

David D. Perlmutter, **Picturing China in the American Press: The Visual Portrayal of Sino-American Relations in *TIME* Magazine**, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007, 265 pp., \$37.95 (paperback).

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Picturing China in the American Press is a book about visual journalism and Sino-American relations. The author, David Perlmutter, is a documentary photographer, an op-ed columnist, and a journalism professor at the University of Kansas. Similar to his previous books like *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy: Framing Icons of Outrage in International Crises* (1998), this book deals with the relationship between visual communication and international relations.

Picturing China intends to analyze how China's images presented by *TIME* magazine influenced the public perception of China in the U.S. and consequently U.S. policy toward China. The period examined by this book is from 1949 to 1973, covering the events from the founding of the People's Republic, the Korean War, the Taiwan Straits crises, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, to Nixon's journey to China in early 1970s. Each of the chronologically arranged five chapters consists of two parts: history and images. The first part narrates and analyzes what happened during that period of time from the author's viewpoint based on contemporary sources. The second part describes and interprets the *TIME* pictures, cartoons, photos, maps, and so on, published during the same period, showing how China was represented then to the American public. For instance, the photo (Jan. 1, 1973) titled "Nixons on a tour of the Forbidden City looking at Chinese Dragon Statue" shows the president and wife laughing with real delight. The photo intends to say, according to the author, that the dragon, so often the image of "a menacing China," is "no longer mysterious, and certainly no longer threatening" (p. 225).

The readers will find that the pictures published then might contradict the present-day narrations of that part of the history which the author calls "a key point" of this book. The author tries to answer the following questions: What did we see? What did we not see? What were we told about what the pictures meant, symbolized, or stood for? In a word, the author tells the readers how *TIME* editors attempted to help ordinary Americans construct their images of China, accurate or distorted, in a changing world.

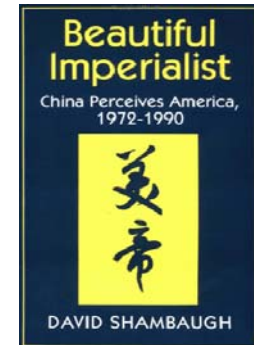
Henry Luce, the owner of *TIME*, was quoted at the beginning of the book as saying: "You know the remarkable thing about China is that everyone who comes here becomes enchanted with the



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tremendous possibilities for achieving whatever it is they want to achieve." His interest in China was rooted in the early years he spent in Shandong, China, where he was born to an American missionary family. Years after he created *TIME* and acted as its chief editor, the magazine's "China factor" grew so strong that Perlmutter claimed "no American news platform had more print word and images about China than *TIME*" (Perlmutter, 1996). It is important to know that Luce "had very strong opinions on what kind of China he wanted readers to know about" (p. xviii), and he never hesitated to admit that purpose.

David Shambaugh, an American sinologist, once published a book on Sino-American relations titled *Beautiful Imperialist*, which was a humorous "direct" translation of the Chinese term "U.S. imperialism (*meidi*), "cleverly suggesting the love-hate relationship between the two countries. Henry Luce himself held this complicated attitude shared among Americans toward China over the years.



As a news magazine, *TIME* used a variety of images to visualize its "first draft of history," and the book *Picturing China* cited a number of illustrations to show how China was portrayed and represented in different historic periods between 1949 and 1973. The author believes that three factors affect the way readers interpret an image: historical background, cultural allusions, and words surrounding it on the page (p. xx). It is interesting to note that to the contemporary reader, some pictures recorded ignorance and prejudices instead of facts. A map of "Korea's Waistland" carried in the October 1950 issue shows "Manchuria" (*dongbei*, or Northeast in Chinese) without mentioning that it belonged to China. The map displays red-rimmed arrows indicating "Red supply lines" entering from Manchuria backed by the Soviet Union. Before and even after the Chinese troops entered Korea in November 1950, *TIME* "projected in maps and diagrams, illustrated in photos, and described in captions and articles" (p. 57) presenting an estimation as expressed by Secretary Marshall that China was "literally under the direction of the Soviet Union." The "puppet" image of China misled Americans into thinking that the Soviet Union, trying to avoid direct confrontation with the U.S. after World War II, would not allow China to intervene. This was the case even after Premier Chou Enlai repeatedly declared that the Chinese people would not "let alone imperialists to invade their neighbors" (p. xxiv). Hence American leaders and public were shocked later when Chinese troops crossed the border and entered Korea.



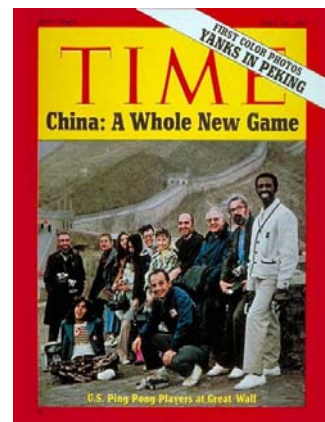
Figure 2.1. October 16, 1950: Map of "Korea's Waistland" (sic). (Artist: R. M. Chapin Jr. Copyright 1950 by Time, Inc. Reprinted with permission.)

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One of the causes for the distortion of China's image projected by news stories and pictures in *TIME* during the 1950s-1960s is that for a long period of time, Western reporters were kept out of China. As a result,

American news media relied on pictures taken of China by the official PRC media which were regarded as sheer communist propaganda by *TIME*'s standards. However, *TIME* editors invented a way, although against the rules of photojournalism, to use contrarian captions to attack the images. For instance, a photo taken by the Chinese official news agency Eastfoto showing Chairman Mao Tse-tung's pictures hoisted by the cheering crowd in a Beijing parade (Oct. 30, 1950 issue) carried a caption "pudgy dictator" (p. 75). Another early 1951 Eastfoto picture of captured Americans in the Korean War was captioned by *TIME*, "Some GIs who escaped reported harsh treatment" (p. 76). Yet another photo from Eastfoto showed students rallying with fists in the air and posters in hands, was interpreted by the *TIME* caption as "ready to believe that black is white" (p. 78).

As the author puts it, *TIME* magazine attempted to systematically "recode, redirect, or overturn for persuasive ends the average American's image of China" (p. xxvi). The *TIME* pictures served that purpose well and was best illustrated in a quantitative analysis. The years 1971-1972 were among the richest periods for pictures about China in the total dataset of pictures from 1949 to 1973, and the rate of "social dysfunction" pictures, or the negative views of China peaked in 1970 and collapsed in the following three years during and after President Nixon's successful visit to China (p. 202). *TIME*'s April 26, 1971 cover was a delightful photo of smiling American visitors on the Great Wall, with captions reading "China: a whole new game" and "First color photos! Yanks in Beijing!" The photo itself was, however, "aesthetically and narratively dull" for a high quality magazine like *TIME*, but it gained "iconic status" (p. 210) because it depicted and symbolized an historic event as well as a new perception of China which *TIME* editors intended to advocate.



The title of the book *Picturing China* reminds us of the famous comparison between "the world outside" and "pictures in our heads" in Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*. "The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind," Lippmann said, "It has to be explored, reported, and imagined" (1997, p. 18). China was such a remote and strange world and Americans had to form the pictures or



images of China in their heads mainly from information provided by the media like *TIME*. Since information was limited, and complicated reality and events had to be compressed into very short messages like pictures, often by reporters and editors with biases, distortion was unavoidable. The image of China, consequently, was formed by a collection of stereotypes based on oversimplified conceptions. China was associated with a fierce dragon, or an overpopulated hell behind "bamboo curtains" (an image borrowed from the Soviet "iron curtain"), and Mao was characterized as a "pudgy dictator," Chinese communists as Stalin's puppets and cold warriors, and

the people as subservient coolies. The facts we see depend upon "the habits of our eyes" (Lippmann, p. 54), and the "habits" of seeing China, or "framing" China, were cultivated over a long time, mostly by the mass media. When "facts" seen through habitual eyes became opinions, and then "crystallized into what is called Public Opinion" and "National Will" (Lippmann, p. 19), media like *TIME* would be performing the role of the opinion leader and agenda setter for policy makers in the U.S.

As "a reflective index of American images of China" (p. xix), *TIME* was regarded by President Kennedy as a magazine that has "reached more influential members of the nation living outside of Washington and New York than any other news service" (p. xviii). From the author's narration and analysis of *TIME*'s history during that critical period of some 25 years, we can trace the impact of visual messages from the mass media upon the formation of stereotypes and public opinions, the construct of national images, foreign policy, and international relations.

As a Chinese reader, I was very much interested in how China was also misled by *TIME* and other American media. According to the author, Mao and other Chinese leaders, following closely news and information from American press, at first got the impression that America was "not willing to defend Korea" (p. 57), because, for instance, *TIME* repeatedly failed to include Korea within the perimeter of American Pacific defence (p. 56). But later *TIME* played a role in "taunting and threatening 'Red' China, thereby provoking Mao to assume the worst about American intentions" (p. 71) — the direct invasion of China. It was said that Mao and his comrades often read translated versions of news from American press including *TIME*, and the news reports were taken as "representations of White House foreign policy (p. xxiii), which was often not the case. President Nixon, as one of the U.S. leaders who realized this problem, wrote to Mao while visiting Beijing in 1972, stating, "we have a thousand newspaper columnists . . . and one thousand politicians, congressmen and senators . . ." and "they have a right under our system to make statements. They do not consult with us before they make these statements" (p. 185). The President was, in fact, telling Mao that the American press did not speak for their head of state, even with statements regarding such important events like his official visit to China.

Mao must have been taken aback by Nixon's statement, and so would other Chinese, who had and still have today the habit of picturing the American press as the organ and tool directly controlled by the U.S. government. Communication scholars still have a lot to do to help people realize and overcome long-held stereotypes between cultures and systems.

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