

第四辑

# China Studies Quarterly

# 中国 学

马克林

中国价值观：西方的中国形象及其现状

胡 伟

软实力视阈下的中国政治价值的普遍性——兼论我国国家形象建构

高瑞泉

追寻平等的百年心路

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关于西班牙汉学

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国际合作新形式——以拉美及加勒比国家与中国为例

倪培民

从“合法性”到“立法者”——当代中国哲学地位之转变

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**特稿 | Features**

# China's Values: Western Images and Realities

Colin Mackerras

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## 内容摘要:

本文讨论了中国在西方世界的形象。这与笔者在中国生活半个世纪以来的经验形成对比。西方对中国的印象不仅受中国现实的影响,还被西方自身政治与社会状况左右。西方世界一直以来对中国有种偏见,这种偏见大部分来自不平等的权力关系,包括无视西方自殖民时代以来就有的优势地位。本文从个人经验出发,认为中国半个世纪以来的变化远胜于其在西方的形象。

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## 关键词:

中国形象;西方;权力关系

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We can consider China's values from many different perspectives. This paper makes these values not so much the direct object of study, as many of the other papers have done. Instead, China's values here become the indirect object of study. What this paper aims to do is to analyse Western images of China, which includes how the West perceives China's values.

My focus is definitely contemporary, although there are some references to past images and values. My contribution is that I have just completed a book published by the Renmin University Press on Western images of the People's Republic of China.<sup>①</sup> The book incorporates quite a few of my own impressions over half a century of visiting and living in China. I first came to China to teach in August 1964, with my eldest son actually born in Beijing Friendship Hospital, the first Australian to be born in the People's Republic of China.

I argue two related points. One is that Western views of China are as much a function of the West as they are of China. The other is that this implies a bias based on cultural values that act as a kind of limitation on the images themselves, and it tends to exaggerate the faults and underplay the achievements.

By way of introduction, I should mention that Western images of China are an extremely complex subject. The West includes many countries, which differ over time. For instance, the United States was hardly part of the West during the European Middle Ages, but has been the dominant Western country during the whole period of the People's Republic. Most of the specific images discussed in this paper are mainly from the United States. However, not only are images of China different in some Western countries from others, but those that are similar do not necessarily apply with equal priority or intensity everywhere. Even in the same country, distinct people or groups regard China differently, so an individual who has studied China is likely to hold different images from somebody whose field of work has nothing to do with China, and journalists or diplomats may view China differently from

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① [澳]马克林:《我看中国——1949年以来中国在西方的形象》,张勇先、吴迪译,人民出版社2013年版。

workers or farmers. Still, while keeping these complexities in mind, it seems to me both possible and sensible to make some general observations of Western images of China that have some validity.

### **1. Images as a Function of the West**

At any given time, Western images of China do to a significant extent reflect the realities of China. However, other factors also exert an influence, including the experience, ideology and temperament of individuals and groups, politics and power relations. In other words, Western images of China emerge not only from China but also, and sometimes more importantly, from the West itself.

Images have differed by category and by period, and the influence of the West as well as of Chinese realities is visible in all of them. In terms of category, the type of images that have most often veered towards the positive have been those concerning the economy, with some aspects of society and culture like the status of women also enjoying some favourable images. As for the other side, the lack of democracy and policy and reality in Tibet have most often loomed large as somewhat or very negative; and since the 1980s Western images have consistently represented human rights in China as very poor because failing to conform to Western-defined international standards.

Concerning period, images were generally much better between the early 1970s and 1989 than either in the 1950s, 1960s or 1990s. The change in images in 1971—1972 was almost entirely due to politics in the West. In 1989 there was another change, this time towards the negative. It was due to an event taking place in China, but the effect was exacerbated by politics in the West.

Surveys suggest that opinion on certain aspects of China has fluctuated in the twenty-first century. The positive image of a growing economy has been the most consistent positive image. However, one important point is that the rising economy has revived the ‘fear of China’ syndrome, an image that had declined sharply from the early 1970s through the 1980s. As China has risen, the West has been forced to come to terms with a reality different from that prevailing at any time for well over two centuries. The West, and especially the dominant Western power the United States, is very unsure that it likes

what it sees.

## 2. Reasons behind Western Images of China

This leads to a major question. What shapes images, or put another way, why are images as they are? Here are just a few of the many possible factors.

The first is realities in China itself. Most observers of China write reports, or take still or moving pictures based on what they read, hear or see. They do not normally just pick fiction or falsehood out of the air. Most are competent at their job and many are extremely well trained and conscientious professionals. They have a good deal of independence in observing events or carrying out research about China.

However, there are factors other than realities influencing Western images of China. One of these proposed by Raymond Dawson in 1967, is the ‘conscious interests and subconscious needs’ of Western individuals or groups.<sup>①</sup> If it is the national interest of any country to admire another one, then that is likely to exert an impact on the images it holds. Individuals who have pleasant experiences in China are more likely to come away with positive images than those who do not. Individuals with tolerant or accepting temperaments are less likely to respond negatively to unfamiliar or unusual conditions and experiences than those with deeply rooted prejudices. There are many examples of writers’ predicting unimaginable disasters, and that possibly indicates a certain type of psychology or temperament. No matter how hard he/she tries, nobody can completely escape upbringing and background assumptions.

Even in our days of globalization, Chinese culture remains very different from any of those in the West, though it is true that some Western cultures are more similar to Chinese than are others, for instance in family matters. There is a tendency for all civilizations to socialize their own people to regard their own culture as superior to that of others. So it would not surprise if a Westerner who came in contact with China initially evaluated it with his/her

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① Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon, An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, p.2.

own background and ideological assumptions as normal and found it wanting or unusual and hence inferior.

On the other hand, there is also a psychology that views the 'other' as exotic or desirable for the very fact of being different. That is one possible reason why some Westerners see a kind of model in China. This type of thinking was common down to the eighteenth century, and is still reasonably common, although certainly not prevalent. Learning from each other is still a familiar refrain in the West as well as in China. However, in my experience of observing Westerners view China, the 'other' that differs from the familiar is more likely to be viewed negatively than the converse.

It is not only Western individuals or groups that are involved in images, but also Chinese diasporas. The fact is that many people of various ethnic groups have left China for the West and not returned. The tendency is for them to prefer the West for its greater wealth and freedom and better facilities and services than they had enjoyed in their original homeland. Familiar with the situation in China, they have obviously been able to influence Western images, sometimes positively, but also often negatively.

### **3. Politics, Human Rights and the Issue of Bias**

It is useful to spend a bit of time on the issue of human rights for two reasons. One is that it is a political factor in the West that has had a big effect on Western images of China. The other is that I believe on the whole that these human-rights-based images are basically unfair and biased against China.

The West almost uniformly thinks of the People's Republic as derelict in its human rights record. However, this seems to me a one-sided and incomplete view, that unquestioningly adopts an individualistically-based, rather than a communitarian view of human rights.

In a very thorough book originally published in 2010 James Peck has also drawn attention to the role of politics in human rights discourse, but with a conclusion somewhat different from the mainstream one. He has examined the roles of human rights organizations like Amnesty International, founded in 1961. He criticizes them for a highly legalistic conception of human rights that focuses on individual civil and political rights, while at the same time

downplaying economic and social injustices. He writes further:

Contrary to all the claims of human rights scholars and advocates, China was never *really* the great ‘human rights exception.’ There as elsewhere human rights organizations broadly followed in the wake of Washington’s global strategy—a hidden history that once again reveals just how tied into U.S. national security concerns the evolution of human rights attitudes has been. An overview of Washington’s grand strategy toward China since 1949 shows this process at work and what was really at stake in it.<sup>①</sup>

In other words, Peck sees human rights scholars and advocacy groups as having been unduly influenced by Washington’s grand strategy towards the People’s Republic of China right from its beginning. I believe his argument is sound.

Not only does the issue of human rights exemplify the role of politics, but it is a good example supporting the theory of the great French author Michel Foucault (1926—84) that power relations within societies can exert unseen impact on social attitudes. This does not deny the freedom of thought of observers. The fact that there are quite a few Western journalists, scholars, and others who adopt a viewpoint or attitude different from the prevailing one shows a significant degree of freedom in their countries. Peck himself and the present writer are examples. But Foucault’s theory does suggest that governments can and do exert political influence great enough that freedom should not be taken simply at face value. Political influence does not prevent the growth of stereotypes that may accord with reality less than they suit the interests of particular groups within society.

Of course, politics can operate in many directions. It is not only Western governments that exert political influence. Chinese authorities themselves frequently restrict information they allow to become available, either to people within China or outside. Censorship in China is very commonly emphasized in

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① James Peck, *Ideal Illusions, How the U.S. Government Co-opted Human Rights*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2010, p.132.



Western accounts and needs no further focus here.

Foucault's theory of power relations operates *between* societies as well as *within* them. Power structures within each society to some extent impact on its social attitudes, but in addition the images of one society about another are affected by whether it stands in a superior power position or not. The fact that the West has felt dominant since the colonial period has largely dictated that it also believes itself better.

In a book published during the Cultural Revolution, the distinguished Western historian Jonathan Spence proposed that many Western missionaries, colonialists and technicians developed interest in China and spent time there specifically in order to change it in their own image. "They had the right [to change China] because they had the ability, the faith, and the drive. They were, quite literally, on the top of the world."<sup>①</sup> Admittedly, he was talking about a past period, but although he believed such an attitude beginning to change greatly when he wrote, he speculated that there were still Westerners with the colonial assumptions of the past.

The mindset of Western superiority, or orientalism, still seems very much alive several decades after Spence wrote. Commentators about the Chinese economy or politics may admire what they see in some ways, but still assume that the Western way of doing things must be better and that the West can still teach China what to do.

Yet, the idea that a powerful West must have orientalist attitudes of superiority towards China based on power relations is no longer sustainable. This is because the balance of power between China and the West has changed drastically in China's favour over the last few decades and is likely to continue to alter. Yet there is a further problem. A rising China arouses anxiety or even fear in the West, because it challenges an existing status quo that suits the West's interests and needs. This could affect images negatively, because nobody in the top place likes to be demoted. Indeed, it is a common

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① Jonathan Spence, *To Change China, Western Advisers in China 1620—1960*, Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1969, p.293.



psychological reaction among those who believe their values or position under threat to hold onto them even more firmly than if there was no perception of danger.

This analysis of what shapes Western images of China implies that they derive both from what Dawson calls “the objective situation” in China<sup>①</sup> and from the West itself. Both the West and China are object and subject. So the question arises: are Western images biased against or in favour of China, or are they reasonable and objective?

How one answer that question depends on a whole range of factors. There are accounts biased in various directions and also balanced ones. However, I see the balance of Western images as biased against China. I quote here an extract, again by James Peck, that puts forward my own opinion better than I can express it myself.

Measured against the standards of the past three hundred years, Chinese citizens now enjoy an unprecedented degree of economic and personal freedom. Inequality is still staggering, progress uneven, the challenges enormous, but the monumental effort to change China continues from within, even if it does not fit easily into the Western human rights vision of change. Neither the national security establishment nor the human rights community has shown much sense of the Chinese people struggling to better their own society in their own way and within their own particular historical context. They seldom acknowledge that this struggle might be growing out of long traditions of protest in a culturally sophisticated society that has been undergoing continual transformation for well over a century. But what a multipolar planet without a proselytizing center might mean for China and elsewhere is not necessarily a weakening of the quest for justice but rather a vision of human rights more challenging and less comfortable for all the great

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① Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon, An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization*, p.2.