Oscillating Perspectives of American Correspondents on Contemporary China

The Case of Orville Schell

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China in the Eyes of Westerners
THE BACK DOOR.
The wily Chinese sneaking over the Maryland border.
TIME

CHINA
DAWN OF A NEW DYNASTY

With the U.S. tied down in Iraq, a new superpower has arrived. Here's how to deal with it.
Introduction

Americans always seem to be busy clearing up misconceptions about China (Harding, 1992). The “pendulum” that Harold Issacs used to capture the American perception of China has swung regularly and cyclically between the extremes of romanticism and cynicism across centuries.

The question regarding who is forming public perception in the United States about China is critical.

The community of American correspondents in China is considered to be the one that provides the first draft of history, and more often than not this draft is considered to have been canonized, passing largely unedited into popular conscience (Kynge, 2009).
American Correspondence in China

• The First Generation
  Edgar Snow and *Red Star Over China*
• The Second Generation
  Hong Kong and the “Bamboo Curtain”
• The Third Generation
  First-hand experience in an authoritarian polity
Media Portrayals of China since 1972

- Second Age of Admiration from 1972-1977
- Second Age of Disenchantment from 1977-1980
- Second Age of Benevolence from 1981-1989
- Cynicism in Post-Tian’anmen era
Why did batches of American correspondents who should have known better allow themselves to be duped?
Theoretical Framework

- The image of China holds up a mirror to structure the debates over the primary reference point back in their own society. (Said, 1981; Madsen, 1992)
- The way the journalists handle the anarchy of events is informed by
  - Available cultural resources, or resonant mythic forms: Herbert Gans and “Enduring Values”
  - The way the journalists organize their work lives to manage events in the field.
- News is a multi-genre cultural form that draws on various conflicting and disparate cultural resources, and the answer regarding which resource to select is also dependent on the features that inhere in the reported events themselves (Schudson, 2007).
Research Questions

• In each particular period, what paradigm predominated, or organized the episodic observations of the American correspondents?
• How did the images of China packaged in each paradigm serve to anchor the journalists’ concern over their own society of that period?
• How did the character of the events themselves and journalists’ working routines help limit what paradigm the correspondents selected?
The Case of Orville Schell

- Journalist
- Writer
- Educator
- Activist
China Correspondents and Their Memoirs

- Critical and self-reflexive dimensions of the journalism craft
- Literary version of the feeding cycle
Why?

- Number and time span of his travel narratives
- The *New Yorker* and literary journalism: Symbolism, subjectivity, and immersion
- Opinion leader
- Journalism educator: reflexive on the journalism as a craft
A Paradigm Formed

- Recurring themes
  - The role of underdog combined with that of an emergent and avenging power
  - Social justice and egalitarian society
  - The pursuit of community, wholeness, and purpose
- Maoist development paradigm and a mentality of “political pilgrimage”
  - Historical parallel
  - The zeitgeist of adversary culture: reconsidering the liberal economic model and imperialism
  - Cultural resources: altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, and self-reliance.
- Working routines and the “field”
  - “Guided” tours: U.S.-China rapprochement and Chinese government’s techniques of hospitality.
  - A priori knowledge: stereotypical images from the propaganda materials during the Cultural Revolution and U.S. detachment from the scene
  - Resources for paradigm repair: didactic sources of the Cultural Revolution and a set of ethnocentric rhetoric for justification
A Paradigm Modified

- Recurring themes
  - Economic development and a renewed preoccupation with the merits of the open market
  - Ambivalence towards Westernization:
    a. Prospective emergence of civil society and torturous progressive march towards democratization
    b. Consumerism, lack of self-discipline, and materialism in China’s pragmatist modernization

- Becoming-the-sameness paradigm
  - A particularly curious case of a late developing state and what that entailed for its democratization
  - Reawakened awareness of capitalist democracy
  - Cultural resources: individualism, responsible capitalism and altruistic democracy.

- Working routines and the “field”
  - The passing of Mao: the recoding of Cultural Revolution, the split political personality of Maoist ideology and Dengist pragmatism, and the outburst of data from inside China.
  - Opening up of China and growing economic ties with the United States: American visitors, contact zone and the expanding scope of Schell’s fieldwork
  - Authoritarian polity: the forced camaraderie, marginal status and empathy with the political dissidents
  - Paradigm repair: a belief in progress
A Paradigm Modified

• Recurring themes
  - Economic development and a renewed preoccupation with the merits of the open market
  - Ambivalence towards Westernization:
    a. Prospective emergence of civil society and torturous progressive march towards democratization
    b. Consumerism, lack of self-discipline, and materialism in China’s pragmatist modernization
  - Marginal status of political dissidents

• Becoming-the-sameness paradigm
  - A particularly curious case of a late developing state and what that entailed for its democratization
  - Reawakened awareness of capitalist democracy
  - Cultural resources: individualism, responsible capitalism and altruistic democracy

• Working routines and the “field”
  - The passing of Mao: the recoding of Cultural Revolution, the “expanding” (fang), or “contracting” (shou) of political boundaries and the outburst of data from inside China
  - Opening up of China and growing economic ties with the United States: American visitors and the expanding scope of Schell’s fieldwork
  - Authoritarian polity: the forced camaraderie, marginal status and empathy with the political dissidents
  - Paradigm repair: a belief in progress
A Paradigm Blurred

• Recurring themes:
  - Irresponsible Chinese government
  - Nationalism
  - Unregulated marketization and loss of social morality
  - Booming economy and rising global status
  - Vibrant underground culture
  - Political restraints upon ordinary people
  - Social divide

• China Rise Paradigm
  - Doubts over a necessary link between democratic institutions and liberal capitalism
  - Globalization: How U.S. maintains its supremacy after the fall of Soviet Union
  - Cultural resources: responsible capitalism

• Working routines and the “field”
  - Contracting dissident community and expanding contacts with the ordinary people
  - Enlarged scope of audience and sources with the advent of the Internet era: scale shifting
  - Self-perpetuating suspicion between the Chinese gov’t and the American reporters
  - Paradigm repair: globalization as the beneficial spread of liberty and capitalism.
Conclusion

- The “images” of China held up a mirror to Schell’s fine-tuned standpoint in his conceptions of the primary reference points.
  - A re-awakened awareness that democratic institutions and civil liberties should precede efficiency and meritocracy.
  - A growing uncertainty about a necessary link between democratic institutions and economic liberalization.
  - From a self-reliant state to the interdependent world systems

- While journalistic predisposition played a greater part than the actual experience in the assessment of the country concerned, the character of events themselves may be highly relevant. The amount of information may not be decisive in shaping perception, whereas the availability or absence of vivid, visual information relating to various social-political events in the country concerned proved to be effective in limiting the choice of cultural categories and fostering stereotypes, both positive and negative.
Conclusion

• As compared with the role of the predisposition, what the journalist had actually seen on the scene played a less remarkable and yet indispensable part, which in turn was mediated by China’s public diplomacy strategies and its communication systems.

• Though the technique of selective exposure has persisted in the Chinese government’s handling of American correspondents, the highly flattering personal attentions on the foreign corps have given way to an open surveillance and distrust, which tends to generate the opposite effect by making the foreign press corps into a close-knit group and facilitating the formation of similarly unflattering opinions of the regime.
Thank you 😊
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