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Living in Beijing as I do, it’s not uncommon to be asked about my feelings on the Olympics. Chinese friends, family, colleagues, and even complete and total strangers (for reasons passing understanding) seem interested in hearing my opinion.

But I’ve learned the hard way that my perspective per se is not what is actually being sought, but rather confirmation of what The People’s Daily and CCTV assure all Chinese is the only possible correct answer: Yes, the Olympics are going to be a huge success and will demonstrate to the world that China is becoming a modern, developed nation. Deviations from that line are not always received well and sometimes elicit outright hostility, which leaves me to wonder: Why is that? Why does concern about the Olympics, criticism of Chinese government policies, or even a news story about the effect of air pollution on athletes, provoke such a visceral response from many Chinese?

Obviously no one set of reasons can cover the gamut of reactions, everybody perceives issues in different ways, but in perusing the comments section of China blogs and the threads on Chinese BBSs, I sense three main themes: the close integration of state/nation/party in both PRC ideology and the minds of the Chinese people; genuine pride at China’s rise in the world and a belief that many countries in “the West” seek to undermine China’s development to satisfy their own selfish strategic goals; and finally, a barely smoldering resentment born out of a history of foreign imperialism in China.

In the United States, there is a tradition–fragile though it may be at times–that says criticism of government policies is not only a right, but in fact is the responsibility of a concerned citizen. Painting in the broadest possible strokes, the founding fathers established a system whereby the state and the nation were separate entities, one under the supervision of the other. This separation means that one can accuse the government of wrongdoing without necessarily implicating the nation or its people. Sure, I might get annoyed a bit whenever non-American friends denounce the United States for the invasion of Iraq or whatever, but at the end of the day it doesn’t affect me all that much: I know it’s a policy of my government that’s being criticized, one which I also oppose, and generally speaking they aren’t attacking me personally or the American people as a whole.

In China, on the other hand, the demands of 20th-century state building, first under the KMT and later by the CCP, fused the ideas of nation and state (and later nation, state, and party) into an inseparable ideology which was then disseminated through propaganda and education to the people.* To criticize one is to attack the whole. Political culture in the PRC has no place for a loyal opposition, never mind the dictum, tenuously attributed to Thomas Jefferson, linking dissent and patriotism. As a result, publicly questioning the government in China is a crime for which the perpetrator risks arrest as a ‘threat to social stability and state security.’ Foreigners who do so are counterattacked as China-bashers; those Chinese who speak out against their own government in the foreign press are pilloried on electronic bulletin boards as hanjian, traitors to their race, an epithet to which Chinese nationals working for foreign media organizations are also frequently subjected.

Moreover, this response carries with it the implicit–and occasionally explicit–tag that those who criticize China are simply jealous and/or fearful of China’s rise.

The Chinese are justifiably proud of how far their country has advanced in the last 25 years, and today’s China is a testament to the spirit of its people, who through their hard work and entrepreneurial drive have launched an era of unprecedented economic growth and development. At the same time, old ideas die hard.

Social Darwinism was first introduced to China through the writings and translations of Yan Fu and Liang Qichao in the late-19th century, at a time when the rapacious demands of the imperialist powers threatened to carve up China (as the oft-quoted trope goes) like a melon. It is little wonder then that early 20th-century intellectuals and state builders looked out into the world and saw nothing but
power politics and a global struggle for national survival. After the founding of the PRC, this concept of a Darwinian international order diffused throughout society as CCP propaganda stressed the need to strengthen the state so that China would never again be bullied by foreign powers. Early production campaigns called on the people to overtake Britain and catch up with the United States. Competition was the name of the game. The antagonism and paranoia of this Cold War propaganda reinforced lessons learned during a long 19th century, and many Chinese came to believe that the world was indeed out to “get China” and geopolitics was a zero-sum game. It’s a perception that lingers to this day.

What is a bit unusual however is the assumption by many people here that all Americans think this way too: that every single person in the US is fixated and frightened by China’s rise, and it is this fear that drives the negative media reporting on China’s environment, food safety problems, human rights abuses, etc. Part of this reaction can be attributed to the “CCTV-effect.” In China, the media is a tool for political control, and many Chinese—especially those who have limited international experience—have trouble believing that the foreign media could operate any differently.

Adding to this, the Chinese media is fond of parroting government officials who label the United States as human rights hypocrites, citing the usual suspects (slavery, imperialism, policy toward indigenous peoples) as well as tossing out a few new ones (waterboarding, the invasion of Iraq). Whether one feels this is a valid defense or not, the salient point is that many in China accept the government line as unequivocal proof that foreign critics cannot be trusted.

Now, I can’t speak for everybody, but in conversations in Beijing with foreign journalists, activists, bloggers, researchers, businesspeople and teachers, the general consensus is that few, if any, have a problem with China’s development or truly fear China’s rise, certainly not in the way that nationalist rags like The Global Times would suggest. Generally speaking, we believe that criticism of the government is based on the notion that certain reforms would make the lives of the Chinese people more secure, prosperous, and free. Surely this is not “bashing China,” rather it’s expressing enthusiasm for our hosts’ good fortune and concern for our friends, the Chinese people. Right?

Wrong, apparently. For you see, China has a long history of foreign do-gooders stepping on her soil and offering suggestions. (Who could forget Columbia professor Frank Goodnow’s helpful hint to Yuan Shikai in 1915 that what the Republic needed most was an emperor?) Missionaries, traders, academics, officials, and writers came to China in droves during the age of imperialism, all with ideas on how to fix China and make the lives of the Chinese better. The problem was of course that no matter how well-intentioned a notion, no matter how sound or rational it might have been, any idea becomes a hard fit when it arrives shoehorned between military occupations and adventures in gunboat diplomacy.

This left its mark on how foreign ideas were perceived and deployed in Chinese society. The challenge in the early-20th century to reconcile Chinese tradition and foreign ideas has been a recurring theme in the literature on modern Chinese intellectual history. That struggle to define modernity, to understand how to be both fully modern and fully Chinese, and how to achieve a sense of equivalency with the West, was left unresolved at the time of the CCP takeover in 1949. Marxism purported to be the answer to this dilemma, but as Marxism loses its intellectual currency in today’s China A-Go-Go, old questions and nagging insecurities start to reemerge.

At the same time, the legacies of imperialism are reinforced in many ways, not the least of which is through the ‘patriotic education’ that’s a key part of the elementary and secondary curriculum in the PRC. Nobody needs to be reminded of the intimate link in China between history, politics, and education. The CCP itself never stops telling the people that it was the Party who was responsible for driving out the foreign imperialists and ending the ‘century of humiliation’ that began with the Opium War in 1840. As such, the story of imperialism is not only an important aspect of China’s recent history, but also a fundamental building block of the CCP’s political legitimacy.

Given that historical context, the politics of education, and the effectiveness of CCP propaganda, it is easy to understand why many Chinese have a hard time believing that foreigners who criticize the Chinese government might actually be doing so in the interests of the Chinese people. At best, it’s
seen as a kind of misguided paternalism, at worst, a wolf-in-sheep's-clothing attack on Chinese sovereignty. The issue becomes murkier still when the issue is "Chineseness" itself, as in the case of Tibet, Taiwan, and Xinjiang.

The notion of 'face' obviously deserves to be a part of this discussion, but at the same time it’s a bit of an intellectual cul-de-sac. It’s not that I consider face to be unimportant, but I do feel non-Chinese are too quick to dismiss an inability to handle criticism as some sort of inherent quirk of Chinese culture. Nobody would deny that 'face' is a crucial factor in business, diplomacy, and even daily life here, but there is more to the Chinese response beyond the somewhat simplistic and essentialist explanation of 'saving face.'

China’s development has been something to behold, but there are challenges still unresolved: staggering environmental problems, a widening gap between the haves and have-nots, and endemic corruption that flourishes in a political culture where the media is censored, non-governmental organizations are proscribed, public speech is still tightly controlled, and where the priority of judges and the courts is maintaining ‘harmony’ at the expense of petitioners’ requests to avail themselves of their legal rights. The CCP and the Chinese government have done a thorough job of spreading a message that is equal parts Lenin, Louis XIV, and Ronald Reagan: The party represents the people because après mois, le déluge and, by the way, it’s morning again in China and you are better off now than you were four years ago. It’s an interesting mash-up of political philosophies, but one that has to a large extent become internalized by the Chinese people, especially the urban elite who have benefited the most from the recent economic boom. Regardless of class however, the idea that the nation’s interests exist independent of the state and party is, for most people, inconceivable.

Foreigners should be allowed to criticize the Chinese government when such criticism is warranted, and I don’t waive my right to speak out against injustice just because I wasn’t born in the country where that injustice is occurring. But at the same time, I shouldn’t be surprised when my criticism sometimes meets resistance and resentment. Sincere engagement with the Chinese people can only come about when the roots of that resistance are acknowledged, and met with equivalent understanding and sensitivity. In this way a true dialogue can begin with people talking to–rather than at–each other.

* For further reading and a more in-depth treatment of this issue, see John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in Nationalist China*. (Stanford Univ. Press, 1998)

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics