

Sin-ming Shaw

Why Are We Unloved?

Until China comes clean on past horrors, it won't win the respect it craves

AMERICANS WILL FIND MUCH TO LIKE IN CHINESE PREMIER Zhu Rongji when he visits the United States this week. Zhu is a well-educated, down-to-earth person with a sharp sense of humor. He knows intimately the irrationality of the communist system: in 1957 he was "sent down" to the countryside for questioning the sensibility of Mao's economic targets. Zhu is the opposite of the arrogant, ignorant fool of a leader one so often meets in China. Yet, he is unlikely to find the respect he desires.

On the surface only three big issues divide the U.S. and China: trade, Taiwan and human rights. As always, the trade conflict will surely be resolved, however imperfectly. Despite frustration over China's allegedly unfair trading practices, quintessential American brands like Coke and Microsoft are now as much a part of Chinese daily life as they are American. And there is one U.S. export that doesn't show up in the trade balance: an American university degree. It is rare now to find children of Chinese leaders without one. What is the price tag of a friendly mind if it belongs to a future Chinese premier?

On the question of Taiwan, no sane person on either side of the Taiwan Strait believes war is even remotely probable. The Strait is the supply route for Japan's energy needs. Interrupting that flow would drag down the world's second-largest economy, pulling the rest of Asia into a black hole, a prospect nobody will tolerate. Taiwan is also an extension of Silicon Valley, supplying a huge share of the world's computer components. Every advanced nation needs to keep its computers humming, just as world manufacturing needs uninterrupted oil supplies. In addition, Premier Zhu must recognize that Taiwan represents something dear to the American psyche: a people who have freely chosen how they should live and be governed. The U.S. isn't likely to look the other way if Beijing moves on Taiwan. And if there were an invasion, Taiwan would become China's Vietnam, for the locals wouldn't welcome Beijing.

So the only issue that truly divides China and the U.S. is human rights. Beijing can reasonably claim that respect for human rights in China has never been better. Economic freedom, the foundation of all liberties, is visible across the land. On that basis alone, Beijing feels it should have its back patted, not kicked. It is also true that the U.S. is less demanding of certain allies that lack a credible human rights record.

But Beijing is missing the point. America expects more from China in part because of its ancient and civilized history. Americans find it repulsive when Beijing, claimant to that heritage, behaves in a thug-like manner toward those with different views, including defenseless youths and intellectu-

als who cannot possibly pose any serious threat to the 50-million-strong Communist Party.

Beijing often cites Russia's recent history as "proof" that democracy is wrong for China. But this ignores vast cultural and historical differences. The Russian experience with total central planning persisted far longer than did China's. And the Russian economy is now dominated by ex-KGB agents and gangsters; China's is freer. Beijing also says democracy is unsuitable for a country that has had to endure 5,000 years of feudalism. (That's one of Premier Zhu's favorite sound bites; listen for it in the U.S.) But Taiwan's thriving democracy shows the fallacy of that argument. Beijing's recent moves to lock up a few people who tried

to form a political party—a right supposedly guaranteed by the Chinese constitution—betrays acute insecurity (not to mention stupidity) among China's leaders. It is conduct unbecoming of a great nation. If honest elections were held today, does anyone doubt the Communists would win? Historically it is governments, not students or the common people, who are the source of upheaval and chaos, for they alone have the power to implement disastrous policies.

To gain the respect Beijing feels it is unfairly denied, it must stop its pettiness toward its own citizens and level with them. The legacy of the Communist Party is one of brutality against its citizens. The bloody suppression of the Tiananmen democracy movement in 1989 is but a footnote compared with the tens of millions who died during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

Neither Chinese President Jiang Zemin nor Premier Zhu had anything to do with those murderous policies, and they should consider coming clean with the Party's sordid past if they want a place in history.

The Germans have apologized for their Nazis, though no current leaders were themselves responsible for past atrocities. Taiwan's President Lee Teng-hui has similarly apologized for the Kuomintang's massacre of thousands of Taiwanese in 1947. Leaders of both societies have gained universal respect for their moral integrity. Japan lacks that in Asia precisely because it refuses to forthrightly address its past. The magnanimity of those in power toward political opponents is not weakness. President Nelson Mandela of South Africa has successfully advocated public reconciliation between black citizens and their former white oppressors, while South Korean President Kim Dae Jung forgave his predecessors who wanted him killed. Both nations are nobler for it.

If Beijing ever finds the moral backbone to come to terms with its past, Chinese leaders like Zhu will find in future visits to America a welcome warm beyond their boldest wish. Unfortunately, that day still seems far off. ■



History will treat Jiang and Zhu kindly if they speak openly about China's past excesses