A Review of “Living with the Dragon: How the American Public Views the Rise of China”

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Book Reviews

Benjamin I. Page and Tao Xie
Living with the Dragon: How the American Public Views the Rise of China
New York, NY: Columbia University Press
212 pp., $27.50 hardcover
ISBN: 9780231152082
Publication Date: June 2010

Benjamin Page, an expert on American public opinion, and Tao Xie, a Chinese political scientist, have teamed up to produce this latest addition to a small but growing (with uneven quality) body of literature that studies American perceptions toward China (including Leonard Kusnitz’s Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: America’s China Policy [1984], Tsan-Kuo Chang’s The Press and China Policy: The Illusion Sino-American Relations 1950–1984 [1993], and Hongshan Li and Zhaohui Hong’s Image, Perception, and the Making of U.S.-China Relations [1998]). In a very useful forward to the book, senior China watcher Andrew Nathan briefly compares the disciplined foreign policy making in China and the decentralized foreign policy making in the United States, which allows public opinion to play a role. While international relations realists, who see diplomacy as a matter of realpolitik, may see the Chinese approach as more sensible, this book suggests otherwise. Using several sets of survey data, the authors conclude that the American views toward China are consistently moderate and balanced. This conclusion is consistent with Page’s thesis in his earlier work, The Rational Public.

The book examines several aspects of American views toward China. On the economic front, Americans are aware of China’s economic rise and worried about job losses, China’s alleged unfair trade practices, the quality of Chinese products, and Chinese attempted acquisition of U.S. companies. However, such public wariness does not translate to protectionism. Americans still prefer to have good trade relations with China. On the security front, Americans have become more aware of China’s increasing diplomatic influence and military cloud in the Pacific and other regions. Understandably,
they see such Chinese influence as challenges to U.S. status, notwithstanding China’s proclamations of a “peaceful rise.” In 2008, “some two-fifths of Americans said that the development of China as a world power represented a critical threat to the vital interest of the United States.” Another half said it was an “important but not critical threat,” and practically no Americans surveyed said “no worry at all” (55–56). However, China was ranked below other potentially “critical threat” issues, such as energy disruption or terrorism. Again, security worries do not mean preferring confrontational policy. Most Americans prefer the building up of regional alliances to check China. However, few of them express any eagerness to confront China militarily. Most tellingly, the survey data indicate that most Americans do not support the use of U.S. troops to protect Taiwan from Chinese attacks.

Americans find China’s ways of restricting human rights and democracy repugnant. They support diplomatic pressures and the activities of NGOs. Yet unhappiness is just unhappiness, as “there is little sentiment for doing much about it” (74). Exporting democracy remains a low priority, and most Americans do not want to jeopardize economic relations for the sake of democracy or human rights. Finally, the authors look at the state of U.S.–China relations. Again, “the attitudes of ordinary Americans toward China are consistent with a ‘rational public’ perspective on public opinion” (110). Public sentiment toward China is “lukewarm” but nonetheless “warm enough” (116). While the opinions between the elite and the masses do diverge on several occasions, the general public opinion does not constitute significant obstacles to the ways that the policy elite formulate China policy. Instead, public opinion acts like a “system of dikes,” in which official policymaking is given wide discretion within the constraints of public opinion.

It could be that as long as China remains authoritarian, Americans will never feel the way they feel about fellow democracies. Nevertheless, any positive turn in U.S.–China relations could generate positive public opinion. Also, developments within China shape American views. The authors therefore suggest to Chinese policymakers that American attitudes toward China to a large degree depend not on the number of Confucius Institutes but rather on how China evolves and manages its own polity, economy, and foreign policy.

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