

FOOLING CHINA, FOOLING THE WORLD

Illusions of Excellence

One hundred years ago, a Columbia University law professor named Frank Johnson Goodnow was dispatched to China to help design the nation's new government. Goodnow would find both irony and vindication in the West's idolization and envy of China today.

In 1911, a revolution led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen had ended two thousand years of imperial rule and established China as a republic.¹ Sun had been elected provisional president, but he gave up the position to Yuan Shikai, a military leader who forced the last emperor to abdicate his throne in 1912.

China needed a constitution.

Acting on the suggestion of Charles Eliot, president emeritus of Harvard and a trustee of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Chinese government sought out an expert to help draft its governing principles. Goodnow was selected from several candidates and appointed for a three-year term, with an annual salary of \$12,000. On May 3, 1913, he arrived in Beijing. Although his duties were merely advisory and he left China the following year to assume the presidency of Johns Hopkins University, he developed two drafts—one in 1913, while in China, and another in 1915, after his departure.

The essence of his first draft made it into the provisional constitution that went into effect in May 1914. Called the "Goodnow Constitution," it gave the nation's president unchecked power

over Chinese citizens, “foreign affairs, war and peace, appointment and removal of officials, and budget and financial matters.”² The second version, based on Goodnow’s 1915 memorandum, would have made Yuan Shikai practically the emperor had he not died in 1916.

Goodnow became known as the “embarrassed monarchist”; he was sharply criticized for ending China’s young democracy. A *Baltimore Evening Sun* cartoon portrayed him as a carpenter helping President Yuan tear down the infant republic and restore imperial rule. He “came to be remembered as the foreign stooge of a Chinese dictator.”³ Goodnow and his defenders claimed that he’d been manipulated, his words used selectively by President Yuan and his supporters. Nonetheless, Goodnow still maintained that “a monarchy is better suited than a republic to China” for reasons of stability and efficiency. He didn’t think China was ready for popular self-government: “Chinese society is so unorganized and so unconscious of any common interests, that it is almost impos-

sible to start parliamentary government here, as we started it in England, on the foundation of economic or social interest.”⁴ Instead of a powerful parliament, he said, “China required a stable, permanent government and a powerful, independent president.”⁵

A century has since passed, and China has reinvented itself several times. When the Communists rose to power, the original Republic of China retreated to the island of Taiwan,

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where it is considered a province. The Communist government gained control over the vast majority of China and established the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Taiwan evolved into a multiparty democracy; the PRC remained a single-party (Communist) government. Although today's China—that is, the People's Republic of China—is not the monarchy Goodnow suggested, its essence is absolute monarchist. There's only one essential difference: the monarch is not a person but a party. The People's Republic has all the features of Goodnow's ideal government: it is powerful, stable, permanent, and independent, without any significant, meaningful influence from the people.

Given the negative response he received at the time, Frank Goodnow couldn't possibly have imagined today's growing admiration for the authoritarian government he suggested for China. Yet that government has been praised not only for leading China's miraculous economic growth and making it the world's second largest economy, but also for providing a viable alternative to the model of development in the dominant Western-style democracies.⁶ What would be even harder for Goodnow to imagine? The fact that there are now US citizens eager to import the Chinese style of government to America.

“CHINA FOR A DAY”

Thomas Friedman, the influential *New York Times* columnist who has written several best sellers on global issues, just might be China's biggest fan. More than once, he has expressed a “fantasy” of America being China for a day. The notion first appeared as the title of a chapter in his 2008 book *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—and How It Can Renew America*. He then repeated his China-for-a-day dream on NBC's *Meet the Press* in May 2010, telling host David Gregory, “I have fantasized—don't get me wrong—but that what if we could just be China for a day?”⁷

Friedman believes a Chinese-style government offers great efficiency—the exact point Goodnow used to support his monarchy proposal a century ago. Frustrated with the ineffectual American government and its tedious two-party wrangling, Friedman wants a “China day” when “we could actually, you know, authorize the right solutions, and I do think there is a sense of that, on, on everything from the economy to environment.”⁸ In a 2009 *New York Times* column, he explains why the authoritarian Chinese style government is better than American democracy: “One-party autocracy certainly has its drawbacks. But when it is led by a reasonably enlightened group of people, as China is today, it can also have great advantages. That one party can just impose the politically difficult but critically important policies needed to move a society forward in the 21st century.”⁹

Would Goodnow agree? He suggested an authoritarian government for China a century ago on the grounds that it wasn’t yet ready for a popular democracy. But Friedman seems to view an authoritarian government as inherently preferable to a popular democracy. And unlike Goodnow, who based his suggestion on a series of logical assumptions, Friedman claims to have empirical evidence. In his latest three books—including *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented* and *How We Can Come Back*—Friedman offers statistics, anecdotes, personal observations, and interviews that relate the great achievements of China’s forward-looking, visionary, courageous, wise, powerful, benevolent—and authoritarian—leadership.¹⁰

After all, in merely thirty years, China’s gross domestic product, a measure of the total size of a nation’s economy, expanded thirty-fold, from \$202 billion in 1980 to over \$7 trillion in 2011. In 2007, China surpassed Germany to become the world’s third largest economy.¹¹ Three years later, China replaced Japan as the world’s second largest economy.¹² It is now well on the way to becoming the world’s largest economy. Estimates vary, but China is generally

projected to overtake the United States and become number one in the next decade.¹³

In 2008, China dazzled the world with the Summer Olympic Games. The awe-inspiring opening ceremony, the guaranteed blue skies, the long list of foreign dignitaries, and the grand facilities drove home a single message: China had become a powerful player on the world stage. The 2010 World Expo, with over 250 countries participating, was another extravagant event that showed off a transformed and modernized China. China now has the world's longest high-speed rail, a third of the world's one hundred tallest buildings, and a network of expressways larger than the United States. It even (temporarily) took the title of the fastest computer away from the United States.

"THE BEIJING CONSENSUS"

Thomas Friedman isn't the only one to notice China's astonishing growth and attribute it to a superior system of economic development. In 2004, Joshua Cooper Ramo, a former senior and foreign editor of *Time* magazine, published a seminal paper, "The Beijing Consensus,"¹⁴ through the UK-based Foreign Policy Center. A journalist and consultant, Ramo has extensive experiences with China. He based his findings on "more than 100 off-the-record discussions with leading thinkers in Chinese universities, think tanks and government."¹⁵

Ramo coined the term *Beijing consensus* in pointed contrast to *Washington consensus*, a neoliberal and market-fundamentalist perspective for economic development derived from the Western liberal democratic tradition. Ramo wanted to show that "China is in the process of building the greatest asymmetric superpower the world has ever seen."¹⁶ He believes that "China is marking a path for other nations around the world who are trying to figure out not simply how to develop their countries, but also how to fit into

the international order in a way that allows them to be truly independent, to protect their way of life and political choices in a world with a single massively powerful centre of gravity. The Beijing consensus, he argues, “replaces the widely-discredited Washington Consensus, an economic theory made famous in the 1990s for its prescriptive, Washington-knows-best approach to telling other nations how to run themselves.”¹⁷

A slew of publications followed describing China’s rise as a global power that has begun to shape a new world order. Major media outlets in the West began assigning stories about China’s growing global influence. A 2007 *Time* magazine article, “China Takes on the World,” asserted that “through its foreign investments and appetite for raw materials, the world’s most populous country has already transformed economies from Angola to Australia. Now China is turning that commercial might into real political muscle, striding onto the global stage and acting like a nation that very much intends to become the world’s next great power.”¹⁸

In 2008 Joshua Kurlantzick, a special correspondent for the *New Republic* and visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, published *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power Is Transforming the World*.¹⁹ “Soft power” is a designation first used by Harvard political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr. in his 2004 book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.²⁰ In contrast to hard power—the ability to coerce—soft power is the ability to attract and persuade. Hard power comes from a country’s military or economic strength, while soft power lies in the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies.

The year 2009 brought another best seller about the superior Chinese way: *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* by the British journalist Martin Jacques.²¹ He too admired China’s recent growth, then went a few steps further, describing how China had found its way to modernity without being Westernized and predicting that the

Chinese way will become the more successful system in the future. China's rise, predicted Jacques, will end Western domination.

Following Jacques's line of argument, Stefan Halper, director of American studies at the University of Cambridge, put forth more evidence that China's autocratic leadership has worked well and will continue to do so domestically and internationally. In his 2012 book, *The Beijing Consensus: Legitimizing Authoritarianism in Our Time*, he argues that while the US democratic government seems to hinder its economic progress, China's autocratic leadership is laying a foundation for future economic success.²² Joshua Kurlantzick echoes Halper in his 2013 book, *Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government*:

Today, China—and to a lesser extent other successful authoritarian capitalists—offer a viable alternative to the leading democracies. In many ways, their systems pose the most serious challenge to democratic capitalism since the rise of communism and fascism in the 1920s and early 1930s. And in the wake of the global economic crisis, and the dissatisfaction with democracy in many developing nations, leaders in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are studying the Chinese model far more closely—a model that, eventually, will help undermine democracy in their countries.²³

“SURPASSING SHANGHAI”

While China's authoritarian capitalism is held up as a model for developing countries, China's educational system is downright worshipped, even in the developed West. Thomas Friedman wants America to be China only “for a day” politically, but when it comes to education, a growing number of Western political leaders, academics, school reformers, and media pundits want to be China forever. And although it's unlikely, setting aside Friedman's fantasy, that any Western democratic nation will seriously borrow

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China’s form of government any time soon, it’s already the aspiration of many Western nations to outeducate China, and to do it in the Chinese way.

For an example, read *Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World’s Leading Systems*.²⁴ Marc Tucker, CEO of the National Center for Education and the Economy (NCEE), pulled together NCEE research to analyze the five leading education

systems in the world: Finland, Japan, Singapore, Canada (Ontario), and Shanghai, chosen to represent China. Shanghai earned its place primarily because of its students’ scores on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA, coordinated by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, measures fifteen-year-old students’ reading, mathematics, and science literacy. Given every three years since 2000, it has become the world’s largest international educational assessment, with some seventy countries participating in the 2009 round—Shanghai’s first. It was the first time any Chinese students had taken the PISA or any other large-scale international assessment. The Shanghai students aced the test, scoring top in all three categories, and they did it again in the 2012 round.

The sweep shouldn’t have been surprising: Chinese students have been outscoring their counterparts in the United States and other Western countries in smaller-scale comparative studies for quite a long time. Two decades ago, *The Learning Gap: Why Our Schools Are Failing and What We Can Learn from Japanese and Chinese*

Education, coauthored by psychologists Harold Stevenson and James Stigler, systematically documented the superb performance of Chinese students and the characteristics of their outstanding education.²⁵ But the PISA results officially earned China the “world’s best education” title, and that victory had a powerful effect on the West. The *New York Times* reported that the Chinese students’ performance had “stunned” American experts and political leaders.²⁶ “An absolute wake-up call” to US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, it gave President Obama a “Sputnik moment,” suggesting that China had beaten America in education just as the former Soviet Union had beaten America into space. Ever since the 2009 PISA results came out, Obama has repeatedly vowed to outeducate China in order to outcompete it.

Shanghai is China’s most sophisticated urban center. Perhaps its students’ results were an exception? In 2012, students from nine Chinese provinces took the test. PISA chief Andreas Schleicher, the German statistician who managed to rebrand the test as the gold standard of education, hinted to BBC reporter Sean Coughlan about the unpublished results: “Shanghai is an exceptional case—and the results there are close to what I expected. But what surprised me more were the results from poor provinces that came out really well. The levels of resilience are just incredible.” Coughlan’s article, titled “China: The World’s Most Clever Country?” summed up Schleicher’s praise for Chinese education: not only would the test results for disadvantaged pupils be the envy of any Western country, but taken as a whole, “the findings indicate that China has an education system that is overtaking many Western countries.”²⁷

Such a great education is certainly worth emulating, especially for Western countries convinced they’re losing their battle with China on the education front. In December 2010, shortly after visiting China, British Secretary of Education Michael Gove published a passionate commentary in the *Telegraph*.²⁸ He recounted his amazement when he was given a book of published research

papers, all written by students in a Beijing school. "Schools in the Far East are turning out students who are working at an altogether higher level than our own," Gove wrote, urging his country "to implement a cultural revolution just like the one they've had in China." At the close of his commentary, he announced, "Like Chairman Mao, we've embarked on a Long March to reform our education system."

Gove devised a long list of revolutionary strategies, like lengthening school days and shortening holidays for British children. In April 2013, he announced his proposal, and he won strong support from the Whitehall with yet another reminder: "We can either start working as hard as the Chinese, or we'll all soon be working for the Chinese."²⁹

The message to the Brits: do as the Chinese do or else risk being taken over. John Holdren, director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, told the UK newspaper the *Independent* in 2011: "Everybody is looking at China and saying, if we don't lift our game, China is going to eat our lunch economically."³⁰

"BE AFRAID OF THE FRIENDS WHO FLATTER YOU"

China's recent accomplishments certainly deserve to be recognized, and China is of course happy to have its triumphs acknowledged by outsiders. As the oldest continuous civilization, China suffered humiliating defeats by Western powers in the 1800s, and for nearly two hundred years, it was left far behind. The Chinese economy stagnated. Chinese immigrants were mistreated and excluded from the mainstream in many Western countries. The underpinning values of the Chinese culture were called into question again and again by both the Chinese and Westerners.

Since the 1800s, outside forces have tried using religious, economic, military, and political forces to Westernize China—all

without much success. Until very recently, the West was trying to export its cultural and ideological values, its Christianity, and its economic and political system to China. Now, all of a sudden, China has been pronounced the model for others because of its superior political system, education, and culture. And those “others” include influential Westerners.

Not surprisingly, the West’s praise has been received hungrily by China, a country that has yearned for outside recognition for a long time. Compliments are warmly welcomed by the Chinese government, which is eager for any evidence to ensure its legitimacy. Publications praising China are quickly translated and published in China, where they become instant best sellers. Authors such as Thomas Friedman and Martin Jacques are China’s close friends and honored guests, treated as royalty by government officials and nationalistic media.

But questioning voices have begun to emerge. Bold Chinese scholars caution the Chinese not to be “murdered by flattery” from Western writers. In *China Refuses to Be Killed by Flattery*, Shu Taifeng, an editor of *Oriental Perspectives* (a popular Chinese news magazine similar to *Time* or *Newsweek*), explains why China should be cautious:

Why is it a bad thing to be praised? It seems to be a silly question. However, if the people who praise you do not really understand you, this flattery is either the result of general good intentions or romantic idolization as a form of self-motivation. Or it could be that they want something from you, even to lure you to sacrifice yourself for them...

Praising China has become a fashionable trend both within and without China. Their motivation varies, but regardless, “the tree wants to remain calm although the wind does not stop.” If China does not stay calm, we will lose our cool head before these sincere and not so sincere praises and lose our orientation. If so, flattery becomes murderous.

Our neighbor Japan has been “murdered by flattery.” Japan grew tremendously after the Second World War and rebuilt itself as a powerful economy in about 20 years. Western praise for Japan at the time was not a little bit less than today’s flattery of China. The American scholar Ezra Vogel published *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* in 1979, suggesting that Japan had surpassed the U.S. in many aspects. Nevertheless, in less than 10 years, Japan’s economic bubble burst and has slipped into decades of recession.³¹

“A VERY LARGE GAP”

Chinese leaders and scholars are keenly aware of the issues China faces. “China has increased its competitiveness in some areas, but there is a very large gap between China and developed countries,” said Yang Jiechi, China’s minister of foreign affairs, in his opening remarks at the 2013 US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue.³² In his book, Shu cites abundant data to show that despite three decades of stunning growth, China’s economy remains volatile, not only because it has a fragile foundation with extremely low per capita wealth but also because of structural imbalances characterized by growing income inequality, increasing mass protests, a deteriorating environment, and lagging development of “soft power.” “An even more important and perhaps key challenge is the decoupling of political and economic reforms,” Shu writes, “even the direction of reforms is still fuzzy.” Burdened with massive challenges, Shu pleads with the Chinese to remain “calm, calm, and calm” and not be fooled by Western authors such as Martin Jacques, who have a very “shallow” understanding of China.

Shu Taifeng is not alone. His book has been well received and hotly discussed inside China. In spite of its apparently negative views of China, a state-controlled publishing house published it. It was also carried online by multiple online portals under close watch of the government. Even state-run media outlets have run opinion pieces echoing Shu’s views.

Although the political system is an extremely sensitive subject in China—and debate about it is generally silenced—education is discussed pretty freely. Again, although the Chinese are happy that their students scored higher than everyone else in the world, virtually no one in China believes that the country has the best education system. The Chinese government has undertaken numerous massive efforts to reform public education. Chinese parents have spent their life savings to send their children to study overseas or in Western-style schools in China rather than keep them in the “world’s best education system.” Education has been widely recognized as the primary culprit for China’s lack of creative and innovative talents—and a major concern for China’s success in the future.

FATAL ATTRACTION: THE REAL CHINA THREAT

The West has dominated the world for two centuries, with Britain owning the nineteenth century and the United States the twentieth. At the moment it looks as if China will reign in the twenty-first century—an intensely uncomfortable prospect for America and other Western countries. According to a 2012 Pew Research Center survey, 52 percent of the general public in the United States were concerned that “China’s emergence as a world power is a major threat to the U.S.”³³ See figures 1.1 and 1.2.

While some are concerned about China’s military power, more are worried about its economic prowess. The Pew survey found that 59 percent of Americans were concerned about China’s economic strength compared to 28 percent concerned about its military strength. A majority (62 percent) of Americans viewed China as a competitor. Majorities were worried about China holding large amounts of American debt (78 percent), taking away US jobs (71 percent), and causing the large trade deficit to the United States (61 percent).

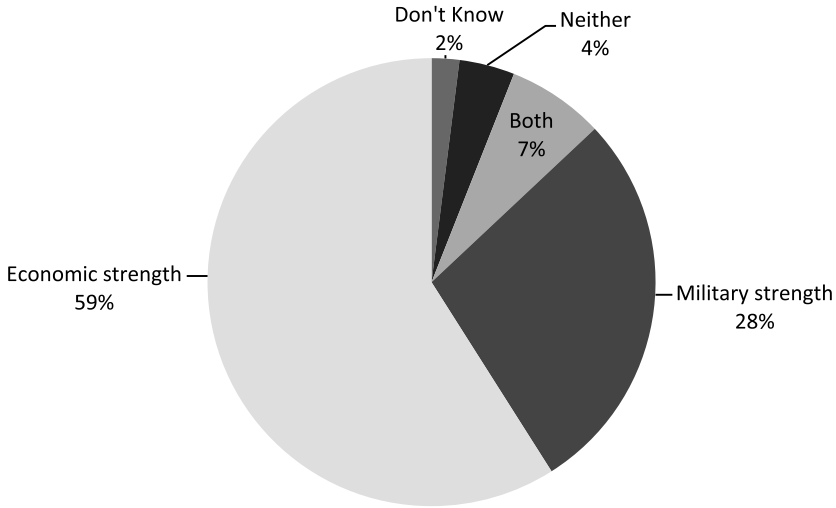


Figure 1.1 Percentage of Americans Who Are Concerned about China's Military and Economic Strength

Source: "US Public, Experts Differ on China Policies," Pew Research Center, Washington, DC. September 18, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2012/09/US-Public-and-Elite-Report-FINAL-FOR-PRINT-September-18-2012.pdf>. Reprinted with permission.

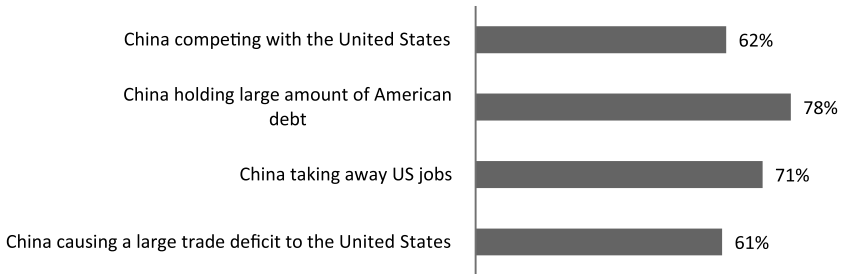


Figure 1.2 What Worries Americans the Most about China's Economy

Source: "US Public, Experts Differ on China Policies," Pew Research Center, Washington, DC. September 18, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2012/09/US-Public-and-Elite-Report-FINAL-FOR-PRINT-September-18-2012.pdf>. Reprinted with permission.

Until recently, most Westerners haven't been concerned about the existential threat the China model presents to the West. But the more we glorify China as a viable model of economic development, the more anxiety Westerners will feel about China's political influence on the global stage. In his article, "How China Will Change the Global Political Map," Martin Jacques makes this prediction:

China has the world's second largest economy. As it overtakes the United States in the relatively near future, and becomes the world's largest economy, China will exercise a growing global influence. Meanwhile, the West—the home of Western liberal democracy—is in relative economic decline. By 2030, it will, by one estimate, account for only 28 percent of global GDP, compared with 33 percent for China and 67 percent for the developing world. In such circumstances, the West's political influence is bound to decline.³⁴

Despite widespread concerns about China's rise, it is unlikely that China will invade any other country, let alone engage in military conflicts with the West. As the Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye Jr. wrote recently, "Given shared global challenges like financial stability, cybercrime, nuclear proliferation, and climate change, China and the United States also have much to gain from working together."³⁵ The economic threat is also debatable. Some economists would argue that China may have brought more economic benefits than threats to the United States and the West by opening its vast market, supplying inexpensive labor, and making stabilizing investments during times of economic turmoil. Although it is painful to see jobs lost to China, this is the nature of economic development, and such offshoring brings stimuli for new innovations and new industries. The political threat may have been grossly exaggerated as well. China, according to many analysts, is not going to take over the United States any time soon. "Right now, the United States is vastly more powerful than the

People's Republic of China," wrote Daniel W. Drezner, professor of international politics at Tufts University. "Anyone telling you otherwise is selling you something."³⁶

China does present a dangerous threat. That threat, however, does not originate with China or its actions. The threat comes from the West's current infatuation with China's educational system and from the actions that countries such as the United States and Great Britain have taken to emulate that system. Those actions betray a shallow understanding of a very old and complex culture, and they confuse short-term outcomes with long-term, sustainable progress.

Chinese education is authoritarian in nature, and it has been for centuries. The spirit of education in China today flows from a two-thousand-year history of imperial exams. Chinese education produces excellent test scores, a short-term outcome that can be achieved by rote memorization and hard work, but like the Chinese government itself, it does not produce a citizenry of diverse, creative, and innovative talent. Chinese education proved a failure back in 1842, when China lost the first Opium War to Great Britain. Ever since then, China has been trying to learn from the West.

If Western countries successfully adopt China's education model and abandon their own tradition of education, they may see their standing rise on international tests, but they will lose what has made them modern: creativity, entrepreneurship, and a genuine diversity of talents.

The only way China will win the global competition of the future is for the West to begin educating the way China does.