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The Expert and the Imperialist: China Views the West

By Alexander J. Brenner

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BEIJING, China—During my two years as an English teacher in China in the late 1990s, I found I could supplement my meager local salary by playing foreigners in television commercials. As I discovered, there were two main types of roles for the white person in Chinese advertising. First there was the role of the expert, often stereotypically clad in a lab coat, who lends the product being pushed the stamp of superior Western technology and quality. Then there was the role of the haughty, buffoon-like imperialist who is ultimately beaten back by a superior Chinese culture that, by association, extends to the product in question.

I had chances to play both foreign expert and foreign imperialist. My favorite imperialist role came in an ad for soy sauce. I was outfitted in a wig and bowler hat, and the script pitted me against two Chinese martial artist chefs wearing Qing dynasty-era robes and long queues down their backs. Brimming with typical western arrogance, I rashly challenged my opponents to a cook-off. Naturally, my team of overweight foreign chefs proved no match for either the kung fu or the culinary skills of our Chinese heroes; armed with their superior soy sauce, they whipped up a meal that I had to admit, in take after take, was far tastier.

Playing the expert was considerably less degrading, but also considerably less fun. Twice I was asked to don the archetypal white lab coat and engage in nerdy white-lab-coat behavior like examining test tubes containing a special laundry detergent and pointing at charts explaining the properties of a new cell-phone battery. Most of my roles, however, came in the type of ads where foreigners simply play themselves. Here the game is pure association: foreigner drinks this brand of packaged ice tea, so it must be tasty; foreigner wears this type of long underwear, so it must be comfortable. In China foreigners don't even need the white lab coat; our white skin wraps us in a kind of permanent coating of authority that declares us automatic experts on pretty much anything.¹

Such commercials provide 30-second crash courses on contemporary China's conflicted relationship with westerners and the West. Sometimes these advertisements play on a sense of Chinese inferiority vis-à-vis the developed West; sometimes they stir up a sense of Chinese superiority over a West that is amoral, aggressive and/or uncultured. What we see, in other words, is a deeply-felt inferiority complex coupled with a deeply-felt superiority complex.

These dueling inferiority and superiority complexes reflect the unresolved nature of a debate that began in earnest in the mid-1800's, when the western powers, and later Japan, opened China forcibly, beginning a century of "humiliation" at foreign hands. China's political and intellectual classes understood that the country had slipped far behind the West in many respects, but they agonized over the

¹ For the purposes of Chinese advertising, and this report, "foreigner" means "white westerner" almost exclusively.

extent to which modernization had to entail westernization. Might not attempts to copy the West result in the loss of all that was valuable, indeed, superior, in Chinese civilization?

A favored formulation guiding late-Qing reformers was “preserve the Chinese core, but adopt practices from the West” (*zhong wei ti, xi wei yong*). Of course such a project simply raised more questions: what exactly *was* the Chinese core; which practices could be adopted from the West without damaging that core, etc. In this sense, debates about national and cultural preservation in the face of western-dominated globalization have been on-going in China since the 19th century. The country’s political and intellectual elites have been the most active participants in these debates, and this continues to be the case. For my purposes here, however, I’m more interested in what behavior in society at large says about current attitudes toward westerners and westernization, and as an extension, toward the globalization process in general. This is a broad topic, and I’ll be returning to it in its various aspects over the next few reports.

In this installment I’ll focus on the expert/imperialist dichotomy as a way to offer some introductory thoughts on Chinese attitudes about the America-centered West. As I’ll discuss, these expert/imperialist personas are the product of mixing oversimplified media representations of the West with underlying feelings of civilizational inferiority and superiority. I conclude with the concern that a two-dimensional understanding of the West may lead to a kind of dehumanizing of foreigners.

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Let me start with some brief background on the westerner’s expert/imperialist identity as it fits into the context of globalization. A few reports back, I recounted my meeting at a domestic-help agency with Ms. Lu, a migrant from southern China. After dismissing her fellow migrants at the agency as incompetent country-bumpkins, she tried to convince me to let her clean my apartment—and, if possible, to marry her daughter as well. The encounter with Ms. Lu encapsulated a Chinese striving, on both conscious and unconscious levels, to distance oneself from the backwardness and insularity exemplified by the peasant and associate oneself with the modernity and cosmopolitanism personified by the foreigner.

This same striving has played out on the macro level for the last 25 years, as a still-largely-rural China has sought to close the gap with the developed nations through the modernization and urbanization of its society and economy. It’s no surprise that foreigners are called upon to play the expert in commercials: after we were thrown out of China during the Maoist era, a main purpose of our being welcomed in again was to provide the



(above) *The long underwear expert...*The coffee-drinking and laptop usage aren’t accidental of course; in Chinese eyes they heighten the foreigner’s aura of technological savvy and sophistication. (below) *...and the soy sauce imperialist: Clowning with one of the Chinese kung fu master chefs on a break from filming*



know-how—business, technological, legal, scientific, etc.—crucial for the country’s development. Chinese themselves, meanwhile, go abroad to learn skills they will (theoretically) bring back to the motherland. Foreign minds and foreign lands contain vital keys to China’s resurgence.

As Chinese have always recognized, foreign expertise comes with strings attached. Every group of foreigners active today in China, from the American Bar Association to Microsoft to the World Wildlife Fund, has an agenda. This has been the case since the earliest prolonged contacts with the West. The Jesuit missionaries who arrived in the late 16th century blended scientific and technical expertise with imperialist impulse, and their Chinese hosts responded by seeking to tap their immense knowledge while placing limits on their ambitions to convert China’s pagan masses. During the heyday of west-

ern presence in China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, businessmen and missionaries played key roles in developing the country's industrial capacity and education system—modernizations inextricably linked, of course, to their rush for dollars and souls. Mao booted most foreigners out in the 1950s, leaving the Russian technical advisers dispatched by Stalin to help his Communist ally. These experts, too, would be sent home, accused of serving Soviet imperial ambitions, not China.

We're now 25 years into the "Reform and Opening" era, a period that has seen a continued strengthening of China's links with the world. We're also almost three years into the country's membership in the World Trade Organization, the one institution most associated with an increasingly integrated global economy and culture. China has never been more open—and yet, like their predecessors, the current crop of westerners can't entirely shake their imperialist shadows. One obvious reason is that the backdrop against which China has been rising, the globalization process, is often associated with foreign aggression and viewed as a kind of western neo-imperialism. The other closely-related reason is that America, the dominant force shaping globalization and spreading westernization, is perceived as all too willing to use its superpower muscle to interfere in other people's affairs, China's in particular. The Bush administration has done much to reinforce such a view, but it was already well-established in the wake of events during the Clinton years, including the introduction of the US 7th fleet into

the Taiwan straits following China's launching of missiles to influence Taiwan's 1996 presidential election, and, during the 1999 war in Kosovo, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade—an incident most Chinese believe was intentional.

As background for this and future reports, it's useful to consider the outline of Chinese academic discourse relating to globalization and westernization. Yu Keping, the director of the China Center for Comparative Politics and Economics at Peking University, is one of the country's leading scholars of globalization. He classifies his colleagues' views into three schools. A first school, the least narrowly ideological, sees globalization as an objective process moving us towards an international integration of human life, perhaps even a kind of global consensus on common problems and solutions. Next come those of Marxist persuasion, for whom globalization is the logical result of contemporary capitalist development. This is the preferred affiliation for those who like to dress westerners up as bowler-hat-wearing imperialists and then out-cook them. For those accepting the theory in its entirety, globalization becomes a byword for late capitalism, and is viewed as a temporary form—"temporary" because of the inevitable triumph of the forces opposing the American-led capitalism. For a third group, globalization is the identification and universalization of human values—values whose highest expression is found in the West, and in America in particular. For adherents to this view, westerners remain imperialists in a sense—they just happen to be right on all the big questions.

Clearly, what we see here are purist positions; one rarely bumps into full-on Marxists or full-on westernizers on the street. But these differing schools of thought do bookend an array of views and concerns many less theory-driven people share about globalization—for example, it's not just Chinese Marxists but Chinese businessmen who are concerned about western firms establishing dominant positions in the domestic market. Overall, these scholarly debates neatly show how current questions about globalization fit into China's long-standing task of relating to a West that is both a both a model of modernity and a source of threat.

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Today's discussions about China and its ties with the West are occurring in an entirely different context from those of the late-19th century, when there was a real concern the country might be sucked dry by the imperialist powers, its formerly glorious civilization faced with *de facto* extinction. Today, with the country rising on the back of globalization, the question veers to the other extreme: what national or civilizational identity should China craft for itself as it becomes a modern, mature major power—or even, superpower. China is increasingly self-confident, and as such feels less need to model itself on the West. Indeed, topics no longer on the table show how far China has come. Today you won't find many advocates for abolishing Chinese characters and taking up an alphabetic



China's opening to the West has involved a somewhat muddled exercise in picking and choosing. Most basically, the country is moving toward building an economic system modeled on those of the developed western nations, and has signed on to a western-dominated global trading system. Western-style political reforms, however, still seem far off, with President Hu Jintao noting this month that multi-party democracy is a "blind alley" for China.
(Courtesy Washington Post)

system, a proposal made repeatedly during the first half of the 20th century (and which came close to realization in the 1950s). I also haven't heard anyone of late suggest abandoning those unsanitary and backwards implements, chopsticks, in favor of the knife and fork, as former Communist Party Chairman Hu Yaobang did as recently as the 1980s.

When I had lunch earlier this summer with two of my former Chinese classmates from the Hopkins-Nanjing Center, they remarked favorably on the current mini-revival of interest in Confucianism; bookstores are newly-crowded with copies of the *Analects* and books about Confucius. One of my classmates said, "As China rises up, we can't base ourselves on the West. We have to go back to our roots." These are assertive words, displaying self-assurance—and yet they also indicate how the shadow of the West still looms over Chinese civilization. The old schizophrenia remains at work, the desire to be like the foreigner co-existing with the desire to beat him back.

When average Chinese people consider western presence in their country, they don't want to get into a discussion about whether globalization is or isn't late capitalism. They just want to know, are you foreigners here to help us up, or to keep us down? Are you with us or against us? While it's not uncommon for people anywhere to harbor reservations about foreigners or members of an "out" group, this reaction is particularly strong in China. This is a country that seems to have adopted "Never Forget" as its national slogan. The national anthem is one long reminder to *qilai*, "rise up," against the imperialists (the original lyrics targeted the Japanese invasion and occupation during the 1930s, but apply equally well to all external antagonists.) School children are taken to museums that gruesomely commemorate Japanese wartime atrocities. Textbooks highlight China's unfair treatment by all the foreign powers. My dictionary carries at least two separate

words meaning "foreign aggression" (*waiwu, waihuan*)—and there is even an individual entry for an expression meaning "to be subjected to repeated foreign aggression" (*waihuan pinreng*).

Some days here I feel I'm entitled to my own expression in the dictionary: "to be subjected to repeated reminders of foreign aggression." On some level, this historical baggage gets dragged into nearly every encounter between a foreigner and a Chinese person. When I meet people for the first time and they ask what I do, I explain briefly that I am sent here by an American organization to do research about China. Very frequently I get the joking response, "Oh, so you're with the CIA." This line is



A few of the 10,000 police on hand at Beijing's Worker's Stadium last August 7th, the night the Chinese and Japanese national soccer teams met for the final of the Asian Cup. This heavy police presence was a response to previous tournament games during which Chinese fans bid for first-class hooligan credentials, booing and harassing the Japanese players throughout the matches and throwing bottles at their team bus afterwards. Japanese media expressed serious concern, and Prime Minister Koizumi even appealed directly to Chinese fans for calm. As the hype around the final game in Beijing swelled, it became a certainty that a percentage of the sellout crowd of 65,000 would wind up either extremely happy and ready to break things or extremely angry and ready to break things. Indeed, when Japan won the game by a score of three to one after several somewhat questionable calls by the referee, there was no shortage of extreme anger. While most people simply went home depressed, a sizeable crowd lingered to vent their rage and burn Japanese flags. The cops didn't manage to stop the smashing of windows of a Japanese-embassy car, but they did rough up three journalists from western news organizations—including an AP photographer who was hit on the head, knocked to the ground and kicked repeatedly (he later received stitches in a hospital). It's notable that reporters were also harassed: perhaps the police weren't too happy about foreigners recording what was, after all, an ugly outpouring of Chinese frustration—the foreign press following its old negative agenda. It could be, however, that these cops were also acting out their personal frustrations about the result of the game. Unfortunately, neither the behavior of the crowds nor the police is particularly surprising given the constant reminders of outside aggression Chinese hear throughout their lives—up to and including that evening's pre-game singing of a national anthem that instructs one to "rise up" against foreigners. Photo: Courtesy AP

delivered with a smile, but depending on the person and the conversation, it's not necessarily funny. The subtext of such a joke is deep mistrust, based on history as well as the current geopolitical situation—after all, few major countries have more reason to spy on each other than the United States and China.

Frankly, it seems fair that Americans on somewhat unconventional fellowships who aren't in China in any specific capacity merit a measure of suspicion; some of my *American* friends aren't entirely convinced I'm not a spy. In fact, I think most of my Chinese interlocutors don't doubt I'm just a boring researcher—but their CIA jokes point up this enduring climate of mistrust. Of course, anyone who is *really* concerned about my intentions doesn't crack CIA jokes, particularly if I'm enquiring about a sensitive topic. When a foreigner pokes into something potentially sensitive or embarrassing, it goes without saying that he may have negative intentions—otherwise why would he be so interested? At times you almost literally see your interlocutors flipping the question over and over in their minds: with us or against us?

Boring researcher types like myself would seem to be a breed apart in that we aren't here to share any particular practical expertise, but rather to try to understand and comment on China. As such, we are often heaped in with journalists. Representatives of the foreign media, however, still provide excellent examples of westerners with split expert/imperialist identities. On the one hand, foreigners who come to report on China have usually made an effort to study the language and culture—all of which wins points for being smart enough to appreciate the depths of the wondrous Chinese civilization. Not that it's hard to win points. If you string three sentences of Mandarin together you are lauded as a linguistic genius. If you say anything indicating even a slight understanding of Chinese history or culture, your cab driver will declare you a *Zhongguo tong*, meaning "China hand" or "China expert." More importantly, most people here realize they aren't hearing independent views from their newspapers and televisions, and they understand that western media are relatively free from government control. As one of my friends at a western publication told me, many of the people she encounters believe that members of the foreign press are "real" journalists, not propaganda tools, and as such serve as models for their Chinese counterparts.

The paradox is, if western journalists know so much about China, and are also standard-bearers for objectivity, then why do they always go off and expose all the country's most

negative aspects to the foreign public? Why do they use their expertise to knock China down, rather than lift it up? There is a widespread belief that here that the western press is overwhelmingly and unacceptably critical of China. When I tell people I'm writing about China, they sometimes comment, "I hope you're telling the truth." On occasion, these words mean "*the truth that our own press can't tell.*" Usually, however, the implication is that there are positive truths that the world deserves to hear about China—but doesn't, because western commentators focus obsessively on negatives in a willful attempt to diminish China. For all their supposed understanding and appreciation of China, western commentators are no less likely to have a foot planted in the imperialist, keep-China-down camp.

* * *

When people whine about how negative foreign coverage of China is, it's useful to remind them that the western press usually takes a more negative approach to everyone and everything, not just China, and that a critical, supervisory role is a main *raison d'être* for an independent media. And of course the western press is less likely to dwell on positive developments in China: it's not controlled by the Chinese government. However, when I'm told that Chinese media coverage of the West, and America in particular, is more balanced than the reverse, I find myself in partial agreement for another specific reason. Urban Chinese are plugged into global affairs to an extent that puts Americans to shame, and their appetite for news is such that they are deluged with both positive and negative coverage.

For starters, consider the *Global Times*, a thrice-weekly newspaper that focuses exclusively on foreign affairs and



that you'll find piled high at corner newspaper kiosks in major cities. It's hard to imagine a publication devoted in its entirety to international affairs flying off the magazine racks at 7-11's and gas stations across America; harder still to picture taxi drivers on break reading that publication, something you see around Beijing. My barber, a migrant, is following the US presidential campaign via the papers and asks me about it when I go in. My cell-phone service sends me a text message each morning with three news headlines; at least one or two are foreign news, one often on the days' developments in Iraq. People don't just follow the "hard" news affecting America, they know the "soft" stuff too. Several months ago, as I waited with a junior-high-school boy for our bikes to be fixed, I was surprised that the student knew all the latest details of the Kobe Bryant rape trial—and even more surprised when the bike mechanic piped in with that day's twist in the case.

People here have access to a tremendous amount of information about many aspects of American society and politics, but the predominant characteristic of all this coverage is the way its tone veers from one extreme (glowing celebrations of our high technology and universities) to the other (angry condemnations of our hypocritical and interventionist foreign policy). As a result, it's not surprising how we end up with a sort of Jeckyl and Hyde, experts-by-day and imperialists-by-night identity. A recent study on attitudes toward the United States offers an illustration of this point. The Shanghai Institute of American Studies asked students at four Shanghai universities to use five words to describe the United States; the two top terms were "advanced" and "hegemonist," used by 94 percent and 89 percent of respondents, respectively. These poll answers translated perfectly into action for students of the graduating in the class of 1999: in May they went to the US Embassy and consulates across the country to throw stones and protest the bombing of the China's Belgrade embassy—and then they came back in June to line up for their student visa interviews.

What Chinese read in their newspapers and see on their TV and movie screens is the major factor shaping these perceptions of

America, and of foreign countries and foreigners in general. The percentage of Chinese people with chances to interact directly with foreigners is minuscule; even in cosmopolitan Beijing and Shanghai, the vast majority of people never has extended contact with foreigners. While it's true that study abroad is becoming more accessible, it is still mostly reserved for the academic and financial elite. Tourism is thus the most rapidly expanding source of contact with the outside world; by 2010, the total of Chinese traveling abroad is expected to be somewhere between 50 to 70 million. France and other European countries are preparing for the day, perhaps within a decade, when Chinese tourists will outnumber those from Japan and America. However, I suspect that for most of these millions of tourists, the goal will be to bring back pictures posed in front of the Eiffel Tower, not a new, deeper understanding of foreign mindsets—admittedly hard to do when you're on a week-long



Michael "Jordan" and Abu Ghraib, the expert and the imperialists. These posters advertising magazines on a news kiosk show the extreme heaven-and-hell split in Chinese views of America and Americans. On the one hand we have the America represented by Michael Jordan. Jordan, repeatedly named the number one "idol" in surveys of Chinese middle-school students in the late-90s, is still a huge star here. When he toured China in May, the throngs who turned out to see him in Beijing were so large that his appearance was canceled because of concerns about crowd safety. Jordan is a kind of one-man embodiment of everything that is great and dominant about the United States. Indeed, Jordan has acquired mystical, demi-god status: the two characters on the poster read ren yu shen, "man and god/spirit." On the other hand we have the America represented by Abu Ghraib, here gracing the front cover of Globe magazine, a popular publication devoted to world affairs. The Abu Ghraib story received thorough coverage here. First, the humiliation of Iraqis at the hands of western imperialists is something Chinese can relate to. Moreover, people here savored the chance to lash out at an America that never tires of criticizing China's human-rights record. The headline refers to the tortured Iraqis as "the people who have returned from hell." America may raise demi-gods, but it spawns demons as well.



...and we'll be back next month for our visas! Students burn an American flag outside the US Embassy in Beijing during the May 1999 protests over the US bombing of the China's Belgrade embassy. (Courtesy AP)

tour and you don't quite speak the language.

While it's true the media serve as the main window on the outside world in all countries, not all countries are potential superpowers: Chinese perceptions of the world will simply matter more. No, China is not a democracy, but given the general trend toward increasing openness, and specific new phenomena like Internet petitions and chat-rooms, the government finds itself ever less isolated from public opinion. In the last few years, for example, we've seen repeatedly how anti-Japanese and anti-American sentiment has come back to bite the hand of the Communist Party that fed it, limiting policy options and forcing more confrontational interactions between governments—and such friction between governments generates ill will that then cycles back to sour mass opinion. A case that followed this script closely was the April, 2001 EP-3 incident, in which a downed American aircrew was held captive, and a Chinese pilot died, after their planes collided.

And of course if China does become more democratic in coming decades, public opinion will matter that much more, How a rising China views the outside world, and America in particular, will be a big story of this century. Unlike America, which rose to superpower status in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries on a wave of immigrants, in China only a small elite ever sees real, extended "face time" with people from somewhere else. And when everyone else's face time with foreigners comes in the form of two-dimensional photos and video images, it's less

surprising that your thinking and conclusions about them would be two-dimensional as well. The sheer quantity of media coverage gives some breadth to Chinese knowledge of the West, but apparently not much depth. Discussions with people sometimes leave me feeling like I'm a protagonist in a kung fu film, trying to knock away stereotypes hurled at me in a furious barrage—and then waiting ten minutes for the next fight scene, where I have to bat the same misconceptions away all over again. This continuous repetition of pseudo-truths results in rigid, cardboard-cut-out conceptions of foreigners. What worries me: Add in feelings of underlying civilizational inferiority and superiority and, as I'll discuss below, the foreigner becomes all too easy to dehumanize.

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It shouldn't surprise me anymore, but it still comes as a bit of a shock when I meet bright, otherwise open-minded university students who emphatically proclaim "I hate Japanese people"—and then immediately admit that they have never met anyone from Japan. This anti-Japanese sentiment is widespread—only 5.9 percent of respondents to a recent Chinese Academy of Social Sciences survey identified Japan as "friendly or very friendly." For historical reasons, the Japanese are of course the easiest to hate; indeed, one frequently hears them referred to as *Riben guize*, Japanese devils. This sounds even worse in English than in Mandarin, but the term serves very much to vilify.

Westerners, meanwhile, are generally more immune

from rhetorical demonization. The Cantonese term *guailou*, meaning generic foreign devil, is still common in southern China; I heard this often during my two years teaching in Guangzhou. However, while it is certainly not a respectful word, the term has lost a good deal of its negative punch. Overall, white people are not felt to be as “bad” as the Japanese, and in most of China epithets used for us no longer relate to devils. By far the most common Mandarin term you’ll hear on the street is *laowai*—which my dictionary translates as “a good-humored nick-name for foreigners, especially westerners.” There is a measure of respect built into this word (*lao* means “old”) but as my Chinese friends freely admit, it too carries its own derogatory edge. *Laowai*, used almost exclusively to denote white people, is a kind of Mandarin equivalent of *gringo*. And admittedly, in a Chinese context there is often something pale and awkward about us, particularly for those less adept at chopstick use. So while the term may be “good-humored,” everyone knows the humor is at the expense of the foreigner.

You’d be surprised by how little white people have to do to be humorous. I realize just how funny I am when I eat in one of my favorite restaurants here in Beijing. This particular establishment is located on a boardwalk-like stretch of bars and eateries along the banks of a small lake. Most of the tables at the restaurant are set against a floor-to-ceiling glass façade, so as one sits there one becomes a kind of live window display for the multitudes milling along the boardwalk. It’s quite amazing how the simple sight of a *laowai* sitting in the window eating noodles can bring smiles to people’s faces. And I know they’re not simply reacting to my looking at them: just glance up suddenly from your plate and you’ll see the smiles already well-stretched across faces. (And I don’t think it’s the chopstick usage—this is the one and only area of Chinese culture where I basically hold my own.)

I’d say that among the Chinese who walk by and notice me, I have about a 70-percent smile rating. I don’t really know if that’s a good rating or bad rating, or what kind of rating should be considered optimal. You might think it’s good to be funny, and some days I agree. On

days when I’m feeling generous, this effortlessness with which I seem to conjure up smiles seems like a strange and wonderful God-given talent. Other days, however, I have Joe Pesci’s famous “so you think I’m funny” speech from *Goodfellas* looping through my head: “I’m funny how? I mean, funny like I’m a clown? I amuse you? I make you laugh? What the #@!& is so funny about me?”

Indeed, why so funny? In one sense, we *are* funny like clowns, particularly to those who find our faces most different and unusual. This obviously means children: when you cross them on the street they will sometimes openly announce to you and anyone in earshot that you are a “*laowai!*” —and then giggle furiously. Smaller children also think we’re funny, but they’re more likely to simply nudge their mothers and whisper the word, hoping you won’t notice and reappear in their bedroom closet at midnight. Infants, meanwhile, are fascinated by our white faces and wiggle their arms in pleasure (admittedly, not all babies react this way; some are terrified and start screaming).

The other group to whom we are funny, like clowns, are migrants, particularly younger ones, few of whom have seen live foreigners until their arrival in the city. I once walked by a group of migrants while eating a banana, prompting one of them to proclaim: “foreigner eating a banana.”

This brought down the house—like a monkey eating a banana, but much funnier.²

People from outside the cities are also most likely to yell “helloooo” at you in a disdainful manner. They know this is a form of greeting, but the point is not to elicit a response. The closest equivalent I can think of is when we see a cow and have an urge to say “moo.” These words are clearly intended for our own amusement, and not to start a conversation. They don’t represent an attempt at communication; they reinforce the utter impossibility of communication.

These spontaneous reactions from children and migrants are at least fairly straightforward to interpret; to them, we look, and sometimes even act, like clowns. Of



Hey laowai, lemme see that camera of yours!

² Some of my American friends here have rightly reminded me that I am omitting important context for this “foreigner eating a banana” example. In China, a common way to exchange small talk is to make a simple statement regarding the activity of the person you bump into. For example, if I’m biking home with bags of groceries hanging from my handlebars and pass one of my neighbors walking his dog, a common exchange would go like this:

Neighbor (*smiling, nodding*): “Went out to buy groceries.”

Me (*smiling, nodding*): “Walking the dog.”

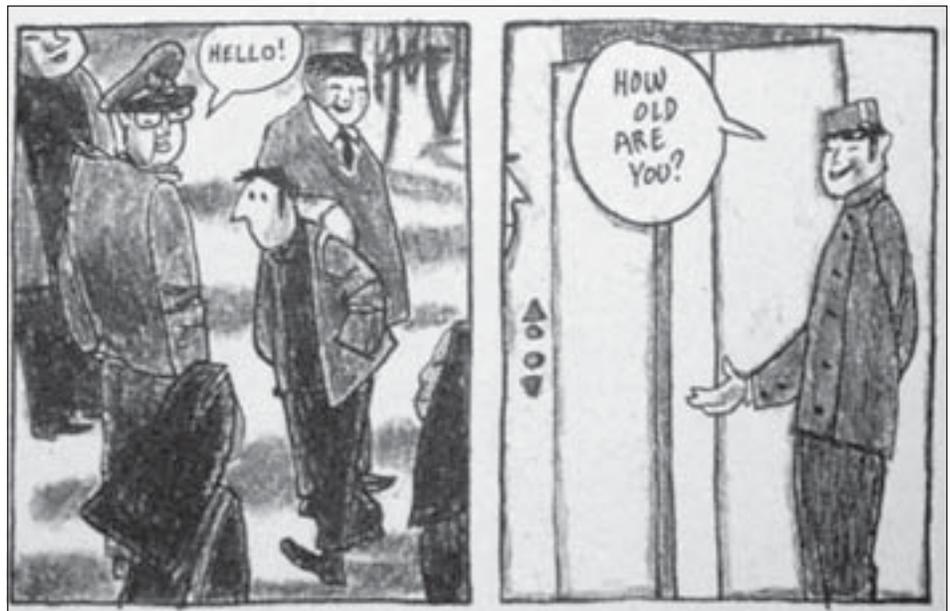
If Chinese saw subtitled versions of the old “makin’ copies” skits on Saturday Night Live, you can see why they might be slightly baffled: “makin’ copies” would be a perfectly reasonable way for the office worker sitting by the copy machine to greet his or her copy-making colleagues. The comment “foreigner eating a banana” in itself is thus less out of context than it might seem—it’s the fact that these people had no idea who I was, and that they laughed raucously, that makes my point.

course, the more education and exposure to the outside world people have, the less likely they are to shout “laowai” or “helloooo” at you. Harder to understand are the reactions of educated, well-traveled adults. There is a now-infamous anecdote about the group of Chinese journalists who were being given a tour of the State Department on the morning of September 11, 2001. After the first plane hit the World Trade Center, they gathered around a television with their State Department guides and several American journalists. Then, when the second plane struck, the Chinese journalists erupted into spontaneous applause and cheers.³

The first time I heard this story it sent a chill down my spine. The way the second plane flew onto the screen and into the

building was so unexpected and horrific, one’s reaction could only spring from some very deep place. Certainly, you could imagine these individuals were carrying bottled up anger over the EP-3 incident, only a few months old, as well as over the Belgrade bombing (the three Chinese killed inside the embassy were all journalists, officially at least). The Oedipal metaphors, however, are hard to resist. Perhaps we can understand why Chinese gathered around that television might have felt a thrill at witnessing the emasculation of the all-knowing, all-powerful daddy. Indeed, that second plane was the first clear image that America really was under attack. If America, faced with even more spectacular attacks or bogged down by unpopular wars abroad, ever begins to pull back into itself, the Chinese journalists’ reaction to that image may have been prescient: this was the moment when the balance of world power switched away from a retreating United States—and toward a rising China.

It seems to me a group of educated, well-traveled journalists could be intensely critical of American policies and intensely patriotic—and yet also intensely horrified at the loss of innocent life. Spontaneous applause is not first-and-foremost horror; it’s dehumanization. I would imagine that part of this reaction comes from watching events on television. One of my former Chinese students was then enrolled at NYU and saw the morning’s events unfold, and I know he wasn’t applaud-



An excerpt from Guy Delisle’s autobiographical graphic novel Shenzhen. Delisle, a cartoonist from Quebec, recounts his experiences in China overseeing out-sourced production work for a French animation studio. (Recommended as an original, humorous visual introduction to life here for foreigners. In French, except when Delisle and his Chinese hosts attempt to interact in English. Paris: L’Association, 2000.)

ing. For Chinese who were viewing on television, however, Sept. 11 was just one more piece of two-dimensional input about America, albeit one with particularly high info-tainment value—outstripping even Bill Clinton’s grand jury deposition in the Monica Lewinsky affair, which had found its way onto video disc format here. So of course, not long after Sept. 11, DVDs began appearing in shops that showed the most violent footage of the attacks. From a production-values standpoint, however, the real live destruction and terror wasn’t appealing enough, and so edited into the video were clips from American disaster movies of collapsing skyscrapers, people fleeing through the streets, etc. Real dying Americans, fake dying Americans, what’s the difference? Americans shimmering on Chinese screens are all just acting their rich Hollywood lives out anyway.

In a similarly creepy example, this September a quiz show on Chinese Central Television asked home viewers to participate by text-messaging in the death total at the terrorist school siege in Beslan, Russia. You could choose from four body counts, ranging from 302 to 402. This show aired days after the siege ended in disaster, and response from at least some viewers, not to mention Moscow, was outraged. Television authorities seem to have realized their mistake, and dismissed two of the producers and an editor on the show. This was clearly the right thing to do, but we are still left wondering about the mentality that imagines the number of freshly killed

³ The group returned to China three days later, their trip cut short, prompting speculation the State Department had basically ejected them from the country due to their behavior on September 11th. When asked about the incident in a press conference the next week, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher refused specific comment and indicated the group would have had to leave America anyway as its next scheduled stop was New York, which had closed down.

children, parents and teachers to be a quiz-show question.

* * *

We have yet to address a fundamental issue: Compared to the West, Chinese simply do not place the same value on the lives of people they don't know, be they foreign or not. One explanation that makes a good deal of sense goes as follows. The Judeo-Christian belief system posits the existence of souls. As such, each person is awarded a measure of innate human value, and each individual has an abstract social obligation to respect this humanity possessed by the other. In contrast, within China's dominant Confucian tradition no such *abstract* social obligations exist, only *specific* social obligations; there are only *specific* social obligations, such as those between husband and wife, parent and child, ruler and ruled. This helps shed light on something that many visitors wonder about: How can Chinese be so amazingly polite to their guests and friends—and then knock each other to the ground in order to shove to the front of a “line” or onto a bus, and all without a word of apology. And of course there is no need apologize; you don't have any specific social obligation to these people. This worldview also contributes to explaining some of the crazy news items coming out of China. For example, a series of food safety scandals have erupted this year, including one in which a major pickled-cabbage factory decided to cut costs by replacing edible salt with a toxic, industrial variety. When the media latched onto the story, workers at a factory admitted they wouldn't let their own families eat the product. This line of argument helps us understand why corruption in China has taken root so deeply and at so many levels.

Make no mistake, the Chinese are their own toughest critics on this issue. Naturally, it's risky pointing out how this indifference to the humanity of others manifests itself in government action. Fortunately for the concerned commentator, society offers up plentiful non-political fodder for this argument. A weekly program on Central Chinese Television tackling issues of public morality began its run last year by airing a shocking home video: It showed a man threatening to jump off a building—and a crowd of passersby below screaming “come on, do it, jump!” (The man did.) In another recent example, an editorial on sina.com, one of China's most popular websites, related an incident that had just occurred at the Paralympics Games, held in Athens in September. When a bus accident killed seven Greek children coming to attend the closing ceremonies, the Games organizers decided to cut the entertainment portion of the ceremony in a sign of respect—including a routine by a Chinese handicapped performance troupe. Chinese Paralympic authorities, however, insisted the group be allowed to perform anyway, and the hosts acquiesced under pressure. The editorial author criticizes this decision to demand to perform—and concludes by asking: “if such an incident were to occur domestically, would we cancel the ceremony's entertainment?” The implica-

tion is that China would not, even if Chinese school children have just died en route.

We should ask: Would a Chinese quiz show ask its audience to guess the tally of *Chinese* killed in some hypothetical hostage disaster? This seems very unlikely to me—and certainly not on state-run television. And it's very hard to imagine planes flying into Shanghai skyscrapers being met with indifference, let alone applause. Indeed, this entire report tries to explain why Chinese might care even less about the lives of supercilious westerners, particularly citizens of the superpower that is trying to keep China down. But I think overall, the picture that emerges is a kind of sliding scale of humanity: on one end, those most like you and whom you see daily in three dimensions, your own family; on the other end, those least like you and easiest to view two-dimensionally, foreigners. The people in between are linked to you with bonds that are increasingly abstract—and that make them increasingly easy to dehumanize.

As I noted in AJB-3, the immediate family serves as a core of an identity that is layered outward through clan/village and dialect group/regional levels—and then up to an ethnic/civilizational layer of Chinese-ness (from there you can keep working outward through the “yellow-skinned peoples” to all Asians and then peoples of other races and regions). As I discussed, regional and dialect group identity remains very strong, and the central government continues the on-going process of trying to weaken these identities in favor of bolstering national or civilizational cohesiveness. Policies pointed toward this end are made frequently; this is the undoubtedly the rationale behind a brand new ruling stating that foreign television shows (*Friends*, etc) may only be dubbed into Mandarin, and not into regional dialects.

However, despite renewed interest in religion, what is going on in China today is not the onset of mass belief in the soul. Rather, the roles of government policies and the media, as well as processes like urbanization and migration, have been serving to break down localized specific obligations. This phenomenon extends down to the familial level, where traditional bonds are weakening as divorce laws and social mores loosen. What were once more specific ties are being made more abstract—and vice versa. Through this kind of conversion we are increasingly seeing specific social obligation wearing a new suit: that of modern nationalism. I am not predicting that China must become an expansionist power and a threat to the peace. I am suggesting that this nationalism will make Chinese relations with the world, and the US in particular, significantly more tense. And unlike the European states, both America and China would seem to be nations that have difficulties abstracting their identities even further, beyond their national borders.

I'm certainly not trying to paint all Chinese views about the West in one light. In fact, I want to conclude by stressing differences in Chinese opinion. I was in Wash-

ington DC on Sept. 11, and the very first call that got through to me was from one of my former Chinese students; my inbox filled up with emails from others. Of course many Chinese felt just as horrified as we did, just as many television viewers were appalled at the Beslan death-tally quiz. That said, Chinese friends tell me that many of their peers felt America “deserved” the Sept. 11 attacks, that it was a good thing.

As far as I know, there is no public-opinion data about Chinese reactions to Sept. 11, so my understanding is based on first-hand contacts. Everything I hear leads me to believe, however, that the “proper” Chinese reaction to these attacks was a source of heated debate. I happen to know of two separate Beijing couples that divorced in the fall of 2001. A mutual friend claims, only half-jokingly, that their marriages were victims of Sept. 11, since both couples had long, angry arguments over how to interpret that day’s events. Obviously, there were many other problems in these marriages. The point, however, is that Sept. 11 became a kind of revealing, personal test relating to their basic worldviews. Chinese had to look inside themselves and work through the built-up morass of conflicted feelings vis-à-vis America and the West in order to come to some sort of verdict about the attacks—with differing verdicts naturally growing out of differing conceptions of the world and China’s role in it.

Debates about Sept. 11 are just part of the greater

Chinese discourse about the country’s rise on the international scene. Will obsessions with expertise and imperialism continue to strip nuance from public opinion about the West? Will China continue to view the world through its dueling superiority and inferiority complexes? America in particular should use every means available to play a part in guiding these outcomes. When it comes to the Islamic world, we’re finally realizing the importance of crafting a message. The *9-11 Commission Report* makes specific reference to the long-term importance of public diplomacy, noting “if the United States does not act aggressively to define itself in the Islamic world, the extremists will gladly do the job for us.”

In China we don’t face the same kind of threats, but the basic questions are quite similar. We must manage a relationship with a great civilization carrying a chip on its shoulder and a deep suspicion of America—and we can’t overlook the fact that there *are* extremists here who would also gladly shape the debate if given the chance. Indeed, if there is any other place on earth where we need to move aggressively to shape our image, it’s China. We need to understand how we’re being defined and why, and have a real strategy to participate in shaping that definition. This is a cook-off we don’t want to lose. □

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Fellows and their Activities

Alexander Brenner (June 2003 - 2005) • **CHINA**

With a B.A. in History from Yale and an M.A. in China Studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex is in China examining how the country is adapting to economic and cultural globalization following its accession to the World Trade Organization.

Cristina Merrill (2004 - 2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and will now spend two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew is spending two years in east-central Africa, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Rudolph (January 2004-2006) • **INDIA**

Having completed a Cornell Ph.D. in International Relations, Matt is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot South Asia Fellow looking into the securitization and development of the Indian economy.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation, Matt is spending two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt is also examining long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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