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MEGAN RUSSELL

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Can't Believe It's the New York Times and Not Daily Mail



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Thomas Friedman probably thought he was being clever when he titled his most recent article How Elon Musk and Taylor Swift Can Resolve U.S.-China Relations. It's a headline meant to catch your attention– appealing to the Swifties, who think Taylor can save the world, the Musketeers, who are certain Elon can save the world, and, of course, their anti-fans who follow their every move with just as much zeal, and perhaps even more. It was the New York Times version of clickbait, because why bother with solid journalism when you can piggyback off the success of billionaires?

It was clickable, but it was hardly readable.

Friedman starts his piece off with a kernel of truth, just enough to shock the regular NYT's readers who are very rarely fed a positive bit of news about China:

“I just spent a week in Beijing and Shanghai, meeting with Chinese officials, economists and entrepreneurs, and let me get right to the point: While we were sleeping China took a great leap forward in high-tech manufacturing of everything.”

Nobody that knows anything about China can argue with that, though a majority of Americans certainly still view the far-away country through the lens of Soviet communism and rural backwardness. The correlation is that the majority of Americans know nothing about China, have never been, and will never go.

He then goes on to express how Donald Trump’s tariffs and anti-China rhetoric jump-started China’s manufacturing prowess, mentioning how Trump’s name on Chinese social media is “Chuan Jiaguo” meaning “Nation Builder.”

No. It was not Donald Trump that ushered in China’s “Sputnik moment,” as quoted by business consultant Jim McGregor. Trump is merely an amusement to China’s general public— a strange American enigma whose hard lines are overshadowed by unexpected candor and comical behavior. For China, the last 40 years has been a continuous Sputnik moment— from the elimination of extreme poverty to unprecedented shift to renewable energy, China has been on the rise, and Donald Trump has never been the yeast making that happen.

And then comes the meat of Friedman’s theory, what he calls the “Elon Musk-Taylor Swift paradigm.” Instead of suddenly raising US tariffs against China, which will lead us into a kind of supply-chain warfare that benefits nobody, Friedman suggest a gradual rise in tariffs, that would allow the US to “buy time to lift up more Elon Musks” which he describes as “more homegrown manufacturers who can make big stuff so we can export more to the world and import less”, as well as give China more time to “let in more Taylor Swifts” which are “more opportunities for its youth to spend money on entertainment and consumer goods made abroad.”

Friedman isn’t wrong about the idiocy of a US-China trade war, but his prognosis is tone-deaf, and very clearly the result of a Western capitalist tormented by the concept of zero-sum competition:

“It’s important to the world that China continues to be able to give its 1.4 billion people a better life — but it cannot be at the expense of everyone else.”

He does, unsurprisingly, make the Soviet comparison:

But if we don’t use this time to respond to China the way we did to the Soviet Union’s 1957 launch of Sputnik, the world’s first artificial satellite, with our own comprehensive scientific, innovative and industrial push, we will be toast.”

Toast! Don't we all collectively like toast?

He talks of the dangers of China's rising economic dominance. How China "owns the future" because it is the main producer of Electric Vehicles. How China is domestically self-sufficient. How China will soon account for nearly half of all global manufacturing. How all of China's gains will be everyone else's loss. How China is going to export robot-run factories to other countries, and thereby steal labor opportunities— as if the West hasn't exported their own factories and exploited impoverished communities for cheap labor over decades.

"But here's what's scary: We no longer make that many things China wants to buy. It can do almost everything at least cheaper and often better."

That must be incredibly scary to the average American who would rather pay a few bucks for a Temu version of an item rather than shell out tens of dollars for anything made by local businesses. It's not their fault. The US is incredibly unaffordable and the government does not seem to care.

At the same time, Friedman criticizes the lack of consumption within China:

"If I were drawing a picture of China's economy today as a person, it would have an awesome manufacturing upper body — like Popeye, still eating spinach — with consuming legs resembling thin little sticks."

It is the fate of a capitalist to view nonconsumption as a societal malady rather than a sign of good health. The truth is those that consume less have other more nourishing and sustainable ways to fill their souls. At a time when consumerism and overspending are contributing to the destruction of the planet, this is a rather thoughtless point to make. Imagine if society applauded community-building rather than the pointless expenditure of money to temporarily fill a gaping emptiness left by a lack of community and an overemphasis on hyperindividualism? It is very American to look for quick solutions rather than address the root cause.

To his credit, Friedman does state the importance of China providing for its 1.4 billion population, but it is a mere drop of humility that does little to balance the western self-righteousness. He does not comment on the fact that China's population is greater than the US and Europe combined. Neither does he comment on the West's own role in exporting labor for cheaper prices— because a capitalist system is run on greed, and wherever a buck can be saved, you bet it will be. Even at the expense of the people.

Friedman suggests that China should "let their people have more of the supply." Apparently, they want to buy more stuff from us. Stuff that Friedman claims they are being starved of

under the rule of the Communist Party of China. Things like art and entertainment. Majors in gender studies and sociology.

“Its youth need more outlets for creative expression — without having to worry that a song lyric they write could land them in prison.”

I have doubts that Friedman ever ventured out to a concert in Shanghai, let alone listened to some of China’s latest indie music. Culture is something that China definitely does not lack, and to make that claim is so wildly misguided that I question whether he has any understanding of China at all. One merely has to take a walk along the riverside in literally any city, and they will be bombarded by musicians, performers, and an impressive amount of outdoor public karaoke. There are as many artists as there are consumers of art, and indeed, a fair share of students pursuing the humanities.

He concludes:

“In sum, America needs to tighten up, but China needs to loosen up. Which is why my hat is off to Secretary of State Antony Blinken for showing China the way forward.”

What did Antony Blinken do that was so impressive? He stopped at a record store in China and bought a Taylor Swift album.

Maybe, just maybe, Friedman is just one giant Swiftie. But more likely, he threw the article together with a preschool level understanding of the WTO, and an opinion that almost sounds like an opinion, but doesn’t really say much of anything when you give it a thought.

The only difference between sudden tariffs and gradual tariffs is time— and what will time do? In our 4-year system, time is as fickle as our word. Either way, China will still be pioneering the green energy revolution, selling affordable EVs and renewable energy equipment around the globe while the United States, as the NYT Beijing bureau chief Keith Bradsher says, will “become the new Cuba— the place where you visit to see old gas-guzzling cars that you drive yourself.”

And if the US continues its threatened posture around anything coming from China—including green energy tech— the world will continue to heat up, and we will all face the consequences.

Friedman’s general lack of understanding about China was a let down. But mostly I was disappointed because the title had me anticipating a much different read— something with a bit of creativity, and maybe even an original thought.

I would have been more impressed if Friedman suggested sticking Elon Musk and his federal spending chopping block DOGE on the over-bloated Department of Defense, and booking Taylor Swift a highly-publicized multi-city tour around China. Send Blinken along with her,

if he's such a big fan, and have him venture outside of his strict China perimeter to meet, talk with locals, and experience a version of China that he never would in his fancy hotel rooms and secure government buildings. Maybe then he would form an opinion based on his own experiences rather than the lines he memorized over the course of his typical ivy league education, and the subsequent falling-in-place that one must do to become the Secretary of State of the United States. A selling out of the soul, if you will.

And maybe the wellbeing of the people — of all people — would be considered for once, rather than the flimsy monetary aspirations of the already-wealthy.

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Megan Russell is CODEPINK's China is Not Our Enemy Campaign Coordinator. She graduated from the London School of Economics with a Master's Degree in Conflict Studies. Prior to that, she attended NYU where she studied Conflict, Culture, and International Law. Megan spent one year studying in Shanghai, and over eight years studying Chinese Mandarin. Her research focuses on the intersection between US-China affairs, peace-building, and international development.