

What do “the Chinese” Think?: Reflections on Chinese Popular Opinion

Testimony at the U.S.-China Commission

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I come to your Commission from, perhaps, a slightly different angle from others because my specialty is not politics, economics, or international relations but literature and popular culture. I am professionally interested in what ordinary Chinese people think, feel, and want from life. I use literature (and indeed anything else I can get my hands on) to study these questions.

I often cringe to hear diplomats or experts on international relations refer to “the Chinese position” on Taiwan, “the Chinese view” of textile exports, and so on. If one speaks rigorously of the Chinese populace as a whole, it is almost impossible to find “the” Chinese opinion on anything at all. There are 1.3 billion Chinese, and they exhibit considerable variety. What diplomats and political scientists really mean when they speak of “the” Chinese view is--to put it bluntly--the official Chinese government view. This view may or may not coincide with the opinions of other parts of the populace.

The diplomats and others who speak of “the” Chinese view sometimes defend the usage by saying it is simply shorthand for “the government view” and that they of course are aware that underlying realities are more complex. This would be all right, I suppose, if everyone constantly bore the shorthand in mind. But in the rough and tumble of debate over of money, arms, sovereignty, and the like, the distinction is lost more often than not. The government view comes to stand, simplistically, for all of China.

When foreigners make this lazy elision, it suits China’s unelected rulers quite well. They have no interest in drawing attention to any distinction between their own opinions and “China’s.” Indeed they often deliberately present themselves as speaking for all of China when their actual goal is a narrow strengthening of their own rule. A world lulled into the habit of equating “China” with “the Chinese government” is too easily misled.

For example, from listening to China’s rulers one could get the impression that positions like the following dominate in Chinese popular thought: adamant opposition to Taiwan independence, fear of the Dalai Lama as a “splittist,” resolute opposition to terrorist activity in Xinjiang, and disgust with the evil cult called Falun Gong. Some Chinese do hold these views, but many do not. Moreover many Chinese would not even think about this list of topics were it not for the state’s inveterate “thought work” efforts that stimulate them--and sometimes require them--to form and express opinions. These topics are not the kind that naturally hold center stage in Chinese daily life.

What are? The evidence is overwhelming that Chinese popular thinking, now as is the past, is preoccupied by daily-life issues: Do I have a job? Is my family healthy? Can my children go to school? Will my old age be secure? To the extent that broader

social and political concerns impinge, they are still concerned with daily welfare: Are taxes excessive? Why is the gap between rich and poor getting so big? Are the leaders corrupt? The extensive popular commentary in uncensored “oral rhythmic sayings” (*shunkouliu*) is almost exclusively focused on such questions. The question of whether the Dalai Lama is a splittist or not would come far, far down any list of natural concerns. If the government’s propaganda system were to leave the Taiwan question alone, it, too, would not matter much. Falun Gong would draw considerably more attention, but much of it would be positive, with Falun Gong viewed as a route to daily-life health and well-being.

When the Chinese government leads the outside world to believe that “the Chinese people” stand behind government views, the outside world needs to peel off three levels of possible bias before drawing conclusions:

--Have the Chinese people really expressed such views? (Or is the government simply making rhetorical claims for its own purposes?)

--If the Chinese people really have expressed such views, do the views reflect their true inner thoughts and feelings? (Or are people just delivering the “right answer” for prudential reasons?)

--If the expressed views truly do reflect inner feelings, did those feelings arise naturally from daily life? (Or were they stimulated and shaped by government “thought work”?)

Let me sketch these issues in slightly more detail.

1. The Chinese government often presumes to speak for all of the Chinese people as if they were a monolith. One does not have to be a China expert to see these rhetorical flourishes as far-fetched, and sometimes even funny. “The feelings of 1.3 billion Chinese people would be hurt,” for example, by U.N. criticism of China’s human rights record. It is not quite accurate to describe these outlandish claims as “lies.” In lying, a person seeks deliberately to mislead a listener about a matter of fact; but when it uses this kind of rhetoric, the Chinese government is not even thinking about facts one way or the other. It is simply manipulating language in pursuit of its own interests, a process in which truth or falsity is incidental. The manipulation is not always bald and obvious, however. Sometimes it is subtle, and even experienced scholars can be taken in. Chalmers Johnson, for example, recently wrote that:

China fears that Taiwanese radicals want to declare independence a month or two before [the 2008] Olympics, betting that China would not attack then because of its huge investment in the forthcoming games. Most observers believe, however, that China would have no choice but to go to war because failure to do so would invite a domestic revolution against the Chinese Communist Party for violating the national integrity of China.¹

Note, first, Johnson’s easy equation of “China” with “Chinese government elite” in his claim about what “China fears.” Is this shorthand, forgetfulness, or naïveté? Next, his claim that if Beijing were to make concessions on the Taiwan question it could spark “domestic revolution” suggests that 1.3 billion Chinese would be ready to rise up and risk

¹Chalmers Johnson, “No Longer the ‘Lone’ Superpower: Coming to Terms with China” at <http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?mm=3&yr=2005>

all on this issue. It is highly doubtful that most Chinese--especially if left alone on the issue--would want to do this. Johnson's statement also misreads the constituency of the Party elite. It is true that the appearance of "softness" on Taiwan policy could leave top leaders vulnerable from below. But the threat would come from those *right below*, i.e., among rivals who could grab the issue and use it to try to jockey themselves to the top position. "The masses," unless manipulated, don't really figure into such calculations, because they don't have political power. Johnson's image of "domestic revolution" betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of Chinese politics. It buys into the government's repeated claim that it--the ruling elite--is the same as all of China.

2. The combination of traditional Chinese concepts of "proper speech" with decades of repressive Communist rule have produced in the contemporary Chinese populace a marvelous ability to dissemble. We should not judge the Chinese people harshly for this; they have developed their skills in response to the natural and universal human preferences to survive and to thrive. But we must bear in mind that their surface expression--in public meetings, in answering questionnaires, in talking with foreigners whom one does not know very well, etc.--often has little to do with their inner feelings. The pressures to perform the "right answer"--meaning the answer that the context calls for, not the answer that springs from inside--can be overwhelming. And with many years of practice, performing right answers can come to seem so natural that a speaker will lose all sense of strangeness or alienation while doing the performance. To say that "Falun Gong is an evil cult" becomes the way to get along in school or to keep one's job at the factory. The truth or falsity of the statement doesn't matter; it is the "right" statement because it works in daily life. It might or might not correspond to the views that a person might have at home, while reflecting on things in private.

3. Sometimes views held at home, in private, etc., do correspond with those of the governing elite, and sometimes, of course, this coincidence of views is perfectly natural. But sometimes not. Especially on political questions, one must ask how much of the coincidence of opinion is an effect of the propaganda system. Recently a widely-publicized opinion poll in China showed that 60% of Chinese feel that American policies toward Taiwan will become the most important obstacle in Sino-U.S. relations in coming years.² But this survey comes after several years of unrelenting and extremely one-sided presentations of the Taiwan issue in the Chinese media. Hence one must ask: absent that stream of invective, would popular perceptions be the same? What would popular Chinese views of the Taiwan issue have been if, over the same period, a free press had presented a variety of views to Chinese readers? He Qinglian's recent book (How the Chinese government controls the media)³ argues a strong case for the connection between government propaganda and warped popular opinion in China. I attach here a review of He's book that I wrote last year for *The New York Review of Books*.

What can Americans or other outsiders do? Not too much, I'm afraid. Freer expression and a better informed Chinese public could do immense good in China, but the achievement of these results will depend mostly on people working inside China. Still, some things that outsiders can do are:

²News.Sohu.com, 10:13 a.m., March 2, 2005

³New York: Human Rights in China, 2004

--Support people inside China (journalists, lawyers, special-issue activists) who are seeking more openness in the media and more respect for rights.

--Get good information into China as much as possible via the Internet, email, and radio and television (including Radio Free Asia and the Voice of America).

--Constantly remind our colleagues in government, the press, and academe that "China" does not mean the top leadership of the Communist Party of China. The point is not trivial, and will have numerous consequences for action if bourn properly in mind.