

The Hate That Won't Go Away: Anti-Americanism in China

Ying Ma

Why Do They Hate Us?

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, many Americans began to ask the question “Why do they hate us?” Today, those who hate us have greatly expanded in number. They range from Muslim fanatics who wish to kill Americans, to numerous citizens of France, Germany, Spain, South Korea, Canada, and elsewhere who see the United States as a bigger threat than the global terrorists that it seeks to eliminate. Americans continue to brood over the fact that others hate us, but they seem no more prepared to understand or address the problem. At a time when luminaries of the foreign policy elite complain daily about the rise of anti-Americanism around the globe, it appears useful to examine anti-Americanism in one country that is of the utmost importance to U.S. national security in the twenty-first century: China. A clarification of the sources and context of anti-Americanism in China might help the United States realize the problem in China and deepen its understanding of the wider global phenomenon.

Anti-Americanism in China, Then and Now

The people of China used to hate the United States loudly and obnoxiously. In May 1999, they staged massive anti-American protests throughout China in response to the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by U.S.-led NATO forces. In April 2001, they again rioted against the United States when an American EP-3 surveillance plane and a Chinese fighter plane collided near the south China coast. U.S. apologies for the mistake in 1999 and explanations of routine intelligence gathering in 2001 did not stave off Chinese anger. That anger manifested itself most grotesquely after terrorists attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. Numerous young Chinese urbanites gloated online at America’s national tragedy.

Today, the Chinese people hate the United States more quietly but just as persistently. According to an opinion survey released in March 2006 by the Chinese newspaper *The Global Times* (*Huan Qiu Shi Bao*), numerous Chinese living in

urban areas admit to having negative views of the United States. Some 59 percent of them believe that the United States seeks to contain China, while 56 percent consider the United States to be China's competitor.¹ A sixteen-nation opinion survey conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project in 2005 produced similar results: only 42 percent of the people in China hold a favorable opinion of the United States.²

In addition, Chinese online chat rooms and bulletin board services (BBS), which have become popular forums for the burgeoning Chinese web population to air their opinions, have witnessed a steady stream of negativity about the United States. Web users regularly see sinister motives behind U.S. actions and gloat over U.S. failures. When the U.S. Space Shuttle *Columbia* exploded in February 2003, Chinese netizens called for a celebration while lamenting that not enough Americans had died. When the United States pushed for United Nations reform at the General Assembly's World Summit in September 2005, some Chinese netizens labeled the United States as the UN's biggest gangster, bent on interfering with the internal affairs of smaller member states. Today, netizens regularly gloat at American casualties and setbacks in Iraq.

To be sure, anti-Americanism in China, even at its extreme, is not virulent enough to inspire terrorist plots against the American homeland. It is better characterized as ambivalence, anger, frustration, resentment, and at times hatred. For instance, although many Chinese harbor negative feelings toward the United States, 79 percent of them acknowledge a liking for Americans.³ Nevertheless, Chinese resentment toward the United States is deeply ingrained. The hatred of the Chinese people, on display at various times during the late 1990s, could have very well been inspired by the intensity of the bilateral conflicts themselves. After all, no one likes to see his country's embassies bombed by a foreign power. The intense Sino-American bickering throughout the 1990s over everything from trade to human rights to Taiwan to weapons proliferation no doubt fueled Chinese resentment as well. However, the Chinese people have continued to resent the United States in the post-9/11 era, which witnessed no tragic accidents or nasty disputes and where Sino-American relations have been labeled the "best ever" by former Secretary of State Colin Powell. Anti-Americanism in China, therefore,

1. Cheng Gang, "Majority of Chinese Optimistic about Sino-American Relations," *Global Times*, March 17, 2006. Available online in Chinese at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2006-03-17/22069376677.shtml>. The study surveyed Chinese citizens in the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, and Chongqing.

2. The Pew Global Attitudes Project, "American Character Gets Mixed Reviews: U.S. Image Up Slightly, But Still Negative," June 23, 2005, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/247.pdf>. The survey interviewed Chinese residents in the cities and surrounding areas of Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, and Shenyang.

3. Cheng, "Majority of Chinese Optimistic."

is not dependent upon bilateral relations but is inspired by independent factors in Chinese society, such as hypernationalism and government propaganda.

The Hypernationalist Identity: Loving China, Hating the Hegemon

To understand anti-Americanism in China, one must look to the Chinese government. In recent years, numerous policymakers, commentators, and scholars have blamed the rise of anti-Americanism across the globe on the Bush administration's unilateralism, the U.S.-led war in Iraq, and scandals such as Abu Ghraib. When it comes to anti-Americanism in China, the Chinese government, above all, molds its citizens' thinking through state indoctrination.

In an era when Chinese Communist ideology has become defunct through the pursuit of market capitalism, Beijing has woven a powerful, alternative paradigm to bolster its rule. This paradigm consists of two prongs: the pursuit of Chinese greatness and the demonizing of American power. The first prong emphasizes a strong China, a powerful China, deserving of the influence and glory that is properly due this ancient civilization. To pursue such greatness, Beijing has chosen economic modernization and social stability as its mandatory accessory. Beijing preaches that democratization, political liberalization, the free press, and anti-government protests are dangerous and destabilizing and so must be suppressed, even if violently. Backed by brutality and distortion, this paradigm leaves room for only one vision of China—rich and strong but not free and democratic. Where the United States is concerned, the second prong of the paradigm teaches that the United States is an overbearing and domineering hegemon that displays no regard for the well-being and dignity of the less powerful. The hegemon continually seeks to undermine China through criticisms of its human rights practices, advocacy of democratization, and support for democratic Taiwan, which Beijing and an overwhelming majority of the Chinese people regard as a renegade province.⁴

The strong China paradigm has been force-fed to the Chinese people since the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989, when the government opened fire on peaceful demonstrators calling for democracy. As the Chinese dissident and essayist Yi Daqi has observed, the government, bereft of all claims to humanity and morality after the massacre, turned to the strong China paradigm in order to bolster its ailing legitimacy.⁵ Since then, Beijing has indoctrinated a whole generation of citizens, especially young people, to believe religiously in the pursuit of a strong

4. Robert Marquand, "As China Changes, So Does Its Image of U.S.," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 7, 2005. For a fuller discussion of Chinese views on U.S. hegemony, see Ying Ma, "China's America Problem," *Policy Review* 111 (February/March 2002): 52–69.

5. Yi Daqi, "The Unfinished Ritual: Spells, Curses and Tattoos," *Democratic China* 138 (February 2005). Available online in Chinese at http://www.chinamz.org/MZ_Magazine/138issue/138.3_pl1.htm.

China. Foreigners, such as Americans, who push for freedom and democracy in China always bear ill intentions in this paradigm and seek only to solidify their own hegemony.

Indoctrination through Media Propaganda

The strong-China paradigm is reinforced through China's state-controlled media and education. Though Chinese citizens today have far more access to foreign and domestic media sources than ever before, their government continues to exert control over their access to information. Crackdowns on individuals who espouse politically unacceptable views, selective censorship of free-wheeling media sources, inducement of self-censorship by the press, and intimidation of the population as a whole account for only some of the ways that Beijing controls media content.

While the state media offers wide-ranging coverage of the United States on a regular basis, it usually ratchets up the negative portrayal of the United States at moments of Sino-American bickering or confrontation.⁶ With Sino-American relations much improved since 9/11, the Chinese government has had fewer reasons to inflame anti-American hatred. Nevertheless, the media continues to characterize the United States as an irresponsible hyper-power that regularly interferes in other countries' internal affairs. The word "hegemon" has become synonymous with the United States in the press, as the maintenance of social stability (i.e., no democratization) has become synonymous with economic progress.

Whereas in the late 1990s, the official Chinese press reported the conflict in the Balkans as an exercise of U.S. hegemony that brought about continual human suffering, today it characterizes the war in Iraq as a war of U.S. aggression, a war for U.S. hegemony. Chinese media coverage of the war in Iraq, therefore, has magnified U.S. blunders, trumpeted the inevitability of U.S. failure, and lamented any signs of success. When U.S.-led troops marched into Baghdad in March 2003 and Iraqis later celebrated the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, Chinese Central Television (CCTV), China's official television news broadcast, was far from ecstatic. According to viewers, CCTV aired a program in which a Chinese military expert all but grieved over the rapid disintegration of Saddam's Republican Guard, and eagerly consoled himself with the possibility that the Iraqi military might retaliate in full force at a later time.⁷

Such press coverage seems to have led to concrete results. Many Chinese, especially the young, fail to understand the nature of the U.S.-led war on Iraq

6. University of Maryland's Institute for Global Chinese Affairs and the Department of Communication, "Perspectives toward the United States in Selected Newspapers of the People's Republic of China," prepared for the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission, May 30, 2002, p. 5.

7. Cheng Xiaonong, telephone interview, October 2005.

or the global war on terror. Their heated diatribes on China's vibrant online chat rooms and BBS reveal that some even view Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein as heroes for their defiance of the United States. The Pew Global Attitudes Project has found that a 57 percent majority of the Chinese people believe that the world is a more dangerous place as a result of the war in Iraq and only 8 percent believe it is safer.⁸

Of course, the war in Iraq has been merely one of the ways that the Chinese government fans anti-Americanism in China. In the realm of Chinese perceptions of the United States, the power of the Chinese media constantly rears its ugly head.

Indoctrination through Education

The power of Chinese indoctrination cannot be understood without also taking into account the Chinese educational system. In a soon-to-be-published study commissioned by the Albert Shanker Institute, He Qinglian (a writer, former journalist in China, and renowned critic of the Chinese regime) finds overwhelming anti-Americanism in state-sanctioned Chinese textbooks and teaching guides for courses on Chinese modern history, world history, and current politics. Reviewing such materials, assigned by the government to the junior high and high school curricula throughout the country, He finds that they propagate precisely the same image of the United States as does the Chinese media: America seeks to weaken China and relentlessly seeks to dominate the world by practicing American-style hegemonism.⁹

Specifically, Chinese textbooks point out that two of the biggest threats to international peace and security today are terrorism and hegemonism, the latter of which unmistakably refers to the United States. One Chinese teaching guide even required the instructor to ask students the following "reflection question": "How can one decipher U.S. hegemonism from NATO's campaign against the Serbs in the 1990s?" The right answer, as suggested by the guide, must include at least three of the following: the United States circumvented the United Nations, violated international law, used human rights as an excuse to violate another country's sovereignty, and bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.¹⁰ The occurrence of grave humanitarian atrocities in Kosovo, which ultimately prompted NATO to act, did not make the cut.

In an unpublished nationwide survey conducted in 2003, Tianjian Shi, Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Chinese Elections at Duke University, concurs that education is one factor that increases anti-American sentiment. Hav-

8. The Pew Global Attitudes Project, "American Character Gets Mixed Reviews."

9. He Qinglian, *Chinese Textbooks: A Window into China's Mind*, report commissioned by the Albert Shanker Institute, forthcoming, p. 17.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

ing surveyed residents of hundreds of randomly selected cities and rural counties, Shi has found that the more sophisticated or intellectual someone is in Chinese society, the more likely that person is to hold negative views of the United States.¹¹ He's study offers an explanation: the more educated members of Chinese society are precisely those who are most susceptible to government propaganda. The educational system and the Chinese media are the twin pillars of the Chinese propaganda apparatus, spewing out anti-American propaganda and the ideology of Chinese greatness.

Anti-Americanism and the War of Ideas

Anti-Americanism in China presents a little noticed but serious challenge to the United States. On the one hand, the culpability of the Chinese government gives the United States little reason to torture itself for not being liked by the Chinese population. Such anti-Americanism also seems harmless, as it has not prevented China from cooperating with the United States on trade, Korea, or counter-terrorism. On the other hand, Chinese anti-Americanism erodes support for the very lofty goals of America's war on terror. After all, the war on terror waged after 9/11 is also a "war of ideas," especially between the model of western modernity, symbolized by freedom, democracy, and the rule of law, and the model of fanaticism associated with Islamic fundamentalists, which generally coexists with tyranny, intolerance, corruption, and the suppression of human rights.¹²

The march of modernity shows no signs of victory in the war of ideas in China. Through relentless media and educational indoctrination, the Chinese government has painted U.S. foreign policy as morally indefensible and U.S. efforts to promote democracy and human rights as an affront to the Chinese people. Though unwilling to offer political representation to its 1.3 billion citizens through valid electoral processes, the Chinese government never hesitates to appoint itself as their spokesman, especially when it hails the virtue of a strong, stable China over the democratic China that America advocates. Unfortunately, Chinese nationalism and anti-Americanism have at times convinced the citizenry that their government is right.

Rampant anti-Americanism, therefore, does nothing to encourage or push for American-style democratic change in China. According to Chinese dissident Cheng Xianong, editor of the *Modern China Studies Journal*, the democratic movement in China today consists primarily of dissidents and independent intellectuals whose promotion of democracy will go nowhere without broader societal

11. Shi's survey is not available for review, and so it is difficult to evaluate the accuracy and credibility of its results or draw further inferences from them.

12. Russell Berman, "Anti-Americanism and the Pursuit of Politics," paper commissioned by the Princeton Project for National Security, p. 5. Available online at <http://www.wws.princeton.edu/ppns/papers/berman.pdf>.

support.¹³ Continued anti-Americanism in China erodes precisely such broad support.

In 1989, the Chinese Democracy Movement was inspired in no small part by the students' infatuation with American-style democracy. Through the image of the lone man standing in front of a row of tanks as the Chinese government prepared to fire upon its citizens clamoring for democracy, the world came to see the Chinese people's courage in fighting for freedom, in standing up to tyranny. Today, those who advocate Chinese democracy are portrayed by Beijing as mouthpieces of the United States. As long as Chinese citizens believe in such propaganda, argues Minxin Pei of the Carnegie Endowment, anti-Americanism will have a negative effect on the process of Chinese democratization.¹⁴

President George W. Bush, in waging the war on terror, has touted democratization as a crucial tool for fostering peace and security around the world. In lofty rhetoric he has emphasized time and again that "every human heart desires to be free." The answer from the Chinese people, sadly, seems to be: "Don't be so sure." Thanks to the Chinese state and the blinding power of nationalism, plenty of Chinese hearts appear willingly blind to the desire for freedom.

Winning the War

On a brighter note, the war of ideas in China has not yet been lost. For one, the answer to the question "Why do they hate us" is, in China, a resounding "It's not our fault." This is not to say that American diplomacy could not be more skillful or that its message to the Chinese people about democracy could not be more articulate. It does mean that in fighting the war of ideas, American values and actions are worth defending, even if numerous people at times misunderstand or despise them.

In addition, in thinking about how to address anti-Americanism, Washington should remember an observation by Cheng Xianong: "Anti-Americanism in China does not indicate that the Chinese people are particularly terrible, but that Chinese state indoctrination is extraordinarily powerful."¹⁵ To win the war of ideas in China, Washington can help combat this distortion by strengthening the voices seeking the truth. It is truth that is spoken by Chinese dissidents, journalists, barefoot lawyers, and democracy activists who risk their lives and livelihood. Washington should also continue to speak out about the horrors perpetrated by the Chinese regime. In the end, Americans will have to continue to tell the Chinese people, even if at times they dislike us, that we stand with them in their struggle for a China that is not just rich and strong but also free and democratic.

13. Cheng Xiaonong, telephone interview.

14. Minxin Pei, interview, October 3, 2005.

15. Cheng Xiaonong, telephone interview.