2010

Bill and Warren’s Excellent (Chinese) Adventure

Caroline Reeves

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/859
Bill and Warren’s Excellent (Chinese) Adventure

By Caroline Reeves

Bill Gates and Warren Buffett are throwing a charity banquet in Beijing. On September 29th, the two American tycoons will host a dinner for China’s wealthiest magnates to convince them to give their monies away to charity. This event has caused a stir in the Chinese world. Everyone from movie stars to industry moguls is involved. *Doonesbury* is talking about it. Some billionaires have publicly declined to dine with the dynamic duo, wondering aloud if the event was planned to publicly part them from their new fortunes. Their response has called into question China’s “charitable impulse” and given rise to questions about China’s ability to “do philanthropy.”

Headlines in the international press have sharpened this controversy. The *Financial Times*’ “US Tycoons Take Philanthropy to Chinese Peers” [editor’s note: the headline has since been changed to “Buffett and Gates on Chinese mission”]; the *Global Times*’ “Uncaring rich may stifle Buffett-Gates”; or the *NYT*’s “Chinese Attitudes Towards Generosity are Tested” portray the visit as an American effort to bring an enlightened stance on giving to a nation of billionaires badly in need of tutelage.

Though Gates’ and Buffett’s efforts are certainly well meaning, in fact the Chinese do not need Americans to teach them about philanthropy. China has a centuries-old tradition of charitable work, funding education, cleaning up after natural disasters, and helping the poor and elderly. My own work on the Chinese Red Cross Society, founded in 1904 by dedicated Chinese philanthropists—the billionaires of the age—shows that the Chinese have been engaged in these kinds of activities, as well as feeding the hungry, clothing the destitute, caring for the sick and burying the dead, through well articulated networks of charitable giving long before America was even born. A growing literature on China’s charitable traditions (Joanna Handlin Smith on the late Ming, Nara Dillon and Jean Oi on the 1930s and 40s, Vivienne Shue in the contemporary period (see Stanley Katz’s *Philanthropy in the World’s Traditions*)) confirms these findings, and the topic has rightly become a hot one in academic circles. While Mao’s Communist experiment did indeed interrupt the normal course of Chinese philanthropy for five or six decades, this hiatus is trivial in light of the five or six centuries that China’s wealthy have been caring for their poor in China and beyond.

In recent newspaper articles, references to the Great American Philanthropic Past are rife. Gates and Buffett are called the Rockefeller and Carnegie of the age (NYT). But China’s history of philanthropy is either misrepresented or reduced to the last twenty years, a period hardly representative of China’s past. Rupert Hoogewerf, an expert on China’s wealthy, is also cited as an expert on China’s philanthropic traditions. He seems to be sadly misinformed, however. Hoogewerf is quoted as trumpeting worn and baseless assertions about Chinese philanthropy, the same ones this author has heard from other Western mouths:

“The Chinese have been very generous for a long period of time,” Rupert Hoogewerf, who publishes the Hurun Report, said by telephone. “The difference has been that they do it between families, and don’t publicize it. What we’re seeing now is a new era of transparency.” (NYT)

Here Hoogewerf—who elsewhere has characterized Western philanthropy as “pure” and Chinese philanthropy as its opposite (FT)—falls prey to a stereotyped vision of China’s charitable activity promoted by EuroAmerican missionaries at the turn of the twentieth century. These missionaries, anxious to legitimate the social gospel they were preaching to the Chinese, coined these characterizations to highlight the importance of their own work in China, ignoring the indigenous activities occurring all around them. Later social reformers and well-meaning Americans—such as the head of the American Red Cross in China during the 1910s and 20s—perpetuated these cultural myths to underscore China’s need for Western (particularly American) social and political interventions.

In fact, China’s philanthropists in the pre-Communist period confronted some of the largest natural and manmade disasters in the world with generosity and remarkable initiative. They gave to strangers across their large country—for example, Shanghai capitalists donating for refugee repatriation from Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905—publicly and proudly, with newspapers
heralding their work and keeping public records of donations. They donated to San Francisco Fire victims in 1906 and to the victims of the Tokyo earthquake of 1923. This is hardly the clannish and secretive philanthropy suggested by some Western “experts.”

Many Chinese are themselves not aware of their own philanthropic past, including Chinese film star Jet Li, who (according to AFP) called China “a newcomer to the charity business.” The article quotes him: “‘China’s real development has only happened in the past 10 years,’ [Li] said, adding the United States had 100 years of experience in philanthropy.” Li apparently made this speech just as he was being named a Goodwill Ambassador of the International Committee of the Red Cross, whose Chinese affiliate has operated for over 105 years.

Despite the New York Times’ dismissal of the importance of situating contemporary Chinese philanthropy within China’s own tradition (“Academics grumble...about efforts to impose Western philanthropic values on Chinese tradition,” writes journalist Michael Wines), Buffet’s and Gate’s “crusade for converts” might well be viewed as another instance of US finger-wagging or even cultural imperialism by China’s nationalistic citizenry. China’s nouveau riche are no more in need of shaming to part with their newfound wealth than any other nouveau riche around the globe. I agree with Harvey Dzodin’s view that Gates and Buffett would be better off inviting Chinese tax officials to dinner (Global Times), and discussing with them tax incentives to encourage Chinese giving. Through that tactic, the American team might encourage the kind of state-private cooperation in charitable work that worked so well in pre-Maoist China. In light of the recent revelation of Bono’s well known ONE Foundation’s misadventures, Bill and Warren’s excellent adventure might not seem so excellent after all.

Caroline Reeves is Assistant Professor of History at Emmanuel College. She has previously written for The China Beat on the history of the Chinese Red Cross (Part 1, Part 2). For more on the Chinese philanthropic tradition, see Joanna Handlin Smith, The Art of Doing Good: Charity in Late Ming China; Nara Dillon and Jean Oi (editors), At the Crossroads of Empires: Middlemen, Social Networks, and State-building in Republican Shanghai; Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, Tears from Iron: Cultural Responses to Famine in Nineteenth-Century China (and her China Beat essay on responses to the Sichuan earthquake); and Vivienne Shue’s essay in Stanley Katz, Philanthropy in the World’s Traditions.

Tags: Bill Gates, philanthropy, Warren Buffett