3-6-2008

Democracy or Bust: Why our Knowledge about What the Chinese Lack is Really No Knowledge at All

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

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

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/194

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Democracy or Bust: Why our Knowledge about What the Chinese Lack is Really No Knowledge at All

March 6, 2008 in Watching the China Watchers by The China Beat | 11 comments
(Posted by China Beat on behalf of David Porter)

An NPR report yesterday on the opening of a new session of the National People’s Congress in Beijing began with a disparaging comment to the effect that China is still a long way from democracy. As a statement of fact, this is no doubt both true and lamentable. As an attempt to convey useful knowledge to American listeners about China’s current situation, however, it seems to me nearly useless. Like many such statements, it is based on an implicit comparison between the Chinese political system and Western-style democracy. And like many such implicit comparisons, it falls victim to a particularly seductive and misleading form of comparative fallacy.

Any time we set out to compare two things, we need to identify and describe the differences and similarities between their corresponding parts. There’s no problem if we are comparing two equally familiar and equally distant objects by applying a neutral, objective standard of comparison. If I assert that granny apples have a green skin and sour flavor, while fuji apples have a golden skin and sweet flavor, I am unlikely to raise many hackles. If I claim that the average American’s diet is relatively high in saturated fat and low in fiber, which the average Chinese diet is the reverse, I’m again on reasonably solid ground. As soon as we allow one of the two objects under study to represent, implicitly or explicitly, a normative standard of comparison, we’re much more likely to produce skewed results. Imagine how a Washington apple would appear to a provincial Floridean who had encountered only naval oranges: as an abnormally hard orange with a dark smooth surface, lacking in internal sections and a readily peelable skin.

The vast majority of Western attempts to describe China, alas, have more than a little in common with our Floridian’s account of an apple. We are inescapably products of our culture and so thoroughly identify with certain of its norms and values that we are strongly predisposed to take these elements as normative standards when attempting to identify or describe instances of cultural difference. We might well be entirely correct in the perception of difference. The trouble is that this predisposition warps the experience of difference so that all we finally see is the absence of qualities we take for granted in ourselves.

Consider, for a moment, some of the major themes that have dominated US news coverage of China over the past year or two. Stories about poisoned toothpaste and lead paint-coated children’s toys point out that China lacks effective oversight of product safety. Articles about the brown skies of Beijing and the algae-green lakes of Jiangsu make clear that the country lacks effective environmental regulation. And reports concerning the arrest and harassment of outspoken dissidents, lawyers, and journalists remind us, yet again, that the Chinese still lack freedom of speech and other basic political rights.

The common rhetorical thread running through all of these news stories is the notion of a Chinese lack or absence: the Chinese fail to measure up, in each case, to one normative Western standard or another. Once one becomes aware of this pattern, it turns up everywhere. The Chinese, we learn from reporters and commentators, lack intellectual property rights, worker protection laws, legal transparency, government accountability, journalistic freedom, and judicial independence. From 20th-century historians, linguists, and comparative philosophers we learn of deeper, structural deficiencies: the Chinese, in many recent accounts, lack a tradition of innovation, abstract reasoning, hypothetical thought, taxonomic classification, a sense of public virtue, respect for personal freedom, declinable verbs, and so on. If you type the phrase “the Chinese lack” into Google, you can come up with 2354 more examples. The Chinese would seem to be lacking in so many essential qualities, in fact, that it seems something of a wonder that they can sustain a functional society at all.

The problem with such formulations is not that they are factually “false,” though some of them certainly are. It is true, after all, that Washington apples “lack” a readily peelable skin and internal sections, that declinable verbs are not a feature of the Chinese language, and that the discourse of
individual rights has not been a dominant current in Chinese political thought over the past several centuries. The problem, rather, is that negative assertions make for utterly inadequate descriptions.

Imagine that I want to tell you about a creature I saw on a recent trip, but that all I can remember about it is that it didn’t have a trunk, tusks, floppy ears, teath, legs, toenails, or deeply textured skin. You might surmise, correctly, that the creature I’d seen was not an elephant, but you’d be hard pressed to conjure up a satisfactory mental picture from my account. My account is an entirely true and accurate description of a whale, but it doesn’t get us very far in understanding what a whale is. A knowledge of China consisting largely of a series of negations—no human rights, no free press, no environmental protection, no effective regulation, no public manners, no democracy—is really no knowledge at all.

What this kind of surrogate knowledge does provide, however, is a wonderfully flattering self-conception for those making the comparison. For if China lacks all these good things, the implication is that “we” possess them, and presumably always have. What American, on reading yet another New York Times article on Chinese human rights violations, doesn’t feel a certain pleasing rush of indignant self-righteousness? Perhaps Americans are justified in feeling pride in a constitution that succeeds in protecting most citizens’ rights most of the time. To the extent, however, that we allow the “knowledge” of Chinese lacks to reinforce our appreciation for our own ways of doing things, we develop a compelling interest in seeking out and perpetuating such negative claims about China, which often, on closer examination, turn out to be useless and misleading. We run the very real risk of being led astray, in our well-intentioned pursuit of cross-cultural understanding, by the very conditions of that pursuit.