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Following a recipe: When Op-ed pieces on China go wrong

January 19, 2008 in Watching the China Watchers by The China Beat | 3 comments

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown is visiting Beijing and the Daily Telegraph has a dour op-ed piece written by Bruce Anderson in today’s edition. Anderson argues that China’s reemergence as a great power is not nearly as worrisome as the prospect of China’s failure.

“If China succeeds, there will be a price. The West would lose power. But Chinese success is much the lesser evil. Imagine what would happen if that huge and powerfully armed nation became a failed state.”

Fair as it goes. China is a large, powerful, and nuclear-armed nation. A collapse of the Chinese state would likely lead to international and humanitarian crises of unknown proportions. The nightmare scenarios include the possibility of rapid destabilization leading to chaos and fragmentation (“Afghanistan with missiles”) and/or the emergence of an ultra-nationalist ‘strongman’ willing to trade international stability or nuclear non-proliferation for regime concessions (“the DPRK on steroids.”) But worst case scenarios are not necessarily—in fact seldom are—the most likely possible outcomes of a given set of circumstances.

Should the above come to pass, it would indeed be troubling, but the deleterious side effects of an economically and militarily powerful authoritarian one-party state should still be on for consideration and Anderson does a fair job at outlining the challenges a rising China presents for the rest of the world.

But Anderson’s assessment of China’s internal problems is rather weak and in places veers dangerously close to substituting essentializing for argument. His analysis is also, unfortunately, somewhat typical of American and European op-ed writing on “The Rise of China.”

China is not a country at ease with itself. Apart from the inevitable strains associated with rapid growth and development, there are at least three others: anger, sex and fear.

Anger. Sex. Fear. These are things sure to titillate op-ed readers and attract fans of the “Jerry Springer Show.”

First, Anderson explains Chinese anger as being both a reaction to the humiliations of the past (true enough) and a result of Chinese racial superiority (where his argument careens off the tracks). An anecdote involving ancient Chinese tales of the origins of the Japanese race leads into an analysis of present-day Chinese resentment over Japan’s economic success.

Let’s ignore, if we can for a moment, that the modern concept of race as Anderson seems to use it, had little, if anything, to do with the pre-20th century Chinese worldview. When more contemporary ideas of race did appear, 20th century Chinese intellectuals, influenced in large part by imported theories such as Social Darwinism, stressed the weakness of the Chinese race vis-à-vis the rest of the world. In China today, ideas of race are still frequently colored by Social Darwinism and conflated with perceptions of comparative national strength.

Contemporary nationalism in the PRC is also just as much the product of ‘patriotic education’ that emphasizes historical attacks on China’s sovereignty, the awesome importance of Chinese
territorial integrity, and the unity of party/state/nation in the national consciousness. It is for this last reason that foreign media criticisms of the CCP, or historical arguments that suggest that, for example, Tibet wasn’t a full and willing part of China since time immemorial, are taken as direct attacks on the character of the Chinese people themselves.

So, let’s talk about sex, baby. (Did I just date myself with that song reference? I think I did. No matter. Press on.) In his piece, Anderson summarizes the Baby Boy Bomb argument: China’s One Child Policy will create a veritable army of pampered and spoiled male children in for a huge shock as they come of age and realize that some of them are going to be left out of the marriage pool.

Again, fair as it goes. It’s not a given, but if one wishes to destabilize a particular society, having a large group of underemployed young males with little hope of being able to enter into normative family relations is a good start. It was a factor in the rebellions of the late Qing and, for some, it’s a cause of concern in the Middle East today. It’s also going to be interesting to watch as the “Little Emperors” grow up with their every want and need catered to only to have the first people to ever tell them the word “no” turn out to be the CCP. As Anderson rightly notes, “it’s a fascinating sociological experiment unlikely to have a benign outcome.”

The One Child Policy and its long-term effects are a favorite topic for western commentators on Chinese affairs. It’s hard not to ignore a strong whiff of “exoticization for the post-modern age” in the West’s continuing fascination with the Chinese family planning regime. To be sure there have been and will continue to be negative consequences (infanticide, abortion for the purposes of sex selection, and increased trafficking in women to name but a few of the most horrific) but it is far from certain that the One Child Policy will have the kind of political or even international ramifications that some have suggested.

It’s definitely worth watching, but there seems to be an assumption in the West that China is definitely heading for some sort of Male Malthusian Meltdown. Like many aspects of China’s recent re-emergence, we really don’t know, there just aren’t any models by which to predic the outcome of this kind of large-scale social engineering.

Finally, we have fear itself, more specifically the Chinese government’s fear of its own people. Here Anderson makes the strong case that the CCP, stripped of much its ideological legitimacy, has resorted to essentially buying off the people in what Anderson, somewhat clumsily, terms an “econocracy.” It’s true that the CCP has taken whole pages out of the Ronald Reagan playbook in recent years. (“Are you better off now than you were four years ago?” “It’s morning again, in China.”)

Anderson warns, perhaps correctly, that this is only a short-term fix. Unfortunately, his argument for this seems to be based on the kind of ethnic characteristic analysis more typical of British journalism a century ago.

Anderson argues, “The Chinese are an individualistic race; they do not share the Japanese tendency to a group mentality.” Thus, he contends, the demand for individual rights will grow stronger and become an irresistible force for change.
I do think that the demand for individual rights is bound to grow in the coming decades but I think this has less to do with the Chinese as ‘a race,’ and more to do with urban Chinese as newly-enriched property owners seeking to preserve their gains over time and generations. Eventually, the choice will be have to be made by China’s emerging urban elite over which is the greater danger to the preservation of accumulated wealth: social instability (the bugaboo of ‘chaos’) or the unchecked power of the state in its myriad forms (official corruption, state appropriation of property, inadequate legal protections of property rights, etc.)

In the final balance, Anderson’s piece is not exceptionally bad, it’s bad on a rather depressingly ordinary and common level.

Too often op-ed pieces on China’s rise seem to be written by recipe: A couple of references to late-Qing history, a soupçon of Mao, a quirky anecdote from earlier historical annals and/or a Cultural Revolution reference (though some prefer the minty freshness of a Great Leap Forward pun), a dash of economic data on China trade, a smidgen of your favorite T-for-Trope: Tyrannical Tots, Taiwan, Tibet, or Tiananmen (to taste). Garnish, if wished, with a cab driver quote, picked up on the way to or from the Beijing airport, about how things were ‘better under Mao.’

Part of the goals of this space is to provide a corrective to the sort of “robot errors” that creep into reporting and writing on China and restore a proper sense that issues relating to China and the Chinese people are as complex and nuanced as those relating to any other large and diverse society. Boiler plate op-ed pieces simply aren’t the answer. It’s hard to fathom the editorial pages of the Telegraph trying to summarize all of Britain, past, present, and future, in 500 words. Why try to do it with China?