China’s New Attitude

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There is an old story, probably apocryphal, that takes place in the 19th century, at the height of British Imperialism in China. A British merchant, full of himself, walks up to a wizened old Confucian. He gestures to the stately Western buildings in Shanghai’s famous Bund, and asks: “Well, old man, what do you think of Western Civilization?” The Confucian’s response: “I think it would be a good idea.”

This story occurred to me during a recent visit to Shanghai because I felt a bit like the Confucian, clinging to a sense of pride in a Western system now beset with problems as I contemplated the Shanghai World Expo—the most recent monument to wealth, power and commercial dreams built by the other guys.

China’s growing wealth and status is of course old news to most of us. Anyone not paying attention was jolted to attention during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, a $60b extravaganza that made last year’s winter Olympics in Vancouver seem almost quaint.

But if China’s wealth and power isn’t new, its attitude is. There is almost an air of arrogance in China’s recent posture toward the U.S. and the west — to the extent I’ve sometimes thought: “My god, these folks are becoming just like us!”

The new sense of hubris in China was clearly reflected in the treatment President Obama received in his first trip to Beijing last November, when China, angered by the U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan and his visit with the Dalai Lama early in the year, seemed to dispense with even the pro forma
niceties and went on the offensive on a range of issues. The trip was quickly followed by what the U.S. perceived as a Chinese ambush at the global climate change summit at Copenhagen—where China, rather than compromising, simply lead a third world attack on the developed countries.

China has since cooled its rhetoric and stepped back a bit, as evidenced by Chinese party General Secretary Hu Jintao’s attendance at the nuclear summit in Washington in April, and the restart of high-level bilateral strategic and economic dialogue in May. But the new edge in China’s attitude toward the U.S. is one we have to learn to deal with. It includes a new willingness to allow public criticism of the U.S. within China, as evinced by a spate of popular books with strong nationalist stances against America, some by current officers of the People’s Liberation Army.

This new attitude is evident even in non-public conversations with Chinese, as during training sessions for young Chinese officials at the Mansfield Center. A comment by a sharp young guy in our last group was an eye opener. “In the past,” he said, “we may have pretended we were ignoring U.S. criticism, but secretly we always cared about what you thought of us.” He then shrugged apologetically and said, “Now, though, we just don’t give a damn.” Chinese friends, although always polite, have also been freer to ask about U.S. problems: “You’re a rich country,” they say, “Why can’t you figure out how to provide decent health care for your people?” Excellent question.

The change in China’s attitude about the U.S. and itself has several sources. One is certainly the growth of a new Chinese nationalism. This is partially the result of their leaders’ skillful effort to unify a country still beset by potentially destabilizing problems. But it also reflects a well-earned pride in what China has become: a wealthy, dynamic and suddenly very influential country.
More than that, Chinese seem to revel in the way the tables have turned on the U.S. Even many Chinese who agreed with us got tired of constant public U.S. criticisms of China in recent years. From their perspective, we were criticizing China for driving up global prices, though it did so within a market system we urged them to embrace. We hectored them on democracy and human rights, until the “war on terror” made it inconvenient for us to do so, suggesting that our beliefs weren’t so fundamental after all. We pounded on China to revalue its currency and to “get their economic house in order” as we ourselves slowly sank into monstrous debt. China, grumbling under its breath, bailed us out by buying billions upon billions of U.S. Treasury bills.

China’s respect for the west seemed to plummet with the recent massive global recession, when not only western economies but many of our democratic systems seemed to founder, sinking into partisan gridlock and disarray over unsolved problems. In contrast, China, less worried about democratic consensus, forged ahead with a massive government investment plan that has brought renewed prosperity -- and enormous new confidence.

In point of fact, China isn’t doing as well as it portrays itself. Its new pride has masked domestic issues—income gaps, demographic pressures, pollution, health care, corruption—that will eventually slow its growth and its ascent to super power status. Many economists also fear that China’s real estate bubble can short-circuit its economic resurgence and prosperity, grievously compounding our problems in the West.

However one views the situation, China’s challenges are a litmus test for our commitment to own values. In cynical moments with Chinese friends, I’ve sometimes responded to their criticisms of the U.S. by saying something like—our system may stink, but it’s a lot better than yours. But it’s time we
begin to back that up. We need to diffuse the partisan bickering paralyzing our system and find a way to rebuild the global image America enjoyed but squandered at the end of the cold war. To do so will involve a collective maturity and resolve that we haven’t shown for a while. But actually showcasing more of the values of western civilization we embrace, I think, would be a very good idea.

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