

## “Understanding China: How the West got China Wrong”

By  
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Ms. Liu pointed out that the US-Chinese relationship has gone through cycles of enchantment and disenchantment. And in fact the US has gotten China wrong more than once, which she illustrated with three slices of history.

Deng Xiaoping succeeded Mao as China’s paramount leader in the late 1970s. 1978-79 was also the time of the *Democracy Wall* -- i.e. the public posting and consideration of previously taboo topics. Americans thought that this was a harbinger of political liberalization. Also, Deng’s personality was relatively friendly compared with his dour and opaque predecessors.

- It turned out that the Democracy Wall was used as an instrument to attack old-guard political rivals, and at a chosen time was shut down.
- And despite Deng’s more open style, he was not admiring of the US as a democratic model, but rather as a source of ideas for helping China to modernize its own industry, agriculture, science and technology, and military.
  - Deng’s famous dictum of “biding one’s time and hiding one’s capabilities” was a tactic for being able to modernize and strengthen while minimizing others’ concerns.

The 1980s were punctuated by Tiananmen Square. The Tiananmen protests persisted, not because of rising official toleration (hoped for in the West), but because of a functional disconnect in China’s leadership – Deng had two titular successors, yet retained great influence. Eventually China’s leaders were able to crack down harshly on the protestors.

- The Tiananmen crackdown damaged China’s international image, but by then US and Chinese business and security affairs were somewhat intertwined.
  - During this period, American journalist John Pomfret characterized the relationship as *conflicted, love-hate* (arguably still so today).

The 1990s saw the explosion of the Internet. Observers in the West saw the Internet as unstoppable, a bastion of free speech – a virtual democracy wall. The Chinese, however, saw it simply as a tool. Today such technology is being used quite effectively to enhance social control.

- Ms. Liu characterized the level of surveillance in Xinjiang province, for example, as *Orwellian*, second only to North Korea.

Today, Beijing is showing a more confident and aggressive face to the world, as reflected in such things as the Belt and Road Initiative, pressure on Hong Kong, and parades showing off military hardware. It appears that the Deng prescription to bide one's time and hide one's capabilities is being debated, if not revised.

China will continue to act in service of domestic priorities such as social stability and regime security. Westerners who think that Beijing is overly concerned with foreign perceptions will continue to be confounded.

**Paul F. Herman, Jr.**