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China Views America: Aspiration, Opposition, and the Telos of China's Return

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Chinese perceptions of America have frequently been characterized as having a kind of “love/hate” dynamic, though perhaps one should use the more culturally idiomatic description of “sweet and sour.” As David Shambaugh’s classic formulation put it, we have long been seen as the “Beautiful Imperialist,” simultaneously a kind of object of desire in the Chinese mind and an object of aversion, both serving as

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“Statue of Democracy” statue that eventually appeared on our own iconic Statue of Liberty, even as Soviet Union’s collapse half a world away—was surely no less presented modernity across the board, and this was mirrored in overlapping and reinforcing ways.

Oppositional elements in the mix, of course. Marxist discourse, the eviscerated eutanasia that it has since been given by its leaders, and the discourse of class struggle and revolution long enough to make Deng’s reform and opening a very tumultuous process. Many still saw the United States as a hegemon, intent upon doing China ill if given the chance. It had been convenient to collaborate against Soviet Union in that fashion, but which could not but remain inherently contradictory. These oppositional elements, however, the balance of power because it had come to be perceived that actually *acting* in a way contrary to China’s interest in living out what I think is the dominant narrative in Chinese political life since the late 19

Now I don't see this Great *Telos* of Return—or “GTR,” if one can be forgiven an acronym—as being intrinsically positive *or* negative, nor aspirational or oppositional, with respect to the United States. Rather, I see the GTR as the kind of a broader, framing and orienting narrative that helps adherents organize and prioritize *other* elements in their policy and conceptual world. This isn't a label I've heard anyone else use, but China Watchers will probably recognize the phenomenon, and see why it is important to understand the GTR's interaction with aspirational and oppositional elements in Chinese thinking about America.

Chinese thinkers have been all over the map during the last century and a half when it comes to what policy solutions they would prescribe for the country's woes. Some turned to China's own ancient traditions for sources of inspiration about how to confront the challenges of modernity, some to nationalism, some to Marxist-Leninism, and some to Western liberalism. But a common thread woven throughout *every* discourse, it seems to me, is what I call the *telos* of return: the imperative of restoring China's pride, stature, role, and power in the world to something more akin to what it is presumed they *should* be, and which they have *not* been for some time. The *telos* thus involves explicit or implicit assumptions about China's birthright as a respected power and civilization of the very first rank, and it provides a framework for structuring other goals according to their anticipated contribution to this objective.

To my eye, the GTR—and I use the term “return” here because merely saying “rise” fails to capture the compelling psychology of something that is not just *desired* but which in fact is felt to represent the natural order of things, and which is thus in important ways *owed* to China—all but saturates Chinese thinking across a remarkable spectrum of political belief, and has done so ever since the twilight of the Qing Dynasty.

Today, the GTR is a major component of the legitimating narrative of the Communist Party-State itself, for the CCP claims to justify its continued domestic hegemony in large part on the basis of its purportedly unique ability to provide that steady hand necessary to ensure the continued growth and social stability essential for the country's return to status and power. Versions of the GTR, however, are articulated even by many Chinese dissidents in exile—from pro-democracy Tiananmen-era protesters

are exceptions that prove the rule. Though recipes for how to achieve it may vary widely, there is hardly *anyone* of significance who is not somehow committed to the GTR.

This *telos* is especially important for Chinese perceptions of the United States, because the balance and tensions between aspirational and oppositional elements within Chinese views of America have been powerfully conditioned by its imperatives. In the 1980s, for instance, notwithstanding the persistence at that time of significant intellectual and political currents of Marxist thought and anti-imperialist instinct, the GTR helped “positive,” relationship-conducive aspects predominate in Chinese perceptions of the United States. America was then widely seen as a country to be emulated in multiple ways precisely *because* as the exemplar of modernity *its* forms of organization were the keys to strength and development.

In that period, therefore, *aspiration* predominated, and in positive forms, for it was critical to achieving China’s destiny to learn from and even to become *more like* the United States. As noted, of course, generally Marxist anti-American oppositional elements persisted. Their “negative,” relationship-degrading expressions, however, could not be permitted to undermine Deng’s great project of opening and reform, for *that* project was key to fulfilling the GTR after decades of isolation, impoverishment, and dysfunction in the era of Maoist orthodoxy.

Indeed, for a while, oppositional elements in Chinese views of the United States may have *reinforced* the wellsprings of aspiration and the elements positively affecting the Sino-American relationship. (Precisely to the degree that the United States *was* still hated and feared, after all, it was perhaps all the *more* important to maintain openness to and engagement with America, for in engagement-facilitated reform lay China’s key to the strength that would enable it to resist foreign predation.) Though Chinese views of America never seem to have been without stereotypically “sweet and sour” tensions, conceptual space thus existed for a sort of “grand bargain” or “truce” between philo- and anti-Americanism. For a while, at least elements of aspiration and opposition *both* encouraged approaches to the United States that were, on balance, and in practice, positive.

The Tiananmen Square massacre—or rather, the Party’s terror at what the demonstrations might have *become*, if not smashed, as students and urban workers alike began to organize, not just in Beijing but in other urban centers around China, to demand change of the government—unsettled this congenial equilibrium. The aftermath of the butchery on Chang’an Avenue proved further unsettling by showing the PRC’s leaders an international community that pulled surprisingly *together*, at least for a while, to castigate and shun the PRC—casting aspersions on the benevolent virtue of its leaders and their right to rule, but also demonstrating the foreigners’ ability to come together *against* China in ways that showed some potential to *thwart* achievement of the GTR. International outrage proved relatively short-lived, but was nonetheless unnerving: coordinated mobilization between so many foreign governments against a Chinese regime had not been seen much since the period of U.S.-orchestrated diplomatic non-recognition in the mid-20th Century, or even since the anti-Boxer expedition of 1900.

The Chinese Party-State did not abandon its opening to the outside world and its economic reform efforts, of course, but it buckled down in opposition to *political* liberalization and redoubled its efforts to preserve “social harmony” and restore the CCP’s badly tarnished legitimacy through propaganda—a.k.a. “guidance of public opinion,” and “thought management”—both at home and abroad. The so-called “June 4th incident” on Tiananmen Square and developments in its aftermath unsettled the previous equilibrium between the tensions inherent in Chinese views of the United States.

Over the next decade and a half, the relationship between aspirational and oppositional currents in China’s view of America—and the relationship of these elements to the GTR—was to remain ambiguous and contested, less stable than before. On the one hand, China still needed America, not merely aspiring to emulate it at least in economic and scientific and technological terms, but also needing “breathing space” in which to accomplish the delicate business of economic transformation. In this respect, therefore, aspiration remained predominant, and continued to have positive implications for the Sino-American relationship because engagement and cooperation were still necessary to fulfilling the GTR.

At the same time, however, post-Tiananmen CCP worries about China’s susceptibility to domestic unrest and the dangers inherent in Western political values led to increased hand-wringing about the supposed dangers of foreign cultural and political “subversion.” Party efforts to “re-ideologize” Chinese political life—though no longer along traditionally Marxist lines, and relying ever more upon much more sophisticated and modern “PR savvy” methods in the place of crude Maoist mobilization—also encouraged negative and oppositional elements in China’s view of the United States, inasmuch as these efforts necessarily involved officials to some degree cultivating a sense of irreducible civilizational and systemic *difference from* and even *competition with* Western modes of socio-political organization. This helped create a tenuous counterpoise of elements in which the various positive and negative aspects of aspiration and opposition were balanced unstably on a knife’s edge.

Memory of foreign reactions to Tiananmen, as well as the advent of America’s ascendancy in its “unipolar moment” after the collapse of the Soviet Empire fed this volatile and precarious ambiguity. On the one hand, these factors underlined the dangers of a *bad* relationship with the United States, since China still *needed* profitable engagement with the world to continue precisely *because* a good deal of unchallenged “rising” still remained to be done before the GTR could be considered achieved. (This perspective emphasized the wisdom of Deng Xiaoping’s counsel of nonthreatening circumspection lest foreign counter-mobilization imperil the conditions making Chinese growth and development possible.) On the other hand, these developments also gave Chinese leaders more reasons to *feel* the oppositional elements in the mix, even as it still remained for the most part imprudent for them to *act* upon such feelings.

But where are things today? In the last several years, it seems that a further shift has occurred in this balance of narrative elements. I don’t think the oppositional

organization. This shift has been driven in part by the Party's need to articulate a *moral* foundation for one-party hegemony in response to social-justice concerns arising out of the rapaciousness and inequality of the PRC's modern-day crony capitalism. It is no longer enough, in other words, to offer an "it ain't broke so don't fix it" approach to performance-based legitimacy rooted primarily in wealth creation.

As seen, for instance in the CCP's increasing emphasis upon "harmony" and "spiritual civilization"—and in the rise of what Anne-Marie Brady, Valérie Niquet, John Dotson and others have identified as more or less explicitly Confucian themes in Party propaganda—it is increasingly felt necessary to defend and promote Party policies and power in what purport to be moral terms. And this, in turn, may have consequences for Chinese views of the United States and approaches to the Sino-American relationship. Assertions of one's own morality in contradistinction to another person's way of doing things, after all, tend to imply his *immorality*—a conclusion, in effect, which one is almost *required* to reach, whatever the evidence, lest one's own legitimacy be called into question.

And so it is that I think the more emulative and thus generally positive aspirational elements in Chinese views of the United States have become attenuated. Compared to earlier phases of the period of reform, America is seen today as less of a model, more of a systemic *anti*-model, and less something to aspire to *except* in the very simple sense that the aspirational elements inherent in the GTR itself lead Beijing to covet America's *power* and *role* in the world. To an increasing extent, *this* more covetous—and thus more negative and potentially conflict-engendering—aspect of aspiration is all that remains, leaving the enduring oppositional elements not merely uncounterbalanced but in fact *reinforced*.

You'll notice that in this discussion of developments in Chinese views of the United States, I haven't said much about the Un

This is one reason why I watch with such concern the CCP's fumbling toward an ever more explicit moral and political vision of antidemocratic legitimacy. In general, the more organized and overtly prescriptive such a cognitive framework is, the more likely it will be to exert influence upon—and create persistent patterns in—its adherents' behavior. The CCP seems to be trying to clean up the conceptual mess of its post-Marxist legitimacy discourse by offering a clearer politico-moral vision that lauds one-party autocracy and denigrates democratic pluralism, and this has important implications.

Hitherto, the implications of the CCP's legitimacy narratives have been somewhat ambiguous for Sino-American relations. Nationalism, of course, can certainly evoke self-righteous anger at perceived foreign affronts, exacerbating “hiccups” in a relationship and increasing the potential for such problems to escalate out of control, but nationalism *per se* has only ambivalent *systemic* implications. Performance-based legitimacy grounded primarily in wealth creation is also ambiguous from a systemic perspective, and while it could perhaps strain relations by eliciting economically competitive behavior, no “existential” or otherwise fundamental antagonism with any other state would seem necessarily to be implied. Conceptions of politico-moral superiority, however, with their concomitant implications for another's *immorality*, raise bigger questions, and may carry the seeds of more persistent problems in the relationship.

Renascent ideological dynamics may reinforce recent shifts toward the negative and the oppositional in Chinese views of America, with the United States again coming to represent ever more clearly, after an interval of some decades, a more traditional sort of overt ideological opponent. Not unlike the United States itself, and indeed over a vastly greater span of time, all things considered, China has tended to see itself as an *exemplary state*—one that represents a particular model of socio-political organization that deserves to be held out in some sense as a model for the rest of the world, if not necessarily as an organizational system to be slavishly replicated than certainly as a key value pole around which the human community should orient itself. The ambiguities and confusion of China's ideological discourse during most of the era of reform greatly attenuated this sort of thinking, allowing “sweet and sour” elements, as it were, to coexist in a fairly relationship-congenial balance for some time.

But it could be that this is changing. To the extent that the CCP is inching its way back toward a coherent system of antidemocratic *philosophy*, a new emphasis upon “exemplary state” thinking may reemerge. To the extent that it does, we should expect views of and approaches to the United States to harden commensurately, and to be increasingly resistant to any diplomatic efforts of our own to “save” the relationship from such deterioration.

It may yet be that the *balance* between positive and negative elements can once again be made to favor the positive. If Chinese leaders again become convinced that assertive and confrontational behavior has a good chance of wrecking China's dreams, for example, Beijing might return to what some scholars have called the “Taoist nationalism” of non-provocative self-cultivation that China employed with such success for some years. Alternatively, changes in the Chinese political system itself could defuse

the growing tensions between the two powers, creating a qualitatively new dynamic no longer polluted by Chinese fears of ideational subversion or by American concerns about the trajectory of an increasingly powerful dictatorship. Absent some change of direction, however, there is likely to be a rougher road ahead in our dealings with an increasingly confident and re-ideologized China.

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