

The Lure of China

'... we need to find a way to be both passionate about a subject and dispassionate about its effects and influences on our own country.'

By David D. Perlmutter

Writing in the *Washington Monthly* at the time of the Tiananmen events in the spring of 1989, journalist Jay Mathews noted that "the emotional commitment to China remains among today's correspondents, particularly for those of us who fell in love with the romance and intrigue of China's history, culture and size when we were still in school."

I know what he means. That feeling began for me when, as a child, I read about and then traveled to the Middle Kingdom, and it has stayed with me during the past decade as I researched and wrote a book about the Western view of China by analyzing how *Time* magazine portrayed China in maps, cartoons, photos and other kinds of imagery from 1949 (the year of the Communist revolution's victory in mainland China) to 1973 (the year after Richard Nixon's famous visit to meet Mao Zedong). My bigger question was how the physical images of China that Western correspondents crafted reveal our conceptions and misconceptions about China.

For example, for several decades, publications like *Time* had no reporters in country so they could only reprint material from the People's Republic of China (PRC) government. But *Time* was anti-Mao and anticommunist; simply posting "Red" propaganda pictures with neutral captions was ideologically impossible. Instead, *Time* used its captions to counter the images it described—that is, the visual content is mocked, questioned, discounted by the surrounding words. So an intended-to-be-flattering PRC-created image of Mao might be labeled "pudgy dictator."

Time's editorializing of images could be more subtle. Throughout much of



the early part of the Korean War, *Time* assumed that China was a puppet of Moscow and would not intervene to help North Korea. To "illustrate" this "fact," maps of North Korea's borderland show "Manchuria" (often crossed by "Soviet" supply lines) but nothing labeled China, although at the time Manchuria was China. Out of cartographic sight was a reflection of the closed ideological mind; hence the shock when hundreds of thousands of Chinese troops crashed into American forces on the Korean peninsula.

China Connection: Promise and Perils

Time, which until 1967 was directed by Henry Luce, was a fascinating focus for China images because the great press baron, a son of China-placed missionaries, was intensely concerned about

China and had strong opinions on what kind of China he wanted readers to believe. The "Lucepress," as it came to be known (the publisher also controlled *Life* and *Fortune*), worked relentlessly in the late 1930's and through 1941 to build American sympathy for China as a victim of Japanese aggression. Such sentiment spurred the United States to enact embargos on sales of critical resources to Japan such as oil, which in turn set the stage for the attack on Pearl Harbor. In addition, it was Luce and other friends of China, such as Pearl S. Buck, who would push for the repeal of the Exclusion Act in 1943, which had for more than half a century allowed the United States to ban Chinese immigration. Then in the late 1940's and '50's, the Lucepress led the charge in accusations against State Department officials of being pro-communist and of "losing China." Luce also was one of the leaders of the China Lobby, a coalition of U.S. congressmen, publishers, businessmen and upper-level military personnel that sought until the 1970's to prevent America's diplomatic recognition of Communist China.

Luce was not alone in being China-obsessed. The truth is that most of us who write about (or picture) China as journalists, commentators or academics are more than dispassionate observers. Many years ago, the late political scientist Alvin Z. Rubinstein commented to me that, in his experience, "people in the West who studied China tended to love the Chinese people, while people who studied Soviet Russia tended to be indifferent or actually dislike the Russian people." He did not mean this observation to be taken as scientific fact, but in general a preponderance of Westerners

who have influenced our visions of China—from Marco Polo to the Jesuit fathers, Buck, Luce, many of the “China Hand” diplomats and reporters of the 1930’s and 1940’s, and most students of China in the academy today—loved or love China. They might have found fault in political situations in China, governments of China, or even aspects of the Chinese character, but basically they were or are fascinated and romantically attached to the Chinese people and culture.

What’s wrong with an art history professor, a magazine reporter, or a department store CEO being a Sino-phile? Problems arise when their bias skews our foreign policies and our coverage of news. Many Chinese political leaders, for example, have found such “lao peng you” (old friends) useful for affecting U.S. foreign policy as well as press coverage. Indeed, consulting for the Chinese has proved a rich field

for former diplomats and secretaries of state, as Harper’s magazine’s Washington editor Ken Silverstein has documented. Likewise, most business leaders today are “pro-China” because that is where the money, production and markets are located. But it does not serve the American public if the talking heads on television introduced as “China experts” are not disclosed to be, in effect, on the PRC payroll.

Perhaps worse, China-lovers have a long history of covering up the unpleasant facts. After 1973, for example, China experts in the West found the human rights situation in the country to be only a minor topic of study and commentary. Even human rights crusaders gave China a pass. As journalist James Mann asserted in his 1998 book “About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship With China, From Nixon to Clinton,” “[President Jimmy] Carter and his aides gave China virtually a

blanket exemption from the human rights policies they so readily applied elsewhere.” Indeed, such a characterization could be applied to practically all China watchers in the 1970’s and 1980’s. As historian Roberta Cohen observed before and after rapprochement, “No systematic or serious effort was made by governments or human rights organizations to call the PRC to account or even to document its abuses. No detailed analysis of China’s human rights record appeared.” Cohen made this point in 1987 in writing about the 1980’s; within a few years China’s human rights problem would be an often-reported news story.¹

In all, writing a book on visual journalism about China has not undermined my esteem for the Chinese people or Chinese civilization. But my studies have also reminded me that blind love, in the end, serves neither the interests of the lover nor the object

of his or her affection. Generally, we need to find a way to be both passionate about a subject and dispassionate about its effects and influences on our own country. People who write about China tend to be fascinated by it; that will always be a given. But our obligation is for that curiosity and affection to lead us to upholding the most basic duty of journalists: to tell the truth, as we learn it. ■

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Time cover painting by Giro. ©Time, Inc. January 13, 1967.

For years, Time used paintings and cartoons to attack and to ridicule the People’s Republic of China leadership. Typical of the genre was a 1967 cover image that juxtaposes a Chinese personage with a dragon. Chairman Mao, lips pursed, squinting, dyspeptic, scans the horizon but, one senses, he is not looking at anything in particular. His head, like some disembodied bust, is surrounded by a snakelike dragon whose body consists of the instantly recognizable lengths and guard towers of the Great Wall. The dragon is not facing us, as was the case with many of Time’s previous Chinese dragons, but is scuttling away, about to close the gap with its own tail. The metaphor is striking and brilliant: The empty god of Mao has walled off the nation and walled out the world. The China monster is also, by implication, about to—like some serpent from a mythological tale—swallow itself. —DDP

¹ See Merle Goldman, “The Persecution of China’s Intellectuals: Why Didn’t Their Western Colleagues Speak Out?” *Radcliffe Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (1981) and Roberta Cohen, “People’s Republic of China: The Human Rights Exception,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1987).



Map of "Korea's Waistland" by R.M. Chapin, Jr. ©1950 by Time, Inc. October 16, 1950.

Editorial views shape images. When North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950 the attack, a manifest act of aggression, was assumed to be a Soviet plot, with Kim Il Sung (hardly known outside the peninsula) as errand boy and China as lurking pawn. After all, the attack came only a few months after China had signed a treaty of alliance with the Soviet Union. Shortly before the onslaught, Secretary of State George Marshall described China as being "literally under the direction of the Soviet Union." This was the press consensus as well: Time, until and even beyond the date of the Chinese intervention in Korea in November, projected in maps and diagrams, illustrated in photos, and described in captions and articles a worldview in which Russia was the controller of North Korea and China a conduit. For example, in Time of October 16, 1950, in the midst of an article "For a Free Korea," a map titled "Korea's Waistland," shows "Red supply lines" entering from Manchuria (not labeled as being in China). Black arrows from the south mark the advance of the victorious American-U.N. armies toward "the Waist" (the narrower section of North Korea).

With such views dominating political and journalistic discourse, the public would be unlikely to hold an opposing view. Indeed, in December 1950, 81 percent of respondents to one poll said that the Soviet Union was responsible for the Korean War while only five percent thought the impetus for North Korea's attack came from China. It followed that American assessments of Chinese behavior would be based on trying to gauge Soviet intentions: a fatal error that ignored Chinese nationalist concerns. —DDP