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On Their Best Behavior: Good Magazine on Contemporary China

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The cover story for the May/June issue of Good Magazine, just hitting newsstands, is “Don’t Be Scared of China.” Living up to their moniker as “media for people who give a damn,” Good’s China issue encourages readers to learn more about China and embrace, not hate, in features like the tongue-in-cheek play on tabloid Us Weekly’s “Stars…They’re Just Like Us” photo spread that declares “They’re Just Like Us…They Like Hip Hop” and “They’re Just Like Us…They Go To Vegas.”

Though this approach at cultural exchange is well-intentioned, it continues a particularly egocentric understanding of China as a recipient of American (increasingly presented as global) culture rather than a generator of trends of its own. This tendency crops up in the cover story—“Ten Reasons Why China Matters To You” by Thomas P.M. Barnett—in which reason number 8 is “Because China’s transformation echoes much of America’s past.” When Barnett writes that “right now, China is somewhere in the historical vicinity of ‘rising America’ circa 1880,” he reiterates this progressive view of history and its accompanying notion that there is a trajectory of development (exemplified by England and the United States) along which all nations travel.

Similarly, in an article on the ritzy Beijing development, “Orange County” (whose homes look just like their SoCal counterparts), author Daniel Brook begins from the premise that modern China is familiar—perhaps even a replicate of the US—and, in his attempts to turn the replicate back on us (posing “If the Chinese are set on emulating us, we might as well give them something worth emulating”), reinforces the idea that the Chinese are indeed copying the United States (rather than a more nuanced view that would argue that the similarities in material culture mask deep differences in use and meaning). This feeds into the naïve belief that China will, indeed, eventually be “just like us,” rather than crediting that there are multiple legitimate paths to modernity, the majority of which do not look like America’s.

There is much to admire and enjoy in Good’s thirty-plus page China spread, including features on (and the art and photos of) many up-and-coming young Chinese designers and an essay by Jia Zhangke (the director of Unknown Pleasures, and Still Life, a recent film shot at Three Gorges Dam). In addition, regulars on the China blog circuit will recognize Jeremy Goldkorn (of Danwei.org) and Dan Washburn (of Shanghaiist) in a feature of interviews with expats who have lived (and stayed) in China.