



China: The Romance of Realpolitik

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China: The Romance of Realpolitik

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"...man's love of truth is such that when he loves something which is not the truth, he pretends to himself that what he loves is the truth, and because he hates to be proved wrong, he will not allow himself to be convinced that he is deceiving himself..."

St. Augustine, Confessions

Last June in Peking, the beast of Communist totalitarianism suddenly stripped off its beguiling oriental masquerade and showed itself, contemptuously naked, on the television screens of the world. Many will believe that the sight of this beast can never be denied or forgotten, but they will be mistaken. Scarcely had the shock of horror begun to recede when a few pundits on U.S.-China affairs, more collected and far-seeing than the rest of us, warned against an "emotional" response by our country and reminded us of the strategic significance of the China "relationship" to the U.S. This psychological counsel was offered in the name of realism.

"The true political realists in the West and East are only those who refuse to accept tyranny..." Milovan Djilas said several years ago. He was commenting on those realists of the time who regarded the "destabilization" of Poland by the Solidarity movement as a threat to peace in Europe. Our China policy makers do not yet seem ready for Djilas' profound definition. Since the Nixon-Kissinger opening gambit almost two decades ago, U.S. policy toward the People's Republic of China has been premised on another, seemingly more hardboiled definition of political realism—that of shrewd players in a geopolitical game. This policy has been widely approved as necessary, clever and correct. It may be all of these things, but, even on its own terms, it has never been realistic. From the very beginning it has been marked not only by emotionalism and sentimentality, but by ignorance and fantasy.

Any possibility that overtures to Peking would be combined with a cold eye on Chinese reality was virtually canceled by the architects of the new China policy. President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor, later secretary of state, Henry Kissinger made it clear at the outset that China's internal situation was its own affair and irrelevant to relations between the two countries. This see-nothing attitude and moral neutrality proved unsustainable in practice and set the stage for self-delusion, not least because of the theatrical manner with which the new approach was initiated—in secrecy, followed by an international shock of surprise. Like a triumphant master magician expecting applause, President Nixon pulled the new China policy out of a hat.

Americans, it seems, are not very good at realpolitik. When Nixon journeyed to the People's Republic of China in 1972, on what he regarded as an inspired, historic mission, and, with an emotional extravagance beyond the demands of protocol, gushingly offered toasts in the banquet hall of Chairman Mao Zedong, it became suddenly diffi-

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cult to accept that this smiling old man, Mao, was in fact a cruel despot, an executioner of millions, still intent on perpetuating his reign of darkness. If this image of Sino-American accord in Peking was not to be rejected as grotesque, then the image of China itself needed adjusting, in order to make sense of such extraordinary scenes.

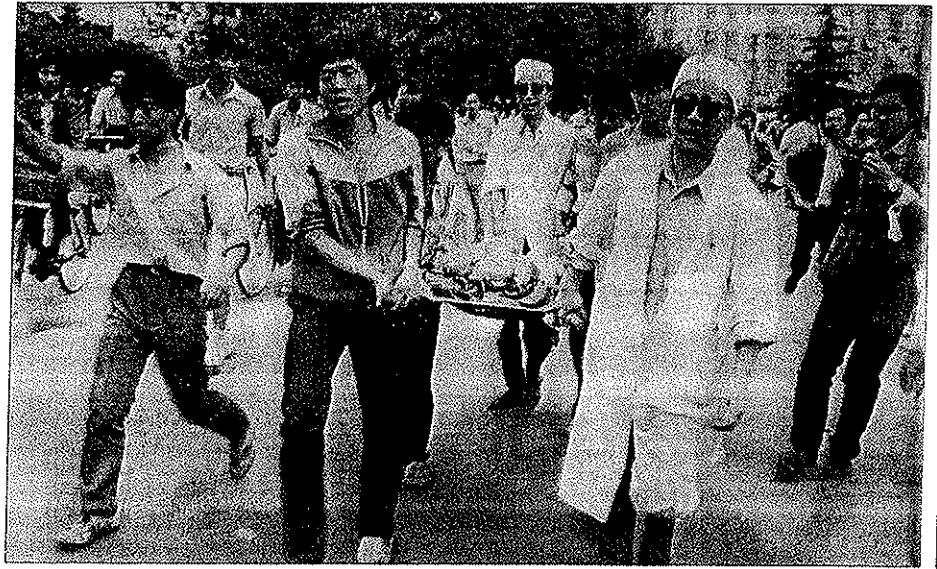
China "experts"

In fact, another China had already been invented, not by cynical propagandists but by eager scholars—namely, an influential group of sinologists and their disciples in leading American universities. They were to become known respectfully as "China experts," especially to television interviewers, who appealed to them periodically as unravellers of oriental mysteries and readers of green tea leaves.

The fictional land created by these China experts cannot be blamed on insufficient information at the time. The so-called bamboo curtain made information about the real China difficult but not at all impossible to obtain. For all their bristling academic credentials, the fact is that the China experts did not wish to know—but to believe. Like some Soviet experts before them, on whom they cast no backward glance, they were practitioners of the intellectual pseudo-faith of the century, dreaming up the City of Perfect Justice on earth. The bamboo curtain was indeed essential to the believing sinologists, freeing them to elaborate their fantasies (in their esoteric way, with footnotes) unconcerned by the intrusion of messy reality or the possibility of verification on the scene.

Thus, in the seventies, when the Chinese countryside was afflicted, as it had been for centuries, by periodic

regional famine; when up to 200 million people were living in semi-starvation—as the Chinese press was later to admit—a number of prominent U.S. experts on the Chinese economy found that, under the Maoist system, the entire population enjoyed “guaranteed” minimal subsistence. China’s food problem, the refrain went, had been solved. At the time of the first Nixon visit, during the dark age of Maoist oppression and despair, the experts found a happy, relaxed and motivated people, somewhat like our Pennsylvania Amish, only better. The reason for this, as explained by the “dean” of American sinology in 1972, was “China’s government



A Chinese hunger striker is carried away on a stretcher in mid-May. Chengdu, province of Sichuan.

by exemplary moral men, not laws,” which was clearly not the case in our own corrupt society. While factional battles still raged across a torn and disordered China, the experts noted that the Cultural Revolution had ended and all was calm and peaceful. It was the beginning of the myth of China’s stability, which was to reemerge in every lull between explosions. Two days after the 5 April 1976 massive popular riot against Maoist despotism on Tiananmen Square, a *New York Times* editorial expressed shock, for “China had seemed to be so orderly, so completely controlled in recent years.”

Although these academic China experts were not instrumental in changing U.S. China policy, but seem rather to have been used by Washington once the new direction was set, they nevertheless had a role to play, especially in enhancing the new policy’s credibility for the general public. Through the media they lent their authority to the growing illusion of a benign new China deservedly awaiting our recognition.

Nixon, Kissinger—Mao, Zhou

It is a bit trickier to ascertain just what influence they may have had on the two chief policy makers themselves, men of no uncertain ego or easy suggestibility. It can be said, however, at the very least, that these experts never made Richard Nixon or Henry Kissinger uncomfortable with their own illusions, for which they demonstrated an independent talent. As in the works of these experts, the enormity of human suffering and death under Maoist rule, while not condoned by Nixon or Kissinger, became for them a bloodless abstraction, which did not, moreover, affect the pressing business at hand. Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai were not a particularly merciless dictator and his wily supporter, but great “statesmen,” whom an American president and his emissary could approach with awe, as if history had vouchsafed them the honor of being admitted into the presence of legendary figures. As recently as 1988,

Nixon listed Mao, along with Winston Churchill, among the “great leaders” he had met in the last forty years.

To Henry Kissinger, Mao appeared a “colossus,” who “emanated vibrations of strength and power and will,” as indeed he might have. But Kissinger’s boundless admiration and even a sort of affection went to Premier Zhou Enlai, by whom, like many other intellectuals before him, he was thoroughly seduced. For Kissinger, Zhou “was one of the two or three most impressive men I have ever met. Urbane, infinitely patient, extraordinarily intelligent, subtle, he moved through our discussions with an easy grace that penetrated to the essence of our new relationship...”

Two eminent sinologists have also described the urbane Zhou. Father L. Ladany wrote: “Zhou Enlai was one of those men who never tell the truth and never tell a lie. For them there is no distinction between the two. The speaker says what is appropriate to the circumstances. Zhou Enlai was a perfect gentleman; he was also a perfect Communist.” Of the undeniably charming and witty Zhou, Simon Leys had this to say: “He had a talent for telling blatant lies with angelic suavity. He was the kind of man who could stick a knife in your back and do it with such disarming grace that you would still feel compelled to thank him for the deed...He repeatedly and literally got away with murder. No wonder politicians from all over the world unanimously worshipped him.”

When Henry Kissinger in 1971 flew from Pakistan into what he called “the land of mystery,” on his first secret mission to the Communist court in Peking, he also crossed from realpolitik into romanticism. He cast, moreover, a peculiar aura around the relationship between Washington and Peking that was to persist through several administrations to this day and degenerate into a kind of sentimentality. After the 4 June bloodbath on Tiananmen Square, President Bush appeared plainly reluctant to hold his “old friend” Deng Xiaoping responsible. Secretary of State James Baker, who does not appear sentimental, passed off the president’s

hesitant and weak response as justifiable caution, alluding again to geopolitical reasons for maintaining our "special relationship" with the regime—evidently any regime—in China. Whatever the reasons, Washington followed a pattern in Sino-American relations set almost two decades ago—of dealing delicately with ruthless men.

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The rise of Deng Xiaoping's revisionism in 1978 gave fresh impetus to our China policy, but required a quick change of illusions behind the scenes. As China itself debunked the miracles of Maoism, a few China experts, to their credit, became thoroughly sober. In general, however, the believing China experts managed to switch one set of illusions for another markedly different set with astonishing ease and with no perceptible damage to their scholarly reputations.

Wrong at the right time

In the People's Republic of China, where independence of mind is seldom a virtue, such experts are understood and valued. What matters is not that they erred on Maoism but that they conformed when it was proper to do so. They were wrong at the right time. Strangely enough, this also explains their survival as experts at home. As the sociologist Lewis Feuer once pointed out, academics get away with and even "thrive on such blunders so long as they are congruent with the emotional currents" of what he called the "Intellectual Elite"—a scholarly clique with status or influence in higher political circles. As for those scholars who had been accurate about Maoism, they could later be dismissed by the reigning experts as right for the wrong reasons—that is, because of some idiosyncratic tendency toward pessimism that paid off or even an accident of ideological bias.

Within China in the late seventies, the full realization that three decades of sacrifice and turmoil had gone for nothing, that China was still a poor beggar among modern nations, produced a "crisis of confidence" in the Communist party's ability to lead. Not so among the faithful China experts in the United States. As if to compensate for the irreparability of their shattered Maoist dreams, they immediately displayed a neomissionary zeal to "help" the new Dengist regime put China back together again. At first, this appeared to be a form of do-goodism, requiring no explanation. Inevitably, however, a rationale developed and a new myth emerged, of such appeal and verisimilitude that it was accepted by Americans generally, on both the political left and right.

In the Orwellian year of 1984, a Chinese émigré scholar who was invited to an international conservative conference on communism found that his presence was a meaningless formality. For the participants, China was already a solved problem of communism; it was "going capitalist" and no longer a threat to the West, but, on the contrary, a useful ally against the Soviet Union.

Wish and reality

The new notion that China was "going our way," that Deng's economic reforms would of necessity lead to a democratized political system, reflected Western wishfulness, not Chinese reality. Careful observers of the China scene saw something far less benign. Through word and action, the Dengist strongmen made their objectives plain—to build a powerful Communist state as rapidly as possible, by partly freeing the economy (still keeping "the bird in the cage") and relying heavily on Western and Japanese aid. They looked not forward but backward to the Soviet China they had originally intended to build in the fifties, before their plans were swept aside by Mao's irrational and deadly experiments. They were set on mak-

Predictable responses from Eastern Europe

The bloody suppression of the pro-democracy students in Beijing drew an almost predictable range of responses in Eastern Europe. The day after the massacre took place the Romanian media said nothing while Czechoslovak media confined themselves to restrained neutral reporting. The East German press, however, defended the Chinese government's actions. The newspaper *Junge Welt* criticized West German coverage of the Chinese events and reproached the West in general for being interested in the destabilization of China as a socialist country, "in the hope that the reforms for socialism will grow into reforms for a bourgeois China along the Western model."

By contrast, the Polish press was critical of the events. An editorial in an official Polish daily *Zycie Warszawy* (June 5) observed that the rebellion of the Chinese students had turned into a mass demonstration of the population calling for the democratization of life, the elimination of corruption, and greater freedom of speech. The Warsaw daily added: "With few exceptions, this was not directed against the present social order, but had the goal of improving it. The demonstrations were not directed against the leadership, but were aimed at strengthening the reformers."

Hungary offered the fullest and most critical coverage in the East bloc. On June 5 Hungarian television commentator Endre Aczel condemned the "mass murders" in the Chinese capital and openly spoke of the possibility of similar "operations" in other socialist countries should the conservative elements there win out. On the same day, the government daily *Magyar Hirlap* said disclosures now being made about the recent past in Hungary showed what serious crimes could result from branding political adversaries as "agents of foreign powers" and argued that economic success could not be achieved without democracy and freedom.

**Soviet/East European Report
Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
Vol. VI, No. 27, 20 June 1989**

ing up for lost time. By the mid-eighties, the German sinologist Jürgen Domes saw in China "no departure from communism," but rather compromise rule by unsteady coalitions of "enlightened Stalinist" and "orthodox Stalinist forces." As he and others discerned several years ago, the future toward which the Dengist regime seemed headed was "the [pre-Gorbachev] political and organizational present of the Soviet Union."

The attempt to apply modern economics to the pursuit of Stalinist goals had chaotic consequences. After the initial, successful reforms reached their predictable limit, new problems multiplied out of control. The economy had, in fact, been freed into a lawless environment, in which the Party bureaucrat, by virtue of his unrestrained power, became chief profiteer. As the authority on the Chinese and Eastern bloc economies, Jan Prybyla, put it: "Instead of socialism with Chinese characteristics [the officially coined phrase], what the Chinese on the mainland are getting is mercantilism with corrupt characteristics." Indeed, the characteristics devoured the whole; corruption became the system.

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In August 1988 China's *Gongren Ribao* (*Workers' Daily*) described the power of the new "profiteer officials" over "every important aspect of business," including allocation of resources and market prices, and summed up the devastating effects: "The bureaucrat-businessmen have used all their power to push the market's distortion to its furthest limit. This...has brought about a mock period of prosperity, and when the market erupts in the future, the cause of the ruin will be buried by the lack of order and market chaos."

Peking's response to successive economic crises was to retreat in alarm to administrative controls—and usually the wrong ones. Many Chinese became increasingly skeptical of the competence of the Party to proceed further with economic reforms. Moreover, the leftist-style suppression of the demonstrations of 1986-1987 dispelled the last hope that the Dengist coalition would permit any of the political reforms regarded by most educated Chinese as essential to continued progress. Popular awareness of having reached a hopeless impasse seemed to intensify in 1988, when the regime floundered deeper into the economic morass.

All these trends were duly noted by Louise do Rosario, specialist contributor to the *Far Eastern Economic Review*

(FEER), who in March 1989, little more than a month before the latest demonstrations began, was also to report a "sense of chaos and breakdown of moral order...evident from many small details in everyday life in China today." This was the "stability" that the regime on 4 June sent out its killer-troops to restore.

Bush notions

Fond notions, however, die hard. During his 8 June news conference, President Bush disclosed a detail of his recent visit to Peking: "...One of the Chinese leaders, very prominent name, told me we want change, but the people have to understand it's very complicated here how fast we move on these reforms. We've come a long way and indeed they did move, dramatically faster on economic reforms than I think any of us in this room would have thought possible.

"What hasn't caught up is the political reform and reforms in terms of freedom of expression...But we were cautioned on that visit about how fast China could move. Some of it was economic and clearly some of the message had to do with how fast they could move politically."

Clearly, the message had been accepted by the American president who sincerely thought he understood China.

For our realpolitikers, the existence of a popular mood in China has always had a curious insubstantiality or, at least, irrelevance. For the Communist leadership, real people do not exist, except as a fiction called "the masses." When the non-existent dramatically asserted itself as a million individuals on Tiananmen Square, the result was not only consternation in the power center of Peking, but surprise and discomfiture in Washington among those who had seen only a few Chinese Communist officials as solidly real.

For what began last spring in China's capital as a peaceful student demonstration for "dialogue" with the government on democratic rights and reforms swiftly turned into a popular movement, much like that sparked by Solidarity in Poland eight years ago. It was also the realization of the regime's worst fears. Deng and his aged cohorts have long shown an obsession with Poland's Solidarity movement and recognized the potential for a similar development in China. In January 1987 Deng praised the Polish government's use of martial law to crush the trade union movement and, in the summer of 1988, Chinese leaders reportedly consulted with visiting Polish leaders on "how the security forces should deal with price-related unrest" (FEER, 21 July 1988). They understood well their own vulnerability in the face of such a threat.

As long ago as 1966, a Soviet internal dissident writer, F. Znakov, pointed to the Achilles' heel of Soviet-type totalitarian systems. His "theory," as elaborated in 1981 by a Lithuanian émigré scholar, Alexander Shtromas, assumes that every such system is "in a state of permanent crisis" and riddled with various forms of dissent, only a small part of which may be overt. Under the controlled surface enormous pressures silently build—pressures of cumulative problems ignored, of injustices

compounded by more injustice, of conflicts and grievances suppressed rather than resolved. If at a critical moment an organization voicing genuine popular interests and demands emerges into full public view, it becomes an "outside body," to which people can switch support. As more people become encouraged to join, the consciousness of no longer being alone and isolated increases and the switch-over snowballs with remarkable speed into a mass movement.

According to Znakov and Shtromas, should this organization, whatever it may be, have or acquire a recognized place within the system, it could then become a "second pivot" of power, which could challenge the Party and "split the system." Barring military intervention, once this is allowed to occur, the unraveling, or "disintegration" of the totalitarian system is "virtually unstoppable."

Since the establishment of relations with the People's Republic, each U.S. administration has refrained from using whatever real leverage it might have had to inhibit Peking's repressive policies. China became "the human rights exception."

During the Deng regime's earlier attempt to suppress the burgeoning democratic movement in 1981, the Hong Kong journal *Cheng Ming* picked up an argument making the rounds in China—namely, that future reform would be possible only if the underground democratic organizations were to unite with reformists within the Communist party. For a brief moment last May on Tiananmen Square, it almost seemed that this formation of a "second pivot" of power was possible. However Deng actually perceived the situation, he acted on the basis of a mortal threat to the Communist system and joined with the more rigid Stalinists in expelling his remaining reformist "successor," Zhao Ziyang. A document consisting of remarks made on 24 May by state President Yang Shangkun referred to Zhao, who had favored meeting the "reasonable demands" of the students, as an unacceptable "second voice" within the Party. Yang stated that anything short of firm opposition to the students would mean "our collapse, the overthrow of the People's Republic, and the restoration of capitalism, which was the desire of the American [John Foster] Dulles." (FEER, 8 June 1989) The June massacre appeared deliberate—a terrorist action by the state intended to remove every trace of a popularly organized challenge to its power.

Even as the regime proceeded with its grisly mop-up operations, it hung out its business-as-usual sign to the world, for as Deng Xiaoping reportedly said with contempt in a 9 June speech, he fully expected that, once the situation was tidied, "the foreigners are still going to come knocking on our door." At the same time, a few veteran

China experts, dusting off the debris of their latest illusions, reappeared as grim realists to explain why our country should meet these expectations. It was not easy to explain and thus understandably seemed confused. On the one hand, the experts stressed, the regime's odious massacre of its people—the failure of such a regime, as Richard Nixon phrased it, "to live up to our standards"—should not be allowed to outweigh "geopolitical considerations." The latter appears to be an *idée fixe*, not subject to review in the light of events. On the other hand, strong economic sanctions would only "hurt the Chinese people." (It was not made clear who exactly would be hurt—the corrupt cadres lining their pockets on foreign business deals, Party Central with its brazen plan to shore up its power with foreign aid, or ordinary Chinese, who once again have been trampled by their wildly erratic rulers and whose idea of "hurt" may differ from that of the experts.) Anyway, the experts concluded, there is nothing our government can really do to mitigate the repression in China.

The fact is that the U.S. government has never seriously tried to do so. On the contrary, since the establishment of relations with the People's Republic, each administration has refrained from using whatever real leverage it might have had to inhibit Peking's repressive policies. As Roberta Cohen, deputy assistant secretary of state for human rights in the Carter administration, has well documented, China became "the human rights exception."

This policy of sparing the "sensitivities" of the Communist court in Peking was not only unwise but unnecessary. Certain evidence suggests that in 1979, the Deng regime—then a desperate supplicant for foreign economic aid—hesitated, with a wary eye on official U.S. reaction, before passing harsh sentence on the young advocate of democracy, Wei Jingsheng. The text of an internal speech in that year by Old Guard member and vice-chairman of the Central Committee Chen Yun surfaced later in Hong Kong. The speech included the following words by Chen Yun concerning the discussion of Wei's case within the Party (as translated in *China New Analysis*, 6 June 1980):

Kissinger's Views

"...let me summarize my own views regarding the events around Tiananmen Square. No government in the world would have tolerated having the main square of its capital occupied for eight weeks by tens of thousands of demonstrators who blocked the authorities from approaching the area in front of the main government building. In China a demonstration of impotence in the capital would unleash the lurking regionalism and warlordism in the provinces. A crackdown was therefore inevitable. But its brutality was shocking, and even more so the trials and Stalinist-style propaganda that followed.

Nevertheless, China remains too important for America's national security to risk the relationship on the emotions of the moment."

Henry Kissinger
The Washington Post
1 August 1989

"I think it would have been much better to talk to him [Wei] and to persuade him gradually. Others were worried that [on account of Wei's condemnation] the Human Rights President, Carter, might change his policy toward China. I was not worried on this point. Carter has hundreds of reasons for normalizing Sino-U.S. relations, and human rights is not one of them."

Such an internal document, like a number of others that have surfaced since that time, cannot be verified, but its authenticity can be quite accurately judged by experienced China analysts. (The Communist press in Hong Kong quickly declared the Chen Yun text to be false.) As a later document was to reveal, during the 1987 crackdown on student demonstrations, Deng Xiaoping himself referred to the Wei case as a test of Western reaction in his now-famous comment: "Look at Wei Jingsheng. We put him behind bars and the democracy movement died. We haven't released him, but that did not raise much of an international uproar." Indeed, very little was heard from the world when the Chinese police and military repeatedly crushed

unrest in Tibet, using the same terrorist tactics that were later exhibited in Peking, including random firing at houses and into crowds.

The Hungarian writer Miklos Haraszti, reflecting on the Tiananmen Square tragedy, summed up a few "truths" that East Europeans have learned from experience: "Oppression never eases without pressure from foreign governments; external pressure is never counterproductive, and in the case of countries that would like to keep advantageous relations with the West, such pressure always helps, at the very least, to halt the worsening of oppression." The failure to apply these lessons of true political realism to China encouraged a ruthless regime to believe that it could get away with murder. As it evidently has.

This regime now sits in Peking like an enemy occupying power, illegitimate and unstable, awaiting the next folly of the free world. ■

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