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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Perlmutter. *Picturing China in the American Press: The Visual Portrayal of Sino-American Relations in Time Magazine, 1949-1973*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007. x + 265 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-1819-1.

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## Glimpses of Pandas and Dragons

David Perlmutter's *Picturing China in the American Press* offers an example of how to analyze "Politics"—the stuff of statecraft, government, diplomacy, war, and peace within national and global frames—while also paying attention to "politics"—the myriad of ways power and authority are constructed, and the means by which truth claims are transmitted, accepted, or challenged within specific cultural frames. Perlmutter, a scholar of visual communication and journalism and a self-professed Sinophile, looks to the ways in which the American media, specifically Henry Luce's powerful newsweekly *Time*, portrayed China in the years between the Second World War and the early 1970s. Though the book is not without some shortcomings, it accomplishes its objective of providing "insights and data that ... help us better understand the tremendous difficulty and many subtle nuances of creating accurate, reliable, and meaningful images of other countries, peoples, and far-off events" (p. xviii).

Perlmutter's inquiry into image making is complemented by a compelling and rich political and diplomatic history of China and Sino-American relations in the late twentieth century. Each chapter pursues "dual chronologies": the first recounts historical events and interprets them in light of current scholarship (which has benefited from historians' access to newly available archival material); and the second discusses how these events were imaged by *Time* in the magazine's famous and influential cover illustrations, and in the maps, charts, cartoons, and captioned photographs that accompanied its edito-

rial copy.

Perlmutter selects *Time* as his lens for a number of reasons, among them the comparative abundance of stories on and images of China in its pages, and the publication's powerful role as a shaper of public opinion. The analysis of *Time* offers, moreover, a case study of what we might call the subjectivity of organizations. Perlmutter argues trenchantly that the magazine's portrayal of China refracted, rather than reflected, the political sensibilities of its stalwartly pro-China, anticommunist owner, editor, and guiding spirit, Henry Luce. Perlmutter's examination of the rhetorical and imagistic style of the "Lucepress" (which also included *Life* and *Fortune*) reveals the complex, often contradictory, set of habits and dispositions with which a subject—in this case, a popular newsweekly—engages the world.

Perlmutter points out the Lucepress's fealty to a "cultural China"—the ancient and majestic society with its artistic, literary, and philosophical artifacts—and the publisher's dogged attempt to exalt that national abstraction even as *Time* constructed and excoriated a post-1949 "Red China" in its pages. The book brilliantly examines the magazine's tribulations in maintaining such a double stance and provides a fascinating account of the dilemma Luce and his editors faced, and the solution they developed, when China severely restricted access for Western journalists after 1949. As the only available images of China were propaganda pieces dispensed by the Communist Party's Eastfoto news service, *Time* found a so-

lution in what Perlmutter calls “contrarian captioning,” whereby, for example, a picture of a smiling Mae Zedong would bear the caption “pudgy dictator” (p. 75). Contrarian captioning became a mainstay for the Lucepress as it sought simultaneously to keep China in view and to malign the usurper it saw in the Communist Party.

What emerges from Perlmutter’s nuanced study of *Time* is a portrait of a historical actor that strived to be objective even as it manufactured truths, and whose relationship with the institutions and figures of U.S. political power was both cozy and fraught with discord. Perlmutter intends the book as a “contribution to the public debate on the question of how the press does or should influence the making of foreign policy” (p. xxiv), and scholars of political communication will be intrigued by his description of the magazine’s tightrope walk between propaganda and journalism. Perlmutter makes a convincing case that *Time*, in its attempt to deliver what it saw as a politically necessary message to the American public, “systematically attempted to skew, recode, redirect, or overturn for persuasive ends the average American’s image of China” (p. xxvi).

The chapters proceed chronologically, moving from World War II and the 1949 revolution that established the People’s Republic of China, to the Korean War and the Taiwan Straits Crises of the 1950s, the descent of the “Bamboo Curtain” and the Vietnam War of the 1960s, and the gradual rapprochement that culminated in Nixon’s 1973 visit to Beijing. From this nonspecialist’s perspective, Perlmutter’s historical narrative, drawn mainly from secondary sources, is informative and capably written, if a bit exhaustive for a book whose stated focus is images. Indeed, the difficulty this study faces is that of drawing together the exhaustive historical account and the analysis of imagery in a practical and graceful way. Perlmutter seems aware that readers may feel a sense of digression as they make their way through the dense political, military, and diplomatic history that opens each chapter, and attempts to mitigate it by providing, at the beginning of the image analysis that closes each chapter, an italicized précis describing the newsweekly’s treatment of the events just recounted. Most chapters also include tables and graphs detailing the tenor and func-

tion of the images of China in *Time*, adding a quantitative dimension to Perlmutter’s otherwise qualitative analysis.

While there is an abundance of things to admire about *Picturing China in the American Press*, the book could have been strengthened by including more images—there are only seventeen illustrations. On several occasions, Perlmutter describes (soundly, one suspects) images that are, for reasons of copyright, licensing, or perhaps availability, not there for the reader’s perusal and corroboration. Wendy Kozol’s illuminating and image-rich study of another Lucepress product in *Life’s America* (1994) springs to mind as a model here. As trenchant and provocative as Perlmutter’s arguments about the images are, more examples would only bolster them.

A second shortcoming is the author’s scant attention to race as a shaper of American perceptions of China. Though the book assails the stereotyping of the “masses” and “hordes” that have characterized Western visions of China since Marco Polo onward, it fails to connect political and cultural images in which *Time* explicitly traded with the specifically racial thinking that emerged in the nineteenth century to account for human difference and to justify various regimes of inequality, such as colonialism. As such works as Robert Lee’s *Orientalism* (1999) have shown, racialized images of Asians and Asian Americans constructed and/or perpetuated notions of Asian political inferiority and barbarism— notions that certainly would have been common to the overwhelmingly white, middlebrow *Time* audience. Perlmutter notes glancingly that race played a part in *Time*’s depictions—as in his aside that a white woman would never have been displayed like the half-naked female victim of the 1958 Chinese bombing of Jinmen (p. 128)—but a more sustained look at the impact of race would have enriched his account of a constructed China.

Overall, however, *Picturing China in the American Press* will give scholars and students a vivid and rewarding look at a type of nation building—that which takes place in the cultural imaginary—no less important than the construction of institutions and processes of governance and statecraft. In picturing China as dragon or as panda, *Time* gave American audiences compellingly reductive fictions by which to live, dream, vote, and fight.

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