

UCSD sociologist Richard Madsen explores moral side of U.S.-China relations in recent book on China and the American Dream

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UCSD SOCIOLOGIST EXPLORES MORAL SIDE OF U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS IN RECENT BOOK ON CHINA AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

The military crackdown on student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 provoked a strong reaction in many parts of the world. But nowhere, says longtime China-watcher Richard Madsen, was the reaction as intense as it was in the United States.

"The Tiananmen Square massacre was for Americans a drama with an unexpected, incorrect ending," explains Madsen, a professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego, "it shattered a liberal myth about America's relations with China and about the nature of freedom."

In his recent book *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry*, Madsen examines the moral history of U.S.-China relations and identifies the myths he says have guided each country over the last 30 years.

"On both sides of the Pacific, I think the failures of Americans and Chinese to understand each other have been related to failures to understand themselves," says Madsen. "The American myth has been that our blend of a capitalist economy and a democratic political system is the model for the good society around the globe. The U.S. relationship with China has disturbed this American dream."

According to Madsen, during the height of the Cold War, right-wing Americans saw China as a "Red Menace" so dangerous that the U.S. might have to give up parts of its own dream of freedom in the struggle against the communist threat. Many liberals meanwhile, argued that China was a "Revolutionary Redeemer" that progressive Americans should embrace as the purest embodiment of a lost American dream. More moderate Americans viewed China as a "Troubled Modernizer" that, if brought out of its isolation, would eventually become more capitalistic and democratic, and thus vindicate the American dream.

The centrist position came to dominate American public opinion, and was perhaps best epitomized by Nixon's visit to China, which helped not only to open up China to the West, but eventually helped to sustain America's hopefulness about its own democratic identity.

The Chinese, however, had a different take on the American dream. Chinese popular culture focused on American consumer goods -- Coca-Cola was described by the *People's Daily* as "capitalism concentrated in a bottle." According to Madsen, many urban Chinese were plagued with a sense of confusion and disorientation as they embraced consumerist ideals while confronting the harsh competitiveness of a world market system.

The end of the Cold War, says Madsen, requires both Americans and Chinese to rethink the meanings of political and economic freedom in an interdependent world. In his book, he proposes a new foundation for building a public philosophy for the emerging world order.

"Americans and Chinese now need more morally adequate myths, postmodern master narratives to beckon the way toward a humane postmodern global politics," he concludes in his book. "This time, probably, the primary dialogue creating such visions will not be between Beijing and Washington, but between a multitude of diverse Chinese and Americans interacting within the fertile spaces on the edges of both societies: in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and multiethnic metropolises such as San Francisco and Los Angeles."

Madsen, who has studied and written about Chinese and American culture for the last 25 years, is a co-author of the highly acclaimed books *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society* which both focus on American society and its institutions. He is also the author and co-author of numerous other books about Chinese culture including, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village*, *Chen Village*, and *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng*.

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