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Chinese perceptions of America have frequently been characterized as having a kind of “love/hate” dynamic, though perhaps one should use the more culturally idiomatic description of “sweet and sour.” As David Shambaugh’s classic formulation put it, we have long been seen as the “Beautiful Imperialist,” simultaneously a kind of object of desire in the Chinese mind and an object of aversion, both serving as *Měiguó*—the Chinese term for the United States, literally meaning “beautiful nation”—and as China’s national nemesis.

This kind of “sweet and sour” dichotomy is a common way to characterize things, and not a bad one. But there may be a better way to think about it. China’s America, as it were, is projected through a prism both of *aspiration* and of *opposition*. I prefer this phrasing, because I think it lets us more usefully analyze the interplay of the positive and negative elements involved. It also helps highlight the way in which—in true Chinese fashion, one might say—the two elements are not entirely antithetical to each other, for each contains the seeds of its opposite.

The balance between aspiration and opposition has not been a constant one since the beginning of the era of reform inaugurated under Deng Xiaoping’s ascendancy in the late 1970s. The 1980s were probably the heyday of aspiration, or at least of its positive, emulative aspects. America provided a model of modernity for many Chinese, a focus for thinking about how they wanted their own country to be. We displayed and symbolized economic development, vibrant market-driven growth, and an open and creative social order, all of which were attractive to a country recovering from Maoist impoverishment and brutality.

For some Chinese, especially idealistic students and young professionals rebounding from Mao Zedong’s political repression, *Měiguó* even provided a model for political liberalization. (The “Goddess of Democracy” statue that eventually appeared on Tiananmen Square in 1989—modeled our own iconic Statue of Liberty, even as Soviet Communism was itself teetering toward collapse half a world away—was surely no coincidence.) America, in effect, represented modernity across the board, and this was something to which many Chinese aspired in overlapping and reinforcing ways.

There remained powerful oppositional elements in the mix, of course. Marxist ideology had not yet suffered the embarrassed euthanasia that it has since been given by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders, and the discourse of class struggle and revolutionary rectitude remained strong enough to make Deng’s reform and opening a conceptually confused and politically tumultuous process. Many still saw the United States as an imperialist would-be hegemon, intent upon doing China ill if given the chance—a power with which it might have been convenient to collaborate against Soviet imperialism in true “United Front” fashion, but which could not but remain inherently hostile at some deeper level. Despite these oppositional elements, however, the balance remained positive—in large part because it had come to be perceived that actually *acting* upon such oppositional themes ran contrary to China’s interest in living out what I think has been the most important meta-narrative in Chinese political life since the late 19th Century: the *Great Telos of Return*.

Now I don't see this Great *Telos* of Return—or “GTR,” if one can be forgiven an acronym—as being intrinsically positive *or* negative, nor aspirational or oppositional, with respect to the United States. Rather, I see the GTR as the kind of a broader, framing and orienting narrative that helps adherents organize and prioritize *other* elements in their policy and conceptual world. This isn't a label I've heard anyone else use, but China Watchers will probably recognize the phenomenon, and see why it is important to understand the GTR's interaction with aspirational and oppositional elements in Chinese thinking about America.

Chinese thinkers have been all over the map during the last century and a half when it comes to what policy solutions they would prescribe for the country's woes. Some turned to China's own ancient traditions for sources of inspiration about how to confront the challenges of modernity, some to nationalism, some to Marxist-Leninism, and some to Western liberalism. But a common thread woven throughout *every* discourse, it seems to me, is what I call the *telos* of return: the imperative of restoring China's pride, stature, role, and power in the world to something more akin to what it is presumed they *should* be, and which they have *not* been for some time. The *telos* thus involves explicit or implicit assumptions about China's birthright as a respected power and civilization of the very first rank, and it provides a framework for structuring other goals according to their anticipated contribution to this objective.

To my eye, the GTR—and I use the term “return” here because merely saying “rise” fails to capture the compelling psychology of something that is not just *desired* but which in fact is felt to represent the natural order of things, and which is thus in important ways *owed* to China—all but saturates Chinese thinking across a remarkable spectrum of political belief, and has done so ever since the twilight of the Qing Dynasty.

Today, the GTR is a major component of the legitimating narrative of the Communist Party-State itself, for the CCP claims to justify its continued domestic hegemony in large part on the basis of its purportedly unique ability to provide that steady hand necessary to ensure the continued growth and social stability essential for the country's return to status and power. Versions of the GTR, however, are articulated even by many Chinese dissidents in exile—from pro-democracy Tiananmen-era protesters who see the PRC's democratization as being the key to that geopolitical “normalization” they feel will mark China's definitive return to national and civilizational respectability, to activists with the outlawed Falungong Movement, whose “New Tang Dynasty” iconography evokes images of an era of lost socio-cultural glory badly in need of restoration.

Minority groups such as the Tibetans and Uighurs conspicuously do *not* partake of this enthusiasm, of course. (They correctly see the CCP's tragically ironic nationalist fixation upon frontiers established by the foreign imperialism of China's Qing-era Manchu conquerors—fidelity to which has become, in official eyes, a litmus test for supporting the GTR against “splittist” efforts that might perhaps derail it—as sounding the death knell for their own cultures and autonomy.) These repressed groups, however,

are exceptions that prove the rule. Though recipes for how to achieve it may vary widely, there is hardly *anyone* of significance who is not somehow committed to the GTR.

This *telos* is especially important for Chinese perceptions of the United States, because the balance and tensions between aspirational and oppositional elements within Chinese views of America have been powerfully conditioned by its imperatives. In the 1980s, for instance, notwithstanding the persistence at that time of significant intellectual and political currents of Marxist thought and anti-imperialist instinct, the GTR helped “positive,” relationship-conducive aspects predominate in Chinese perceptions of the United States. America was then widely seen as a country to be emulated in multiple ways precisely *because* as the exemplar of modernity *its* forms of organization were the keys to strength and development.

In that period, therefore, *aspiration* predominated, and in positive forms, for it was critical to achieving China’s destiny to learn from and even to become *more like* the United States. As noted, of course, generally Marxist anti-American oppositional elements persisted. Their “negative,” relationship-degrading expressions, however, could not be permitted to undermine Deng’s great project of opening and reform, for *that* project was key to fulfilling the GTR after decades of isolation, impoverishment, and dysfunction in the era of Maoist orthodoxy.

Indeed, for a while, oppositional elements in Chinese views of the United States may have *reinforced* the wellsprings of aspiration and the elements positively affecting the Sino-American relationship. (Precisely to the degree that the United States *was* still hated and feared, after all, it was perhaps all the *more* important to maintain openness to and engagement with America, for in engagement-facilitated reform lay China’s key to the strength that would enable it to resist foreign predation.) Though Chinese views of America never seem to have been without stereotypically “sweet and sour” tensions, conceptual space thus existed for a sort of “grand bargain” or “truce” between philo- and anti-Americanism. For a while, at least elements of aspiration and opposition *both* encouraged approaches to the United States that were, on balance, and in practice, positive.

The Tiananmen Square massacre—or rather, the Party’s terror at what the demonstrations might have *become*, if not smashed, as students and urban workers alike began to organize, not just in Beijing but in other urban centers around China, to demand change of the government—unsettled this congenial equilibrium. The aftermath of the butchery on Chang’an Avenue proved further unsettling by showing the PRC’s leaders an international community that pulled surprisingly *together*, at least for a while, to castigate and shun the PRC—casting aspersions on the benevolent virtue of its leaders and their right to rule, but also demonstrating the foreigners’ ability to come together *against* China in ways that showed some potential to *thwart* achievement of the GTR. International outrage proved relatively short-lived, but was nonetheless unnerving: coordinated mobilization between so many foreign governments against a Chinese regime had not been seen much since the period of U.S.-orchestrated diplomatic non-recognition in the mid-20th Century, or even since the anti-Boxer expedition of 1900.

The Chinese Party-State did not abandon its opening to the outside world and its economic reform efforts, of course, but it buckled down in opposition to *political* liberalization and redoubled its efforts to preserve “social harmony” and restore the CCP’s badly tarnished legitimacy through propaganda—a.k.a. “guidance of public opinion,” and “thought management”—both at home and abroad. The so-called “June 4th incident” on Tiananmen Square and developments in its aftermath unsettled the previous equilibrium between the tensions inherent in Chinese views of the United States.

Over the next decade and a half, the relationship between aspirational and oppositional currents in China’s view of America—and the relationship of these elements to the GTR—was to remain ambiguous and contested, less stable than before. On the one hand, China still needed America, not merely aspiring to emulate it at least in economic and scientific and technological terms, but also needing “breathing space” in which to accomplish the delicate business of economic transformation. In this respect, therefore, aspiration remained predominant, and continued to have positive implications for the Sino-American relationship because engagement and cooperation were still necessary to fulfilling the GTR.

At the same time, however, post-Tiananmen CCP worries about China’s susceptibility to domestic unrest and the dangers inherent in Western political values led to increased hand-wringing about the supposed dangers of foreign cultural and political “subversion.” Party efforts to “re-ideologize” Chinese political life—though no longer along traditionally Marxist lines, and relying ever more upon much more sophisticated and modern “PR savvy” methods in the place of crude Maoist mobilization—also encouraged negative and oppositional elements in China’s view of the United States, inasmuch as these efforts necessarily involved officials to some degree cultivating a sense of irreducible civilizational and systemic *difference from* and even *competition with* Western modes of socio-political organization. This helped create a tenuous counterpoise of elements in which the various positive and negative aspects of aspiration and opposition were balanced unstably on a knife’s edge.

Memory of foreign reactions to Tiananmen, as well as the advent of America’s ascendancy in its “unipolar moment” after the collapse of the Soviet Empire fed this volatile and precarious ambiguity. On the one hand, these factors underlined the dangers of a *bad* relationship with the United States, since China still *needed* profitable engagement with the world to continue precisely *because* a good deal of unchallenged “rising” still remained to be done before the GTR could be considered achieved. (This perspective emphasized the wisdom of Deng Xiaoping’s counsel of nonthreatening circumspection lest foreign counter-mobilization imperil the conditions making Chinese growth and development possible.) On the other hand, these developments also gave Chinese leaders more reasons to *feel* the oppositional elements in the mix, even as it still remained for the most part imprudent for them to *act* upon such feelings.

But where are things today? In the last several years, it seems that a further shift has occurred in this balance of narrative elements. I don’t think the oppositional

components have changed too much, for their core remains fairly consistent: suspicion of American motives, some fear of Western “spiritual corruption,” much fear of the potential for Western *political* values to undermine CCP rule, and a deep uneasiness at the thought that the outside world—led implicitly or explicitly by Washington—might yet come together to thwart the GTR in some way before it has quite been achieved. These elements, and their negative impact upon the Sino-American relationship, are hardly new.

Rather, I think it is the aspirational elements that have recently shifted. To be sure, there is still much aspiration when it comes to American *strengths*, as they are perceived in China: our scientific and technological accomplishment, our military prowess, America’s role in setting the global political and intellectual agenda, and especially the United States’ sheer weight and status as—still—the most important state in the international system. But these aspects of emulation are by no means ones with intrinsically positive implications for the relationship. Indeed, they tack rather close to covetousness, and seem as likely to encourage competition and strife as much as collegiality. (This is especially true with respect to jealousy of America’s status and role in world affairs, for to the extent that such covetousness directs itself at another’s *primacy*, this is a role-aspiration likely to engender opposition, fear, and resistance—especially if it involves the development or use of military power, another locus of Chinese aspiration.) Significantly, it is *other* aspirational elements that seem to have faded, particularly the ones with connotations of systemic *emulation*, and which thus tend to conduce to more positive and fraternal relations.

China now has such an economic size and capacity, for instance, that it looks less and less at America as a model for how to be a powerful, modern state. In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, it also looks less to American and Western economic models as a key to achieving the GTR and indeed to structuring the international system. CCP and other Chinese elites seem today to be enmeshed in internal debates about how outspoken to be in trumpeting the PRC’s own approaches, not just as an alternative but perhaps even as a *competitor* to the “Washington consensus,” and about how assertive to be in foreign relations.

In the political realm, too, as they struggle to provide answers to their own legitimacy crises in a context in which market-focused development has made risible any serious effort to rely upon Marxist concepts, CCP leaders are increasingly fumbling towards a domestic discourse which describes Western political models as not just inappropriate *for China* but in fact *per se* undesirable and discreditable. Through this prism, Western approaches to democracy itself are ineffective, erratic, subject to partisan paralysis, unharmonious, and unequal to the task of leading large and complex states through troubled times.

There has been, in other words, a movement from a political discourse of differentiation to a discourse of competition—that is, from a more defensive and negative vision of the CCP’s Party-State as the best available answer *under Chinese circumstances* to a more affirmative one that depicts it as a positive good and an exemplary *type* of

organization. This shift has been driven in part by the Party's need to articulate a *moral* foundation for one-party hegemony in response to social-justice concerns arising out of the rapaciousness and inequality of the PRC's modern-day crony capitalism. It is no longer enough, in other words, to offer an "it ain't broke so don't fix it" approach to performance-based legitimacy rooted primarily in wealth creation.

As seen, for instance in the CCP's increasing emphasis upon "harmony" and "spiritual civilization"—and in the rise of what Anne-Marie Brady, Valérie Niquet, John Dotson and others have identified as more or less explicitly Confucian themes in Party propaganda—it is increasingly felt necessary to defend and promote Party policies and power in what purport to be moral terms. And this, in turn, may have consequences for Chinese views of the United States and approaches to the Sino-American relationship. Assertions of one's own morality in contradistinction to another person's way of doing things, after all, tend to imply his *immorality*—a conclusion, in effect, which one is almost *required* to reach, whatever the evidence, lest one's own legitimacy be called into question.

And so it is that I think the more emulative and thus generally positive aspirational elements in Chinese views of the United States have become attenuated. Compared to earlier phases of the period of reform, America is seen today as less of a model, more of a systemic *anti*-model, and less something to aspire to *except* in the very simple sense that the aspirational elements inherent in the GTR itself lead Beijing to covet America's *power* and *role* in the world. To an increasing extent, *this* more covetous—and thus more negative and potentially conflict-engendering—aspect of aspiration is all that remains, leaving the enduring oppositional elements not merely uncounterbalanced but in fact *reinforced*.

You'll notice that in this discussion of developments in Chinese views of the United States, I haven't said much about the United States itself. I do not mean to suggest that our *own* choices and actions are irrelevant, for of course Chinese views of America *are* affected by what we do. It's important, however, to stress the degree to which Chinese views of and approaches to the United States are also *about China*. What various Chinese participants see in us, or fear about us, derives in part from what they want for their own country, what they desire or fear in connection with *its* internal struggles and debates, and what their own political agenda in some sense makes it *necessary* to believe.

This isn't unique to China, of course, for it is presumably true to some extent any time *any* country turns its gaze toward a foreign "other." But it is important to remember the point here, for the *domestic* roots of China's narrative of America help make such views—and choices made on the basis of such perceptions—to some degree *independent* of U.S. policy and U.S. choices. And this, in turn, has broader implications for the Sino-American relationship, because to the extent that Chinese antagonism is rooted in China's own internal dynamics, it is beyond our power to "cure" through congeniality and diplomatic "flexibility."

This is one reason why I watch with such concern the CCP's fumbling toward an ever more explicit moral and political vision of antidemocratic legitimacy. In general, the more organized and overtly prescriptive such a cognitive framework is, the more likely it will be to exert influence upon—and create persistent patterns in—its adherents' behavior. The CCP seems to be trying to clean up the conceptual mess of its post-Marxist legitimacy discourse by offering a clearer politico-moral vision that lauds one-party autocracy and denigrates democratic pluralism, and this has important implications.

Hitherto, the implications of the CCP's legitimacy narratives have been somewhat ambiguous for Sino-American relations. Nationalism, of course, can certainly evoke self-righteous anger at perceived foreign affronts, exacerbating “hiccups” in a relationship and increasing the potential for such problems to escalate out of control, but nationalism *per se* has only ambivalent *systemic* implications. Performance-based legitimacy grounded primarily in wealth creation is also ambiguous from a systemic perspective, and while it could perhaps strain relations by eliciting economically competitive behavior, no “existential” or otherwise fundamental antagonism with any other state would seem necessarily to be implied. Conceptions of politico-moral superiority, however, with their concomitant implications for another's *immorality*, raise bigger questions, and may carry the seeds of more persistent problems in the relationship.

Renascent ideological dynamics may reinforce recent shifts toward the negative and the oppositional in Chinese views of America, with the United States again coming to represent ever more clearly, after an interval of some decades, a more traditional sort of overt ideological opponent. Not unlike the United States itself, and indeed over a vastly greater span of time, all things considered, China has tended to see itself as an *exemplary state*—one that represents a particular model of socio-political organization that deserves to be held out in some sense as a model for the rest of the world, if not necessarily as an organizational system to be slavishly replicated than certainly as a key value pole around which the human community should orient itself. The ambiguities and confusion of China's ideological discourse during most of the era of reform greatly attenuated this sort of thinking, allowing “sweet and sour” elements, as it were, to coexist in a fairly relationship-congenial balance for some time.

But it could be that this is changing. To the extent that the CCP is inching its way back toward a coherent system of antidemocratic *philosophy*, a new emphasis upon “exemplary state” thinking may reemerge. To the extent that it does, we should expect views of and approaches to the United States to harden commensurately, and to be increasingly resistant to any diplomatic efforts of our own to “save” the relationship from such deterioration.

It may yet be that the *balance* between positive and negative elements can once again be made to favor the positive. If Chinese leaders again become convinced that assertive and confrontational behavior has a good chance of wrecking China's dreams, for example, Beijing might return to what some scholars have called the “Taoist nationalism” of non-provocative self-cultivation that China employed with such success for some years. Alternatively, changes in the Chinese political system itself could defuse

the growing tensions between the two powers, creating a qualitatively new dynamic no longer polluted by Chinese fears of ideational subversion or by American concerns about the trajectory of an increasingly powerful dictatorship. Absent some change of direction, however, there is likely to be a rougher road ahead in our dealings with an increasingly confident and re-ideologized China.

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