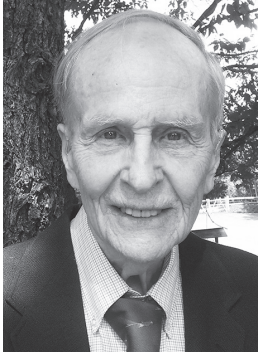


Understanding China: Dangerous Resentments

By George Du Bois



George Du Bois

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He obtained his Ph.D. in American labor history in 1995 from the University of Maryland. His first book, *Cross-Class Alliances and the Birth of Modern Liberalism: Maryland's Workers, 1865-1916*, was published in 2008.

"Understanding China: Dangerous Resentments," a summary of his most recent book of the same name, was presented to the Westminster Club on December 2, 2014.

Historians who have been studying the causes of war have found that when a dominant superpower like the United States faces a fast-rising power like China, there is a danger of war between the two just before or just after the rising power reaches equal power with the dominant superpower. ("Power" is a difficult to define term, but includes military and economic strength, technological abilities, friendly attitudes by other countries, etc.) A major war has occurred in 11 out of 15 similar situations in history; usually, the war is initiated by the rising power.

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Equal power is unlikely to occur for the two countries before the 2030s, even should China surpass the United States economically before then, because the United States has a large present advantage in equipment and technology, and its forces are battle

tested, unlike the Chinese military. The United States also has friendly relations and/or mutual defense treaties with other strong nations—the European Union, Japan, and members of the British Commonwealth, for instance. China has friendly relations with Russia, but few other strong nations.

Secretary of State John Kerry has noted that a clash with China is not an inevitability, but a choice (*Wall Street Journal*). The dominant United States should treat rising China in a way that will discourage such a choice. Such discouragement, unfortunately, is rendered more difficult by deep resentments that China has against the nations of the West, which militarily abused China severely in the 19th century without any justification whatsoever. Many Chinese also resent, consciously or unconsciously, the destruction of one of the most brilliant civilizations in world history by the introduction of Western political creeds, education, and industrialism. China lost its "place in the world" in the 19th century; it may seek to regain it in the 21st.

Isolated from other civilizations for over 2,000 years by the Himalaya Mountains and the Gobi Desert, agricultural China considered itself the Middle Kingdom, whose advanced culture radiated like a bonfire to primitive lands like Japan. China was an exporter, not an importer, of culture. Its achievements include what are called the "Four Great Inventions":

- 1) the magnetic compass, an enormous aid to early navigation and trade;

- 2) gunpowder which, like it or not, has had an great influence on world history;
- 3) paper in the early 2nd century, CE; and
- 4) printing (600 years before Gutenberg).

The historical impact of these inventions is incalculable, and they merely head the list.

The Chinese used petroleum and natural gas as fuels 2300 years before anyone in the West. They produced steel 1700 years before anyone in the West and produced it in blast furnaces 1000 years before anyone in the West. They used assembly lines to produce porcelain 600 years before Henry Ford used them to produce cars. They also used pumps and chain and belt drives at early dates.

The Chinese were no less inventive in the area of government. In the 6th century BCE, Confucius recommended the type of government and society that the Chinese adopted 300 years later and used for the next 2,100 years up to 1912, just 103 years ago. Thanks to its great stability, China was the only ancient civilization that lasted intact well into the modern era.

In keeping with Chinese tradition, emperors were autocrats, but Confucianism carefully put limits on them. The Confucian doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven established that an emperor is legitimate only if he is benevolent, if he is good to his people. If a ruler is tyrannical, the people have a right to revolt and put a new ruler on the throne—the Confucian teaching preceding a similar theory by the Englishman John Locke by about 2800 years.

Confucius also generally limited the Emperor's important activities to the two things that the ancient emperors

had done—water management of China's rivers for flood control and large-scale irrigation and defense against invaders— tasks that a family or group of families could not do all by themselves and had to be undertaken on a national scale. Thus, most governance in China was on the local level through village associations headed by the most prominent village elders, especially those who were literate and/or landlords.

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Emperors rarely violated Confucian limits on their activities by major innovations, and even then the most common was the establishment of “ever-normal granaries” whereby the state sought to stabilize prices by buying grain when crops were abundant and releasing it into the market when harvests were poor and prices accordingly extremely high. The system provided relief to struggling peasants, an act of benevolence by the emperor.

Another principal limitation on an emperor's power was the practice of filling important government posts with men of merit who had devoted years of study to Confucianism, men who constantly advised emperors not to innovate but to look to the past for guidance. Limited civil service exams

began in China in the 2nd century BCE and increased in use until the 10th century CE, when they became the principal means of filling all important posts in the government for the next thousand years. The United States, in contrast, did not have any federal civil service examination until President Chester A. Arthur and Congress enacted a modest civil service law in 1883 as a first step in replacing the previous “spoils system,” in which presidents, reluctantly or otherwise, filled government posts with an eye more to the applicant's connections than to his competence.

It would not be incorrect to describe the unique Confucian government as an autocracy restrained by a meritocracy, resulting in a decentralized centralization. It worked beautifully for more than 1900 years, but in the 1800s an aggressive West already in the industrial revolution and growing in military strength began to seek more colonies in Asia.

The Opium War (1839-42) is by far the most famous of the aggressive actions of Western nations after 1800, deeds that stimulate Chinese nationalism, deeds that still rankle. The British forced China to allow the importation of opium even though its free importation into Britain was strictly illegal, an amazing example of hypocrisy by a supposedly civilized nation. The British seized many Chinese cities in the three years the war lasted, and the peace treaty required the Chinese to allow unlimited importation of the drug into their country, to pay Britain a huge sum, to transfer Hong Kong to Britain in perpetuity, and much else.

Li Hongzhang, a leading Chinese statesman of the late 19th century, commented in his memoirs:

I know that, because of this money-grasping, trade-compelling feature of England's dealings

with my country, millions of wretched people of China have been made more miserable; stalwart men and women have been made paupers, vagrants, and the lowest of criminals; and hundreds of thousands of the weaker ones of my race--mainly among the women--have been sent to suicide graves.

All this because gold and territory are greater in the eyes of the British Government than the rights and bodies of a weak people [...].

Yes! Yes! Yes! We Chinese have been laughed and sneered at in the streets of London itself, and have been called pig-tailed Opium Eaters [...]. (Li 280-91)

In the 50 years after the Opium War, China was compelled to allow importation of an astounding total of 800 million pounds of the drug, and addiction became widespread. There was also a war that Britain and France provoked over trivial incidents, a war with France alone, and a war with the Japanese, who had adopted Western imperialist ways. The peace treaties were, of course, always one sided. Later the Russians and Germans began to annex some Chinese territory.

The Confucian order finally collapsed in the Revolution of 1912.

The first eight decades of the 20th century in China can only be described as an era of recurrent chaos. I am going to skip over these eighty years in this paper (but not in my book, *Understanding China: Dangerous Resentments*—see the notice on p. 42 of the Fall 2014 Edition of *The Torch*). Those years saw collapse of the Confucian civilization, four civil wars by different combinations of warlords, a lengthy civil war between Nationalists and Communists, two invasions by the Japanese, and incompetent and

fanatical governing by Chairman Mao Zedong, tragically exemplified in the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution – disasters both.

The period between 1979 and the mid-1990s, the era when Deng Xiaoping was in charge of China, finally began to bring order out of the chaos. In reintroducing private enterprise into China, Deng—more of a patriot than a fanatic socialist like Chairman Mao Zedong—was interested in strengthening China economically rather than in creating complete social equality. As he said, “It doesn’t matter if the cat is black or white so long as it catches mice.”

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Under Deng, China began a 30-year period of an average of 10% compound economic growth per year. At that rate, an economy will double in seven years and quadruple in fourteen. By the thirtieth year, it will be more than 16 times larger than at the beginning—a phenomenal growth, unparalleled in history, the “China miracle.”

Growth was everything. Little attention was paid, for instance, to

controlling air pollution. Steel mills were built even if there was little demand for more steel. Shipbuilding facilities were constructed even though there was little demand for new ships. Cement plants were another contribution to China’s multiple “bridges to nowhere.” Many Chinese cities are ringed with skyscraper apartment houses in which no one lives. China did manage to create the world’s second largest economy in the world but now faces multiple problems:

1. *Competition by lower-wage countries.* China is losing its edge as the preferred low-wage nation. Since fewer workers are entering the labor force than are retiring from it, labor is scarcer, and wages are rising (20 per cent a year from 2005 to 2011). Foreign investment is now beginning to flow to cheaper-labor countries like Viet Nam and Indonesia. The growth rate has already dropped from 10% a year to below 7%, and is certain to go lower.

2. *Pensions.* Traditionally, elderly Chinese received support from their numerous children and grandchildren. That source of funds was largely eliminated over three decades by China’s One-Child policy. A recent modification to permit two children will accomplish nothing until the second child is old enough to get a job some 15 to 20 years after birth.

Public funds at present are also inadequate to replace traditional familial support for the aged. Rural pensions, for instance, now average a meager \$100 a year, and some 42 million elderly are estimated to subsist on about \$500 a year. There are now 186 million elderly in China, comprising 11 percent of the population, and there will probably be 400 million by 2050 -- a large and growing fiscal burden.

Chinese workers today need to save much of their money for their old age rather than spending it on consumer goods and services, thus seriously slowing the government's plans to convert from an export-driven to a more modern consumer-driven economy. One problem can create another.

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3. *Pollution.* China has paid an enormous environmental price for its creation of an embryonic middle class. The Air Quality Index, for instance, recently registered 755 in Beijing, well beyond “hazardous” on the scale used to measure pollution (which stood at a mere 13 in New York City). China now uses almost as much coal, the “dirtiest” of all fuels, as the rest of the world combined. Solving the air quality problems in the major cities will be very costly and will make China even less competitive. Moreover, air quality problems have contributed to a significant exodus of talent and money from China to other countries.

4. *Inequalities.* There are large gaps in wealth and in wages between the

coastal provinces and the interior provinces, between workers in the private sector and in the state sector, and between the cities and the countryside. Social tensions are rising in China. While China still has many socialist state-owned industries, its income gap is much closer to those that occur under capitalism than to those that occur under socialism.

5. *Widespread corruption.* Controlling corruption is a political problem for the government and an economic problem for its victims—especially peasants, whose farmland has been expropriated for inadequate compensation by local officials to sell to developers. Peasants are often compensated for expropriated land at its value for agricultural use rather than its value for development, which is as much as 50 to 70 times greater. Local officials have deprived some 40 million peasants of all or part of their land since 1990. Since then, public protests have centered on land confiscation—estimated at 65 per cent of all of the hundreds of thousands of public protests each year.

China's present problems indicate that it is not yet strong enough to challenge the United States, the world's dominant superpower, but by the 2030s, China may seek to reassume the position it enjoyed for at least 2,000 years as the world's richest, most populous civilization, to become again the Middle Kingdom, the nation that set the rules for the world.

Since the Chinese have strong and valid resentments against the West, it is folly to rub salt in China's wounds, but that is exactly what the United States is doing now.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration's unnecessary announcement of a “pivot,” military as well as political and economic, from the Atlantic to the Pacific can only fuel China's historic resentments and raise Chinese suspi-

cions that the United States wants to “contain” China.

The United States announced that it would maintain sixty percent of its naval strength in the Pacific region, up from a previous fifty percent. With a navy already much larger than that of China, the previous fifty per cent was surely adequate for any purpose of the United States except to send a message to China—a message sure to stir up latent resentments. Are the Chinese really naive enough to think the United States is trying to do anything other than contain China?

The United States is currying favor with Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and the Philippines, all of whose claims to sovereignty over various islands are aggressively disputed by China.

The most troubling current dispute between the two nations is over small groups of islands in the South China Sea. The United States is currying favor with Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and the Philippines, all of whose claims to sovereignty over various islands are aggressively disputed by China. The United States does not, however, pretend to say who owns the islands, only that China should not (may not?) use force to assert its own claims.

At stake are potential undersea petroleum deposits estimated by the United States at 11 billion barrels of oil, a quantity large enough to supply China's needs for a mere three years. The amount involved would be long dissipated, and China would be still the second largest importer of oil in the world, if not the first, by the time it was militarily strong enough to challenge the United States—probably no sooner than sometime in the 2030s.

At present the United States is the world's dominant superpower and sets the rules for international relations, a position it gained by virtue of being the only developed nation that ended World War II with its industrial base intact. It then produced about 50 per cent of the world's goods, a share that has dwindled to less than 25 per cent as the other developed nations—Europe and Japan—recovered over the last 60-odd years. With the third world countries, such as China, India, Brazil, and South Africa, also becoming stronger economically and militarily, the U.S. share of the world production of goods is likely to be below 20% by the 2030s, and no nation with that small a percentage will be able to act as a dominant superpower.

The world order is already changing. Five nations--Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—are considering alternatives to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, organizations whose U.S.-backed financial rules have controlled world finance for decades.

The United States is entitled to protect and promote its own national interests, such as insisting on rights of free navigation in disputed international waters and defense of our allies under our mutual treaty obligations. We should also be willing to participate in internationally authorized actions, but it is time for the United States to take a modest first step, limited to the disputes in the South China Sea, of withdrawal

from its present role of the world's dominant superpower, a sign that the United States is not a threat to China and does not seek to contain China. The fate of these small, sparsely inhabited islands is hardly a major concern of the United States. The United States should inform the China and the other claimants accordingly.

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Declining to protect other nations' claims to the islands does not mean, however, that the United States should tamely and unquestioningly accept, for instance, a Chinese invasion of the mainland of Vietnam. China must be made to understand that in such a case we retain all our options. We are still the dominant superpower and at present only need to take a first step in giving up a position that we will inevitably lose in a couple of decades. Future steps at appropriate times and intervals should diminish China's resentments and encourage it to cooperate in keeping the peace.

Facing future reality is not a sign of weakness but of wisdom. A muscular approach to China will not work.

For most of the last three decades China and the United States have enjoyed friendly relations. The United States would make a great mistake if it now sought to "contain" China. Unlike the Soviet Union, which sought to impose its system on the rest of the world, China has not done so. China is a commercial competitor, not an ideological competitor. There is no need to create a new Cold War.

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