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 Asia Society

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A New China



A face of the new China includes foreign settlements. Photo: David Hogsholt (see photo essay in link below).

As China, one of the world's oldest civilization, changes rapidly and grows in its economic and political power, Americans — including teachers — are struggling to understand modern China and how to present it to their students.

And when it comes to China's emergence onto the world stage, public opinion polls indicate Americans just aren't sure how they feel about it.

"Our students virtually know nothing about modern China; the parents in our communities know nothing about modern China," Vivien Stewart, vice president for education at the Asia Society, said at the National Chinese Language Conference in Chicago. "If we are going to engage students in understanding modern China, we ourselves how to wrap our minds around that."

Very quickly, even within the last 15 years, modern China has become an ever-evolving story full of complexities and contradictions, said Evan Osnos, a Beijing-based staff writer for The New Yorker.

Osnos has told China's story through articles about people like Tang Jie, whose nationalist online video drew more than 1 million hits in a week and a half. Tang, a graduate student studying Western philosophy comes from a farming family, and his parents could not read or write. Tang "wants the world to recognize that China today is not the place that it was 10-15 years ago," Osnos said.

Osnos has also written about Joseph Nwaosu, a 29-year-old illegal immigrant from Nigeria, one of tens of thousands of Africans who are making a living in China. As more people like Nwaosu settle in China — and sometimes marry there — China is confronting new questions about racism, immigration and what it means to be Chinese, Osnos said.

Osnos warned that iconic symbols of China's history, like the Great Wall, can be "alluring," but also "a distraction to what's happening in the here and now." Using the Great Wall to understand China would be akin to studying Mount Rushmore to understand modern America, he said.

"So the burden ... falls on us, the educators, policymakers, scholars and writers," Osnos said. "Beyond the language itself, how do we present China to the world in all of its glorious complexity and contradictions?"

Though many struggle to understand modern China, the question of China's influence is a settled issue, said Marshall Bouton, president of The Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

Americans see China as the second-most influential country in the world after the United States. In terms of importance to the United States, China is considered "very important" by 52 percent of Americans, with only Canada (53 percent) and Britain (60 percent) perceived as "very important" by more Americans. The Council conducted the nationally representative survey of Americans in July 2008.

Americans, however, distinguish clearly between China's rising economic power, with which they are ambivalent, and military power, with which they are less comfortable. According to The Chicago Council, 76 percent of Americans believe it would be mainly negative if China became significantly more powerful militarily.

"We appreciate what's happened in China, but are kind of uncertain about what that means for us," Bouton said. "But when you turn to the question of security, the anxiety becomes very much sharpened."

And it's unclear the extent to which Americans are prepared to deal with China's rise. Only 11 percent of Americans say it is "very important" for children to learn Chinese, a statistics many conference attendees found discouraging.

Author: Amy Fletcher

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