

Introduction

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One day in March 1998, while meeting with a group of delegates to the Chinese National People's Congress, Jiang Zemin, general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and president of the People's Republic of China, suddenly started talking about Hollywood movies. High-spirited and expansive, Jiang told his audience how he had enjoyed certain American films. Some Hollywood creations promote good morals and have considerable educational value, Jiang said. He continued:

A new movie will soon be shown in our country. It's called *Titanic*. This film does a good job of depicting tension between love and money, the gap between the rich and the poor, and how people behave in different ways facing adversity. . . . In any event, we shouldn't simply assume that, in cultural exchanges, the capitalist world has nothing worthy to offer us.¹

Jiang went on to reminisce how, back in the 1940s, he, a college student in Shanghai, took great pleasure in watching American movies. Among those he remembered fondly—*Gone with the Wind*, *Singin' in the Rain*, and *Waterloo Bridge*. “I recently suggested that our comrades in the Politburo all go see *Titanic*,” he said. “I don't mean to beautify capitalism, but I do believe that we should all be knowledgeable not only on our own country but on the rest of the world too so that we can enrich and improve ourselves. One thing is clear—do not just assume that we alone are capable of moral education.”²

These comments, coming from the head of the Chinese Communist Party, were remarkable. In a country where ideology reigned supreme and politics was full of symbolism and cultural nuances, government officials—especially those in high positions—were extremely cautious about what they uttered in public. Tight-lipped, they would stay close to official scripts and spoke mostly in party jargon, especially on a sensitive subject such as the United States.

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Why would General Secretary Jiang go out of his way to comment so freely and so publicly on Hollywood and American culture? To understand this, we should consider the context for the incident, with particular regard to the interplay among the Chinese government's U.S. policies, Chinese intellectuals' views on America, and the popular sentiments in China at the time.

Jiang Zemin came to the helm of the Chinese Communist Party in late 1989, shortly after the Chinese government's violent suppression of a large-scale pro-democracy movement, a crackdown that resulted in the death of numerous protesters in Beijing, to the horror and outrage of the world. Jiang's tenure as China's top leader thus began rather inauspiciously. However, in the years that followed, dramatic changes took place in both China's domestic affairs and its foreign relations. After an initial period of uncertainty and hesitation, the Chinese Communist Party decided to continue the liberal economic reform of the preceding decade. China's economy once again boomed, bringing prosperity to a large number of Chinese people.

The relationship with the United States remained icy for a few more years. Immediately after the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, the United States imposed a wide range of sanctions against China. In the middle of the 1990s, tension between the two countries further heightened as Beijing and Washington wrestled each other over various issues. There was, for instance, the serious disagreement over the status of Taiwan, which China viewed as a renegade province, and which the United States supported in its de facto separation from the People's Republic of China. When, in 1995, Washington allowed independence-minded Taiwanese leader Lee Teng-hui (Li Denghui) to go on a trip in the U.S.—an unprecedented event since 1949—the Chinese government reacted strongly. The Chinese People's Liberation Army staged large-scale military exercises in South China and test-fired missiles off the coast of Taiwan. In response, Washington deployed a sizable naval battle group to the region. The relationship between the two countries fell to its lowest point since the Mao-Nixon *rapprochement* more than twenty years before.

Meanwhile, inside China, some significant changes were also taking place, especially with regard to China's educated elite. In the 1980s, Chinese intellectuals had largely viewed America with a liberal inclination, taking the United States as an inspiration for the economic and political development of China. That partiality for America became quite evident when, at the height of the 1989 pro-democracy movement in Beijing, demonstrators set up a replica of the Statue of Liberty at Tiananmen Square. Entering the 1990s, however, the mood of China's intellectual life changed notably, transforming the Chinese elite's outlook on America. The failure of the 1989 pro-democracy movement poured cold water on political activism as renewed economic growth in China shifted attention from politics to business. Now there was a sense that China could do reasonably well without mimicking the West. A younger generation of Chinese intellectuals was coming of age, whose memory of the

troubles in the Mao Era was more remote and less personal. Keenly aware of the national differences between China and the West, the new generation of educated Chinese had its reservations about Western liberalism as a universal value. Not surprisingly, these Chinese did not have much patience for American criticism of China, which they believed to be tainted with inherent U.S. hostility toward their motherland.

The new trend in China's intellectual life in the 1990s revealed itself in the phenomenal success of a little book published in 1995—*China Can Say No*. In a radical departure from the liberal tradition of the 1980s, the young and angry authors of this little book squarely condemned U.S. policies toward China as well as American culture itself. The book provides a long list of China's grievances against the United States, including, among others, the U.S. effort to defeat Beijing's bid to host the Olympic Games, the American objection to China's membership in the World Trade Organization, and Washington's support for Taiwanese and Tibetan separatist movements. The Chinese had long been naïve and foolish in their adoration of the United States, the book authors argued. It was now the time for the Chinese to wake up, face reality, and take a stand against American harassment and intimidation.³ With their sweeping denunciation and urgent exhortation, the authors of *China Can Say No* quickly became national celebrities, and their book sold more than a million copies.

One might simply dismiss cases such as this as acts of young provocateurs. Events like this, however, were indicative of some larger changes that were taking place in Chinese society at the time. About twenty years into the free market-oriented economic reform that Deng Xiaoping initiated at the end of the 1970s, the average Chinese were facing a new situation. Even though they were still largely supportive of the reformist policies that had brought them prosperity, the people became increasingly concerned with some side-effects of the liberal changes. The ruthless drive for profitability generated widespread social dislocation. Urban workers no longer enjoyed job security; they made good money as long as their companies or factories did well but faced the prospect of losing their livelihood altogether when, somehow, things went wrong. Poor peasants, unhappy with the miniscule yields from their paltry land, roamed the country in search for work at a time when millions of city workers struggled. The gap between rich and poor Chinese widened spectacularly, and belief in stability and harmony—so essential to Chinese society for so many centuries—was evaporating rapidly. Crime, prostitution, environmental degradation, along with a host of other social ills, ailed the country, as ever more fabulous shopping plazas and skyscrapers rose above China's horizon. Individualism seemed to be running amok, making a mess of China's moral fiber. Angst like this inevitably raised doubts on the wisdom of Western liberalism, especially the famed American Way.

Thus, in China of the 1990s, anti-American sentiments were gaining strength at all levels of Chinese society—state, intelligentsia, and general

populace—creating a delicately difficult situation for the Chinese Communist Party. True, China's political leaders frequently benefited from anti-American feelings in China and often fanned the fire for their own gains. At the same time, anti-Americanism also posed a threat to a government that derived its legitimacy from China's recent economic success, which in turn came out of an ongoing liberal reform. If anti-Americanism spun out of control, it could seriously damage the reform in China, thus preventing the Chinese Communist Party from achieving its long-term goals. To sustain economic growth, China had to work closely with the United States; sweeping condemnation of America, on the other hand, would raise questions about the morality of a government that actively cooperated with the United States. For its own interests, the Chinese government had to manage the presentation and assessment of the U.S.A. carefully.

Viewed in this context, General Secretary Jiang Zemin's pro-American talk in March 1998, as related at the beginning of the current discussion, does not appear so odd after all. In the wake of the crisis over the Taiwan Strait in the mid-nineties, both Beijing and Washington recognized the danger of a Sino-American confrontation, and they moved to mend their relationship with each other. As part of this effort, an exchange of presidential visits took place: Jiang Zemin visited the United States in October 1997; Bill Clinton reciprocated and traveled to China in June 1998. It was in between these two important visits, both of which Chinese media covered extensively and enthusiastically, that General Secretary Jiang spoke favorably of Hollywood and paid his tribute to the moral elements in American culture.

It was quite unfortunate for Jiang that not long after the exchange of the Jiang-Clinton visits in 1997–98, certain highly destructive events took place, severely wounding the recently repaired Sino-American relations, leaving Chinese leaders such as Jiang in an awkward and embarrassing situation. On March 8, 1999, bombs dropped from U.S. warplanes taking part in a NATO air-raid campaign in Yugoslavia struck and destroyed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three and injuring twenty other Chinese diplomats and journalists. Washington's explanation that the strike was an accident could not dispel the widespread Chinese suspicion that this was a deliberate attack aimed to intimidate and humiliate China. Furious college students staged heated protests outside the U.S. embassy in Beijing. Then, on April 1, 2001, a U.S. plane on a reconnaissance mission off China's southern coast collided with a Chinese fighter that was tailing it, causing the crash of the Chinese aircraft, the death of the Chinese pilot, and the emergency landing of the U.S. plane on Chinese territory. Beijing lodged strong protests against the United States. The expression of indignation notwithstanding, the Chinese government, eager to avoid a serious escalation, speedily returned the American crew and the damaged spy plane to the U.S. (China had to reject an insulting offer from Washington in the amount of \$34,576 to cover the costs related to the event.)

These events, taking place within a relatively short period of time, enraged the Chinese already angry with U.S. policies toward China and embarrassed reform-minded Chinese leaders such as General Secretary Jiang Zemin, who had recently spoken so favorably of the United States.⁴ After the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, one Chinese college student noted:

When I first watched American film *Saving Private Ryan*, I was deeply moved by it. What recently happened to the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, however, made me think about how the United States often bullies other countries. American lives are certainly precious; but, aren't soldiers of other countries human beings too?⁵

The circumstances surrounding Jiang Zemin's seemingly trivial remarks about Hollywood demonstrate how Chinese views of the U.S. are fashioned in a broad and dynamic process. Generally, one people's images and opinions of another are often fragmented, constantly evolving, and full of undertones and subtexts. This is especially true with Chinese views of the United States, given the nature of the nations involved in the particular case. China and the U.S., two of the world's largest countries, are drastically different in their cultural backgrounds and historical experiences. In the twentieth century, these two nations played significant roles in world affairs and actively interacted with each other. The potential for misunderstanding was enormous and consequences of such misunderstanding immense. Because of all this, the Chinese looked at the United States with diverse considerations and in widely divergent ways, which in turn led to images and interpretations that were highly complex and often self-conflicting. It is no easy task, therefore, to make sense of the multifaceted Chinese views of America. To reconcile the differences among the varied and contradictory perceptions and opinions, we need to move beyond the fractional and fluctuating particulars to reach what works behind the scenes—the dynamic processes that created the Chinese outlook and rhetoric on the United States in the first place. By investigating the ways in which larger historical forces shaped Chinese perceptions and attitudes, rather than simply presenting various views, we may be able to achieve a unified understanding of not only *what* the Chinese think of the United States but also *how* they view and interpret the important nation sitting on the other side of the Pacific.

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While many larger historical forces contributed to the making of the Chinese images and interpretations of the United States, this current study focuses on

the following questions. First, how has China's relationship with the United States interplayed with China's internal affairs? Second, in the domestic context, how have the Chinese people's cultural predispositions interacted with the political life of China? Third, how have the major groups in Chinese society, most notably the Chinese state, intelligentsia, and general populace—each with its own particular cultural concerns and political agenda—contended with one another over the proper interpretation and presentation of America? Fourth, how, over time, have the general forces noted above aligned and realigned among themselves, generating new dynamics that shaped and reshaped the Chinese outlook on the United States? In the contexts created by larger historical forces we can better examine and evaluate particular Chinese views of the United States at given places and times.

What do we mean by the “larger historical forces” noted above? Throughout the twentieth century, the United States figured prominently in China's national consciousness. To the Chinese, the United States was more than a foreign country; it stood for a way of life, which had significant implications to China struggling in the modern age. The United States and China were remarkably successful at different points in history, a fact that led each of the two nations, in their respective ways, to regard itself as the very epitome of human civilization. In premodern times, China largely dominated her part of the globe, and the Chinese people came to believe that their country, the Great Flowering Central Kingdom, was situated at the very center of the whole world, both geographically and culturally. Foreign conquests of China did take place, but on each of these occasions, despite China's military defeats, the Chinese managed to maintain their way of life, eventually converting the conquerors into followers of Chinese traditions.

Events in the nineteenth century, however, shattered this old historical pattern when Western powers, armed with modern technology and new ideas on sociopolitical organization, subjugated China. This time, the outsiders not only defeated China militarily but also dictated a new way of life that the Chinese had to accept. China tried to fight off the predators, but the ailing empire lost one war after another, falling to the very brink of total colonization. With their traditional values and institutions in shambles, the Chinese found themselves struggling in a completely different world, helpless and confused. Quite perceptively, Li Hongzhang, an enterprising but ultimately ill-fated Chinese statesman in the late nineteenth century, characterized the upheavals he and his contemporary compatriots lived through as changes that China had not seen in over two thousand years.

The challenge to the Chinese nation in the modern times has been, therefore, twofold. On the one hand, it was a struggle against the Western powers to save China from national annihilation. On the other hand, it was a drive to modernize China by adopting Western ways. Rather aptly, Chi-

nese Communist leader Mao Zedong once described the situation as one in which China, a humble journeyman, tries to learn a trade from a powerful but abusive master, the West.

As the Chinese struggled with their dilemma, they could not help noticing the rise of the United States, which, within a relatively short period of time, fought successfully for her independence and grew to be the most affluent and powerful country in the world. The national experiences of the U.S. and China thus sharply contrasted each other, with one country succeeding splendidly and the other failing miserably. Even more significantly, what lay behind the American success, the American culture and institutions, seemed to be so antithetical to those of China—creativity versus conventions, individuality versus collective thinking, progress versus tradition, and so on and so forth. Quite naturally, the United States of America fascinated the Chinese and compelled the Chinese to examine many of their fundamental beliefs as they endeavored to reinvigorate their country and reinvent their national identity. In this way, America as a way of life became an integral part of the Chinese effort to reshape China in the modern times.

But the United States was not just a concept; it was also an actual nation-state, with its own interests, a power that actively participated in the Western encroachment on China. As such, the United States was deeply involved in Chinese affairs, a fact that aroused strong sentiments and reactions in China, which at times proved to be strongly hostile. Such Chinese resentments complicated the Chinese fascination with America as an ideal and gave rise to conflicts and fluctuations in Chinese attitudes toward the United States. There is, therefore, an intricate connection between China's domestic affairs and China's relationship with the United States.

Within China, politics and culture also interplayed with each other to fashion Chinese views on the United States of America. As noted earlier, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, having suffered repeated defeats at the hand of the world's imperialist powers, the Chinese learned the hard way that for China to survive as a nation, the people must let go many of their deeply cherished traditions and embrace a new civilization. Most important of all, they had to forego the ancient Chinese emphasis on the group over the individual, so as to liberalize Chinese society to allow the free growth of a modern economy and democratic institutions. This was a fundamental cultural revolution for a country with one of the longest continuous histories in the world, where the influence of the past was the most pervasive and enduring. It soon became clear that it was one thing to recognize the necessity for this fundamental change and quite another to actually effect the transformation and live with it on a daily basis.

The arduous task to achieve a cultural revolution was made even more difficult by the political environment in which the changes in values had to

take place. Given the severe national survival crisis that China experienced in modern times, the Chinese had to take immediate and concerted actions to save their country; otherwise, their whole cause would be lost, leaving no nation behind for them to modernize. The political imperative was therefore largely collectivist by nature, calling for the loyalty and devotion of the Chinese people above everything else. This impetus inevitably conflicted with the cultural imperative that insisted on the emancipation of the individual as the ultimate solution to China's problems in the modern times. The tension thus created led to a kind of cultural politics characterized by painful choices on both political and personal levels. It was with such paradoxes and divided commitment in terms of cultural-political interplay that the Chinese had to confront the United States of America as a power and as an ideal.⁶

Furthermore, Chinese groups of different social and political standings—the Chinese state, intelligentsia, and general populace—tended to have different emphases in their contemplations on the U.S.A. The Chinese state, for one, was obsessed with political stability and was thus predisposed to view American presence in China as politically subversive, an effect it strived to control. Chinese intellectuals, who for the most part favored the idea of progress, were more willing to experiment with new and challenging ideas, including those of American origin. The masses of China, for their part, were more interested in issues with direct and immediate bearing on their daily life, including matters such as morals, security, and material well-being. With such divergent preoccupations and inclinations, the Chinese state, intelligentsia, and general populace frequently found themselves at odds on what to make of America. The tension and contention among these groups thus constituted yet another major element in the dynamic formulation of Chinese views on the United States.

Finally, in terms of changes over the twentieth century, the dynamics that shaped Chinese views on the U.S.A. manifested themselves in several major stages: from 1900 to 1949, from 1949 to 1979, from 1979 to 1989, and from 1989 to 2000. General circumstances in these historical periods varied greatly to influence the making of Chinese views on America in diverse ways. At the same time, the larger historical forces outlined above were actively at play in all of the four phases, generating some enduring themes and persistent patterns that held up throughout the twentieth century.

III

The current study contains eight chapters. Chapter 1 surveys the years from the beginning of the twentieth century to the Communist victory in 1949, a period in which war and revolution were wreaking havoc in China, when

central control was weak, resulting in a relatively open and free setting for the Chinese to explore America. Chapter 2 examines the situation in the early 1950s, when the newly established Chinese Communist government carried out comprehensive social and political reorganization as China rejected American influence against the backdrop of the Sino-American confrontation in Korea. Chapter 3 focuses on the dramatic events of 1957, when China's liberal intellectuals, eager to deal with new problems in China, challenged the Chinese government on the proper interpretation and presentation of America, prompting the Chinese state to strike back. Chapter 4 inspects the developments from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, a period that witnessed the reestablishment, radicalization, and eventual disintegration of Communist China's official America. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 cover the years from 1979 to 1989 and respectively focus on the experiences of the Chinese government, intelligentsia, and general populace as related to the U.S.A. in the context of the post-Mao liberal reform in China. Chapter 8 follows, which inspects some old trends and new issues in the making of Chinese views on the United States of America in the 1990s, when China emerged as an economic and political power in world affairs and conditions in China differed substantially from any of the preceding decades in the twentieth century.

In many ways, the current study is an overly ambitious project, setting the author's limited abilities against broad and complex subject matter. Designed to demonstrate the workings of larger historical forces during an extended period, the study is sketchy on many specific issues and leaves some important questions unanswered. As such, the work is not meant to exhaust all the investigative possibilities in the field of study. Instead, the author attempts to suggest a way of understanding that attends to both particular cases and general forces, with the meaning and significance of the former elucidated in the contexts created by the latter. With regard to the gaps and spottiness in the study, the author finds consolation in Jacques Barzun's observation that "the historian can only show, not prove, persuade, not convince; and the cultural historian more than any other occupies that characteristic position."⁷ It is hoped that, by following what Barzun termed as the "middle course between total description . . . and circumscribed narrative,"⁸ the author can shed some light on how the Chinese people, in a century of dramatic changes, contemplated the United States of America as they carried on their own discourse on the proper relationships between the West and the East, between modernity and tradition, and between the individual and society.