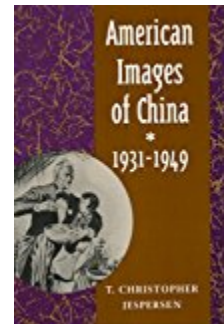


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

T. Christopher Jespersen. *American Images of China, 1931-1949*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996. xx + 254 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-2596-5.

Reviewed by Stephen G. Craft (Tunghai University)
Published on H-PCAACA (September, 1996)



America's Image of China

The 1989 Tiananmen Massacre not only spawned a cottage industry in accounts of the event, but also re-hashed the old debate of why Americans and their leaders have consistently misperceived China. With Tiananmen in mind, T. Christopher Jespersen attempts to explain why Americans throughout their history have viewed China, in part, with “naivete, paternalism, and awe” and how America’s China images have influenced American foreign policy. The answer, he argues, is found in domestic sources alone. The mass media, popular culture, and the work of Chinese relief agencies have provided the cultural and political contexts that either facilitated or limited foreign policy (p. xv).

Jespersen concentrates on the 1931-1949 period because he contends that the Great Depression and World War II undermined America’s exceptionalist values. He claims that the need for Americans “to reassure themselves of their uniqueness and special place in history” lay behind American paternalism toward China and the “projection of idealized images about their own characteristics, attributes, and habits onto the Chinese” (p. xix).

The book, however, is actually built around Henry Luce, who was convinced that America could “fulfill its historic mission in China.” Through his *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* magazines, which were filled with Luce’s “dangerous and harmful illusions about China” (p. 22), and the United China Relief (UCR) organization which he co-founded, Luce presented to millions of Americans the images of a democratic China fighting the Japanese and Chinese Communists under the Christian leadership of

Chiang Kai-shek. In the end, Americans “accepted the idea that China was very much like the United States” (p. 81). However, Luce’s China images were betrayed by the “loss of China” to the Chinese Communists in 1949 because Luce and his fellow Americans “erred in thinking that China was made up of people who in their hearts wanted to become just like them” (p. 182).

Succinctly and well written, *American Images* does provide new information on the UCR, Madame Chiang, and propagandists like Frank Price. However, there are flaws. Along with no discussion of how popular culture influenced Washington policymakers, Jespersen presents little evidence that Luce’s mass media images determined Franklin Roosevelt’s and Harry Truman’s foreign policy options. Instead, he provides ample evidence that Luce had almost no influence on foreign policy making, and that, after hearing out people acquainted with China’s actual situation, FDR and Truman overcame their idealized images of China when they reasoned out their policies (pp. 124-25).

Nor does Jespersen show how the Great Depression and World War II undermined American exceptionalism, or how Americans, other than Luce, tried to export American popular culture. One would expect American images of China to be influenced by, for example, the “Back to the Land” Movement, or, to find among the thousands of letters that FDR received daily expressions of the need to restore America’s uniqueness.

Flaws aside, Jespersen is still a good beginning for those who want to better understand the China images

of Henry Luce and like-minded Sinophiles.

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