

WORLD AFFAIRS

How American Expats Can Represent Their Country

Here's what it feels like to be an American expat living in China.

I was standing on stage wearing a pink Hello Kitty shirt, Hello Kitty glasses, a wig, and a winged Arale hat. It was Halloween, and I was dressed as a Chinese girl, in a costume that politically correct white American liberals would have hated but Chinese people loved. I was about to win the costume contest, when the contestant next to me played the nationality card.

“His America is allied with Japan!” he said, after grabbing the microphone.

I knew just what to say. “The Diaoyu Islands are Chinese [territory]!”

The party-goers roared with applause, and I easily won the contest. (It also helped that my friend was the host and judge.) This was in 2012, just two months after Hong Kongese activists had landed on the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu in Chinese), which China claims, and raised Chinese and Taiwanese flags. In truth, I don't know which country has the rightful claim to the islands. I do know that Japan first took control of the islands in 1895, the same year it colonized Taiwan, beginning their era of imperialism that America eventually ended in World War II. So from that perspective their historical claim may appear problematic. However, there are other factors in territorial disputes, so the answer is far from clear. But the important thing was that, by virtue of being American, I was then a small part of the controversy.

Tensions between China and Japan had risen. In September 2012, there were fiery anti-Japanese protests across China. Japanese cars were smashed. Japanese factories were closed. At one protest, **a Maoist professor slapped an 80-year-old man.**

Anywhere I went, I was bound to hear a few patriotic people mention my country's relationship with Japan. I wasn't scared or ashamed, though. I wasn't going to be like Americans who put a Canadian flag on their backpacks after the Iraq War started—or a Chinese who put their country's national flag over the logo of their Toyota automobile at the time.

Lyman Stone, author of the blog [In a State of Migration](#), wrote [an article for The Federalist](#) that said “the American diaspora” can be an asset if those expats “carr[y] a positive or hopeful vision for home.” I believe in individualism. I am a myself, first and foremost. But, as an American in a Communist country, it is inevitable that

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some people here look at me as a representative of my country and its politics. Indeed, many Chinese people even like to initially make friends with me out of an interest in American culture.

It is also true that many Chinese people view themselves as representatives of their country, and want to treat me hospitably as a guest. Once when I booked a taxi online, some rowdy drunk men got in the backseat before I could take the front. They argued with the driver, and it wasn't until they saw I was a foreigner that they got out and apologized.

“Were you scared?” the driver asked. No, I said. “If you weren't a foreigner, they would have tried to fight you.”

Top Three Misconceptions about Americans

I'm not flag-waving Constitution-thumper, but I do correct misconceptions about America and defend our values. The top three misconceptions I encounter are that almost all Americans own guns, that American youth are wild like the characters in “American Pie,” and that all Americans have white skin and blue eyes.

The first two misconceptions come from seeds of truth that have grown into wild exaggerations. The third is just a stereotype. Indeed, America has more guns per person than any country in the world, and, with the Second

Amendment, it is **one of only three countries** with gun rights enshrined in its constitution. With 300 million guns in private ownership, America has about 300 million more privately owned guns than China, even if a majority of Americans don't own guns (ranging from **53 percent in a Gallup survey** to 68 percent **in a General Social Survey**).

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The assumption that Americans are wild party animals largely comes from Hollywood films and TV shows. While American college students do drink more at house parties than Chinese students, who live in dorms with five or so classmates and face greater social restrictions, many Chinese who study abroad find America isn't quite as exciting as they were led to believe. "America isn't New York," one student who studied in the small town of Bloomington, Indiana, wrote on a Chinese social media

account.

When it comes to stereotypical appearances, I'm a brown-haired, brown-eyed American, but even I have been complimented on my "beautiful blue eyes." Americans of Asian heritage face an interesting challenge. For a black guy or a white guy like myself, it is easy to get complimented on your Chinese. All you have to do is say "Nihao" ("Hello"), and many Chinese people will respond, "Your Chinese is so good!" Asian-Americans studying in China have been known to get strange looks from Chinese people when speaking Chinese. Some of them think it is surprising at first that a presumed Chinese person would speak Chinese at a beginner's level.

When a Chinese person asks what Americans eat—"Is it just hamburgers and bread?"—I try to explain that Americans actually eat a lot of different things. "We're an immigrant country," I say. As for hamburgers, McDonalds doesn't represent the quality of a good hamburger!

One Chinese restaurant owner who studied abroad and then opened an American restaurant said, "For Chinese, eating a hamburger is a new

experience. When they first look at the menu, their reaction is, ‘Why is this burger so expensive?’ Then I try to explain to them there is a difference between fast food and [real American food].”

Bigger Questions, of Democracy and War

These are small potatoes, though, compared to questions of foreign policy and power politics. Much of the above are just due to Chinese people being unfamiliar with American culture. After all, the number of foreigners in most Chinese cities is still very small. China was closed off to the world for a long time and poor. It is only recently that Chinese people have had opportunities to appreciate American culture, and they show a great interest in it.

American films routinely top the list of most popular films in China. This spring’s “Furious 7” surpassed 2014’s “Transformers: Age of Extinction,” as the highest-grossing film ever in China, earning 2.3 billion yuan (U.S. \$370 million).

When it comes to politics, many Chinese people, especially urban youth, support the concepts of democracy and freedom. They may have different ideas about what those concepts mean and how to get there. China has a history of tumultuous and violent revolutions. In the past 200 years, it has waged two wars with Britain; been invaded by foreign powers (the Eight-Nation Alliance of Britain, Italy, France, Austro-Hungary, Japan, Germany, and America), who took concessions in treaty ports; overthrew the Qing Dynasty; waged two wars with Japan, the second of which caused the deaths of 20 million or so civilians; fought a civil war; and underwent the Great Leap Forward and cultural revolution under Chairman Mao. It is understandable that many Chinese prioritize stable development over immediate democratic reforms. Common refrains include, “There are too many people,” and reform should be done slowly.

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Broad concepts are one thing, but specifics are another, and when it comes to specific human rights-related questions, many Chinese react in the same way as many Americans do when foreign countries “accuse” America of human

rights abuses in Ferguson or Iraq. In many cases, even Americans buy into flawed narratives on particular issues, as in Ferguson. If American news anchors still cite the myth of “hands up,” it isn’t surprising that some foreigners have bought into it. Similarly, Chinese might think that Americans are misinformed about some Chinese issues due to the biases of American domestic news media.

Fear of American Hegemony

One big difference, however, is that while America’s news media may be biased in that its journalists hold certain viewpoints about democracy or China, they are not constrained by large-scale government censorship. In fact, Americans are more informed about China on some issues. Once while staying at a hostel in Shanghai, I noticed a poster of Ai Weiwei behind the front desk. Surprised to see the face of the activist artist who was arrested in 2011, I asked the staff if they knew who he was, then started asking some guests. As I found out, the reason there was no problem in having his poster there is that almost no one knows who he is.

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The word for “hegemony” in Chinese is composed of two characters: “ba-quan” (霸权). The first can also mean “tyrant,” and the second means “power.” American hegemony is a big concept in Chinese discussions of foreign policy.

One day I attended a Chinese “military affairs class” (which is really more like international relations class) at a local university, and the professor showed a slide on “American Hegemony” followed by slides of photos from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Another slide showed China nearly surrounded by American allies with American bases.

China is scared of America trying to contain it, and it is particularly scared of Japan, based on Japan’s history and its government’s attempts to reform its pacifist constitution. But when Chinese people mention Japan in conversation with me, that very history provides me with the right response. After all, who liberated China from Japan in World War II? One reason so

many American troops are stationed in Japan is because Japan had no offensive military of its own under the constitution America imposed on it.

Of course, there is always national interest at stake. America doesn't like to have other countries to have hegemony anywhere in the world, so we resist it. But wars are sold to the public on the basis of grand moral ideals, and, in America's history, our moral claims for war have more often than not been the right ones.

If we fought Germany to prevent German hegemony over Europe, the allies also liberated the prisoners of death camps. If we engaged in the Cold War to resist Communist hegemony, we also liberated oppressed and impoverished peoples around the world.

Opportunities to Defend America to Chinese

Indeed, another example I can cite to Chinese to justify America's military history is the Korean War. The Chinese fought on the side of North Korea at the time, and they used the war as a source of anti-American propaganda. But, 62 years after the armistice agreement, most of the Chinese public can see that North Korea is a backward state. "It was like China in the 1960s," when the country was poor, closed to the world, and fanatical, some say. "If Mao's son hadn't died [fighting in the Korean War], then China would still be like North Korea," is another common refrain.

America protected South Korea from the invasion of the Communist Kim family. Today, South Korea wouldn't have democracy, free speech, personal liberties, K pop, and an advanced economy if it wasn't for the United States and the United Nations. Korean appreciation for the help it received is evident in the many proud war memorials around the country. At one street corner in Seoul, the flags of all the supporting countries are displayed. (America provided about 87 percent of the foreign troops.) If you ask any Chinese person, "Would you rather live in

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North Korea or South Korea?” they will choose the obvious answer: South Korea. They have lived through a North Korean-style ideology and seen it fail.

America might use “democracy” as an “excuse” for asserting our will, many Chinese will say. How did regime overthrow turn out in Iraq or Libya? America has made mistakes and overreached recently. Americans such as John McCain and John Bolton may disagree that Iraq was a mistake. Of course, people disagree, and disagreements are not discouraged in a democracy. As an individual, I say that I agree Iraq was a mistake because that is my view. Being able to criticize or critique the actions of your own country and government, after all, is a hallmark of a democracy.

Jung Chang, a Chinese who emigrated to the United Kingdom, wrote in her book “Wild Swans,” “To me, the ultimate proof of freedom in the West was that there seemed to be so many people there attacking the West and praising China [in the 1970’s]. ... I realized that this was the kind of society I wanted to live in: where people were allowed to hold different, even outrageous views.”

Being tolerant of outrageous views, however, isn’t the same as supporting counterfactual views and letting them go without challenge. Edgar Snow, author of “Red Star Over China,” was a renowned foreign correspondent in China, and he took real risks to go off into a war zone and be the first foreign journalist to interview Mao Zedong. But he was blinded by his left-wing ideology, and he denied the starvation occurring in Mao’s China.

Jung Chang wrote,

Still, I could not help being irritated by some observations. Once I read an article by a Westerner who came to China to see some old friends, university professors, who told him cheerfully how they had enjoyed being denounced and sent to the back end of beyond, and how much they had relished being reformed. The author concluded that Mao had indeed made the Chinese into ‘new people’ who would regard what was misery to a Westerner as pleasure.

I was aghast. Did he not know that repression was at its worst when there was

no complaint? A hundred times more so when the victim actually presented a smiling face? Could he not see to what a pathetic condition these professors had been reduced, and what horror must have been involved to degrade them so?

As an American particularly, but ideally as someone from anywhere in the world, we should express the truth and correct propaganda and distortions.

China Versus Its Neighbors

China, of course, has its own interests. It wants to be powerful so it isn't invaded again. It also wants to expand its territorial scope. China claims ownership of almost all of the South China Sea. It has placed an oil rig in waters claimed by Vietnam and had naval skirmishes with the Philippines. Many of those countries are trying strengthen existing relationships with the United States to defend the territorial sovereignty of lands that they currently control or claim ownership of.

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Some, like the Philippines and Indonesia, are strong allies. Others, like Vietnam, are not allies but are cozying up. In October 2014, the U.S. **sold lethal weapons to Vietnam** for the first time since 1975. President Obama affirmed in his April 2014 visit to Japan that the Senkaku Islands **would be covered by the Japan-U.S.**

Security Treaty (which isn't the same as making a statement on which side is right).

The Chinese resent that America is involved in these global security issues in their corner of the world. The people of China's neighboring countries are making up their minds. Citizens of South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, India, Indonesia, Japan, and even Vietnam see America as their chief ally, **according to Pew**. Those from the Philippines, Japan, and Vietnam view China as their biggest threat. When a big power is forcefully asserting its will and violating another country's sovereignty, America's support is appreciated. Even the Chinese felt that way in 1941.

Mitchell Blatt is a columnist and freelance writer based in China who covers politics and travel. He is the lead author of Panda Guides Hong Kong guidebook. He has been published at Washington Examiner.com, Daily Caller.com, The Hill.com, and Newsbusters, among other outlets.
