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For American pundits, China isn't a country. It's a fantasyland

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Whenever I want to be cheered up about the future of my adopted country, I turn to American pundits. The air here might be deadly, the water undrinkable, the Internet patchy and the culture strangled, but I can always be reassured that China is beating America at something, whether it's clean [energy](#), high-speed [rail](#), [education](#) or even [the military](#).

Over the past decade, American audiences have become accustomed to lectures about China, like a schoolboy whose mother compares him with an overachieving classmate. "That used to be us," Thomas Friedman tells us, [citing](#) the "impressive" Tianjin Meijiang Convention and Exhibition Center (thrown up in a few months) as an example of China's greatness and glacial U.S. construction projects as an example of America's decline. China is "kicking our butts" because the United States is "a nation of wusses," according to then-Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, who in 2010 [lamented](#) his state's inability to handle snow.

Rendell ignored the time snow paralyzed southern China in 2008, stranding millions of people, cutting off water supplies to major cities and killing dozens. Friedman ignored the buildings that collapsed like a soft pile of tofu across Sichuan in an [earthquake](#) that same year because they were rapidly erected by crooked contractors. I'm not talking here about arguments over China itself, like the dueling predictions of magical reform or sudden collapse so brilliantly dissected in James Mann's "[The China Fantasy](#)," or about the delusional fears of Chinese plots from analysts like [Michael Pillsbury](#). The people telling these tales aren't interested in complexities or, really, in China. They're making domestic arguments and expressing parochial fears. Their China isn't a real place but a rhetorical trope, less a genuine rival than a fairy-tale bogeyman.

For Chinese residents, daily life is a constant reminder of both how far the country has come and how far it has to go. One morning recently I went to the coffee shop at the end of my central Beijing alley for a superb latte, where the owner teasingly chastised me, as he has before, for paying with cash like some peasant rather than with my mobile phone through the WeChat Wallet service. That evening, I came home to one of our small compound's regular power failures, and I wrote this in the dark on a laptop battery and a neighboring building's thankfully unshielded WiFi signal. In heavy rain, our alley becomes a swimming pool, and even newly built

Beijing streets disappear under a foot of water because the drainage is so bad; in [storms in 2012](#), people drowned in cars stuck under bridges.

China's mega-projects are often awesome, but they're also often limited, costly and corrupt. The more than 10,000 miles of recently built high-speed rail came in well over the original \$300 billion budget, and all but a few lines run at a loss. The process of creating them was [so crooked](#) that the Ministry of Railways ended up broken into three parts and most of the top officials ended up in jail. Yet it's understandable why visitors, especially those who don't stray beyond the metropolises, might be overwhelmed. What's not forgivable is how rarely pundits try to look further, content with an initial vision of glittering skyscrapers and swish airports that can be conveniently shoehorned into whatever case they're trying to make.

And because China is so vast, its successes can be attributed to whatever your pet cause is. Do you oppose free markets and privatization, like John Ross, former economic policy adviser for the city of London? Then China's success is [because](#) of the role of the state. Do you favor free markets, like the libertarian Cato Institute? Then China's success is [because](#) of its opening up. Are you an environmentalist? China is working on huge [green-energy projects](#). Are you an energy lobbyist? China's building gigantic [pipeline projects](#). Are you an enthusiast for the Protestant work ethic, like historian Niall Ferguson, who describes it as one of his "killer apps" for civilizations? Then credit China's manufacturing boom to its [40 million Protestants](#) — even though they're less than 5 percent of its 1.3 billion people.

With a massively changing country, correlation and causation are easily confused. China's boom years in the 2000s, for instance, correspond nicely with an explosion in the number of pet dogs; perhaps some canine enthusiast is even now explaining how this is evidence that [Bo](#), not Barack, should be making policy.

There are fields, such as education, where China's supposed achievements are almost pure illusion. Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) statistics, which show China [topping the lists](#) in reading, math and science, are often [cited](#) by Common Core advocates in the United States and by proponents of traditional teaching methods in Britain, such as former education minister Michael Gove. Yet these PISA statistics cover just an [elite group](#) of Shanghai schools, where entry depends on bribery and string-pulling. In the rest of the country, classes [average](#) 50 students, only a third of rural children [make it](#) to high school, and I've found innumeracy to be just as common as in the United States.

This takes about a half-hour of research to discover, or five minutes of conversation with anyone who went to an ordinary Chinese school. But the Western educators and politicians who fawn over China's schools can't be bothered with the realities of crumbling rural classrooms, students forced to bribe teachers to get a seat in front, or the mind-numbing ["politics" classes](#) that kids and adults alike sleep through. China is a lead-in [anecdote](#) to their arguments, not somewhere they're actually interested in.

Purveying China fantasies in the service of your own vision isn't new. Voltaire pioneered the technique $2\frac{1}{2}$ centuries ago, depicting a government of refined Confucian deists in counterpoint to the barbarities and superstitions of Europe. He took this portrayal from the

missionary letters of his archenemies, the Jesuits, who themselves sought to triumph in theological argument by portraying China as moral, civilized and awaiting the Gospel. Yet the priests, working on the ground in Peking, had a greater interest in the tense and complicated political and intellectual rivalries of Qing China than the philosopher did; for him, reality was a far second to argument.

In Voltaire's era, perhaps a few hundred Europeans had spent time in China, and the country was an arduous, months-long journey away. In the 1960s and 1970s, the few Westerners allowed into the country were almost inevitably fellow travelers with Maoism, led by the nose by guides who were trained to parrot the triumphs of socialism and who were happy to [regurgitate the pap](#) they had been fed to foreign audiences. Today there are tens of thousands of Americans in China, and millions of Chinese in the United States, but the level of nonsense seems to have only marginally diminished.

Finding China's realities can be hard simply because lying is so common here, whether it's fraudulent government [data](#), false [ambulances](#) or tainted [baby formula](#). The [collapse of social trust](#) as a result of decades of Maoism, followed by a get-rich-first ethos, has made honesty a rare quality. With no external controls from a free media or civil society, Potemkinism is an everyday skill across the country, whether directed at outside investors or official inspectors.

Some claims move from the exaggerated into the outright sinister. Take University of New Mexico professor Geoffrey Miller, who has written about the nation's one-child-rule [exceptions](#), which mostly benefit underdeveloped rural areas and ethnic minorities, not the elite. Miller [claims](#) that China is engaged in a long-term eugenics program to increase its national IQ, and that the United States must copy this or fall behind. [No such program](#) exists, although it's true that China's disability laws drew upon the language of early-20th-century eugenics as late as the 1990s before advocates campaigned for changes. Miller's particularly ugly arguments mix a projected fantasy of Chinese super-babies with a dubious pro-eugenics agenda; in that way, they are not that different from the essential refrain of others: "China is beating us, and to succeed we must become like them."

The damage done by such arguments goes beyond their individual cases. They reinforce the seductive, and false, notion of efficient authoritarianism. According to this vision, Washington dawdles because of special interests or democratic debate while Beijing, directed smoothly from the top, drives forward to the future.

Invisible in this is the massive role of vested interests in China and their ability to block or divert reform efforts, the contentions between local governments and the center, the authorities' constant and fearful swinging between cracking down on and pandering to public opinion, and the intense and sometimes murderous politicking behind the scenes. Pandering to state power is exceptionally dangerous at a time when democratic states such as [Turkey](#) and [Hungary](#) increasingly turn toward Chinese- or Russian-inspired models of centralization and oppression.

In actuality, one of the great strengths of the Chinese system over the past 35 years has been cautious experimentation, from health-care reform to open markets, in a few villages; then, if successful, ramping projects up to the provincial level; then to a national scale. This is how

private farming began in 1979. Some of China's ambitious projects have been genuine successes, some abysmal failures, but most have the mixed and complicated legacies of any political scheme. If we praise Beijing for the wrong reasons, we miss the lessons it is actually trying to learn.

And when we treat China as a fantasyland of instruction for ourselves, we end up ignoring the Chinese. Like Voltaire's mandarins or the happy peasants of Maoist propaganda, they cease to be real people and become perfect puppets deployed for rhetorical ends. The Chinese can be just as dumb, lazy and pig-headed as anyone else. They can also be just as smart, determined and empathic. They deserve better than to be reduced to examples.