

The
HEDGEHOG REVIEW
Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture

Spring 2011 / Volume Thirteen / Number One



American Culture Facing China's Rise: Can We Make Room at the Top?

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FOR THE U.S., CHINA'S RISE PRESENTS AN extraordinary challenge. Many called the twentieth century the "American Century," just as the nineteenth was the "British Century." Yet, in 2007, the United Nations found that no fewer than a dozen countries have advanced beyond the United States in overall development per capita in the twenty-first century. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has not yet accomplished this feat, and whether it ever will remains to be seen. What is apparent, however, is that the PRC already has a far larger pool of labor and human capital than the United States, more telephones and internet users, and a faster-growing gross

domestic product (GDP). The "communist" country's GDP has increased more than tenfold since the institution of "Reform and Opening" in the late 1970s. Though still lagging behind the United States when the measurement is GDP per capita, the PRC more than doubled its per capita gross national income from \$930 to \$2,000 between 2000 and 2006, and breakneck growth continues. At the same time, Beijing is pouring money into infrastructure and high-tech research—savvy choices that have already yielded such apparent results as a testable ballistic missile defense system.¹ To this litany one could add much, but the point is clear: the United States

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appears to be losing its place as the world's material hegemon, and the country rising to replace it is China.²

America has not ignored this development. In its imminent confrontation with the PRC, America theoretically has a range of choices, from hostility to indifference, from amicability to deference. But in this choice, neither the political, social, and cultural elites of the United States, nor its people, are entirely free. How America has long viewed China exerts no small influence on which path Washington will follow in its material and cultural relations with the People's Republic.

Let us assume, for normative if not for empirical reasons, that the ultimate desire of America's people and elites is peace with the Chinese. For this to come about, how the U.S. views and speaks about the PRC will have to undergo a deep cultural change. In the democratic discourse of the United States, there is a striking binary that divides the civil from the uncivil. Americans will have to resolve their ambivalence about contemporary China and move from uncivil to civil discourse. This will be difficult, for Americans have persistently equated civilization with being not only capitalist but democratic, with being just like their own country, the United States.

How America perceives China depends upon how America views itself. For as long as America has existed, it has believed in its own exceptionalism, in the uniqueness of its character, destiny, and mission. Even before the United States was an independent nation, America imagined itself to be a "city on a hill" in the eyes of the world.³ For the first Puritan settlers, the beacon of civilization was to be completed in the westward march to America, moving from the Old World to the New.⁴ That relocation completed, the tide of civilization would then change directions, flowing always outward from America back to the West and the East. America had been "chosen" in the history of progress, its own development representing the next and highest stage of civilization. The boundaries of this first new world civilization

were not only territorial but symbolic and moral. Those living outside these boundaries were not only unfortunate; they were different, to some degree uncivilized, in some manner barbaric. Americans felt they needed to defend themselves against such antidemocratic people, morally in every case, politically in many cases, and militarily on occasion. Other nations and peoples who made progress were conceived as moving from barbarism toward civilization—via religious conversion, democratic transformation, capitalistic development, education, or some combination thereof.⁵ With such progress, these others transitioned naturally from enmity to amicability vis-à-vis America. Indeed, Americans often called the progress of others "Americanization," a term that illuminates how outsiders to civilization were conceived as becoming insiders.⁶

In relation to this American "empire of civilization," China long appeared the backward "Orient," a region beneath true civilization, outside of true humanity.⁷ For Western civilization, as the critic Edward Said put it, the crucial task was to "control, contain, and otherwise govern (through superior knowledge and accommodating power) the Other."⁸ What Said missed in his now classical polemic was that, at least for America, this construction of the other did not necessarily imply hatred; America could embed difference in a narrative of future transformation, whether religious, political, cultural, or economic.

Mao Tse Tung's Communist victory transformed China from an orientalized backwater that America could patronize into a rival in the twentieth century's clash of ideologies. America could no longer ignore the quaint Middle Kingdom. It had joined "the Communist side," fallen under the sway of the Kremlin.⁹ Political confrontation, perhaps even war, would be necessary to compel wayward Red China to resume progress towards Civilization. As for the revolutionary communists, they reversed the civil/anti-civil binary. Like other Communist leaders of

the time, Mao advocated world revolution as the only way to civilize the capitalists, whom he and his Chinese comrades regarded as imperialist, war-mongering, and barbarian. Both poles of the America-China binary supported a narrative of confrontation.

Restoration of official diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China—under the sign of Nixon-Kissinger *realpolitik* and in the twilight of Mao's reign—placed America in a rhetorical dilemma. No longer could Washington afford to dismiss Beijing as "Oriental," but it could not yet hope for the conversion of the latter to Civilization.¹⁰ As a temporary solution, American presidents admitted the possibility of a future comprising a multiplicity of irreconcilable systems.¹¹

China finally stepped onto the path toward Civilization with Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening" in the late 1970s, which inaugurated the movement toward market capitalism. Demands posted on Beijing's Democracy Wall also sparked American hope in a future China that would embrace civilization's political pillar: democracy. These seemingly twinned developments significantly repositioned China from an American other to a junior member of the American side of history. For two decades, China's rise became grist for the mill of America's self-congratulatory narrative of conversion to Civilization.¹² In 1983, U.S. President Ronald Reagan described communism as "another sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages even now are being written."¹³ Two years later, the President declared not only that American modernity was a universal cultural model but also that America would "nourish and defend freedom and democracy...and...communicate these ideals everywhere we can."¹⁴ In this context, Reagan not only mentioned "East Asia and the Pacific," but he explicitly named China. Beyond reflecting the adoption in the material sphere of a new system of production (capitalism), China's "Reform and Opening" seemed to signal a cultural and polit-

ical rebirth, one upon which the American mind would seize.

Only one decade later, there occurred an abrupt reversal of China's tide of change, with the post-Mao Chinese leadership issuing its first global rejection of a thoroughgoing Americanization. In 1989, Tiananmen Square erupted. Yet, for an America long steeped in the narrative of conversion, and now interpreting post-Communist China's every move through this lens, the 1989 incident seemed paradoxically to confirm hopeful expectations. There had been an eruption of democracy. The statue of liberty had appeared in the center of Beijing. Once again, a comment by President Reagan exemplified the sentiment:

Perhaps most exciting are the winds of change that are blowing over the People's Republic of China, where one-quarter of the world's population is now getting its first taste of economic freedom. At the same time, the growth of democracy has become one of the most powerful political movements of our age.... Throughout the world, free markets are the model for growth. Democracy is the standard by which governments are measured.¹⁵

America learned to its disappointment that the actual effect of Tiananmen Square was to launch China on a path away from the American model. Still, in the years following, and despite this dawning realization, America continually tried to embrace this increasingly powerful and ever more challenging other, and to draw it into American civilization. The effort failed, and the failures often tempted American leaders to place all the blame on the Chinese side. For example, during the 1992 presidential context, Democratic candidate Bill Clinton accused President George H. W. Bush of "coddling tyrants, including those in Beijing."¹⁶

Having once pulled China from the "Oriental" box, however, America could not

very easily stuff this newly emerging, ever more powerful, yet still different other back inside. No longer could America write off Chinese deviations from the path to American civilization in essentialist terms. "Orientalism" was no longer a going concern. Americans could no longer categorize Chinese as exotic creatures of an unfamiliar species. Obviously, the industrious and ambitious members of this rapidly advancing society were people like Americans, equally materialist and individualist, if not equally democratic, at least not in the Western way.¹⁷ If such admirable people chose to rebuff the American system, it could be a severe discursive challenge, and perhaps would eventually present a significant political threat.

America could not justify blatant disregard for its own democratic values; at the same time, it could hardly afford to break off relations with the world's largest and most efficient factory. The rhetorical solution was to align America's economic interests with the democratic interests of the Chinese people. American leaders introduced a policy of economic "engagement" designed not only to benefit America but also to bring China "into the world." The result of economic engagement would allow "the world [to] bring change and freedom to China."¹⁸ The beacon of civilization was determined to shine its light on China, no matter what, and thereby bring this new behemoth into the global system. So the rhetoric of conversion continues. China's difference, and what sometimes seems its growing hostility, are explained by the fact that China's conversion remains far from complete.

What America needs to face, what culturally it cannot yet begin to comprehend, is the very real possibility that China might become a huge economic success without becoming democratic. In the late 1980s, on the eve of Tiananmen, Chinese conservatives spoke about their nation taking "the Bismarck path." The great nineteenth-century, German political leader had united Germany and coordinated its rise to economic

equality with France, England, and the United States. That story did not end well. Western Europe and the U.S. fiercely resisted Germany's effort to remake the world, the German difference deepened, and the central European nation brutally fought back. Let us hope that neither the U.S. nor China wishes to go that way again.

Endnotes

- 1 Sheng-Wei Wang, "China's Ascendancy: An Opportunity or a Threat?" (Washington: International Publishing House for China's Culture, 2007) 53–8 and 61–3; and Andrew Jacobs and Jonathan Ansfield, "With Defense Test, China Shows Displeasure of U.S.," *The New York Times* (12 January 2010): <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/13/world/asia/13china.html>>.
- 2 For the United Nations' measurement of the United States' "Human Development Index" (HDI), see "Human Development Report 2009," The United Nations Development Program (2009): <<http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2009/>>. On China's rise, see Nicholas Eberstadt, "Will China (Continue To) Rise?," *The Rise of China: Essays on the Future Competition*, ed. Gary J. Schmitt (New York: Encounter, 2009) 131–2 and 153–4.
- 3 John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630): <<http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html>>.
- 4 Brett Bowden, *The Empire of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 203.
- 5 Bowden 70.
- 6 When terrorists brought down the Twin Towers of New York's World Trade Center, President George W. Bush verbalized these primal convictions, implicitly denying Samuel Huntington's argument that "the fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future" (Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72.3 [Summer 1993]: 22). Instead, Bush portrayed the War on Terror as a clash between civilization (singular) and its other: "This is not, however, just America's fight.... This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.... The civilized world is rallying to America's side" (President George W. Bush, "Address to Congress and the American People" [20 September 2001]).
- 7 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979) 107, 252, and especially 42.
- 8 Said 48.
- 9 See President Harry S. Truman, "Report to the American People on Korea" (11 April 1951): "Behind the North Koreans and Chinese Communists in the front lines stand

The Language Deficit

The September 11, 2001 attacks, followed by the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, spurred an important debate over the “language deficit” in the United States—our inability to communicate with or understand crucial areas of the world. The Modern Language Association (MLA), for example, commissioned and published a study calling for curricular reform in higher education that would address the need for increased language instruction that also fully incorporates cultural and historical reflection.

In December, the MLA released a new study of U.S. colleges and universities that shows that the study of languages other than English is both growing and diversifying.

The three most studied languages remain Spanish, the overwhelming favorite, followed by French and German. While each of these grew in enrollments since the last report in 2006, the largest percentage increases came elsewhere. Enrollment in Arabic language courses grew by 46.3 percent after a 126.5 percent increase between 2002 and 2006. Arabic is now the 8th most studied language. Enrollments in Korean grew 19.1 percent (14th most studied), Chinese grew 18.2 percent (7th most studied) and American Sign Language grew 16.4 percent (4th most studied).

These statistics are certainly good news: student interest in language learning is rising. In terms of the MLA’s other goal, of situating language study within cultural and historical frames, the picture is less rosy. In most university language departments, literature and culture are not typically an integral part of the language sequence but are the topics of upper-level courses and taken by far fewer students. Budget cuts at universities, which have led to the closing or shrinking of some language departments, suggest we shouldn’t expect this to change any time soon.

See the MLA report at: http://www.mla.org/2009_enrollmentsurvey.

additional millions of Chinese soldiers. And behind the Chinese stand the tanks, the planes, the submarines, the soldiers, and the scheming rulers of the Soviet Union.”

¹⁰ In presidential rhetoric beginning in 1971, the country formerly painted by the U.S. simply as “Red” became “the People’s Republic of China” and “a potentially powerful Communist nation, China,” as evidenced in President Richard Nixon, “Radio Address about Second Annual Foreign Policy Report to the Congress” (25 February 1971).

¹¹ President Gerald Ford in his “Address on U.S. Foreign Policy” (10 April 1975) spoke of “deep differences in our philosophy and social systems.”

¹² Consider President Jimmy Carter’s “State of the Union Address” (23 January 1979): “I’ve outlined some of the changes that have transformed the world and which are continuing as we meet here tonight. But we in America need not fear change. The values on which our nation was founded—individual liberty, self-determination, the potential for human fulfillment in freedom—all of these endure. We find these democratic principles praised, even in books smuggled out of totalitarian nations and on wallposters in lands [namely, China] which we thought were closed to our influence. Our country has regained its special place of leadership in the worldwide struggle for human rights.”

¹³ President Ronald Reagan, “Evil Empire,” remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals (8 March 1983).

¹⁴ President Ronald Reagan, “State of the Union Address” (6 February 1985).

¹⁵ President Ronald Reagan, “Address at Moscow State University” (31 May 1988). See also President Ronald Reagan, “Speech on Foreign Policy” (16 December 1988), especially the following: “When you consider that, according to the Freedom House count, 70 percent of those not living in freedom are in China and the Soviet Union—and even in those nations, as I say, we see glimpses of hope—the picture is even brighter. The most dramatic movement of all has taken place: More than 90 percent of the people are now living in countries that are democratic or headed in that direction.”

¹⁶ Journalist John Mashek in a question to William J. Clinton. William J. Clinton, debate with President George H. W. Bush and Ross Perot (11 October 1992).

¹⁷ Clinton debate with Bush and Perot (11 October 1992). “If we can stand up for our economic interests, we ought to be able to pursue the democratic interests of the people in China.”

¹⁸ President William J. Clinton, “State of the Union Address” (19 January 1999).