

Asian Views of the United States: Post-September 11
A View from three UBCHEA Visiting Scholars



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An Asian's View of America

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Since an Asian view of the U.S. is such a broad topic, I will focus on a few main points: how China views America contrasted with America's view of China; next, China's post-September 11 views of America; and then, US-China disagreements; and finally, how one might discuss these views with students.

Once there was a window. It was very narrow and offered a limited view seen through glass colored by whichever government was in power at that time. From China, the view of America was not of the vast landscape of "America the Beautiful," but pieced-together glimpses of biased news reports and the altered realities of America portrayed by television and movies. At the same time this "stained glass" Cold War window was used to show all the evils of Imperialist America to the Chinese people, the American government was using the window to vilify Communist China. Over time, this window has been slowly renovated. As relations between China and the U.S. have gradually improved, Chinese citizens have been allowed to come see with their own eyes the reality of America and bring this new vision home to share with other countrymen. Americans are wealthy, friendly, happy, and sincere. They are proud of their human rights,

freedom, and democracy and are eager to spread these concepts outside their country and convince other nations of the benefits of their way of life. As the leader in world trade, science, and education, America is viewed abroad with admiration despite cultural and political differences.

One of the cultural differences with China is in how American families interact with each other. American children sleep in their own rooms away from their parents, obtain their own cars in high school, work their own jobs to keep and spend their own money, and eventually make their own decisions about college, marriage, and career. This freedom to live independently as a family member is very different from Chinese parent-child relationships in which Chinese parents are involved in all decisions concerning their children's education, marriages, and careers. They are also involved in the raising of their grandchildren. As a result, parents and grandparents are respected and cared for when they are too old to take care of themselves. It is not unusual to find three or more generations living under one roof. All this "parental caring" creates a culture of collectivism and respect for the experience that comes with seniority.

The honoring of seniority and family relationships also translates to all other relationships. For example, at my home university in China, department heads visit faculty homes on holidays, special occasions, or during serious illnesses. Seniors in neighborhoods are often highly respected. The Chinese tend to settle down in one fixed location and spend their entire lives in these close communities, very much like the Chinatowns of America. A parental role is also played

by the Chinese government "caring" in great detail about housing, medical care, and insurance.

Another cultural difference with China is in America's educational system. Most Chinese, especially university students, have a high opinion of the American educational system, and not just because many American universities are ranked highly internationally. The American educational system is pedagogically flexible and offers wide selection of courses. Degree programs are well-rounded. American students enjoy the freedom of taking courses from a variety of disciplines. There is also a higher concentration of internationally recognized experts for students to access. American students, as a result, are stronger in such practical skills as oral presentation, communication, and creative thinking. Chinese pedagogy, by contrast, is rote memorization so students acquire vast amounts of data and do well in standardized exams. However, they lack opportunities to create presentations or to learn practical applications of the subject under study. A small class consists of about 40 students compared with 25 in America, where one easily finds oneself actively involved with students of various ages and academic backgrounds. The larger Chinese classes result in less access to facilities, materials and student-teacher interaction. American students interact more with their instructors than Chinese students do because Americans are raised to ask questions while Chinese are raised to accept whatever the text or teacher puts forth.

A talk on Asian views of America would not be complete without mentioning the after-effects of the September 11th events. Let there be no doubt that Chinese people condemn terrorism and send sympathy and condolences to all the victims of these outrageous crimes. In the days immediately after the attacks, China made every effort possible to host a safe and successful APEC conference in my home city of Shanghai, which could have been a possible target of terrorism. During this conference, its leaders, including President Bush and President Jiang Zheming, stated their determination to fight global terrorism. The common enemy we are facing now is Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. They not only attacked America, but also are held responsible for the destruction of historic Buddhist statues in Afghanistan, as well as for the terrorist activities in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of northwestern China. For years, China has been fighting against terrorists who were active along border areas in cooperation with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Early this year, right after President Bush's China visit, a U.S. FBI office was established in Beijing in a joint effort to strengthen international anti-terrorism cooperation. So the window between us opens wider.

However, for the people in both countries, the window will unfortunately always be there. It will be colored by media and government distortions which will leave each side with an altered view of realities. This is where misunderstandings and disagreements seep in like cold drafts from around the window frame, despite the interest in and goodwill of Chinese and Americans for the other's culture and society. Two recent

examples stand out in this respect. The first example is the U.S. bombing which hit the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in May, 1999. The Chinese version of the incident was that it was a deliberate invasion of Chinese territory and a severe violation of the human rights of those who died or were injured. The Americans reported it as a "mistake." The second example took place on April 1, 2001, when a U.S. Navy aircraft and a Chinese fighter plane collided over the South China Sea. The Chinese pilot was missing and the American plane landed safely at a local airport on Hainan Island, in China. Americans were angered by the wait for the return of the crew and the aircraft, while Chinese were grieving over the death of the pilot, Wang Hai. He left behind a wife and a 5-year-old son, and was remembered in many ways in China, including being given an honorary title issued by the military and having a monument built in his honor in his hometown. Luckily, both countries have overcome these problems in a responsible and peaceful manner. Yes, only when both countries work to resolve their disagreements, and focus on their successes diplomatically, and only when the media on both sides stop labeling each other as an evil, rogue, arrogant, or terrorist country, can people of both countries have a more unbiased, objective view of each other. When we stop pointing fingers at those on the other side of the window, we stop blurring our views with unproductive fingerprints.

China is more than the limited stereotypes Americans might have of it such as Kungfu martial arts represented in Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li movies or Chinese food they have tasted. Likewise, America is not simply a wealthy and free country with people driving luxury limousines and living in spacious villas. America and China are two great nations with their distinct characteristics. Now, what would I have you teach your students about China? Open their minds to the views I have just shared with you.