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## Owning the Olympics

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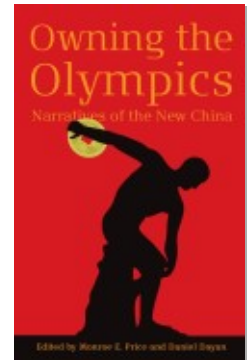
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# Dreams and Nightmares

## History and U.S. Visions of the Beijing Games

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*Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom*

In 1936, the United States participated in the Berlin Summer Olympics, despite Adolph Hitler's scheming to make the Games a Nazi showcase.

...

Should we go [to Beijing] in 2008?

I think not. How can memories not be considerable of the Tiananmen tanks of 1989 . . . ? (Mizell 2001)

This will be the first time that China has hosted the Olympic Games, and this historic occasion will be a landmark in the rest of the world's discovery of this wonderful and fascinating country . . . [And] greater exposure of China to the world will undoubtedly help promote increased openness and understanding over the coming years. (*People's Daily Online* 2006)

Get ready. Over the coming months, before and during the Beijing Olympics of 2008, you will be bombarded with stereotypes about China that have accumulated over hundreds of years. (Mann 2007)

**T**he Western discourse on the 2008 Olympics, which has periodically reached high levels of intensity ever since the news broke in 2001 that Beijing would get to host the Games, cries out for historical analysis. Or, rather, as the preceding quotes suggest, it cries out for several different kinds of analysis that relate to history. For this discourse has

been one in which *historical analogies* (see the Beijing 2008 equals Berlin 1936 reference in quote 1 at the beginning of this chapter) and *historical allusions* to the Chinese past (see the same quote's reference to the 1989 massacre) have figured prominently. This discourse has also featured the suggestion that the Games will mark a *historic turning point* (see quote 2) and been shaped by a long *history of Western commentaries on China* (see quote 3).

This chapter will have something to say about all of these kinds of historical relevance, but will focus primarily on situating some of the comments that have been made and are likely to be made soon about the 2008 Games into long-standing patterns in Western media coverage of and thinking about China. Insofar as this analysis will also touch on other ways in which history figures in this discourse, I will stress the extent to which analogies, allusions, and references to turning points often come naturally to mind or take on a special power as a result of being refracted through the lenses through which Westerners have tended to view China.

For example, Westerners have long been accustomed to view China as a land given to despotic rule. And for a shorter period (but still several decades) some commentators have stressed similarities between Germany's Nazi regime and China's Communist ones. The notion that the Beijing Games should be compared to the Berlin Games—a 1936 event disparaged now for having given Hitler more international legitimacy than he deserved—should be understood as fitting within the context of the general Chinese rulers equal despots and specific Communist leaders equal Fascist leaders patterns.

Conversely, the idea that has been invoked in various IOC pronouncements, including the statement by Rogge quoted previously, that China is finally on the right track and about to turn a historic corner, in terms of both its openness to and place in the world, is by this point a familiar one—especially in the United States. The claim that China was about to undergo a historic shift, which would make it easier for Americans to understand and deal with the Chinese people, was put forward when Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) was inaugurated as president of the new Republic of China in 1912; when Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) ruled the country (1927–1949); and when Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), governing what by then had been rechristened the People's Republic of China, launched his policies of *kaifeng* and *gaige* (openness and reform) just a few years after the death of Mao Zedong (1893–1976).

One reason for my decision to focus here on long-term historical patterns in commentary on China is that while I disagree with some arguments in Mann's *The China Fantasy*—differences I will not spell out here, as they can be found in my *World Policy Journal* review of his book—I think he was right on target about one thing: we will be “bombarded” between now and the end of the 2008 Olympics by variations of “the same clichéd phrases” and “standard China graphics” that are always trotted out to refer to or represent the world's most populous country when it is in the global spotlight (Mann 2007).<sup>1</sup> We have, in fact, already undergone such a bombardment. It began when the IOC announced in 2001 that Beijing would host the 2008 Games. Indeed almost a decade before, in the early 1990s, the first Olympic-related volleys in this bombardment were fired during the raging debates over whether the 2000 Games should be held in China.

Before trying to place into long-term perspective the resurrection in coverage of the Olympics of old “clichéd phrases” and familiar “images,” which present China as either trapped in age-old patterns or rapidly leaving all tradition behind (Mann provides an amusing list of visuals we can expect to see during the television broadcast of the Games),<sup>2</sup> let us look quickly at some examples in the Western discourse on the Olympics of historical analogies, historical allusions, and visions of China having reached or about to reach a historic turning point. In doing so, it will be useful (for heuristic purposes) to divide up commentators into what might be called “pessimistic” and “optimistic” camps (keeping in mind that many commentators walk a line between the two positions or alternate between taking a pessimistic or optimistic view of where China is heading). In the pessimistic camp are those who are doubtful that the 2008 Olympics will have any positive effect for China or for the world. They were in 2001 and remain to this day critical of the IOC decision to award the Games to Beijing. In the optimistic camp, meanwhile, are those who have been and remain hopeful about what the event will or at least might accomplish.

As we will see, each group turns at times to history to buttress their stance. But the analogies and allusions they favor differ markedly, with the best example perhaps being the way in which optimists prefer to think of Beijing 2008 as more analogous to Seoul 1988 (an Olympics that helped democratize an authoritarian society) than to Berlin 1936. And though both groups sometimes suggest that 2008 may be seen by later generations as having marked a historical “turning point” for China and the world, the pessimists imagine it as a turn for the worse

(signaling full international acceptance of a brutal regime), not for the better (continuing China on the road to openness and freedom).

### History and the Pessimists

Since the 1989 massacre . . . the People's Republic of China has thumbed its nose at world opinion of its degraded human rights practices. . . .

Now the international community—or that segment of it represented by the International Olympic Committee—has administered some long-overdue discipline to China's dictators.

Beijing will not host the Olympic Games in 2000. In a surprise move, the IOC chose Sydney, Australia, as the site of those games.

This year, Congress passed a resolution opposing Beijing's bid. "I do not believe we should allow the Chinese government a huge propaganda victory when it routinely tortures [and] severely restricts freedom of assembly and expression," said U.S. Senator—and Olympic basketball gold medalist—Bill Bradley (D-N.J.).

Not everyone saw it that way. Giving the games to China would "influence a change in behavior," remarked IOC board member Dick Pound. Some people have short memories. Moscow had the games in 1980, but spent almost the rest of the decade engaging in butchery in Afghanistan. Berlin hosted the 1936 Olympics, three years before Hitler made war on the world and initiated the Final Solution.

Den [sic] Xiaoping and his gang are just as merciless. (*Boston Herald* 1993)

As we saw in the first quote used to open this chapter, the two main ways that critics of the IOC's decision to award China the 2008 Games have brought history to bear on the issue are via analogies to the 1936 Games and allusions to Chinese repression in 1989 (*Independent* 2001; *Houston Chronicle* 2001).<sup>3</sup>As the long excerpt from the *Boston Herald* editorial just provided illustrates, these two kinds of uses of history belong to a tradition that predates 2001—for analogies to the Games that Hitler hosted and allusions to 1989 were common in the Western press while China made its failed bid almost a decade earlier to host the 2000 Games.<sup>4</sup> The Berlin 1936 analogy and backward looks to Tiananmen have been and continue to be a mainstay in pessimistic commentaries on China's current condition and future prospects, put forward by people who argued before 2001 that the IOC should not let the Beijing

regime host the Games and have since then criticized the IOC's decision on 2008.

Commentators in this camp tend to stress certain basic points. They emphasize the degree to which the PRC has failed to move forward in specific areas (particularly the protection of human rights). They are doubtful about the prospects of meaningful transformation coming soon if the country is left to its own devices (and if the CCP retains control). And they have been skeptical of any suggestion that the Olympics might have a positive impact on China (some think it could even be harmful, either because of the way it will affect the lives of ordinary Chinese or because of the international legitimacy having the Games held in its capital city will give the current regime).

It is important to note that new wrinkles have continually been added to this by now well-established approaches, and we should expect still other ones to be added by the time the Games take place. One example of a recent novelty within a general framework of continuity is that the Berlin 1936 analogy is now (as I write this in June 2007) often reinforced by references to Chinese complicity in the Darfur genocide (Farrow and Farrow 2007; Chu 2007). When efforts were made to tie Beijing 2008 to Berlin 1936 prior to 2007, this typically tapped into the tradition (alluded to earlier) of equating Communist leaders to Fascist ones. This tradition was given a new boost as recently as 2005, with the publication of Jung Chang and Fred Halliday's biography, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, which some scholars (myself included) criticized as sensationalistic and sloppy but which received a great deal of positive media attention and became a bestseller in several countries. Chang and Halliday (2005) link the Chinese Chairman to the German Fuehrer at several points, and they claim that as long as a giant portrait of this bloodthirsty Nazi-like tyrant continues to stand above Tiananmen Square, the PRC cannot be said to have really changed.<sup>5</sup> Now, however, a more specific Holocaust referent has been added to the Berlin 1936 analogy via the use Mia Farrow and others have made of the "Genocide Olympics" phrase.<sup>6</sup>

Another shift over time has been that those critical of the decision to award the 2008 Games to China have begun to put more emphasis on specific things that have been done in and to Beijing to prepare the metropolis for the Games. The destruction of old neighborhoods, forced relocations of residents, and the tough measures taken to keep the central districts free of beggars and migrant workers when foreign ob-

servers come to town, for instance, are often now cited as evidence that the regime did not deserve to get the nod in 2001 (Yardley 2007; Sheridan 2007; *New Zealand Herald* 2007; Gu 2007). Still, the basic thrust of pessimistic commentary remains much as it was when the IOC made its decision to grant Beijing the 2008 Games (and before that debated whether to allow China to host the 2000 ones), with the Berlin 1936 analogy in particular playing a central emotional part, conjuring up discrediting memories of a time the world community gave legitimacy to an abhorrent regime.

### History and the Optimists

The question of human rights will be an important factor in deciding the site of the 2000 Olympics, International Olympic Committee President Juan Antonio Samaranch said yesterday. . . .

“Human rights is important. . . . To have the Games in a country also is quite important, if you study what happened in 1988, for example,” Samaranch said. “Maybe the Olympic Games in Seoul pushed the change in this country quicker.” (*Washington Post* 1993)<sup>7</sup>

I think Beijing’s hosting of the 2008 Olympics Games could be a great opportunity to help promote democracy and openness in China. If there is [a] democratic movement in China at that time, would the Beijing authorities dare to strike it down by force at a time when the world’s spotlight is fixed firmly on it? . . .

Student movements in South Korea used the 1988 Seoul Olympics as a chance—coupled with international pressure—to push for a democratic government.

If Korea can do it, why can’t China? (Wang Dan 2003)

On the other side, meanwhile, as indicated in the preceding quotations, there have for years been and continue to be those who stress the Olympics’ potential either to start China off, or help it to continue, in a positive direction—and here, too, history is invoked. When optimists turn to international history, their favorite point of reference since the early 1990s has been and continues to be 1988, the year that the Games were held in Seoul, the capital city of an authoritarian state that had just begun to become more democratic and would soon afterward move decisively in that direction.<sup>8</sup> Optimists sometimes pair this with a nod to China’s own past, occasionally even invoking the same year,

1989, that figures so prominently in texts calling for a boycott of the 2008 Games. Thus we see some commentators suggesting, as Wang Dan did in his 2003 *Taipei Times* interview, that there is the potential for a revival down the road of the sort of democratic activism that fueled the inspiring Tiananmen protests, and that the global coverage of the Olympics could aid this process. Other optimists bring history into play in a different fashion, as noted in one of the quotes used to open this chapter. Namely, they stress, as IOC President Rogge did in 2006, how far the PRC has come in recent years in terms of opening to the world and modernizing the economy. They emphasize in particular the historical distance that China has traveled since the era of Mao Zedong (1949–76) and even that of Deng Xiaoping (1978–97).<sup>9</sup>

The Seoul analogy is sometimes paired with looks backward to other past Olympics. Some optimists, for example, remind readers of what happened as a result of the Moscow 1980 Olympics. Even though we have seen an example already of this analogy being used in a negative fashion (in the previous quote that referred to Soviet repression continuing after 1980), those Moscow Games have sometimes been given credit for starting the chain of events that ended in 1991. The Olympics are said to have helped bring about the demise of the Soviet Union, since through the Games, despite the American boycott, the Russian people were brought into close contact with far more foreign visitors and generally received far more information about foreign lands than they had for decades. This led them to draw comparisons between their government and their country's stage of economic development and those of other lands that were very unflattering for Moscow. In addition, as noted earlier, optimists sometimes point to the 1964 Tokyo Games. They do so not to suggest that hosting the Olympics pushed Japan onto a new path, but rather that it served as an appropriate recognition of how far that country had come in recent decades; China, optimists suggest, has made similar progress.<sup>10</sup>

### **Looking Backward**

Even though many different kinds of positions are staked out in the media discourse on China and the Olympics, it is striking how prevalent the two stances just sketched out have been and continue to be in rhetorical clashes linked to the 2008 Games. It is also interesting that the clash of viewpoints outlined here, which will doubtless persist through the summer of 2008 (albeit with new wrinkles added over



time), is not just one in which references to history have played and will continue to play important roles, but also one in which echoes of past debates about China can easily be heard.

We have already seen that the early twenty-first century debate was prefigured, rhetorical move for rhetorical move, by the late twentieth century one surrounding Beijing's failed attempt to get the nod for the 2000 Olympics. Then, too, some international commentators insisted that China's regime was too brutal to be allowed to host the Olympics, especially in light of its then-recent crushing of peaceful student-led demonstrations in 1989. Then, too, there were those who thought that allowing China to host the Games would push the country in the right direction, making it more likely that it would follow the path to democracy that had recently been taken in countries such as South Korea that had shed their authoritarian ways.<sup>11</sup> And so on.

There are, of course, specific ways that the 1990s differ from the present, as China's stage of development and role in world affairs was not the same then as it is now—and this had an effect on the discourse of the time. For example, the fact that China is now seen as a rising economic power has added novel dimensions to commentaries on the 2008 Olympics as opposed to the bid for the 2000 Games, as has the fact that it is seen as a country with increasing influence in Latin America and Africa. Prior to 2001, the tendency was still to present China as a developing country with ambitions of becoming a world power, and to ask whether its achieving that goal was something that was worrisome or welcome and would be helped or hindered by hosting the Games. In the 1990s, there were more doubts raised about the regime's ability to create a modern urban infrastructure of the kind that the Olympics needs, whereas recently the focus has been on the social costs of the creation of that kind of infrastructure. Still, it makes sense to think of the debates of the 1990s as a dress rehearsal of sorts or prequel to the contemporary debate.

It is not just echoes of that relatively recent debate, though, that can be heard in the early twentieth-century arguments about China focusing on the Games, for James Mann is correct when he refers to "stereotypes about China that have accumulated over hundreds of years" coming into play. In the pages that follow, I will focus on two such "stereotypes," one of them a comforting sort of stereotype, the other of a more menacing type, and each of them misleading in its own way. I will refer to them as stereotypes that feed the "American China Dream"

and the “American China Nightmare”—the intertwined fantasies invoked in this chapter’s title.<sup>12</sup>

To understand fully the story of the 2008 Olympics, as it is told by and told to international audiences and Americans in particular, it is important to appreciate the role that these two fantasies have played and continue to play. They are fantasies that can be traced back to many starting points, but one of the most plausible is the Boxer Rebellion of 1899–1901. This was a complex series of events but it is remembered mostly now for two things. In the United States, what is remembered is that insurgents (whom Westerners called “Boxers,” due to their use of martial arts techniques) killed Chinese Christians and missionaries and then laid siege to Beijing’s Legation Quarter for 55 days in the summer of 1900, before foreign troops marched in to free the hostages. In China, while these actions are remembered, so too is something else: after the siege was lifted, foreign troops (marching under the flags of eight nations) looted Chinese national treasures, wreaked havoc on the Chinese countryside, and imposed an enormous indemnity on the Chinese state. What is perhaps most important about the Boxer Rebellion for our purposes here, and what makes 1900 a fitting point of reference, is that the siege of the Legation Quarter was one of the first events (perhaps the very first event) that put China in something that deserves to be called the global media spotlight, thanks to the fact that, because of the marvels of telegraphy (the breakthrough “new” medium of communication of an earlier day) and undersea cables, it was followed in many parts of the world in something very close to real time.

What is intriguing about moving forward from the Boxer Rebellion to the present is that even though the China of today is in many regards a very different country than it was in 1900, the groundwork for the interplay of dream and nightmare in coverage of contemporary stories about China, including the Olympic one, was laid in the violence of that time. The coverage of China in 1900, a year when the American press romanticized the Chinese Christian martyrs slain by Boxers as paragons of virtue, while painting the Boxers as inhumanly savage, was unusual in its intensity. Still, this would not be the last time that American ideas about China would be colored by a love-hate relationship defined by visions of conversion and savagery. Both positive and negative images already in circulation before 1900, but given added power by the events of that year, have continued to shape American ideas about the world’s most populous land.

### The Dream and the Nightmare Defined

It is time now to flesh out these comments on the Boxers and provide a brief summary and backward look at the evolution of what I have labeled the American China Dream and the American China Nightmare, since their influence on coverage of the Olympics can only make sense if we know more about what they are and how they arose. In a nutshell, the Dream has always been and still is predicated on a vision of the Chinese as people who want to embrace our ways and who live in a land poised on the brink of shedding vestiges of worrisome old ways. The Nightmare is predicated on a contrasting vision of the Chinese as people who are helping to keep in power or have become the unwilling victims of a vicious state that threatens all we hold dear.

It would be a mistake to argue that, just because both the Dream and Nightmare have been in play for more than a century, there has never been and is not now anything new under the sun where American ideas about China are concerned. This is because, as already indicated, there are always shifts taking place within an enduring general framework defined by the poles of the two fantasies. The details of both the American China Dream and the American China Nightmare have continually changed in subtle but sometimes very important ways from period to period, just as they are currently shifting again, as China is being seen as an economic threat (a novelty, at least in modern times), a country capable of competing with Western countries and Japan for a position as a great economic power. This means that versions of the American China Dream and American China Nightmare that took for granted the “backward” nature of the Chinese nation are being retooled for an era characterized by high growth rates and rocket launches in the PRC.

Another kind of shift, which is not unprecedented but has some novel features, has to do with the relative power of the Dream and the Nightmare. There have been particularly optimistic moments when the Dream predominated (e.g., midway through the 1989 protests), and pessimistic ones when the Nightmare held sway (e.g., just after 1989’s June 4 massacre). There have also periodically been ambiguous points in time when elements of each fantasy were fully in play, and the Dream and Nightmare jostled for supremacy. These third types of moment are, not surprisingly, the most interesting to analyze, and it is in one of these that we currently find ourselves.

One of the interesting features of these moments of ambiguity is that they enable us to see how much the American China Dream and American China Nightmare have in common. They also add new shadings to each fantasy. History suggests that such new shadings are especially likely to come when any one of the following things happens: unexpected events suddenly put China in the global spotlight (as was the case when the Boxers laid siege to the foreign legations in Beijing); orchestrated media events take place (e.g., Nixon's first trip to China in the 1970s and Deng Xiaoping's first trip to the United States in the 1980s); or international phenomena not directly tied to China occur that make Americans particularly hopeful or fearful about a different distant country, thereby indirectly minimizing hopes and fears associated with the Chinese (e.g., the China Nightmare almost disappeared completely in the wake of Pearl Harbor).

The six-year period bracketed by the quotes with which I began has been one that has added new shadings to both old visions. This is not surprising, for not only were updated versions of both the Dream and the Nightmare in play throughout, but all three types of fantasy-altering developments occurred. In April 2001, for example, the "spy plane incident" (the collision of American and Chinese military jets that led to mutual recriminations and a brief period when U.S. servicemen were held on the PRC island where their craft had made an unapproved emergency landing) was an unexpected event that breathed new life into the old Nightmare. In October 2006 (when North Korea carried out a nuclear test and Beijing worked to rein in that neighboring Communist state), an unexpected international political development cast China in a positive light. And during those years, media events held in China, such as the APEC Summit that brought Bush to Shanghai in October 2001, made their mark.

We can also expect the near future to be a fascinating one to watch insofar as the two fantasies are concerned. Leaving aside the always present possibility of unexpected international events that bring China and the United States closer together or push us further apart, modern Olympics involve orchestrated media events (such as the opening and closing ceremonies) and are often accompanied by unexpected dramas of an inspiring or tragic nature, with the multiple 1936 victories of Jesse Owens that undermined Hitler's goal of showcasing Aryan greatness falling into the former category, and the tragic violence of the Munich Games, into the latter.

### Scratches on Our Minds

One of the best places to begin a discussion of the long-term evolution of the American China Dream and American China Nightmare is with a book that was published in 1958 (exactly five decades before the Beijing Games), yet remains eerily relevant. It is called *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India*, and its author, Harold R. Isaacs, worked as a journalist in China before World War II and then went on to have a second career teaching political science at MIT and writing books on various subjects.<sup>13</sup> *Scratches on Our Minds* was based on extended interviews with a variety of influential Americans (journalists, politicians, business leaders, etc.), all of whom Isaacs asked during the interviews (conducted in the early to mid-1950s) to describe their ideas about China and India, and also to reflect upon the readings, movies, and experiences (stories told by relatives, travel, interactions with people from the two countries and so forth) that helped shape these ideas.

The treatment of India in *Scratches on Our Minds* has had some impact, but it is the book's treatment of China that has tended to get the most attention.<sup>14</sup> And it is the book's compelling vision of the peculiar love-hate relationship between America and China that was responsible for the appearance of two updated editions of the book, published at notable junctures in U.S.-Chinese relations. A second edition appeared in 1972, around the time of Nixon's famous meeting with Mao, while a third appeared in 1980, just after Deng had introduced reforms that promised to open the PRC up to international influences.

Notably, while Isaacs wrote new prefaces for the second and third editions of *Scratches on Our Minds*, in which he presented interesting new information about recent trends in American thinking about China (e.g., Nixon's meeting with Mao would add new twists to old motifs), he insisted that the basic framework of the 1958 edition had not been made obsolete by developments of the 1960s and 1970s. In the preface to the 1972 edition, for example, he summarizes his vision of America's peculiar mixture of passionate concern with and ambivalence toward China, and the tendency of Americans to alternately romanticize and vilify the Chinese, as follows:

Down through time, from Marco Polo to Mao Tse-tung [Mao Zedong], the Chinese have appeared to us as superior people and inferior people, outrageous heathen and attractive humanists, wisely benevolent sages

and deviously cunning villains, thrifty and honorable men and sly and corrupt cheats, heroically enduring stoics and cruel and sadistic murderers, masses of hardworking persevering people and masses of antlike creatures indifferent to human life, comic opera soldiers and formidable warriors. (Isaacs 1980, xxi)

Isaacs then goes on to quote at length from a “key passage” in the first edition. This passage begins by referring to the way that, throughout “the long history of our associations with China,” “two sets of images,” one strongly positive and the other strongly negative, continually “rise and fall, move in and out of the center of people’s minds over time, never wholly displacing each other, always co-existing, each ready to emerge at the fresh call of circumstance, always new, yet instantly garbed in all the words and pictures of a much-written literature.” It ends by summarizing American feelings about the Chinese as having “ranged between sympathy and rejection, parental benevolence and parental exasperation, affection and hostility, love and a fear close to hate” (xxi–xxii). In his 1980 preface, he stresses that, while much has changed, “our assorted positive and negative images and feelings about the Chinese flicker in and out of the immediate scene and many of both kinds remain in view together” (xvii).

*Scratches on Our Minds* does not take a straightforward chronological approach to the subject of the formation of American images of China, but it does flag key moments in the past that helped to solidify or breathed new life into a positive or negative idea about the Chinese. The rise of the Boxers and the appearance of the Fu Manchu books and films soon after that, for example, are cited as developments of the early 1900s that contributed greatly to American fears of China. And the publication of Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* and that novel’s subsequent transformation into a popular Hollywood film, meanwhile, are linked to the circulation of a much less threatening sense of the Chinese in the 1930s.

What comes across most strongly in *Scratches on Our Minds*, though, is the sense of the interplay, at each stage of the twentieth century, of strongly charged positive and negative ideas about China and its people. Isaacs sees this as contrasting with the more dispassionate views that Americans often had of people of other distant lands, including India. It also sets American visions of China off in an important way from the Western visions of the Middle East criticized in Edward Saïd’s influential and controversial study of that topic, *Orientalism*

(1979). Some of the forms that negative American images of China have taken can be fit into Saïd's framework. The same cannot be said, however, of the recurring American positive fantasies about China, which are tinged with admiration and present the United States and China as being destined to become, and on the brink of becoming, close friends.

### The China-Japan Seesaw Effect

Isaacs adds an intriguing twist to the story of American images of China in a section of the preface to his 1972 edition that brings the Japanese into the story. He presents data taken from Gallup polls to suggest that, while American ideas about China and Japan have each followed a distinctive trajectory, there is also, at times, a strong inverse correlation between our images of the people of the two countries. To put it crudely—more crudely than he does—it sometimes seems that when one country's people are admired, those of the other are distrusted, and vice versa.

The obvious case in point is that American stereotypes of the Japanese during World War II were nearly identical to American stereotypes of the Chinese during the Korean War.<sup>15</sup> In each case, it was not only that the alleged cruelty of the people in the enemy country was stressed, but also that much was made of their alleged tendency toward conformity. The rise and fall of other traits (being considered "hard-working," "brave," "honest," etc.) has not flip-flopped quite as neatly, but with those too, Isaacs argues, the question of whether they are most aptly applied to the Chinese or to the Japanese has shifted from decade to decade, due in large part to changes in international politics. T. Christopher Jespersen, in a book that is particularly good at showing how Song Meiling (Madame Chiang Kai-shek) came to embody the American China Dream, makes a similar point about this China-Japan seesaw pattern in *American Images of China, 1931-1949* (1996). And Sheila K. Johnson's lively and insightful 1988 book, *The Japanese through American Eyes*, sheds light on the same phenomenon (what she calls the "Migrating Asian Stereotype") as well.

To simplify things greatly, we can draw upon the material Isaacs, Jespersen, Johnson, and others present to paint the following picture of American ideas about China from around 1900 through around 1980, and the relationship of these to ideas about Japan:

1. The Boxer period—China was feared or despised (though positive images of the Chinese were kept alive by hagiographic accounts of Chinese Christian converts who died at the hands of the Boxers), while Japan was admired due to its rapid modernization.
2. The 1910s–20s—hope for China rose, especially around 1912, with Sun Yat-sen inaugurated as the first president of the new Chinese Republic, though doubt lingered as to whether it could modernize effectively, while Japan was still largely admired, but starting to be feared as a potential competitor.
3. The 1930s–40s—negative images of Japan as populated by savage conformists predominated, while China was seen as either a victim deserving sympathy or a brave ally in the fight against tyranny.
4. The 1950s–60s—a reversal of the 1930s–40s situation, with Japan admired for its ability to bounce back economically from its World War II defeat and apparent readiness to embrace American ways, while China became again a source of fear, imagined as a land of automatons in thrall to a brutal dictator allied to the Soviets.
5. The 1970s—another reversal begins, with the Chinese now seen as people who, under the surface, are much more like us than we had imagined, and concerns about Japanese economic competition beginning to rise.

### **1980 Onward: Ricochet Effects and Mixed Emotions**

Americans always seem to be busy clearing up misconceptions about China. In an attempt to get beyond one set of misunderstandings, however, they often create new ones to take their place. They substitute today's "truth" for yesterday's myth, only to discover that today's "reality" becomes tomorrow's illusion. This is why American attitudes towards China have undergone the regular cycles of romanticism and cynicism so well described twenty-five years ago in Harold Isaacs' classic, *Scratches on Our Minds*. (Harding 1982, 934).

The story of American images of China from the end of the 1970s through the present is a complex one that can only be told in a very sketchy fashion here. It was a period during which orchestrated media events often played a central role in reinforcing or adding new dimensions to the American China Dream or the American China Nightmare. For example, in the first half of the 1980s, when Deng Xiaoping



donned a cowboy hat during his visit to the United States, after American newspaper stories stressed his pragmatic approach to economic and political issues and his love of playing bridge, he became perhaps the most powerful high-ranking embodiment of the Dream since the days in the 1930s and 1940s when Wellesley-educated Song Meiling was routinely celebrated in the pages of *Time* magazine. The new twist here, though, was the idea that Deng was a Communist leader who, at heart, was not really so different from the pioneering capitalists whom Americans credit with having made our country great. And throughout the last two decades, periodic trips to China by American presidents have been orchestrated media events that have given new twists to the Dream in particular.

It has not only been orchestrated media events, however, that have been significant image shapers in recent years, for unplanned occurrences have also put China in the spotlight and resurrected or gave new shadings to old positive and negative fantasies late in the last century and during the first years of this new one. The events of 1989, in particular, showed the ability of unexpected developments to alter American perceptions of the Chinese (for the better) and their leaders (for the worse). We should also remember that the events of 1989 came on the heels of not just a burst of positive publicity about China's leaders (due to things such as Deng's celebrated trip to the United States), but also a decade of Japan bashing (that, via the seesaw effect, helped keep images of the PRC relatively positive). The Tiananmen crisis thus had a curious effect, with the American China Dream retaining its hold but going underground in a sense, as hopes for the country were relocated from the leadership to the dissidents, and fantasies of a complete U.S.-China reconciliation placed in an imagined post-CCP future rather than a Deng-led CCP present.

### **Big Bad China and the Good Chinese**

The 1990s and first years of the twenty-first century also saw pendulum swings, which added new twists to but did not fundamentally undermine the basic pattern that Isaacs described.<sup>16</sup> Once again, orchestrated media events (such as Clinton's 1998 visit to China) played a role. And so, too, did unplanned developments (such as NATO bombs hitting the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, triggering protests in the PRC, and the conflict that developed during the "spy plane" incident of

April 2001). In general, this period saw hopes for China placed not in the leadership but in the people of the country (the “Good Chinese” of this subsection’s title)—both dissidents and, increasingly, less explicitly political groups whose members seemed bent on embracing Western lifestyles (eating hamburgers, going bowling, listening to Western pop music, etc.).

This divide was not absolute, however, as the Chinese people were sometimes seen as dangerous, if only because they could still be mobilized by the regime. The anti-NATO protests in 1999 were thus presented in the U.S. press as both a sign that the government could still get people out onto the streets, and, in the most extreme commentaries, a sign that the mentality of the Boxers had never been completely vanquished. American fear and denigration of Japan, which peaked in the 1980s, waned during the 1990s, and talk of a potential “China Threat” (thought of sometimes in military terms and sometimes in economic ones) began—and at times continues.<sup>17</sup>

### **Looking Forward: What to Expect in 2008**

How does this historical tour prepare us for analyzing the Western and particularly American commentaries on China and its 2008 Olympics? One thing worth remembering is that the Games themselves often involve both planned and unplanned elements (choreographed opening ceremonies, but also unexpected things—not just who wins or loses, but things like the 1968 Black Power salute). No matter how tightly controlled the Games are, unexpected things will occur either on the streets of Beijing, in the announcers’ booth, or in crowds, and these compete with internationally acclaimed film director Zhang Yimou’s choreographed displays when it comes to media attention. Patterns of framing are persistent. Some themes are emphasized in the media whether or not unexpected events take place. For example, if protests against the regime occur during the Games (or at other times), these will be taken by some commentators to be additional proof that the Communist Party is a repressive organization. But if there are *no protests*, this will likely be cited by some commentators as evidence of just how repressive the Communist Party is.

In other words, given both the continued relevance of the patterns that Isaacs described five decades ago and recent developments in ideas about China (e.g., only in the last few years has the idea of the PRC be-

ing more of an *economic* and *diplomatic* threat become more pronounced than the idea of it being a potential *military* threat), future narratives will have the very solid markings of the past. We are likely, for example, to see an ongoing division between stories that look at individual Chinese (in this case mostly athletes) through the lens of the American China Dream, and stories that look at the Chinese state (and representatives of it such as the police) through the lens of the American China Nightmare. The way that Yao Ming has been treated gives us a preview of how the “Big Bad China and the Good Chinese” story line can work in the world of sports.

Yao Ming as an individual is often the focus of reports that play up the similarities between the American and Chinese spirit. He is treated as a person who has been able to move easily across national borders, adopting some elements of the American lifestyle, while remaining tied to China culturally and to some degree politically (such as by continuing to play for the PRC national team). These positive reports compete, however, with tales of Yao Ming the product, a manufactured sports star created by a soulless Chinese state (bred from birth to be a super-athlete, the product of a state-arranged marriage between two basketball players, etc.).<sup>18</sup>

History also suggests that we need to be aware that, if stories of the 2008 Olympics spin in an unexpected direction, this may have at least as much to do with changes in the international arena as with changes in China itself. In just the last couple of years we have seen coverage of the PRC affected greatly, but in opposite ways, by two international crises: that relating to Darfur, which as noted earlier added a new twist to the Nightmare, and that relating to North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, which added a new twist to the recurring Dream motif of Beijing representing a relatively benign version of Communism, and gave us yet another example of the “migrating Asian stereotype,” as Pyongyang has come to represent what Tokyo represented during World War II and Beijing represented during the Korean War.

#### NOTES

1. For my critique of his representation of how China specialists tend to think and write about the PRC, see Wasserstrom 2007b.
2. Mann’s list includes everything from shots of mountains shrouded in mist and of the Great Wall to images of Chinese youths carrying cell phones. See Mann 2007, 90.

3. These are 2 of the 121 articles that came up on November 8, 2006, when I ran a Lexis-Nexis database search for pieces in “major papers” from the period January 1, 2001–December 31, 2001, in which the terms *China and Olympics* and *Hitler and 2008* all appeared. These articles were among the many generated by that search that endorsed the value of the Berlin-Beijing parallel (often bringing Tiananmen as an example of the regime’s deeply problematic record on human rights), but a smaller number brought up the parallel in order to debunk or at least question it. See, for example, Sullivan 2001.

4. For an illustrative piece from the 1990s, which refers to how common talk of the Berlin analogy and invocations of 1989 had become during the lead-up to the announcement about the 2000 Games, see Todd 1993.

5. Critical reviews that suggest the need to approach the book with a degree of skepticism include Davin 2005; Wasserstrom 2005; and Nathan 2005.

6. Here is a summary of this position: “Concern over [atrocities in] Darfur . . . prompted actress Mia Farrow to pressure director Steven Spielberg, an artistic adviser on the opening ceremony of the Games.

‘Does Mr. Spielberg really want to go down in history as the Leni Riefenstahl of the Beijing Games?’ Farrow asked in a commentary last month in *The Wall Street Journal*, referring to the German director who presented the 1936 Berlin Olympics as a triumph for Adolf Hitler. Spielberg promptly wrote to President Hu Jintao, urging Beijing to use its influence to stop the genocide in Sudan.” (Fan 2007)

7. For a similar reference to the relevance of Seoul, see also *Toronto Star* 1993 and *New York Times* 1993.

8. See, for example, *New Zealand Herald* 2001, which I discovered via the Lexis-Nexis search described in note 3, in which the Tokyo and Seoul as well as Berlin analogies are discussed; Moscow parallels are mentioned in Sullivan 2001.

9. See, for example, the *Guardian* 2007.

10. For more on analogies to past Olympics, see Wasserstrom 2002, and for an interesting discussion of the relevance of the Seoul and Moscow analogies for Olympic planners in Beijing, see Liu 2007.

11. See, for an early use of the Seoul analogy, *New York Times* 1993, and for an early claim that the right analogy for Beijing hosting the Games was not Seoul 1988 (or Moscow 1980) but Berlin 1936, see the *Independent* 1993—an article that leads with a reference back to the massacre of 1989.

12. This terminology is original, I think, but was inspired by two very different works: Madsen 1995 and Starr 1973, a series of books that includes Starr 1990. Here I will focus on specifically American images of China, which often overlap with but sometimes diverge from the images of China in play in other parts of the West. Readers interested in Western notions about China more generally would be well served by turning to Spence 1999 and two

books by Colin Mackerras (2000a and 2000b), one a survey and the other a collection of translations.

13. All of my citations will be to the 1980 edition of the book, the third, which comes with three prefaces by Isaacs, written to accompany the book's original 1958 publication and 1972 and 1980 reissues.

14. For a fascinating discussion of *Scratches on Our Minds*, by a writer who specializes in U.S. relations with South Asia and pays roughly equal attention to what Isaacs had to say about China and India, see Rotter 1996. Rotter is both critical of some of the methods that Isaacs used (e.g., many of the people Isaacs interviewed were friends, very few were women, no effort was made to be scientific in his sampling, etc.) and appreciative of many of the basic conclusions put forward in the book. Rotter also provides interesting details about what Isaacs did prior to writing *Scratches on Our Minds*.

15. The classic study of American ideas about the Japanese during World War II remains Dower 1987; see also Johnson 1988.

16. This section draws heavily from my chapter, "Big Bad China and the Good Chinese: An American Fairytale" (Wasserstrom 2000); see also, for further relevant background to American views of China in the 1990s, other chapters in that same volume. Throughout this chapter, I have drawn inspiration from Geremie Barmé's gem of a foreword to that volume, in which he argues that, for the Western press, China stories are too often, in effect, written before they happen, with only the details needing to be filled in at the last minute.

17. For details on U.S.-China relations during this period, see Shirk 2007; issues addressed in the preceding paragraphs are also discussed at greater length in Wasserstrom 2007a.

18. See the following books and the stories linked to each that appeared in the American press when they were published: Ming with Bucher 2004; Larmer 2005. In general, stories building upon material in the former publication emphasized themes associated with the Dream, while those building upon material in the latter emphasized themes associated with the Nightmare.

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