

China and America: The Hu-Obama Washington Summit

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Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

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On the eve of the Chinese President's visit to the United States, and the intense speculation about his intentions—and ours—I found myself in a dark room at the Anthology Film Archive in the East Village watching a spectacular documentary by Chinese filmmaker Zhao Liang called *Petition*.

It's about the tens of thousands of people with grievances who seek redress in China at offices ostensibly set up to resolve their problems.

The right to petition is guaranteed by the Chinese Constitution—yes China has a Constitution, but it is unevenly enforced like our own. Falun Gong first tried, but failed, to bring its human rights claims to a Petition office like the bureaucratic centers shown in the film as do a small army of individuals who every day, bravely—sometimes fanatically—insist it is their human right to be heard. (In Falun Gong's case, they were outlawed and systematically repressed for more than a decade with a large cost of lives.)

Listen to the description of *Petition*: “Since 1996, Zhao has documented the ‘petitioners’ who come from all over China to make complaints in Beijing about abuses committed by their local authorities. Gathered near the complaint offices, living in most cases in makeshift shelters, the complainants wait for months or years to obtain justice. Peasants thrown off their land, workers from factories which have gone into liquidation, small homeowners who have seen their houses demolished but received no compensation, they pursue justice with unceasing stubbornness, facing the most brutal intimidation and most often finding that their hopes are in vain.”

Before you put this down just to the authoritarianism and insensitivity in China, remember the song “before you ‘cuse me, take a look at yourself.”

Think of all the Americans who get nowhere fighting their City Halls or battling denials of claims by health insurance companies or foreclosures by banks. Think of the vast growth in poverty and the persistence of high unemployment. Think of the millions of Americans behind bars. We have no petition office which I am sure must resolve some issues even if the film didn't show that!

Our systems may be different but some of the top down ways our rulers operate are the same. Now, our two governments are about to sit down with each other to discuss common problems and stubborn differences.

“The U.S.-China summit this week could rank among the most pivotal in history,” writes Leslie Gelb who went from the New York Times to the Council on Foreign Relations to the

appropriately named Daily Beast. “Presidents Barack Obama and Hu Jintao can either find fresh ways to work out increasing differences, or they can settle for friendly gasbag rhetoric that will bow to their mutual and mounting hawkish pressures. But failure to compromise on tough economic and security issues will have dangerous consequences for both leaders.”

Elite journalists tend to worry more about the tenure of elites than the well being the people. Yet, when you think about US-China relations, its not just governments that are wrestling over policy.

For example, whenever Washington summons up the courage to criticize China’s dismal and repressive human rights record, Beijing fires back with the scorecard of US police abuses and mass incarceration. They report regularly on Obama’s backpedaling on human rights here.

(And know well that the summit is being carefully stage managed by lower level officials on both sides who have already come up with some compromises that each side can use to show how flexible and responsive they are. Each side must save face after all.

In case you haven’t noticed, the world has changed with China’s economy growing faster and doing better—at least for now—than ours.

Money represents real power in this world, and ours seems to be declining while theirs is in the ascendancy.

China’s President Hu Jintao is sending contradictory signals. In one conciliatory statement, he called for the US and China to work out their mutual problems. He sounded reasonable and friendly.

“There is no denying that there are some differences and sensitive issues between us,” Hu told American newspapers, “We both stand to gain from a sound China-U.S. relationship, and lose from confrontation.”

At the same time, the Chinese are freaking out Wall Street and its cadre of henchmen in Washington by questioning the future of the dollar as the world’s reserve currency. Even as China’s investments in America’s bonds and other financial instruments has become essential for our well being and perhaps China’s as well, there are many in Beijing who don’t like the dependence on an American system that has lost them money and independence of action.

All countries have their own interests although the United States likes to pretend that everything we want is in the world’s interest. Our PR may be better but our global image is severely tarnished by our wars and the Wikileaks disclosures.

The US has been pressing the Chinese to revalue its currency for years. The Chinese often sound as if they will—but, in the end, they haven’t because to do so would hurt their economy and spark more unemployment.

Now Congress is getting into the act to add pressure on Beijing. AP reports, “Three US senators announced plans Monday to renew their effort to penalize China for what they term currency “manipulation,” on the eve of a state visit by Chinese President Hu Jintao.

“Our message to President Hu is, ‘Welcome to America, but we want to make sure we have a fair trading system,’” said Michigan Senator Debbie Stabenow, who joined fellow Democrats Charles Schumer and Bob Casey in the announcement.

The bill to be introduced in the new Congress would “vigorously address currency misalignments that unfairly and negatively impact US trade,” the three said in a joint statement.”

China will not be moved by this pressure move. They don’t like being bullied and have their own grievances with our economic polices including US cases filed against China at the World Trade Organization that they view as invalid and protectionist, as sops used for domestic political considerations.

The fact is that all of these get China maneuvers will not achieve what most Americans want more jobs. Writes Harvard Law Professor Mark Wu, it “is unlikely that a stronger renminbi would bring many jobs back home. Instead, companies would most likely shift labor-intensive production to Vietnam, Indonesia and other low-wage countries. And in any case many high-skilled jobs will continue to flow overseas, as long as cheaper talent can be found in India and elsewhere. Only in a few industries, like biomedical devices, would a stronger Chinese currency combined with quality issues tempt American companies to keep more manufacturing at home.”

Meanwhile, China is well aware of how to “win friends” in the US, as Reuters reports. Deals do it.

“The Chinese government kicked off a four-day U.S. trade mission on Monday by signing six deals in Houston with undisclosed U.S. companies worth \$600 million, according to Chinese state media reports.

The deals came a day before Chinese President Hu Jintao arrives in the United States for a visit being billed as the most important U.S.-China summit since Deng Xiaoping’s visit to Washington 30 years ago.”

The future of our relations is not just dependent on what the leaders say or agree on at Summits. China is wary of US military power encircling them. They are being forced to spend more money than they want to on naval ships and stealth planes. This is a country that grew up with Mao’s dictum that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”

As the Telegraph noted recently, “on virtually all the main issues that separate the two nations, (China) seems intransigent and uncompromising. The sense of threat is heightened by the fact that, while America is gripped by economic, social and political self-doubt, the Chinese have never been more certain of their ascendancy.”

It may be that both countries are shakier than we think. There may be no economic recovery in the United States for five years while some Hedge Funds fear, “China is a bubble close to bursting.” Reports another article in the Telegraph, “The world is looking to China as a springboard out of recession – but some hedge funds are betting the country’s credit and growth levels cannot be sustained.”

So far, neither Washington nor Beijing have realized the apocalyptic projections of their many critics. Both states still pay lip service to their ideal, but both can be unraveling.

A fancy State Dinner will not bridge the gaps that separate our two countries and “paths of development,” as the Chinese say.

The US says it wants more democracy in China but officials like Tim Geithner are upset by the debates taking place there, and pine for the days when they could deal with a dictator like Mao or Deng who, as the New York Times explained, “commanded basically unquestioned authority.”

Our leaders prefer dealing with that type of authority and wish they had it here.”

Back in Beijing, in the shabby Petition Villages where Chinese citizens soldier on in their fight for justice, or in this country where our citizens are frustrated and angry with an economic crisis appears to have no end, no one will expect much from this summit in faraway Washington where diplomatic dances produce kabuki plays filled with smiles but no real changes.

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