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- Our view on social networking security: MySpace stalls on safety
- Opposing view: Our agreement is big step
- Two faces of China
- Bravo for Yale and Harvard, but what about the rest?
- As Americans grow older, need for income decreases
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Two faces of China

The West views this Asian country as a new world economic dynamo, but also as a closed society captive to its dated Communist structure.

By Juan Williams

SHANGHAI — The year 2008 is likely to be the Year of China.

The Olympics will move China to the front of world attention, much as its rapid economic rise has already allowed it to surpass the United States in generating global economic growth. But the China the world will see this summer is one that is jam-packed with contradictions. I visited China for the first time in December, and the two faces of this country jumped out at me every turn.

(Illustration by Keith Simmons, USA TODAY)

On a street corner here was a small old house where Mao Zedong met with fellow revolutionaries in 1921 to start the Communist Party. When the party's founders conspired here secretly, pretending to be students, the house was in a run-down area behind warehouses.

Nearly 100 years later, the house is a tourist attraction anchoring an upscale shopping mall, complete with \$4 coffee at Starbucks and \$8 beers at a faux Irish bar. And next to the Xintiandi mall — the name translates into English as "new heaven on earth" — are skyscrapers filled with multinational corporations drawn to Shanghai as the booming financial center of China's super-heated economy.

The ironic location of the cornerstone of Chinese communism next to glossy shrines to capitalism is just one of many sharp contradictions.

Another disconnect comes with all the talk of China's go-go capitalism. U.S. businessmen here talk excitedly about the economic growth occurring before their eyes. They describe opportunities in China, in the world's second-largest economy, with new markets opening and labor still relatively cheap. The stock market here has been red hot. Yet most big industries and even most of the brokerage houses remain government-owned.

Optimism betrays class divisions

Polling reflects a country struggling to define itself. A report by the Committee of 100 (C-100), a group of prominent Chinese-Americans trying to maintain positive connections between the USA and China, found that 88% of Chinese people believe that their country is headed in the right direction while 42% see getting wealthier as a priority.

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But beneath this optimism, China faces sharp class divisions. Wealth is concentrated in the hands of a growing number of millionaires and billionaires while poverty — especially in rural areas — remains a fact of life for the multitudes. [Up to 200 million people](#), in search of jobs and schools, have rushed from impoverished countryside to big cities. But many drift from one low-paying job to another and struggle for basics such as housing. The legal system hasn't kept up, either. The economy is speeding into the 21st century, yet the legal framework is a vestige of the 19th century or earlier, with political influence and bribes trumping the law.

Even the world view of China is shown to be slightly askew after one glimpses the country from within. China is known for its powerful central government, but the local, provincial governments collect taxes, approve business deals and most often enforce the rules of everyday life. They keep the wheel turning.

That gap between the modern face China wants the world to see and the realities at its heart often feeds this global disconnect. The C-100 report found that [45% of Americans](#) have a negative view of China, and 40% of Americans see China's growing economic dominance as a "potential threat" to the United States. But the report shows that much of the American animosity is tied to China's lack of product safety and regulation — issues that have dominated headlines in the USA over the past few years.

A developer here, Vincent Lo, explained that Communist Party officials in the national government and the provinces are judged by the rate of development — new factories, buildings and businesses creating jobs — in areas under their control. But no rewards are bestowed for improving product safety or workers' rights. And that is where the contradiction between China's ambitions and its reality breaks down. A major global economic player must react to the flow of capital as well as the flow of ideas, human rights and public opinion. On that level, China might as well be a walled-in, ancient society.

Still censored

As a journalist, the most troubling contradiction was the absence of a free press. Government censorship is evident in the watered-down coverage in Chinese newspapers and TV and radio news shows. The result is a rush to the Internet by the Chinese seeking "news" created anywhere but under government influence. Even there, the contradictions are in evidence. The Chinese can argue about anything online so long, as one blogger explained to me, as it does not involve the banned spiritual group Falun Gong or the three T's: Taiwan, Tiananmen Square and Tibet. Even so, the government must realize that trying to orchestrate, monitor, much less control the [1.3 billion voices](#) will ultimately prove to be a futile exercise.

To this curious visitor, it is clear that the Chinese people aspire to return their country to a place it occupied centuries ago — as a great civilization and world leader in economics, the arts and military might.

Many Chinese people told me that America's negative views of their authoritarian government, media control and lax product safety is proof that the USA is jealous of China. The Americans, they say, are simply trying to impose their values while undermining this emerging rival.

And perhaps that's what the modern Cold War will be about. Not capitalism vs. communism, but a conflict within China between rapid economic growth and a closed society constrained by an outdated Communist structure.

Juan Williams is a political analyst for NPR and Fox News.

Posted at 12:16 AM/ET, January 23, 2008 in [Business issues - Forum](#), [Foreign Affairs - Asia - Forum](#), [Forum commentary](#) | [Permalink](#)

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TLP wrote: 2h 16m ago

Good old Juan. Even in China he has found financial inequities and is fomenting class envy. If there's a liberal "merit badge" out there for this kind of thing then I think that Juan has earned his. Who am I kidding, I'm sure he's got a drawer full of them. Good liberal. I wonder if Juan ever feels guilty about folks around himself, who don't have as much as HE does. Naaaaahhhh. That stuffs for