land, a ravishing culture, an indispensable partner, a fond dream, and a patronizing teacher.

Chinese political elites may still recall the striking remarks made by Mao Zedong in 1949, when he referred to the West as a dream and as a teacher: "Imperialist aggression shattered the fond dreams of the Chinese about learning from the West. It was very odd—why were the teachers always committing aggression against the pupil? The Chinese learned a great deal from the West, but they could never make it work and were never able to realize their ideals." Hence, the revolution to drive the West out of China.

The process of reform and opening that is now occurring in China can be seen as the renewal of an earlier painful process of learning from the West. Many Chinese wonder whether the teachers will once again bully the pupil. And yet, how immeasurably better it will be—for the United States and for the rest of the world—if, in the 21st century, Chinese ideals are fulfilled. □