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Picturing China in the American Press

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David D. Perlmutter, *Picturing China in the American Press: The Visual Portrayal of Sino-American Relations in Time Magazine, 1949-1973*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007. ISBN 978-0739118207, paper, \$37.95, xxvii + 265 pp.

This book reconfirmed my assessment of David Perlmutter—whom I know solely through his prior work on visual communication—as an assiduous researcher, fine writer and discerning observer of media. Coming to the end, however, left me oddly dissatisfied, which seemed an inappropriate reaction to such a serious and meticulous study. That the book forced me into further reflection is in itself a good outcome, of course. But my verdict remains mixed.

Picturing China actually consists of two parallel works of reconstruction—one of historical occurrences and current understandings of them, the other of mediated messages about that history. Each track is deliberately distinct in approach, substance and tone; in conjunction, they share the purpose of exposing contrast, which indeed emerges in practically every respect. This structure makes for a tricky balancing act, since the main argument—that media representations diverge from historical realities—is supported in a jarring, zigzagging manner. This, of course, is characteristic of the real world; in any case, Perlmutter's clarity and circumspection enable a reader to follow the trail of evidence and thought with ease.

In other respects, the two dimensions remain disconcertingly different, and may be valuable in different ways for different constituencies. One track, based primarily on wide-ranging use of secondary and tertiary sources, provides a detailed and accessible recounting of a quarter-century of events in the People's Republic of China, U.S. responses to those events, and the troubled devolution and repair of U.S.-China relations from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to the rapprochement signaled by the ping-pong diplomacy of 1971 and culminating in Richard Nixon's historic visit of 1972. The information, familiar to anyone versed in contemporary Chinese affairs and the Sino-American relationship, is essential background for students and scholars who might not be.

The second track, based on original research and analysis, is an extended explication of *Time* magazine's depictions of China over the same stretch of years, 1949-1973. The emphasis is on visual images, including photographs, maps and cartoons, but contextualized with intelligent reference to enveloping

stories and insightful attention to captions. This portion may be particularly useful for students interested in content analysis, since it offers an exhaustive example; at the same time, in examining the entire universe of visual content from the specified years—using a "census" rather than a sample—it is atypical, often redundant and at times wearisome. In addition, it raises the eternal question of any labor-intensive content analysis: What is delivered, beyond the level of detail, that could not be gained from less structured, even casual, reading?

A prologue lays out the objective of comparing "what we know now" (p. xx) of history to what *Time* magazine suggested was going on at the time. The book then progresses chronologically through chapters centered on the immediate pre-PRC years of China's resistance to Japan as well as civil war; the Korean War years; a spate of skirmishes over Taiwan; what Perlmutter characterizes as Cold War "stasis" of the 1960s; and, finally, the beginnings of Sino-American re-engagement. Each chapter reviews relevant developments in the news with the benefit of historical perspective, followed by content analysis of *Time* visuals and related material during the same window of time.

As we learn at the outset, the major conclusion to emerge from these pages is that *Time* consistently distorted the facts according to an intentional agenda shaped largely by Time, Inc., founder Henry Luce and his legacy. This finding is neither surprising nor new; biographies of Luce and histories of his publications have been making the same point, with respect to China and much else, for decades. This is not to dismiss Perlmutter's study, which provides additional evidence and new varieties of ammunition. Among the contributions is persuasive proof of political intent at work through *Time*'s chronic "counter-captioning" to cast officially released photographs from the PRC in negative and often mocking light.

Nor is Perlmutter's discussion facile; as he makes clear, a process attended by myriad editorial, organizational, cultural and political complexities yields results that are likewise complex, fraught with nuance and sometimes contradictory. And he gives due deference to the difficulties of China-watching from Hong Kong and abroad during the long freeze in relations between the two countries. The overall pattern, though, is the familiar one of media content evolving in tandem with official policy as well as trends in public sentiment.

Perhaps the biggest gap in this work, also common to content analysis as a method, has to do with the leap from content to audience. By virtue of broad readership and ostensible agenda-setting properties, *Time* is presumed to be important as both gauge and molder of public opinion. Further discussion and demonstration are warranted. In addition, the visual content of *Time* is assumed to be a key agent of meaning and molding. I'm not convinced this is so.

I can't help thinking a better object of visual study would have been that other Luce publication, the grand old weekly *Life*, which with pass-along readership reached an estimated 12 million men and 10 million women in the 1950s and remained America's pre-eminent current affairs pictorial through the 1960s. Television pulled the rug out from under, of course, robbing the magazine of its advertising base and making its huge readership a burden rather than a boon. Meanwhile, though, *Life* arguably was a more

important purveyor than *Time* of American visions of China—all the more so when it came to pictures.

Life certainly brought U.S. readers the most frenzied images of the Cultural Revolution, a period when information from the PRC was scarce and confusing. *Life* also played a key role in Sino-U.S. reconciliation with its exclusive reports from Edgar Snow, author of *Red Star Over China* and longtime chronicler of the Chinese revolution. Writing from what would become his last trip to China, in 1970, Snow disclosed that the Chinese were open to a visit from President Richard M. Nixon. How curious that *Life*'s demise as a weekly in 1972 coincides precisely with Nixon's China visit: The final issue showed the U.S. president wielding chopsticks in Hangzhou.

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