

# Panda-Huggers and Dragon-Slayers: How to View Modern China Today

Rob Gifford

**A**re you a panda-hugger or a dragon-slayer? In case you are unfamiliar with the terminology, these are the phrases used to describe two different kinds of China-watchers, and increasingly, two different types of people in the general public. A panda-hugger is someone who says that almost everything going on in China is good, that China's progress is a great thing for the world, and that any problems are peripheral. A dragon-slayer is someone who says the situation in China is terrible, that China is a threat to the world, and that any positive developments are just window-dressing. These two extreme positions have long characterized those who view China from the outside; and perhaps one of those positions describes you. The point about China today, though, is that it has become infinitely more complex than it ever was before, and being either a panda-hugger or a dragon-slayer is becoming increasingly untenable.

In the 1960s, it was simple. China was Communist. Chairman Mao was responsible for the loss of millions of lives within China, and intent on exporting Communism round the world. In the context of the Cold War, the Western world was right in analyzing China as a threat and as an enemy. Now the situation is very, very different, and we as Western readers, listeners, and viewers need to be aware of how different it is. That doesn't mean we just roll over on human rights issues, or accept Chinese assurances that it won't be a threat to world peace. Chinese human rights are still being abused, and many Chinese people are angry at the one-party state that still rules their country. Beijing is also building up its military at what can seem like an alarming rate, and we should make sure we continue to investigate, expose, and report on those issues all the time. I have spent much of my professional life doing exactly that.

The complicating factor, though, is that now there are many hundreds of millions of people in China who are much happier than they were before. There is a new Chinese middle class, who owns apartments, cars, laptop computers, and who vacation in Thailand and Europe. Even rural farmers, whose lives are still desperately poor in many parts of the country, have seen many benefits in the reforms of the last 30 years. So, while some of the old paradigms are still true in many parts of China, they are now untrue in many parts of China too. And that's the problem. Which is the real China? The answer is: it all is, good and bad, and we have to make sure our views on China reflect the complexity of the reality on the ground.

The latest U.S. State Department report on human rights says that China is still a gross abuser in that area. The Chinese Foreign Ministry's latest report about human rights in China says that human

rights are better than ever before. The crazy, maddening thing about modern China is that both statements are true, and that's very confusing.

But that's the point. *We should* be confused about China. China is supremely confusing. If we are *not* confused about China, then we haven't been paying attention. Confusion is progress—progress from the one-dimensional view of China that saw everything in black and white. China is no longer black and white. It is every shade of every color, just like America.

But if we are trying to sift through all the information that is out there, it can be difficult. There are still plenty of dragon-slayers in the media who want us to believe everything is bad in China, and still plenty of panda-huggers, especially in the business community, who want us to believe that everything is fine. The fact that the line has been increasingly blurred between what is good and what is bad in China makes that even more difficult. Does the Internet give Chinese people more freedom? Or does it just make it easier for the Communist Party to control people? Should factories paying low wages but not practicing Western standards of labor rights be shut down? Or should they be encouraged because they are helping to lift migrant workers out of poverty? No question is as simple as it seems, and with China, more than most countries, we simply have to look at both sides of the argument.

Finally, we need to question our own prejudices. As an Englishman, I can say I honestly love the United States, but I do find it far too divided. So-called conservatives on the so-called right see reading anything written by the so-called liberal media as some kind of moral contamination. So-called liberals in the so-called elite view anything reported by anyone right of center as being utterly unreliable and tainted by right-wing propaganda. We all need to just get over some of these prejudices and read the information written by people who know what they are talking about, regardless of whether they work for an organization that we believe not to be on our own side of the political fence. They are usually the people getting dirt under their fingernails covering life on the ground in China, not people in studios pontificating about a country

they have never been to.

So here are some suggestions of what to do and what to read:

1. Obviously, the best thing you can do is get on a plane and go there yourself. My own dear sister, who lives in rural England, visited me in Beijing in 2004, and one of the first things she said on the way into town from the airport was ‘Wow, they’ve got cars!’ How she had missed this point over the previous decade is beyond me, but was also a sad indictment of Western journalists who had not managed to show her that, yes, China does have plenty of problems, but it is also making economic progress. I can guarantee that you, too, will be surprised by many things in modern China (though not necessarily that one).

2. If you can’t visit China, make sure you read a variety of materials about China. Some of the best reporting on China is done by American news organizations. I am completely biased, but I think National Public Radio’s coverage is excellent ([www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)). And the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* are outstanding. The *Times*’s archive also has links to other excellent China links and blogs:

<http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/news/international/countriesandterritories/china/index.html>

3. Invite some Chinese students round for holidays like Thanksgiving. There are usually lots of Chinese students at schools and colleges even in the smallest towns in the U.S. Their viewpoints

## TEACHING ACTIVITY

### Kickoff: Accessing Prior Knowledge

This issue of *Social Education* provides content to enrich student understanding of the People’s Republic of China. The goal of this activity, and of those throughout the issue, is to suggest lessons that stimulate student thought.

A useful beginning is to determine what students already know about China. This activity builds upon Rob Gifford’s article about “panda-huggers and dragon-slayers” in which he suggests ways to view modern China. Although Gifford’s article is intended for teachers, it can easily be adapted for work with students.

- Ask the class what they know for sure about China and record their results for all to see. When a sufficient number of suggestions have been offered, have students classify them into categories they establish. If needed, you can suggest such categories as: leaders, policies, key events, life in cities, life in the countryside.
- Based on issues they have identified, ask students to list progress and problems of life in China since 1949.
- Explain and discuss Gifford’s categorization of *panda-huggers* and *dragon-slayers*. Have a few students explain or read their views about progress and problems in China. Ask the class to identify these views as representing “pandas” or “dragons.”

- Then divide the class into groups of *panda huggers* and groups of *dragon slayers*. Have each group prepare a presentation to persuade others of the accuracy of their view. Use texts, supplementary materials, websites, etc. Then have each side select spokespeople to present their views.
- How accurate can these views be considered given that they may be generalizations about more than a billion people? In a class discussion, examine where we obtain information about China, how opinions are formed, influences on actions by individuals and nations, and how views change with new information.
- Conclude by having students describe the progress and problems of life in China since 1949. An alternative is to have students write a short statement or editorial on one of the following topics:
  1. How we view China today and why it matters.
  2. What life will be like in a changing China in 2049.
  3. How the U.S. will view China and China will view the U.S. in 2049.—*Patience Berkman\**

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will give you an invaluable insight into how China sees the U.S., and how Chinese people think.

4. Read recent books about China. I can recommend Leslie Chang's *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* which gives a great view of life through the eyes of China's migrant workers. Also Peter Hessler's *Oracle Bones*, which takes a more historical view of modern China. James Kynge's book *China Shakes the World* is an excellent economic introduction to China. Finally, *Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of the New China* by Philip Pan is a good, though quite pessimistic, view of life on the bottom rung of Chinese society, seen through the eyes of those struggling for better human rights.

5. Read blogs of people who live in China. Here are a few places to go to find good ones.

[www.danwei.org/blogs/model\\_workers\\_eng\\_2008.php](http://www.danwei.org/blogs/model_workers_eng_2008.php)

Danwei is a good website for a funky look into modern China, and this is their pick of the blogs from China last year, including some translated from the Chinese.

[www.panasianbiz.com/2009/01/the-60-best-blogs-on-china-in-english/](http://www.panasianbiz.com/2009/01/the-60-best-blogs-on-china-in-english/)

Also: <http://rconversation.blogspot.com/>  
This is the website of former journalist Rebecca MacKinnon, who is now an academic at the University of Hong Kong. It will give you some good insights especially on the impact of the Internet in China, and also contains good links to other China-related sites.

So, to summarize, I would say try to get out of your comfort zone on China. Don't just read things that back up your own prejudices. If you have a tendency to be a panda-hugger, get out there and slay some dragons, and if you are more of a dragon-slayer, go hug some pandas. If we're going to have to deal with China in the twenty-first century—and we surely are—then it is imperative that we know what kind of country it really is. 🐼

**ROB GIFFORD** was Beijing Correspondent of National Public Radio from 1999 to 2005. He is author of *China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power* (Random House, 2007), which relates a journey he took along China's equivalent of US Route 66, from Shanghai on the east coast to the border with Kazakhstan in the west. He is currently NPR's London Bureau Chief. His website is [www.robgifford.com](http://www.robgifford.com).

