

The Multi-Recognitions of

CHINA

SEYMOUR H. FERSH*

FOR the first time since the Communists gained control of the Chinese mainland more than two decades ago, the U.S. government is seriously considering official recognition of this event. *De facto* recognition came when President Nixon announced his intention to visit Peking; presumably he could not go if, in fact, there were no Chinese government there to greet him. Even his reference to Peking as the capital of the People's Republic of China was a kind of "recognition," because previously the U.S. Department of State carefully followed Nationalist Chinese usage that the capital of China remains at Nanking; hence, Peking (meaning "northern capital") had been changed by the Nationalists to Peiping, "northern peace." All of this, some would say, is merely a matter of semantics, but *de facto* recognition is built of such things.

There is also increased talk of United States *de jure* recognition of Communist China and the establishment of diplomatic relations. Such recognition will probably come in connection with the President's actual visit to Peking.

Yet beyond the kinds of recognition which governments exchange, there are human kinds of recognition, and it is these which should especially concern us as teachers. "Recognition" is one of those words which has many definitions, connotations,

and synonyms. "To recognize" can mean to see, comprehend, understand, recall, and recollect; it can also mean to know by some detail, to identify as known before, to perceive, to accept, to acknowledge as worthy of commendation, to acknowledge the sovereignty, to grant the right to speak. How many kinds of recognition are we prepared—by education and disposition—to extend to China?

The American View of China

For most Americans, the name "China" has represented the most far-off place on earth. As children we learned that China was at the other end of the hole which we were digging in the sand. It was also the place where they did things backward—they wrote from right to left and in columns from top to bottom; they placed their family name first; their compass needle pointed south instead of north; and their language, religion, and customs were perhaps the most "peculiar" on earth.

Even though the Chinese were "peculiar," our feelings toward them were not always negative; our attitudes depended not so much on the facts of Chinese culture as on our perception of them. After all, we

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- *Guidance sees itself as a profession. But most counselors do what their principal or agency head tells them to do.*

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have acknowledged that China is a "cradle of civilization" (past tense?), and Marco Polo and Pearl Buck taught many generations of Americans to have respect and some admiration for the Chinese civilization and people. When Chinese workers were imported to the United States in the 1860's to help build the transcontinental railway, cultural differences were at first overlooked or ignored. Later, those differences were recognized by competing workmen; and the Exclusion Act of 1882 restricted Chinese, and later Japanese, from immigration. To "have a Chinaman's chance" became a shorthand way of saying to have no chance at all.

In the 20th century, American attitudes toward China and the Chinese—in the words of Harold Isaacs—have alternated "between sympathy and rejection, parental benevolence and parental exasperation, affection and hostility, love and a fear close to hate," with these two sets of images "never wholly displacing each other, always coexisting, each ready to emerge at the fresh call of circumstances."¹

The Chinese View of China

The Chinese have rarely been deeply concerned with other cultures. To them, the center of the universe is China, and backwardness could be measured by the degree to which practices elsewhere departed from the norm, which, of course, was established and maintained in "Chung Kuo"—the Middle Kingdom. For over 3,500 years this has been the only name which Chinese recognized for their country; the written characters for "Middle Kingdom" are those used today on the postage stamps of the People's Republic.

Thus, the whole question of who has been isolated from whom depends on where the "center" is. President Nixon still refers to China as being in the "Far East" but the Chinese are more likely to believe that the United States is in the "Near West." Here again, these distinctions are not merely semantic—they represent psychological as well as geographic assumptions of placement.

¹ Harold R. Isaacs. *Scratches on Our Minds*. New York: The John Day Company, Inc., 1958.

James Reston of *The New York Times* recently reported from China that the Chinese "show very little curiosity about the scientific revolution that is shaking the world, ask few questions about it, and concentrate on China's problems, China's progress, and China's rights."² In another report, he wrote: "One has the impression that long before the United States tried to 'contain' China, they were self-contained, quite satisfied that they had enough land, resources, and people, and not at all sure that they wanted any more outsiders in their ancient 'middle kingdom.'"³

These observations almost echo the attitudes expressed in messages sent by the Chinese Emperor to the King of England in the 1790's when he rejected English demands for extended trading privileges. "I do not forget the lonely remoteness of your island, cut off from the world by intervening wastes of sea, nor do I overlook your excusable ignorance of the usages of our Celestial Empire," wrote Ch'ien Lung; but he added, "How can our dynasty alter its whole procedure and system of etiquette, established for more than a century, in order to meet your individual views?" The Emperor was adamant:

If you assert that your reverence for our Celestial Dynasty fills you with a desire to acquire our civilization, our ceremonies and code of laws differ so completely from your own that, even if your envoy were able to acquire the rudiments of our civilization, you could not possibly transplant our manners and customs to your alien soil. Therefore, however adept the envoy might become, nothing would be gained thereby. . . . As your ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on

² "Letters From China: V." *The New York Times*, August 18, 1971.

³ "China's First Order of Priorities." *The New York Times*, August 25, 1971.

objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures.⁴

American and Chinese Views of Each Other Today

As American and Chinese leaders consider "the normalization of relations," we must be aware of the past as well as the present. When Chou En-lai and Mr. Kissinger first met in Peking the Chinese premier, after a handclasp, remarked that apparently the President's representative was "not ashamed to shake hands." This observation was an obvious reference to a diplomatic reception in Geneva in 1954 when Secretary of State Dulles turned his back on Chou in what the Communist leader interpreted as a deliberate insult.

Significant and crucial reminders of past ways in which Americans and Europeans have dealt with (rather than related to) Asians come from U.S. Senator Daniel K. Inouye of Hawaii, who is of Japanese ancestry:

We have looked upon most Asians as wards of colonial powers, and in many ways, still treat them as such. We think of our relations with Vietnam and Southeast Asia as something that started after Lyndon Johnson became President. Most Asians have longer memories. To them, their relations with the West cover decades and centuries, instead of months and years.

They still recall the degradation of colonialism. They remember the wars of exploitation such as the infamous "Opium War" when the British forced the Chinese to legalize and use that commodity. Hong Kong and Kowloon are spoils of that experience. They still recall the international settlements—the Western enclaves in their territory.

⁴ Hilary Lew. "Telling Off the Barbarians." *Free China Review*, April 1970. pp. 31-35.

Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1972	March 5-8	Philadelphia	Philadelphia Civic Center
1973	March 17-21	Minneapolis	Minneapolis Auditorium
1974	March 9-13	Anaheim	Anaheim Convention Center
1975	March 15-19	New Orleans	Rivergate
1976	March 14-17	Miami Beach	Convention Center

These memories are not happy ones. We should, therefore, not be surprised if they approach us with caution and apprehension. We should not feel too insulted if our motives are questioned and our declarations of good intentions are doubted.⁵

For many Americans, the change in official U.S. policy toward Communist China has been welcomed as new opportunities. Some have referred to this change as a "new ball game." But that figure of speech—so clear in its assumption—is exactly what we need to reject. Human relationships do not turn on and off like sports contests. To approach China—its people and culture—without any knowledge or understanding of its past and especially our part in it can only lead to further insensitivity and misunderstandings.

Yet to know only the past is not enough. We must also be aware of the changes which are now occurring. The period of American and Western European domination of world events is ending. Our offers to negotiate international differences are motivated more by a realistic acceptance of our national limitations than by a new sense of political morality. Moreover, our equating of military and technological achievements as measures of preeminent civilizations led the Western world to believe in its own innate cultural superiority. Now Japan and China in East Asia and the Soviet Union in East Europe must be recognized as major partners in shaping the future of our world.

Learning About China and Other Asian Cultures

The impending diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China by the United States will make easier the other kinds of recognition which we have been considering, but the process is not automatic. If we study about China to "know thy enemy," the results will be a kind of nonrecognition which defeats rather than advances our opportunities to learn about one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations where lives one-quarter of the world's population.

⁵ Speech, 1971.

Fortunately, there are organizations in the United States which can help teachers and students to increase their understanding of China and other Asian cultures. Foremost is the Association for Asian Studies (One Lane Hall, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104), which is the professional organization of Asian studies scholars. Other institutions which publish dependable materials and provide other services related to Asian studies are: the American Society for Eastern Arts (405 Sansome Street, San Francisco, California 94111), the National Committee on United States-China Relations (777 United Nations Plaza, New York, New York 10017), the Japan Society (333 East 47 Street, New York, New York 10017), and The Asia Society (112 East 64 Street, New York, New York 10021).

For a special newsletter devoted to Asian studies at the elementary and high school grades, consult *Focus on Asian Studies* published by Professor Franklin Buchanan (Ohio State University, 1945 North High Street, Columbus, Ohio 43210). Also the November 1969 issue of *Social Education* published by the National Council for the Social Studies (1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036) focused on Asian studies and included substantive as well as pedagogical articles. An excellent way to begin multi-recognitions of China is to read the essay in this special issue by Professor Yu-kuang Chu, "The Warps and Woofs of Chinese Civilization." The conclusion of his article is also appropriate here; Professor Chu shows that once we see Chinese civilization as a developing process,

We are less likely to freeze it around 1850, put it into a museum as an exotic masterpiece, and regret its passing under modern conditions. From the Chinese point of view, the last thing they want to become is a museum piece. They want to better their lives by absorbing new forces into their long-range trends to create new patterns suited to their present needs. Chinese civilization, like any other, has always been and is a developing process, never a static thing.⁶ □

⁶ Yu-kuang Chu. "The Warps and Woofs of Chinese Civilization." *Social Education* 33 (7): 804-11; November 1969.

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