David Bell

Dr. Joshua Howard

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Idealizing China: A Propagated Effort

China has a rich history dates back thousands of years. The cultural values and political aspirations of Chinese people developed over that time. The United States, on the other hand, has a history that dates back only hundreds of years. During the 20th century, the illusion that China aspired to be like the United States circulated. Americans believed that a paternal relationship existed between them and the Chinese. The United States would Americanize China. How is it possible that Americans developed the idea that Chinese people aspired to be like them? The American images of China were developed by the influence of Henry Luce's Time Inc., the United China Relief, and Madame Chiang Kai-shek.

Henry Luce played a major role in creating the illusion that China was on the verge of becoming Americanized. His outlet of creating the illusion was the media empire known as Time Inc. His corporation gave him the power to shape the minds of many Americans. By 1941, the magazines *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* had 3.8 million subscribers.[[1]](#endnote-1) Luce had the ability to publicize his opinions, which derived from his paternalistic view that China would develop in America's image. He attempted to force that change through American policy by misrepresenting China to the American people. Consequently, Luce "sought to foster illusions about Sino-American harmony that Americans would then insist must be preserved."[[2]](#endnote-2) His strive to influence public opinion was intended to direct the actions of America towards China.

Luce recognized that China contained great economic opportunities for the United States. *Fortune* asserted that America should assist in the development of a strong China. China was the "greatest potential market on earth" and it was eager for American influence.[[3]](#endnote-3) In order for Luce to reinforce this notion, his magazines had to purposely show China in the most favorable light possible.[[4]](#endnote-4) One of the ways Luce's magazines accomplished this task was by showing resemblances between the U.S. and China. In *American Images of China*, T. Christopher Jespersen writes, "*Time* declared that, having captured "China's Boston (Peking), New York (Shanghai) and Washington (Nanking)," the Japanese were advancing on "China's Chicago (Hankow)."[[5]](#endnote-5) *Time* referred to the Chinese retreat westward as the "covered wagon trek to their Wild West."[[6]](#endnote-6) This far-fetched comparison alluded to migration of Americans to the actual "Wild West."

Luce's magazines also showed Chinese government officials and the Nationalist army in a positive light. A *Time* cover story in 1941 praised Chen Cheng, a military advisor of the Nationalist army, for being "brilliant" in his command in his approach to the capital of Chongqing. The story also described the Nationalist troops as being "husky, shaven-pated sons of the soil who…like better than anything else to close with the Japanese hand to hand."[[7]](#endnote-7) It is obvious that *Time* was romanticizing the Nationalist army and government officials.

At the heart of Luce's image of China, however, was the characterization of Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Nationalist government. Chiang's conversion to Christianity and his supposed support for democracy was highlighted by Luce's magazines. In a description of the September 1941 issue of *Fortune*, Jespersen notes:

[Chiang] was intent upon bringing China into the Christian, democratic community of nations, and he also- to *Fortune*'s satisfaction- offered to assist the United States in finally realizing its dogged belief in the China market. From there, the two nations could march toward their mutual goal of creating a Christian capitalist world order.[[8]](#endnote-8)

To the Americans of the 1940's, the image of a Christian Chinese leader that supported democracy was appealing. Luce's use of Time Inc. was essential in creating the illusion of similarity between China and the United States.

The United China Relief was also vital to spreading the American images of China. The UCR educated Americans about the benefits of an Americanized China.[[9]](#endnote-9) A UCR memorandum stated that the organization's purpose was to sell "China to the American people."[[10]](#endnote-10) To accomplish this task, a democratic China needed to be portrayed. The UCR presented China in a favorable light through the use of radio broadcasts, educational pamphlets, and public lectures.[[11]](#endnote-11) An important part of the UCR program was to educate young Americans about the idealized China. The idea was that better relations between future generations of Chinese and Americans would result.[[12]](#endnote-12) One pamphlet, titled *China Primer*, demonstrates "the nature of the cultural forces at work in the construction of American images of China."[[13]](#endnote-13) Part of the pamphlet states that Americans and Chinese "both love independence and individual freedom" and that they are alike because of their "natural democratic tendencies."[[14]](#endnote-14) Although this is another example of the democratic view of China, the molding of young minds gives reason as to why the illusions of China persisted.

The UCR also provided humanitarian and rehabilitation within China. Fund-raising efforts were coordinated in the United States. Some of the education on the conditions in China was accomplished at these fundraisers as well. The UCR used the money to assist in medical care, child welfare, educational needs, disaster relief, and economic reconstruction in China.[[15]](#endnote-15) In 1941, the UCR raised approximately $3.25 million for their operations.[[16]](#endnote-16) This system helped foster the paternalistic relationship between America and China. Overall, The UCR was important in propagating the Sino-American relationship and getting people involved in the attempt to Americanize China.

Another figure was prominent in supporting the American images of China. Soong Meiling, the wife of Chiang, greatly contributed to the idea that the Chinese were similar to Americans. She had a head start in becoming acclimated to American ideals. Madame Chiang grew up in a Christian family, and her marriage to Chiang influenced his conversion to Christianity. She was also educated in the United States.[[17]](#endnote-17) However, Madame Chiang became an iconic model for Americanized China after becoming the first lady of the Nationalist government. Jespersen describes an article from the *New York Times*:

Indeed, the *Times* declared, she was "more than the beautiful Chinese girl educated in America": the nation could add a "certain paternal pride" to its "admiration" of her polish, poise, and grace. Madame Chiang's emphasis upon the common links between China and the United states "demonstrated not only how well she speaks our language but how much the thought and aspiration of China are like our own."[[18]](#endnote-18)

The exaggerations of this article reflected the paternalistic and democratic assumptions that secured American attitudes toward China.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Madame Chiang's influence was far-reaching. Her appearances in America drew large, enthusiastic crowds because she was a walking example of the Sino-American image. During a tour across the United States, she drew "a crowd of 50,000 at City Hall and another 50,000 when she toured Chinatown after the official reception."[[20]](#endnote-20) The massive gathering of Americans on Madame Chiang's account gave her the opportunity to further the notion that China resembled America. In a speech to the U.S. Senate in 1943, she used herself as an example of the ties between the two nations. In the speech she said, "I speak your language, not only the language of your hearts, but also your tongue. So coming here today I feel that I am also coming home." She also said that even though most of the Chinese people could not speak English, they would say "that we are fighting for the same cause, that we have identity of ideals."[[21]](#endnote-21) Once Madame Chiang gathered the crowds, she was able to deliver her influential speeches. Madame Chiang became a face for the American images of China.

Many Americans during the 1940's were disillusioned into believing that China became Americanized. The images of Chinese democracy and Christianity spread across the United States. Similarities between the geography, history, and people of America and China were exaggerated. Luce's use of his media assets, the efforts of the UCR, and the Sino-American icon produced by Madame Chiang created and maintained these images. As for whether or not this affected the United States foreign policy towards China remains a question. The United States did send aid to the Nationalist during World War II. However, the Nationalists focused their attention on wiping out the CCP. To the demise of the Nationalists, the CCP ended up with control over China several years after WWII. America's foreign policy was very different when fighting the Chinese in the Korean War.

1. T. Christopher Jespersen, *American Images of China, 1931-1949* (Standford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 42-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 65-66. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 98-99. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)