

Book Reviews



Book Review

Biwu Zhang, *Chinese Perceptions of the U.S.: An Exploration of China's Foreign Policy Motivations*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012, 266 pp. + xvi.

Most writings in the English language tend to look at modern China from a Western point of view. There is an excessive focus on those aspects of China that play either to Western strengths or Western fears. The former dwell on the shortcomings of China such as its poor human rights record and its oppressive political system. They also predict that if China were ever to modernize, it has to become more Western. The latter emphasize the China threat, that the rise of China will challenge Western global hegemony. There has however in recent time some attempts not so much to give a Chinese perspective but to give something of a corrective to some of these views. We have a book on China by Henry Kissinger which came out in 2011. Kissinger argues that China is singular or unique, and does not see China as a threat. Another one, published in 2009 and updated in 2012, is by Martin Jacques, a British public intellectual, which is provocatively titled *When China Rules the World*. Among other things, Jacques argues that when China modernizes, it will not necessarily become more Western. These last two are worthy efforts. What is needed however is a study on what the Chinese themselves actually think of world affairs.

The above book is such a one. Written by a Chinese, it gives a Chinese perspective of, in this case, America. The author, Zhang Biwu 张苾芜, an academic in a reputable Chinese University, Xiamen University, sets out to find what the influential elites of China think of the United States and Sino-American relations. The methodology he employs is an analysis of the content of certain selected publications, described in the academic jargon as “content analysis”. For this, Zhang analyses articles in six journals on these two subjects written between 1991 and 2000. These journals are *Meiguo Yanjiu* 美国研究 (American Studies), *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 现代国际关系 (Contemporary International Relations), *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* 国际问题研究 (International Political Studies), *Zhanlüe yu Guanli* 战略与管理 (Strategy and Management), *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 世界经济与政治 (World Economy and Politics), and *Waijiao Xueyuan Xuebao* 外交学院学报 (Journal of the Foreign Affairs College). Each of these journals is affiliated with one of China's top foreign policy research institutes. These institutes reflect the perceptions of China's foreign ministry and other influential Chinese organizations.

The book seeks to answer the question as to what are the motivations of Chinese foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the United States. Here the author divides the question into two parts. The first, and the more important part, is how the elites perceive Chinese national interests to be, and second, how they perceive the character of the United States. As to the former, the elites first perceive US power to be superior to China in all important aspects. The US economy is much larger; American science and technology are decades ahead; and US military equipment compared to that of China are several generations in advance. American superiority is also seen even in soft power. Such overwhelming superiority has affected Chinese national interests negatively, as it has allowed the US to interfere in the internal affairs of China. For example, US power stands in the way of Chinese reunification with Taiwan, and the US pushing of human rights nearly caused complete chaos in China. China then being so inferior, according to these elites, should practice a policy of appeasement and cooperation with the US unless US interference is of an intolerable kind.

There are however some positive elements. The elites acknowledge that the US commitment to peace and to an engagement policy has ensured a peaceful environment for China. America's vast market, its investment in China and its occasional transfer of technology all help China in its modernization efforts. In addition, US assistance facilitated Chinese entry into the world community and China's status as a world power.

As to the second part, the author states that the dominant Chinese images of the US have been of three kinds, imperialist, degenerate and partner. The imperialist image had been one of the most persistent and salient Chinese image of the US. It ran all the way from the late 19th century to the 1990s. The degenerate image was particularly prevalent during the Maoist period when the US was seen to be a paper tiger. Scholars then tried to put this degenerate image within Marxist terms likening the US to be in the last legs of capitalism. The author does not think such Marxist rationalization to be convincing. And indeed, the degenerate image gave way to the partner image, an image which became dominant in the 1990s, the period of study of this book. This is especially so in the economic arena where Chinese scholars agree that Chinese-US relations is mutually beneficial though asymmetrical. China is more dependent on the US than the US on China. However, cooperation on the security front is seen as not so strong. The Chinese scholars see cooperation as one of the management of conflict rather than the stronger one of mutual need against a common enemy as during the Cold War.

The elites also see the US as a kind of a model. As an economic model, the US is worthy of emulation and the model in this respect is prevalent, strong and explicit. It is more mixed in the political front where the Chinese accept the merits of democracy. Democracy works well in the US, and

that convergence towards the US model should be the direction of Chinese political reform. But few advocate immediate and unconditional acceptance of the US political model.

Zhang's book is a good, systematic study of elite Chinese opinion of the US. Books such as this rarely come by in the English language though it is actually based on a doctorate thesis from the Department of Political Science in Ohio State University. As such it reads like a thesis. Questions however arise. Is Zhang's study overtaken by events? Because of the fast moving nature of Sino-American relations, a study based on perceptions in the 1990s to 2000 may not be totally valid for the years from 2001 to 2012. China in 1990 was not that significant a factor in the world economy but is the second largest economy in the world at the end of the decade of 2000. This together with its remarkable economic prowess in the last decade are increasingly seen by American as a threat to their economic well being. Will this lead to a change in the perception of the Chinese elites of a benign American attitude towards China's economic development? Will the perceived decline in the opinion of many in the world of America just after the Iraq war of 2003, so soon after the American unipolar moment, be that also of these elites? What about the Global Financial Crisis of 2008? Will this affect the Chinese perception of the superiority of the economic model of the US? I suspect it will. All these questions aside, this is a book worth reading.

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