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## Chinese Culture and Postmodern Diplomacy

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**CHINESE CULTURE AND POSTMODERN DIPLOMACY**

**By**

**Jeremy C. Wooden**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements for the degree**

**Of**

**UNIVERSITY HONORS  
WITH DEPARTMENT HONORS**

**In**

**The Department of History**

**Approved:**

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Logan, UT**

**2002**

Recent decades have seen the collapse and transformation of China's ancient polity. But in looking at the advent of nationalism, liberal democracies, Marxism, and other dynamic elements of a worldwide civilization, we should not forget the still largely unexplored resources of the Chinese people's own experience. The Chinese tradition is rich and various. Tomorrow other elements may emerge from it.

J.K. Fairbank, *The United States and China*

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## INTRODUCTION

The United States presently finds itself standing at a remarkable historical juncture. As the world's only "remaining superpower," it enjoys the benefit of military superiority, economic prosperity, and vast cultural influence. Yet despite its seeming superiority to other nations –or, perhaps, *in spite of it*- the future is not necessarily secured for the United States. While Americans may be able to take *American power* for granted, there is a general sense that the United States is either at or near the apex of its *influence*; that, as Samuel Huntington has argued, while the U.S. will remain strong, its strength will decline relative to that of other civilizations.

Besides this impending redistribution of relative power in the world, there is another problem that threatens U.S. prosperity and security; namely, a widespread dislike, distrust, and dissatisfaction with America in general – its culture, its success, and its foreign policy. While the extreme possibilities of this peril are encapsulated in the horror of 'terrorism,' it is not limited to terrorist activities per se. For every member of the Al-Qaeda network there are millions of Chinese and Arabs who, though less violent than terrorists, hold many of the same fundamental views toward America. Just as an Islamic fundamentalist believes the West, and particularly America, is an evil bent on eradicating Islamic culture and religion, many millions of Chinese are taught in their public education system that the U.S. is the primary protagonist against Chinese culture. They are taught that Americans delight in humiliating Chinese civilization.

Anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism may become defining macrohistorical issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; a corollary dynamic in the process of globalization. Since its founding, America has been able to respond to the waves of macro-historical challenge

with unparalleled security and resourcefulness. The Industrial Revolution found fertile ground in a resource-rich land relatively uninhibited by an entrenched economic form; American political independence and military achievement dictated that it was on the victor's end of the last gasp of imperialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; American geographic isolation strangely allowed it to prosper off of the cataclysmic wars that shook nearly every other civilization in the world during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When the history books are written at the end of this century, anti-Americanism may very well appear a topic of macro-history alongside Communism/Capitalism, the world wars, imperialism, and industrialization. In order for the United States to respond successfully to this amorphous threat, it must take a very informed, proactive leadership role; for this challenge –unlike the ones which preceded it- is aimed directly at the U.S. It is not an import or a threat that can be buffered by the cognitive dissonance of bordering oceans.

It remains to be seen what type of leadership role America will take in responding to this challenge. For certain, we know that America is currently committed to the extermination of terrorist cells in countries around the world. But what of the pools of psychological discontent that breed terrorist cells in the first place? What of the millions of people who, though they will never become terrorists, sympathize with them? If these factors remain, is it possible that anti-Americanism will find surprisingly new forms of expression? One possibility is that Chinese nationalism could take on a unique face if their nation eventually confronts, as some have recently claimed, the “collapse of China.”<sup>1</sup> Another possibility would be that, as the military and economic power of other nations rises in relation to the U.S., hate-filled nations could form dangerous alliances against America's best interests.

Even in the absence of catastrophe, there are many reasons why the United States would be wise to take a proactive stance in ameliorating the signals it sends to other peoples which feed anti-American biases. First, while many of the factors behind other's dislike of American culture are irrational and beyond our control, some are not; while there are indeed "evil" people out there whose socio-political designs incontrovertibly conflict with the founding principles of the United States, there is also a tremendous mass of the world population whose opinions can be swayed away from "evil." Indeed, while opportunists may use anti-Americanism as a noble toga draped over their will to power, it shouldn't obscure the fact that many of their adherents have grievances that are both rational and remediable. Second, the problem of anti-Americanism is not confined to foreign countries – it is an aspect of our own culture. Terrorists bent on destroying America, or at least some of its political structure or society, are nothing new to us: Timothy McVeigh lashed out against the federal government; the Columbine perpetrators felt victimized by a very inegalitarian school system; the young man who flew his student plane into a building in St. Petersburg was upset with America in general; whomever perpetrated the anthrax scare seems to be deeply antagonistic towards American media and politics. These are all examples of American citizens perceiving the same things in America that terrorist see: mainly, injustice, oppression, and routinized victimization.

A third reason to reevaluate American behavior in response to global anti-Americanism is that it is simply in our best interests. Strong institutions grow by learning what criticism to accept and learn from, and which to dismiss and move away from. At some point in history, the "American Experience" became grossly distorted in the minds of those in developing nations, as well as the minds of some who were raised within our

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon G. Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China*, (New York: Random House, 2001).

own borders. An honest and thorough evaluation of how we as a nation have shaped that experience –whether or not it truly aligns with the best American democracy has to offer– would strengthen our interests both at home and abroad.

The improvement of relations with disenchanted peoples will not require that the United States drastically alter its fundamental priorities. Rather, what stands in need of correction is the way we go about our business abroad: the implied messages we communicate, the unexamined biases we express, the misunderstandings we unknowingly foster.

- *What are these implied messages?*
- *How is it that while I see my country as a peaceful land of opportunity, millions see it as “ruthless, aggressive, conceited, arrogant, easily provoked, biased.”<sup>2</sup>?*
- *What are the biases Americans communicate to other nations, and how?*

In this essay, I try to answer these questions in the context of the ongoing human rights dispute between China and the U.S. In the context of this disagreement, the question of how America communicates aggression, bias, and arrogance is answered in a preponderance of evidence that suggests that cultural miscommunications not only thwart American efforts to improve human rights, but, sadly, convey threatening motives to the Chinese populace. Despite our good intentions, America’s effort to improve human rights practices in China has counterproductively alienated much of the Chinese population from U.S. interests. In other words, the American effort to improve human rights in China has estranged itself from the very humans whose rights it is trying to



secure and protect. The key to an improvement of relations between the two countries is a more enlightened leadership approach; one contingent upon a better understanding of Chinese culture, as well as a more well-rounded appreciation of American history.

## CULTURE

Before beginning my analysis of the U.S.-Chinese human rights dispute, it is necessary to look more broadly at the role culture plays in the world in general, as well as in international relations. I will also define *culture*.

We cannot understand culture without understanding the historical force which pre-empts our need to understand it (which has placed culture in the textbooks of nearly every course offered in university study - neuroscience, business, biology, not to mention the humanities). The historical force I am referring to, of course, is globalization. The term itself is ill defined. Politicians, scholars, and common people use it in many different ways.

Political leaders around the world have different views of what globalization is. The official Chinese view is that globalization (*quanqiuhua*) is an economic force that, in its first phase, will allow it to finally gain equal-footing with the West in the modern world; and, eventually, allow Chinese civilization to re-assert itself as superior.<sup>3</sup> American political leaders speak of globalization as a historical transformation that will eventually lead to the Americanization of global society, economy, and polity. The American line of reasoning looks like this: globalization ⇒ open markets ⇒ societal awakening ⇒ creation of a middle-class ⇒ political reform ⇒ establishment of Western-

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<sup>2</sup> By Andrea Stone, "In Poll, Islamic World Says Arabs Not Involved in 9/11," *USA Today*, February 27, 2002.

style democracy. The Chinese line of reasoning looks more like this: open markets  $\Rightarrow$  belated economic independence  $\Rightarrow$  a natural (and belated) re-enthronement of Asian superiority.

In intellectual and political circles, globalization means different things to different people. Those who argue for "it" present an argument similar to the one presented by American politicians: the freeing of economic markets will benefit American financial interests as well as give it a more advantageous position to guide nations into choosing "the right future."<sup>4</sup> Intellectuals, however, often do not all align their opinions with this view. Noam Chomsky, for example, argues that globalization is simply a means by which American and British corporate-government interests continue to exist as the "first beneficiaries" of other people's natural resources.<sup>5</sup>

To the common American, globalization seems to be a vague, though very real thing embodying distant contradictions. The term triggers a sense of democracy's impending triumph, as encapsulated in the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the image of the statue of liberty in the Tiananmen demonstrations. Yet it also suggests possible tumult, as sensed in the Seattle-WTO protests as well as the horror of terrorist attacks and Israeli-Palestinian violence. Between these two bi-polar impressions of globalization there is a more sleek sense that globalization somehow means the homogenization of the world through devices of convenience and entertainment – the pc, the cell phone, the DVD player, and Hollywood entertainment.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas G. Moore, "China and Globalization," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1999, pp 65-95.

<sup>4</sup> This statement is a partial paraphrase of the sentiment expressed by President Clinton in the 2000 State of the Union Address: "We need to know we did everything we possibly could to maximize the chance that China will choose the right path." The statement was made after the bilateral agreement had been reached between Charlene Barshefsky, but before the congressional vote on granting China permanent normal trade relations.

Despite the lack of cogency between people's conflicting views of what globalization is, there are a few characteristics of it that one can pin down with relative certainty. First, in a metaphysical sense, global reality is a process that is *shrinking* the globe as it causes more and more *interconnection* between formerly dis-connected cultures. These two concepts –shrinkage and interconnectedness- are quite commonly used in conversations concerning the consequences and dynamics of globalization. Sometimes it is difficult to decipher what one means by these terms (even if you are using them). Usually, it seems, both concepts find useful application in reference to both the generalized psychological sense imbued by globalization as well as its real dynamics. For instance, technology has –for all intents and purposes- shrunk the world: travel technology has erected bridges of hours between cultures where there was formerly a wall of weeks. The spread of capitalist markets and production has also created a very real sense of interconnectedness. The evidence for such interdependency lies in both macro- and micro-economic anecdote. Macro: the Asian Financial Crisis threatened the livelihoods of many more people than just Asians; micro: workers at the Boeing plant in Washington state rely on factories in 11 different countries to complete their airplanes.

More vaguely, but no less importantly, the world simply *seems* more interconnected to the average person. Modern media carries images of other people's conflicts with more prominence and urgency than ever before. We frequently hear of pacts, alliances, and conferences being created or held between the representative powers of disparate cultures – WTO, UN, GATT, OAS, etc. Increasingly, production workers anywhere in the world are aware that they must work to increase productivity or their job

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<sup>5</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Whose World Order?*, taken from [http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/whose\\_world\\_order.htm](http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/whose_world_order.htm).

will go to one of many hungry persons somewhere else in the world. In these generalized ways, interconnectedness *seems* to be occurring between peoples that were once separated by both geography and indifference.

As the world shrinks and becomes more and more interconnected, there is a heightened need for new models of cross-cultural understanding. Existing mental clichés will not work; whether for co-workers in a multinational firm who have different cultural backgrounds, or for nations allying in trade organizations – cultural misunderstandings can spoil even the most promising relationships.

Culture is also a pervasive factor in international politics. Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* and Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* - two landmark works of the past decade on international relations -- devote major portions of their work to the role of culture in the unfolding world order. Huntington treats cultural differences, which he more often states as civilizational boundaries, as inexorably divisive. Fukuyama takes a more moderate position on the role of culture in today's world. He admits that while there is often a disjunct between a people and their state because of culture, he argues extensively that culture will most likely prove less powerful than the forces of democracy and capitalism. Both authors see culture as an obstacle to peace and a potential source of violence, but they disagree over the relative force of this divisiveness in the face of other world forces; mainly, the momentum of democratic-liberal principles. Huntington argues that liberalism is ultimately weaker than civilizational differences; Fukuyama predicts that culture, while indeed an unpredictable wildcard in world geopolitical development, will ultimately prove weaker than the rational appeal of liberal democracy.

The point in introducing these views is not to bring about a reconciliation of the two. I believe that presently there is no reconciliation to be found between the two; that the actions of statesman and peoples will prove which abstraction best fits reality. During the 90s, events seemed to support Fukuyama's idea as countries from all civilizations enjoyed the benefits of a world economic boom, felt the negative effects of the Japanese economic crisis, and countries like Russia and China appeared to be on the path to democratization. However, the limits of Fukuyama's world of harmonious globalization were checked violently on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Suddenly, Americans were made to confront evidence that suggests globalization could mean more than layoffs at the local manufacturing plant - it could mean nothing less than death, hatred, and protracted military engagement. A world that once appeared to be best described by one theory now appears to be more accurately portrayed by another.

These arguments and their related events are relevant to my research because they set the context in which I approach this issue of culture. They say resoundingly, "Culture matters. We're not sure exactly how, but we're sure that it does - that it is a real factor in international politics."

The significance of culture in diplomacy is one of two reasons why I will refer to today's diplomacy as *postmodern* in this essay. Modern diplomacy (Cold War) was governed by nuclear weaponry and ideological black and white. The main question was 'whose camp are you in, communist or capitalist?' With the collapse of the geopolitical world's ideological bifurcation and the dissemination of weapons technology, people's perceptions of the U.S. have become a national security issue. Moreover, there are now more cultures than ever that dominate the geopolitical landscape. Cultures once relegated

to the periphery of the colonial or Cold War orders are now gaining due respect as their nations integrate into the world industrial-capital framework.

Another reason I refer to today's diplomacy as 'postmodern diplomacy' is its similarity to postmodern novels, which highlight information and advertising as sources of power and confusion. In this vein, America's presentation of itself has become a national security concern: some fight to make the image bold and resilient, some to soften it. Third, in keeping with the postmodern literary tradition, diplomacy now features an underlying metaphysical confusion; i.e. a world that has seen so many value-assigning 'horizons' (religious, philosophical, ideological) come and go that people/nations find themselves in one of three camps. There is the camp that rejects the whole truth-finding activity as absurd, the camp that clings tenaciously and self-consciously to a traditional horizon, or the camp that believes in one horizon while tacitly admitting that that horizon is not binding on everyone.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of the postmodern world, unprecedented weight must be placed on cross-cultural awareness. Today, it is not enough to simply possess more nuclear weapons than Russia; what is important is how we communicate our missile defense initiative shield to their leaders. America's biggest threat is not the USSR, but the small groups of people or coalitions of people whose common bond is not an ideology but simple hatred. While no one is naïve enough to expect that this hatred will one day be eliminated, most recognize that America itself can do much to improve its image abroad. This image improvement will come about if American policymakers not only learn to better grasp other's cultures, but if they also find more constructive ways of harmonizing cultural differences. Each will require new ways of looking at the postmodern world.

A world of increasing interconnectedness is also a world of increasing moral and psychological complexity. In such a world, cultural differences should be, at least, a moot point so as to deamplify the other differences which will inevitably arise over conflicting interests and the unavoidable competition for limited resources. In order for this to occur, we must learn to apply new paradigms and perspectives to culture. It is vital that Americans in general, in an effort to become more representative global citizens, learn to better understand the dynamics and risks other nations face in adopting American values.

Moral complexity requires two things of one wielding superior force. First, it requires restraint and critical thinking when labeling issues of conflict. In a postmodern world (or any world) moral absolutes are so deeply contested that they mustn't be cheapened by the thoughtless application of moral absoluteness to every disagreement that arises between people. The best bulwark against moral relativism is not moral zealotry but a wise and sparing discipline of knowing which issues are truly moral and which are best labeled as amoral preference. In my own experience as a Mormon missionary in Taiwan, I found that the most effective missionaries were the ones who suppressed their natural inclination to label every difference between them and their students as an issue of morality or religious correctness. The least effective missionaries were those who sought to convert the Taiwanese to many things beyond the fundamental principles of Mormonism. Oftentimes these would be things as frivolous as American cultural or aesthetic preferences.

Second, moral complexity requires wisdom in regards to interpreting the actions and motives of other people. Even if America's national interests were perfectly aligned

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<sup>6</sup> Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity*, (Harvard: 1989).

with standards of moral correctness, *all* its actions would not necessarily be morally upright. Max Weber best expressed this truth when he said, “It is *not* true that good can only follow from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, while American goals and motives may be pure, the actions they effect may actually come across as perniciously (and oftentimes conspiratorially) destructive by those on the receiving end of that behavior, who sit on the other side of a dizzyingly complex cognitive kaleidoscope of history, culture, and psychology. How else could Chinese citizens come to resent American efforts to improve their political condition? How else could U.S. goodwill be interpreted by hundreds of millions of Chinese as an effort to undermine the legitimacy of a government which, though they admit is not perfect, has at least gotten them into the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

For an American, it is extremely difficult to accept that our nation’s good intentions are misconstrued by peoples abroad, let alone people for whom we seem to be sticking our collective neck out for, so-to-speak; peoples for whom we are simply attempting to improve living conditions and extend rights and liberties. One might be tempted to label such recipients as ungrateful and blame their ingratitude on the communist party, assuming –in keeping with Western liberal orthodoxy- that all peoples, if given a choice, would choose to enjoy the rights which we enjoy. And that it must be that the communist party has so successfully suppressed the flow of information in China that it has misconstrued the meaning of otherwise altruistic U.S. intentions. Both assumptions carry with them a portion of the truth, but to rest on these assumptions is to miss a glaring point – most Chinese do not want increased political freedom if it either (a) comes at the expense of economic stability or (b) if it is imposed upon –or even

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<sup>7</sup> Taken from Kishore Mahbubani’s *Can Asians Think* where it is used in a similar context.



accompanied by- by outside force or even influence. Thus, the Chinese presently value both subsistence and autonomy as their inalienable human rights. It doesn't take a culturally relativistic standpoint to accept this notion, but a simple acknowledgement that both came much earlier in the American experience than did the rights proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence (of which still the majority of Americans had to wait decades to enjoy).

There are several reasons for this shocking phenomenon of inverse interpretation: that is, the experience Americans are now coming to terms with (especially since September 11<sup>th</sup>) of projecting good motives upon another people only to be repaid with suspicion, guilt, and/or "evil." The first and most obvious reason is that people tend to share an inviolable kinship bond which is easily offended when some party outside that bond attempt to regulate or judge someone within it. For example, while I may criticize the prevalence of "a McDonald's on every street corner" in America, I tend to bristle when a foreigner criticizes my homeland for the same. The second reason why good intentions can be repaid with evil in the arena of international politics is simple history. After centuries of being on the brunt end of unfair treaties, imperial arrangements, and territorial abrogations, nations such as China are rightly suspicious of Western motive. A third reason, and one that is interrelated to the previous two, is culture. Within Chinese culture it is a large taboo to a) criticize without proper relationship (*guanxi*) and b) emphasize differences over similarities. Presently, the U.S. human rights approach commits both cardinal errors. There are few quicker routes to damaging trust in Chinese culture, yet each are an obvious aspects of the current U.S. policy on human rights in China.

From the outset, I want to establish the limits of cultural understanding as a tool in international affairs. The suggestion of making attempts to better understand another's culture may trigger an unconscious bias that this author is somehow apologetic in the face of the flack America catches by virtue of its being the dominant superpower. This presumption is unfounded. I recognize that there are limits to cultural awareness in smoothing over relations between nations of markedly different cultures. For example, I don't argue that improved cultural awareness will ever eliminate the need for tangible negotiating tools, such as: economic sanctions and rewards, military action, and exclusion from and inclusion in alliances. Furthermore, postmodern diplomacy -and, more specifically, post-September 11<sup>th</sup> diplomacy- will consist of many integral aspects. One example is the possible implementation of a "new Marshall Plan" as advocated by Richard Sokolksy in a recent New York Times op-ed. Another essential aspect of postmodern relations is our communicating to world leaders that we do not approve of the scapegoating of America for their nation's problems (Nicholas Kristoff recently made this argument in the context of the Chinese educational system). While examples such as these two are still waiting to be implemented, the effort to improve America's image abroad has already begun. The Bush administration recently hired a public relations specialist (Charlotte Beers) to improve America's image.

#### **DEFINITION**

I define *culture* as a set of normative presumptions shared by a society, state, or civilization. Since my analysis is directed at cultural communications in the content and context of policy formulations, I find it appropriate to designate this philosophic definition. I also feel this appropriate because I will be analyzing the metaphysical and

moral frameworks behind the policy arguments of the CCP and the State Department. Analyzing these frameworks reveals the underlying normative presumptions at work in the human rights dispute. For the purposes of this essay, I have identified two primary axes of normative assumptions which clearly contrast between America and China: face and modes of promise-making.

On a broad level, people carry normative presumptions about the how nations *should* conduct themselves as well as how power *should* be distributed between nations. On a more microscopic level our cultures have differing premises concerning justice, fairness, and interpersonal interactions. Both are important to harmonious diplomacy, especially in this period of postmodern diplomacy when people's opinions of us are tantamount to a major national security issue.

How does culture matter? So what? And, what are we to do about it; i.e. what operational frameworks need be adopted to deal with this vague concept of people's collected beliefs, biases, and values? More specifically, how do we continue to pursue our concrete aims without getting bogged down in the abstract mess of evaluating another's perceptions of how we conduct ourselves?

This definition of culture as a set of normative presumptions makes practical usage of the host of information one can gather about another culture. When one usually thinks about culture, one thinks of the defining differences between one's own culture and a foreign culture. For an American envisioning the culture of the Chinese, images of chopsticks or the sounds of a queer, choppy language may come to mind. Common categories of emphasis include eating, philosophy, religion, and ideas of what constitutes "polite" behavior (the act of bowing in Japan). In my own cross-cultural interactions, I

have found it very practical to see these all as differences of normative appeal towards a wide-range of human behaviors. From this point of view, one can set one's own opinion about which differences are simple biases or aesthetic preferences, and which are fundamental disagreements over principle and truth.

Herein lies the crux of effective communications between people of different cultures in day-to-day circumstance as well as between nations in policy formulations: recognizing which points of view are of necessity moral, which are moral and workable, which are moral and unworkable, and which are irrelevant preferences. It is not my purpose to apply these categories towards every American foreign interests. However, by the end of this essay, it will be apparent that I designate the human rights issue to be a moral issue that is presently unworkable. The recalcitrant nature of the issue I blame both on the unique historical positioning of the Chinese as well as on the self-limiting, ill-informed approach Americans have chosen to adopt towards human rights practices there.

### **THE HUMAN RIGHTS DISPUTE**

On a yearly basis, the U.S. State Department issues a report to the world on human rights conditions in the People's Republic of China. Within a week, the Chinese issue an impassioned, defensive response. The State Department's report makes judgements on immoral aspects of CCP rule; year after year, the Chinese respond with heated accusations of hypocrisy and charges of "interfering in the internal affairs of other countries."<sup>8</sup> At the very least, disputes like this are interpreted by the Chinese people as

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<sup>8</sup> *U.S. Human Rights Record in 1999*, Information Office of the State Council of the P.R. of China, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/7248>.

proof that the U.S. presumes itself the world's moral policeman; at the very worst, U.S. behavior is distorted by CCP propaganda to demonize the U.S. government as an international bully dead-set against relinquishing its imperialistic tendencies. Both results represent the lose/lose situation the current American effort has boxed itself into.

The United States should shelve its efforts to improve human rights conditions in China *through these means* for two reasons. First, the current approach is counterproductive. The Chinese government has grown more and more bold in refuting U.S. charges. Ten years ago, the CCP simply did not respond to accusations of human right abuses, tacitly ignoring a source of embarrassment. Today, emboldened by a popular anti-U.S. rallying point, the CCP proudly defends itself while levying its own accusations against the U.S. The American effort have erred so badly that China has moved from a nation that publicly ignores its sins to a nation that boldly defends them.

More important than the CCP rhetorical response, however, is their response in practice: respect of human rights has not increased at any point since the U.S. stepped up its pressure in the early 90's. In some years, as State Department reports indicate, abuses have only increased.

Lack of cooperation on the part of the CCP is only one part of the evidence that suggests U.S. efforts to improve human rights conditions have been counterproductive. The other part lies in the increasing resentment, mistrust, and hostility the Chinese populace harbors towards the U.S. Americans err in assuming that the Chinese voices clamoring for democracy and human rights are indicative of the majority of Chinese opinion. In fact, these voices are a diminutive minority that receives a grossly disproportionate amount of media attention. The fact is that most of China's one billion

plus people are presently not interested in the rights America wants it to universally adopt. This indifference is not a sign of barbarism nor is it a result of brainwashing – it is the natural culmination of the history and culture of a people who have always favored the pragmatic over the theoretic, but have been given more reason to do so after a century of ideological upheaval that, let's face it, Americans simply cannot empathize with. Presently, the Chinese are content with the human rights they've secured – independence from foreign domination, economic subsistence, and security.

If American's desire to heighten cross-cultural understanding is sincere, it behooves them to examine their own history. Americans too savored the taste of political independence and economic security before they haggled over the Bill of Rights. And even after those political rights were secured, they were extended in a very inegalitarian distribution. More than two centuries later, it is natural -but cognitively costly- for Americans to take independence and subsistence for granted. Did not the anger against foreign-intervention-mixed-with-condescension shown in the Boston Tea Party precede the constitutional convention? China is only now emerging from the colonial consequences of humiliation and psychological subjugation. Americans once emerged from similar, though less drastic, circumstance in the late 1700s. Even someone who refutes culturally relativistic arguments should concede that autonomy is a more basic right than something like freedom of expression.

As contact through trade, education, and media increases between our psychologically disparate nations, it is necessary to look to new cognitive models in making sense of the Chinese experience. Presently, many Americans are caught up in a knee-jerk bias that interprets the Chinese political situation in bipolar moral rhetoric. It

sees the Chinese people as a billion oppressed dissidents (and possible consumers of U.S. goods) who are waiting for someone stronger to help them out. This conception of reality couldn't be further off the mark. Another popular bias is the post-World War II fear that any aberration in human rights respect must be rooted out or it will lead to nazi-type atrocities. This is a faulty historical analogy when applied to the Chinese situation. A more apt analogy would be one from our own history, which is no stranger to the exclusion of large elements of its population from the umbrella of rights, liberties, and dignities.

The second reason in favor of ending our current policy towards China's human rights practices is both hypothetical and historical: if China faces an economic collapse, as many financial analysts predict, it may look to other nations for both political and economic guidance to save itself. China, as well as many other nations who have modernized in the past two hundred years, has looked to foreign leadership in the past. The Self-Strengthening movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century borrowed from Western ideas and technology. The communist revolution borrowed from the Russian experience. More recently, Deng Xiaoping's "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is a strange hybrid of native and foreign principles of progress. Should China hit tough times in the future, it may appeal to the outside. Due to U.S. economic capital, this appeal will undoubtedly be extended to it; however, if American moral policy continues its present course, it will have bankrupted its moral capital by the time when it really would be worth something.

## THE CULTURAL DIMENSION

As mentioned above, harmony and productivity in the globalizing world is contingent upon the mental agility of all involved. The acceptance of new mental modes of thinking, as well as fresh models and metaphors, is vital to this adaptation. I have mentioned the need for new historical analogies. However, the purpose of this essay is to focus on another area of cognition – culture.

Hidden within the human rights debates and other geopolitical disputes between China and the U.S. are indicators of a large disparity in respect and understanding of Chinese culture. In the case of U.S. reports on human rights abuses, there are two main cultural axioms that are either overlooked or misapplied by U.S. policymakers: first, no heed is given to the overriding Chinese desire to preserve ‘face’ (surface reputation). This omission by the American government plays into the hands of those who would like the Chinese people to believe that America is a bullying Goliath bent on discrediting other great civilizations. Second, many of our accusations against the CCP human rights policies are ignorant of the Chinese cultural difference between *ke tao hua* and *ying chou hua*: empty speak and full speak. *Ke tao hua* is an accepted form of speech in Chinese society in which promises are made from one party to another, yet both parties may not fully expect the promises to be kept, pending circumstance. *Ying Chou Hua*, on the other hand, is a form of promise making in which the participants both expect fulfillment. CCP leadership often tacitly engages in a form of empty speak with its people. America’s purposes are thwarted when its government attempts to intervene in this discussion without understanding the language rules that regulate it within the native culture. People



generally tend to resent outsider interference in insider conversation; the more so when the outsider is as threatening and foreign a power as the United States is.

Beyond these two cultural axioms, there is a fundamental disagreement between the two societies about which human rights are most important. While Americans inherently maintain the inborn rights to abstract freedoms of expression, protest, and humane treatment, the Chinese point out the necessity of security, economic livelihood, and subsistence.

### **FACE**

“Face” is perhaps the most pervasive cultural factor in Chinese thought, behavior, politics, and communications. The establishment of face is a vital aim in Chinese introductory interactions; the maintenance and strengthening of face is a necessary aspect of harmonious interactions; the loss of face is a cardinal mistake tantamount to discrediting oneself. As with the Chinese people, so to with the Chinese nation. Foreign nations are held to the same cultural standards that the Chinese hold all people, native or foreign. This idea is not that far off from something that exists in American culture, or indeed in all cultures – the attachment of value, respect, and deference to another party in varying degrees. Just as Americans may hold one person in high repute and another in ill repute, so too we may hold one nation in esteem (Britain) and another in low regard (Iran).

Yet understanding the cultural significance of face in Chinese society is not as simple as finding an analogy from one’s own culture and assuming the meaning to be transferable. Such an assumption would be grossly in error for three reasons: first, face plays a centrality in the Chinese mind that cannot be gauged by any Anglo-centric

comparisons. Second, the criteria for projecting face upon someone in Chinese culture does not completely align with the criteria Westerners use in granting another party respect. While there are many characteristics of a person or society that merit respect and face in both cultures (education, achievement, and family life), there are a host of judgement criteria which are unique to Chinese society. These criteria, though difficult to understand, are vital to the development of *genuinely* harmonious relations with Chinese people in general, not to mention Chinese representative organs. Harmonious relations based upon trust and respect are vital if America is serious about changing human rights practices in China; otherwise, American efforts amount to nothing more than empty posturing and condescending rhetoric. The judgement criteria include standards of humble deference, respect to *guanxi*, an attitude that emphasizes agreement over disagreement, and a temperament that places convergence before divisiveness.

One example of how U.S. diplomats already grasp these concepts, and thus conduct themselves in face-saving ways, occurred at the recent Asian Economic Summit. The summit was President Bush's first meeting with Chinese officials. At a dinner introducing President Bush to the CCP leadership, the American diplomatic team was asked to have Robert Rubin introduce President Bush. It was not enough for Bush to simply hold the title of President of the United States: he needed to go through the formality of building on someone else's *guanxi*. In this case, the *guanxi* belonged to Rubin, the former Clinton treasury secretary and a trusted advisor to Chinese leadership. The Bush team wisely assented to this arrangement. By doing so, it went a long way towards setting the terms for a productive relationship between Bush and the CCP. President Bush established face in this incident by a) building upon the face of one whom

the Chinese already respect (instead of assuming his position as president guaranteed it to him), and b) respecting a deep-seated cultural norm to approach power through pre-existing channels of communication. The move also had symbolic weight - it suggests President Bush is willing to build on common ground instead of focusing on differences.

The third difference between Chinese and Western culture is in the way each conceives face. It may be said that both American and Chinese cultures attach value to the concept of face. However, much more weight is attached in Chinese culture than in American. Evidence of the concept of face in American culture is evident in Dale Carnegie's best-selling book *How To Win Friends and Influence People*. Carnegie relates a face-saving incident at a party where one of the guests claimed a quotation to be taken from the Bible. Another guest, who was listening nearby, remarked to his friend that he, in fact, had conclusive evidence that the statement came from the mouth of Shakespeare. His friend urged him to correct the speaker, but he refrained, choosing instead to value the speaker's public reputation over factual correctness. Mr. Carnegie, for the sake of winning friends and influencing people, advocates this face-saving attitude.<sup>9</sup>

This example only approximates the concept of face in Chinese culture. It serves as a platform from which one must step in order to understand the centrality and nuanced implications behind what it means to "save face" in Chinese culture. The first step an American must take away from his Anglo-centric concept of face (as illustrated in Mr. Carnegie's example) is to accept that in the Chinese mind, the dinner guest would not even consider correcting the speaker because the appearance of harmonious relations – even if they appear false to the American mind- are of indisputable, seminal importance.

The Chinese mind unconsciously guides behavior towards harmonious social relationships; the American mind is more likely to guide behavior towards abstract models of truthfulness, honesty, and factual correctness. A rough analogy that gauges the offense incurred in the Chinese mind by face-losing behavior is understood if one imagines an American who continually corrects the minor imperfections in an interlocutor's grammar, logic, or accuracy. Instead of viewing this upstart as "anal" or "uptight," a Chinese person would likely view them as patently "rude" and presumptuously "arrogant" similar to how an American would view someone who tread upon our own cultural values. The nearest example of this type of affront in American culture would be someone at a funeral who decides to speak accurately about the faults and mis-steps of the deceased person; in most cases, this would rub against the grain of the other family members present, who value deference and respect to the deceased regardless of his mistakes.

Attempts such as this to transmit cultural understandings are unavoidably fuzzy. Such is the confusing nature of learning to understand another's culture. The most accommodating tools in such a process are an open mind -one willing enough to slow the knee-jerk nature of one's normative judgements - and a keen mind -one that attempts to step into the minds of Chinese conversationalist and imagine sympathetic analogies such as the ones presented above. One must always remember that these analogies are only approximate; that is, they do not get at the exact experience of the Chinese - nevertheless, they are extremely valuable. The value of such approximations is greatly increased when one adopts the mindset that they are working theses in a lifelong attempt to understand a formidable subject.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard W. Hartzell, *Harmony In Conflict*, (Taipei: Caves Books Ltd.), 1988, pg. 309.

A useful analogy was drawn for me after a face-losing situation in Taiwan. I was sitting in the home of a Chinese family of six, as a dinner guest along with my American friend. At one point in the introductions, I was told I had very good Chinese-speaking skills. "Thanks," I replied. At that the conversation hushed into an uncomfortable, feet-shuffling confusion. Seconds later it was resuscitated by one of the family members and steered to a new topic. After dinner, my friend reminded me that one of the quickest ways to lose face in Chinese culture is by directly accepting a compliment (this gets at another Chinese cultural axiom - humble deference). My friend's comment came as an affront to my pride. I thought of myself as a well-aculturated missionary, having been in Taiwan for well over a year and developed a number of meaningful relationships with natives. I argued with my friend for a while until he insisted that I take a rational look at the reaction my comment caused. I couldn't refute the chill my comment had effected (although some do, arguing that the Chinese should learn to see things from the foreigner's perspectives). He then suggested an analogy of his own by suggesting that I imagine having had, as a teenager, invited a high-school friend over to eat dinner with my family. Over the course of the dinner my friend chose to use vulgar language in responding to questions raised by my mother. The response –an embarrassed chill, if not downright angry offense- would have been similar. In both situations, the host's opinions of the guest would have taken a hit; guests in both scenarios would likely be viewed as ungrateful, disrespectful, and even insolent.

While there are many cultural axioms that influence ways face is preserved, the most prominent two are emphases on the appearance of social harmony and the preservation of personal reputation. Failure by a foreigner or foreign nation to respect

these innate values results in nothing less than a personal insult to the dignity and humanity of those concerned. Taking a cultural evaluation of one's behavior into consideration is necessary to understanding the confusing truth expressed by Max Weber and illustrated in global, anti-American sentiment today. Evil can follow from good if one's perception of his own good trespasses upon the sacrosanct values of another culture.

One could argue that this is irrational, but that point is moot. It is evident after nearly four centuries of contact between the West and China that certain cultural values are an inexorable fact not to be exterminated by any amount of Westernization, modernization, or even inner-imposed "Cultural Revolution." They must be dealt with tactfully. The alternative is a serious breach in trust, which ultimately leads to ineffective communications, misunderstanding, conflict, and extreme bitterness. Factors such as these can no longer be dismissed by even the most powerful nation in the world.

The concept of face-preservation relates to U.S.-Sino relations more in our methods of communication than in fundamental policy formulations. In the case of the human rights debate, a re-evaluation of the deference we give to face would not necessarily mean that the American embassy in China refrain from keeping track of human rights abuses in China or that Americans come to accept those abuses (heaven forbid!), but it would alter the ways in which the U.S. pursues its policy aims. Presently, the U.S. seeks to advance the cause of human rights in China through a variety of methods. While I examine each of these in a separate section, it is necessary to state my main argument as concerns each of them: that they ultimately thwart their ultimate purpose – broadening the appeal of human rights practices. State Department reports,

comments by visiting statesmen, and American press denunciations of China's bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympics, to name just a few – these and other methods alienate the U.S. from the people whose rights it assumes itself to be defending.

American attempts to improve human rights practices in China fail for reasons cultural as well as psychological. In other words, condescending rhetoric, scathing reports, intellectual condemnation – each of these would earn defensive, uncooperative reactions from people of any cultural background. It just happens that in this situation the behavior simultaneously offends the deepest cultural predispositions of the Chinese people to respect face through emphasizing similarities and preserving the appearance of surface agreement even if parties disagree in private. Pressure in human rights reform also deeply offends the Chinese sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency.

American ignorance and insensitivity is the CCP's gain: as the collective Chinese opinion of the U.S. has gone down, popular support of the communist party has risen. Based upon survey results collected by a group of American-trained academics, the CCP enjoyed more popular support in the mid-90s than it did in the mid-80s.<sup>10</sup> As the Chinese government has lessened its control on economics, lifestyle, travel, and education, its popularity has –not surprisingly- increased. But expansion of freedom is not the only factor enabling an increase in popularity of an oft-pronounced 'moribund' regime. The Chinese people seem to give their government more credit with each attempt the U.S. makes to discredit it. The Chinese emphatically resent any foreign government

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<sup>10</sup> <sup>10</sup> Taken from Human Rights in Chinese Foreign Relations, page 31. Ming cites a study done by Jie Chen, Yang Zhong, and Jan William Howard in Beijing, 1995. The poll was designed to gauge popular support of the communist regime. Results were compared with a similar poll done in the mid-80s which showed that support for the CCP was then "moderate" (31). A comparison showed that, contrary to common perception, support for the CCP had actually increased.

criticizing its own, regardless of the truth-value or moral high ground evident in the criticisms.

The Europeans provide a viable alternative to the moral high-mindedness of American human rights policies. The European Community, more intimately aware of the horrors of human rights atrocities than the U.S., chooses to pursue improvement of practice in China by deferring to regional human rights institutions and promoting multilateral monitoring. European countries did not link human rights concerns with foreign policy until the late 1970s, but still remain much less coercive than the U.S. Reasons for less overt pressure on behalf of the Europeans include “respect for [China’s] ancient civilization...sensitivities about its century of humiliation, and lack of domestic lobbies.”<sup>11</sup>

For Americans to accept that their human rights policies are defective does not mean a rejection of the human rights cause in general. It simply means that good intentions should be funneled into different, more effective channels. For instance, while *collective* U.S. policy has proven counterproductive, the *individual* acts of certain Americans have proven disproportionately effective. *The New York Times Magazine* recently published an article on John Kamm, the former president of Hong Kong’s American Chamber of Commerce. Kamm, it seems, has turned retirement into a time for personally secure the release of Chinese political prisoners. Surprisingly, he has succeeded in securing the release of over 200 grateful democracy advocates, activists, and other so-called (by the CCP) “subversives.”<sup>12</sup> Efforts such as these should be

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<sup>11</sup> Min Wang, Human Rights in Chinese Foreign Relations, (University of Pennsylvania Press: 2001), pg. 67.

<sup>12</sup> The story on Kamm was taken from *The New York Times Magazine*, March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2002, Section 6, written by Tina Rosenberg. I put “subversives” in italics not because Rosenberg wrote it, but because subversive



encouraged, for they are not only effective, but they do not threaten to destabilize relations between the two nations.

### **EMPTY SPEAK AND FULL SPEAK**

One of the most frustrating tenets for a Westerner to grasp in communicating with the Chinese lies in the area commitment making. In the West, a person's character is judged in part by the commitments they keep or don't keep as well as the truth-value of the intentions they express in making promises. This is not always the case in China where people regularly engage in two forms of talk – *ke tao hua*, or 'empty speak,' and *ying zhou hua*, or 'full speak.'

Full speak is a form of speaking Westerners are most likely to expect in setting commitments and establishing expectations between two parties. In general, if someone tells us they will be over to dinner at a certain time, we expect them to be there. In the West, we assume that, 99% of the time, if someone is speaking of a commitment or setting an expectation between two or more parties, that his words are "full" of his true intentions; that he is being "honest" in expressing his true intentions to follow through on what he promises. In China, this is the case much less than 99% of the time. The reason for this is that the two cultures have differing concepts of honesty.

In Chinese culture, honesty is not as contingent upon truth-value as with Western culture. The Chinese often engage in 'empty speak' when it concerns appointments, engagements, and other practical matters. If, for instance, a Chinese person tells someone they will meet them for dinner at a certain time and fail to show up, the

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behavior is one of the many offenses the CCP regularly accuses its enemies of. Another such epithet is "counter-revolutionary."

disappointed party does not feel compelled to ask for anything more than a cursory explanation. Typically, the Chinese will offer a very flimsy excuse for standing someone up: “my mom is sick,” “I had an emergency meeting,” etc. In the Chinese psyche, the probability that these statements are factually untrue does not change their degree of honesty. A statement is “honest” so long as it is not meant to “cheat, defraud, or physically harm someone.”<sup>13</sup> So long as malice or deception is not involved, the Chinese may speak words that are empty of true intent.<sup>14</sup>

These truths should not be missed in examining the relationship between the CCP and Chinese society. The CCP often makes verbal commitments to such things as the development of grass-roots level democracy (village elections), freedom of speech, and greater political tolerance in general only to renege or peripheralize these promises. To the silent majority of the Chinese population, this empty speak is not nearly as vitriolic as CCP attempts to cheat and defraud the public. The West often forgets that one of the primary causes of Tiananmen unrest – if not *the* primary complaint – was increasing evidence of intraparty corruption.

Returning to the intricacies of Chinese culture, in many cases, infactual statements may be seen as more ‘honest’ than factual statements because they are meant to convey a sense of respect to the party involved. For example, the Chinese rarely tell Christian missionaries in Taiwan that they are not interested in hearing their message. Instead, they will agree to an appointed meeting time, and simply not show up. Once a missionary becomes acculturated to Chinese cultural practicality, he or she realizes that the invited person simply did not want to show disrespect or loss of face by directly

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Hartzell, *Harmony in Conflict*, (Taipei: 1988), pg. 325.

<sup>14</sup> Taken from my own experiences in Taiwan and China, and corroborated by Hartzell.

refusing to meet with the missionaries; that would be a greater insult than accepting the invitation, but not showing up in the end.<sup>15</sup>

Western culture is not totally void of accepted forms of empty speak. In dating in particular, empty statements are accepted as much more tactful than full ones. A woman who tells a pursuing man that she is busy on a night when he would like to take her out is not labeled a dishonest person, but a kind, good-hearted one. There are other spots on the Western communication landscape where empty speak is acceptable. In business settings it is quite common for associates with “connections” to make empty promises of job “hook-ups” or other benefits without full intent of provision. Given the prevalence of preserving face and upholding the appearance of harmony in social interactions, instances such as these are more common in Chinese communication.

Forms of speaking, empty or full, are taken for granted in Chinese culture. A Chinese person engages in making commitments without, necessarily, being aware of which form of speech he is engaging in. The Chinese are, above all else, practical people. One may make a commitment on Tuesday which one intends to fulfill on Saturday, but practical circumstance intervenes between to make the Saturday appointment much less practical. In the final analysis, the person would be mystified if he were questioned as to why he didn't fulfill his Saturday obligation, for, in the Chinese mind, there is virtue in expressing one's hopes in the form of expectations. Furthermore, it is an unquestioned given that expectations be stated with a silent “circumstance pending” tacked on the end.

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<sup>15</sup> The experience of being “fang'ed” (Americanization of the Chinese idiom for being stood up – *fang wo gezi*) for missionaries is a daily occurrence. In two years, I saw it dealt with in a variety of ways: some ignored it and didn't attempt another appointment set-up; some ignored it but pursued more appointments;

Empty speak and full speak are facts of Chinese culture that should be taken into consideration when casting an eye on interactions between the Chinese state and society. Americans in particular transmit Cold War-era biases into their view of the Chinese state-society scenario. We naturally assume that the only way a communist regime can maintain control of society is through coercion and force. While coercion and force are undoubtedly part of the CCP's present practices (not to mention deception), there are more prominent facts to examine when looking at government and society in contemporary China. These facts cannot be accurately construed except with a lens of Chinese cultural understanding and an appreciation of Chinese history.

First of all, the relationship between citizen and polity is very paradoxical. This may be attributed in part to the contradictions inherent in Chinese Communist orthodoxy, in part to the unique historical experience of the Chinese straddling socialism and capitalism, agrarian and technological economies, remote villages and tremendous megalopolises. Despite the paradoxes in Chinese politics, the CCP is not as unpopular as Western media often makes it out to be (sometimes through coercive methods such as when an American news reporter at Tiananmen encouraged a student whom he had just ate with to claim on television that he was on a hunger strike). For example, polls in China show that while most Chinese do not "trust" and are generally not "proud" of their government, they are nevertheless "in support" of it.<sup>16</sup>

This is attributable to an aspect of Chinese culture that one researcher labels "Chinese instrumentalism:" a pragmatic view that bases the social contract on the expectation that government will promote growth, not uphold abstract ideologies. With

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some called the potential convert to inform them that they had stood the missionary up, and that that was a very rude thing to do.

this in mind, it is a mistake for Westerners to assume that the Chinese acceptance of authoritarian rule (however short term it may turn out to be) is purely the result of coercion, misinformation, and backwardness. In fact, most Chinese seem to recognize the desirability of securing better human rights practices. However, most will also cite the historically gradualist steps other nations, including the U.S., have taken to gain these heightened freedoms. For them, it would be absurd to fight for such things before they have secured more fundamental blessings which their past experience keeps them from taking for granted – political independence from foreign interference, economic stability, and freedom to eat three meals a day.

### **COMMUNICATING DAMAGING BIASES**

There are several sources of bias and ineffectivity when it comes to protesting human rights practices in China – political rhetoric, intellectual literature, military action, and the press all make a unique contribution to what is, collectively, the effort to improve human rights in China. Each set of voices has its own dynamics. For example, political rhetoric by visiting presidents and congressional leaders debating such things as WTO-admission usually lend the strongest, as well as the most audible voice, to counterproductivity. Intellectuals, on the other hand, have created an environment that stifles any thought which could lead to an improvement in our approach to human rights in China. I will examine expression of U.S. foreign policy through political rhetoric, intellectual literature, military action, and the press.

*Political rhetoric* on human rights practices in China comes from American politicians in irregular waves. China is a gigantic nation that somehow only enters the

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<sup>16</sup> Ming Wan, Human Rights in Chinese Foreign Relations, (Pennsylvania: 2000), pg. 32.

American political radar screen during times of conflict (Hainan Spy Plane Incident) or periods of intense integration (WTO). The most effective remarks for both accurate policy-making at home and conveying a positive message to the Chinese are those which are measured and respectful. For instance, during the congressional vote on the repeal of Most Favored Nation status, Present Clinton told a group of students of international affairs to keep in mind that China's "leaders are very intelligent people" who "know exactly what they're doing." He went on to suggest that economic change would give the Chinese increased "imperative" to reform politically.<sup>17</sup>

Comments such as these are much less offensive to both Chinese culture and reality than comments like the ones heard in congressional testimony before the House Ways and Means Committee two months later. The committee had convened prior to the final vote on MFN-status for China, (even though the vote was symbolic since WTO admission had already been agreed upon with Chinese leaders). For instance, Charles Rangel (D. New York) wondered aloud how the U.S. could "so easily agree to engage with a billion communists in China." Sandy Levin (D. Michigan) went on to encourage congress to create an oversight committee to "place an ongoing and focused spotlight on China" which would ultimately be more concentrated than the yearly review then in place through MFN renewal. Later in the testimonial, Frank Wolf (Virginia) went on to compare China to Nazi Germany.<sup>18</sup>

These three statements are not only irresponsible policy suggestions (by virtue of their being counterfactual), but they damage our relations with the Chinese when conveyed to them via the press or intelligence gathering. Although most in China would

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<sup>17</sup> Clinton's Words on China: Trade is a Smart Thing, *The New York Times*, March 8, 2000.

probably laugh off the suggestion that there are a billion communists (there are less than half a million) there, and that the disparate arrests of dissidents and activists there is comparable to the systematic genocide of Hitler's Germany, the suggestion made by Congressman Levin that the U.S. should create an oversight committee would definitely offend many Chinese students, workers, and peasants. Who gave the American government the right to monitor and judge another sovereign nation? Suggestions such as Congressman Levin's are as presumptuous as they are counterproductive. If anyone has the right to monitor human rights practices in Mainland China, it is the Chinese people themselves, independent groups around the world, or the United Nations.

*Intellectual* debate is, surprisingly, one of the least diverse forums on the issue of culture and human rights in China. Since the collapse of communism thirteen years ago, Western intellectual sentiment has streamlined into sets of untested presumptions that some have labeled the prevailing "Western liberal orthodoxy."<sup>19</sup> It is a set of assumptions that are extremely intolerant of anyone who suggests that Western liberalism is not a wholesale collection of better values than anything any other culture has, or may have, to offer. It fails to keep with a truly liberal tradition in that it is not pluralistic – rather, it presumes superiority in Western values and closes the door to any amount of parity between Western values and those of another culture.

In a globalizing world where cultures new and ancient are thrust into interdependency, it is vital that American intellectuals take a view that is, at least, more tolerant (not necessarily pluralistic) towards other cultures. Doing so is not a cowardly confession that our own values are inferior, but a courageous assertion that our own

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<sup>18</sup> Comments taken from *Hearing before the Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives One Hundred Sixth Congress Second Session*, May 3, 2000. Printed by the U.S. Government Printing Office.

values are strong enough that a) they needn't be held up through coercion and force, and b) they will prove themselves superior in their own due time.

Cultural intolerance is dangerous not only because it increases the likelihood of conflict between regions, but also because it creates an intellectual reactionism within the self-perceived superior culture. America may only conditionally and condescendingly extend respect to a nation like Singapore for its miraculous economic and social transformations because it scoffs at anecdotal stories of not being able to chew bubble gum in Singaporean streets. We, ever playing the role of rights-loving patriots, tend to dismiss economic ends gained at the price of civil liberties. This type of moral haughtiness obscures facts that would be of our benefit to appreciate – the Singaporean system works to improve many of the rights Americans currently do not enjoy. The most glaring example is Singapore's relatively non-existent rate of violent crime. Can Americans not at least respect another culture's independent decision to give up certain things for the comfort of being able to roam whatever neighborhood they like without fear of robbery, rape, or murder? We cannot say the American system – as much as we may cherish it – has done the same in even the neighborhoods that surround our nation's capitol.

*United States Military Action* often inadvertently offends and alienates the U.S. from the very people it is trying to help. It does this through an unavoidable unevenness of action; nevertheless, better communication campaigns would alleviate the growing discontent that results from this. Even when U.S. aid was extended to those traditionally seen as being outside the Western cultural umbrella, Bosnian Muslims, many from the Muslim culture were quick to denounce American actions as maliciously delayed. No

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<sup>19</sup> *Can Asians Think*, pg. 14.



military campaign is perfect; the dizzying demands of war and international diplomacy are irremediably uneven. People will undoubtedly find offense with whatever action the U.S. takes in keeping international peace. However, the U.S. could also go a long way to ameliorating the effects of other's misinformation of U.S. military efforts. For instance, while hostile Arabs were accusing the U.S. of colluding to let Muslims die in Bosnia, Americans in the Middle East could have been explaining their best efforts to protect both Muslims and Croats in Bosnia. Furthermore, one would imagine that there are many Muslims in Bosnia who are presently very grateful for the U.S./U.N. effort to end Serbian incursions and war crimes in their country. Could not they be called upon to testify to those of their Muslim brothers who are claiming that America seeks to destroy Islam at every turn?

*The Press* is perhaps the guiltiest party in conveying biased information to the Western public on situations and attitudes in the other cultures. This is especially dangerous since, no matter the amount of interconnectivity between cultures, the press still stands for most Americans as the only tributary to the flow of information from other cultures into the American mind. It would be helpful if America would wake up to the monopoly of press coverage "our own" have on the world's information. After spending two years in Taiwan and several months in China, I have concluded that the Asia which the Western media had presented me with (a China full of technocrats and peasants all hankering for American freedoms and a Taiwan full of democrats uncritically accepting American influence) is extremely inaccurate. In China, between the microscopic poles of democracy advocates and hard-line communists, Anglophiles and Anglophobes, there are a tremendous amount of people who are simply not interested in the rights America wants

to impose upon it and who are quite confused by a nation whose primary national holiday celebrates independence from colonialization yet simultaneously meddle in other's morality. The Western press conspicuously ignores views such as this even though they seem to be held by the silent majority of Chinese people.

All in all, these different voices come together to stifle an effort which has the best of intentions. The Western press and intellectual debate paints a very close-minded, illiberal picture of China. The media does this by giving an unrepresentative amount of coverage to those Chinese citizens whose sentiments align with Western values, but who in no way represent a major voice in China. Western intellectuals commit a similar error in arrogating a superiority of Western values that would best be left up to the due course of events, rather than coerced into actualization. Inaccurate and misapplied attention from media and scholarly sources in America gives rise to other sources of ineffectivity in the human rights effort. Political rhetoric and misinformation about military campaigns are but two of these.

### **THE SOLUTION**

History is repeating itself. In the mid-Seventeenth Century westerners found themselves in a situation similar to the one the West as a whole now finds itself in – as interlopers in a Chinese affair which they would like to influence with their own moral standards. In the Seventeenth Century, these standards of morality descended from a system of Catholic theology which placed god at its head and people in his service; three hundred years later, the Western system of morality descends from a form of humanism that ultimately places man at its head, and whose unfolding has been the domain of

Hobbes, Locke, Jefferson, Madison and others. The epistemology may have changed from the religious to the secular, but let there be no doubt about what is at stake – competing systems of morality; different perspectives of humanity’s most fundamental – and powerful – distinction, the distinction between right and wrong. Despite America’s secular self-justifications, it has nonetheless not relinquished the role of missionary to a China that stands in need of help in “choosing the right path.”

It is imperative that America recognize the historical familiarity of what is occurring – that despite dramatic changes over the intervening centuries in dynamics and power structure between China and the West, there is a fundamental moral component that remains the same. It is imperative because failure in this sense has become routinized by Western powers. Furthermore, the West has continued to fail in their proselytizing effort (for good or bad) despite the formula for success being laid bare in virtually any Chinese history book.

If America is going to succeed in its efforts to export its socio-political values alongside its economic products, it must digest the historical lessons of Matteo Ricci, Jesuit missionary and Chinese cultural aficionado.

Ricci was the most positively effective western diplomat to ever work in China, where he lived for 30 years. He found favor in the eyes of the Chinese emperor – a remarkable feat for anyone, *especially* a foreigner – through two methods. First, he became very familiar with Chinese culture. He not only knew of its material abundance, but he appreciated its moral sophistication and strength. Furthermore, Ricci was not threatened by Confucian morality; his vision of Christianity-in-China included such Chinese cultural staples as ancestor worship and homage to Confucius. These Rites, he

reasoned, were civil rather than religious and did not threaten the sanctity of Christianity. Second, Ricci served the emperor in positions which were not contingent upon the emperor's (or anyone else's) conversion to Christianity. Ricci and other Jesuit missionaries served the emperor as astronomers, cartographers, and engineers.

As it turned out, the efforts and character of Ricci and his understudies resulted in enough Chinese conversions to Christianity that the criteria of conversion became an issue of imperial edict for Emperor Kangxi in 1692. This time period represents the high-water mark in Western-Chinese relations. With the possible exception of the Comintern agent Michael Borodin in the 1920s, Westerners have never enjoyed such influence and integration in Chinese polity. Unfortunately, this cooperative goodwill soon came to an end when the missionaries, intoxicated with the possibility of mass conversions, adopted measures that were not in keeping with Ricci's appreciative treatment of Chinese culture.

The fateful juncture that took Western relations away from the cultural deftness of Ricci down the path it presently finds itself in the aftermath of arose when Pope Clement XI decided, upon consulting with an emissary, that Ricci's allowance of Confucian practices after conversion was sacrilegious. The Pope issued an edict of his own that threatened any convert who did not reject Confucianism with excommunication. While many missionaries continued in the spirit of cultural tolerance, many did not. The disagreement eventually wrecked a very promising exchange of religious and scientific teachings. As Jonathon Spence notes,

*This mutual hard line wrecked the power base of the missions in China and effectively prevented the spread of Western teaching and science. Had either side been more flexible, then later in the eighteenth century, when the Catholic church accepted the findings of Galileo and the missionaries started to introduce up-to-date Western astronomy to the*

*Chinese, the new knowledge and techniques might have led to significant changes in Chinese attitudes about thought and nature.*<sup>20</sup>

The lesson that Ricci's brief window of success teaches us when viewed alongside the ensuing years of mistrust and unequal relationships is that genuine success in cross-cultural interaction with the Chinese requires a healthy fusion of old and new. In Ricci's case, the new concepts of Catholicism were wed with the old concepts of Confucianism.

As is evident with the pope in this instance, westerners tend to chafe at the prospect of a mutual blending of cultural standards. But in a "shrinking" world where previously indifferent cultures are increasingly dependent upon other cultures, is there any other peaceful option? Wholesale adaptations do not work by any society, at any level of culture or conscious – religious, governmental, or philosophical. Even the Chinese Cultural Revolution – an indigenous attempt at the wholesale adoption of new, pseudo-scientific principles – backfired, leaving decades of confusion and metaphysical wounds.

Even many adaptations by foreigners of western culture which seem to be done with no regard for native culture rarely turn out that way; that is, when one peers deeper into the minds and behavior of a foreigner in western clothing, listening to western music, watching western movies, it becomes very obvious that the foreigner retains the more deeply engrained habits of his culture. If it were any other way, he would be adrift in an identity-less sea of metaphysical noise.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Spence, Jonathon D., *The Search for Modern China*, (New York: W.W. Norton), 1999.

<sup>21</sup> I drew this conclusion after working with many youth in Taiwan. Many of the "adrift" youth I mention here were, I'm afraid, converts to my own religion who seemed to have no identity beyond the religious one handed to them by missionaries.

When championing the success of Taiwanese democracy, Americans often overlook the uniquely Taiwanese characteristics which their democracy possesses. The most obvious is that its actualization took forty years to bloom; that America's strategically, Jiang Kai Shek, was a brutal authoritarian leader who paid only lip service to democracy. It wasn't until the late 80s when the martial law that was declared in the early 50s was removed and civil right restored; it wasn't until the presidential election of Chen Shui Bian in recent years that experts were actually convinced Taiwanese democracy would support a change in party power. Mahbubani has suggested that if the U.S. had, with Taiwan and Korea, pursued the intolerant and condemning policies it pursues with modernizing nations today, both Taiwanese and Korean democracy never would have come about. Taiwan and Korea were, in the early stages of democracy and capitalism, guilty of human rights abuses on par with that of China; nevertheless, we feel it more appropriate to condemn China instead of, as we did with Taiwan and Korea, give near unconditional support in a belief that the abuses were anomalies in the larger scheme of things.

The challenge of creative adaptation between cultures is already being successfully dealt with by the organizations at the forefront of global integration – multinational corporations and businesses. Business leaders and management consultants have already taken the lead in suggesting new types of leadership to deal with the adaptive challenge of different cultures in the workplace.

Recently, editors of the *Harvard Business Review* published their first ever “Best of” issue devoted to the its most significant articles on the art of leadership. In an article titled “The Work of Leadership,” Donald Laurie and Ronald Heifetz outline one of the

central problem-producing aspects of the workplace: “conflicts across functions,” or, conflicts that arise over seemingly technical issues, such as procedures, lines of communications, and schedules. The authors argue that the effective leader is the one who sees the depth of these conflicts, that they are “in fact proxies for underlying conflicts about values and norms.”<sup>22</sup>

In a world where competing values and norms come continually into conflict—as in diplomacy with the Chinese— the effective leader must adopt effective stratagems to turn conflict into the benefit of the company. There are two main stratagems suggested by Heifetz and Laurie. The first is a suggestion that executives “breakdown a longstanding behavior pattern...providing leadership in the form of solutions.” This attitude worked, they argue, only when adaptive challenges were at a minimum. In an environment where there was little dispute over fundamental values, the CEO could effectively provide solutions based upon his indisputable authority and higher competence. But the environment has since changed to a more varied global reality, where competing normative perceptions continually jostle across functional lines, within a company. The real solution to this new challenge, they argue, is to rely more upon the “collective intelligence of employees at all levels,” rather than to simply making unilateral decisions for them.

In foreign policy behavior, America is no stranger to unilateral solution implementation. This fact was perhaps best summed up by Vojislav Kostunica, a U.S. ally. Within a week of winning Serbia’s presidential election, Mr. Kostunica made two telling statements about U.S. foreign policy. First, he stated that “the United States has

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<sup>22</sup> Ronald Heifetz and Donald Laurie, *Harvard Business Review*, “The Work of Leadership, December 2001.

done too much meddling in our internal affairs.”<sup>23</sup> Later, Mr. Kostunica went on to complain that the Americans were wrong in applying the view that there was a solution to every problem to Kosovo; Kosovo, he argued, was like Jerusalem, a problem without a clear solution that needed cooperation and creativity at all levels involved.<sup>24</sup>

Leaders of the twenty-first century, Laurie and Heifetz argue, are more apt to ask tough questions instead of attempting to provide all the right answers; they are less willing to protect people, letting them “feel the pinch” of reality themselves; instead of stopping conflicts, they tease the underlying issues out for all parties to solve. This approach is both more effective and more difficult to do, more effective because it requires all parties involved to shoulder the responsibilities of conflict management; more difficult because it requires letting go of the illusion that the paternal CEO is in control.

The second principle advocated by Laurie and Heifetz is one of enlightened diversity. “Different people,” the argue, “within the same organization bring different experiences, assumptions, values, beliefs, and habits to their work.” These differences are, in fact, strengths to be channeled, not weaknesses to be glossed over. Diversity, they argue, is a prerequisite for “innovation and learning.”

A healthy pluralism, such as the one advocated by Heifetz and Laurie, would benefit the United States in the international arena. In dealing with the Chinese, at least, relationships can only be harmonized if differences are appreciated (or ignored) and similarities maximized. The international organizations that the U.S. finds itself the leading member in –WTO, the UN, and G7- also benefit from differing national values, beliefs, assumptions, and experiences. It serves no one’s best interest when an

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<sup>23</sup> *Yugoslav Chief Upset at Some of His Allies*, The New York Times, by Steven Erlanger, October 12, 2000.



embarrassing situation such as human rights is brought up as a point of protest or humiliation.

Instead, these differences should be approached in an open framework, but not one where leaders simply trade accusations and insults about the worst possible conditions in each nation. This approach serves no one, least of all those political prisoners or enemies of the Chinese state who are tortured and beaten. This open framework is only possible if American policymakers shelve any illusions they may have of homogenizing the world into their own image overnight. The developing nations of the world have every reason to take a gradual course in the emancipation of civil liberties as America itself took. If American-style democracy is to triumph, it will only do so because it presents itself as the most desirable, most humanitarian form of government. When Americans themselves seek to artificially augment this by interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign nations and adopting carrot-stick measures of political and economic reform, natives of other foreign nations gain a distorted view of American democracy. Instead of seeing one that protects freedoms, they see one that oppresses them.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

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