HOLLYWOOD GOES TO WAR

How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies

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Democrats Old and New: "Classless" Britain and "Modern" China

This emphasis on Chinese disunity and internal strife is particularly unfortunate today when it is important to acquaint audiences in all parts of the world with a new and unified China.

—OWI script review of
Keys of the Kingdom,
Jan. 19, 1944

Mrs. Miniver swept the Academy Awards for 1942. A characteristically lavish MGM release, the film garnered three of the most prized Oscars: best picture, best actress (Greer Garson), best director (William Wyler). The public loved the picture. It was a box office smash in both America and Great Britain. A U.S. poll in 1942 ranked *Mrs. Miniver* and *Wake Island* as the two favorite movies that year; women especially liked the Greer Garson portrayal. A well-made though not brilliant film, *Mrs. Miniver* was probably an inevitable success. Garson and her leading man, Walter Pidgeon, provided ample star power. Director Wyler, a three-time Oscar winner, was one of Hollywood's best. Perhaps equally important was the fact that the movie had the ideal message for the times. The character of Mrs. Miniver, a courageous mother who holds her family together in the teeth of the Blitz,

symbolized in personal terms Britain's lonely heroism in stemming the Nazi tide. *Mrs. Miniver*, like *Since You Went Away*, projected an appealing fantasy—the upper middle class family as war-inconvenienced democrat. Like *Mission to Moscow*, though in a less political vein, *Mrs. Miniver* was intended to familiarize audiences with the valiant story of one of America's allies.[1]

The MGM picture was not only a favorite with the public, but OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures considered it a model propaganda piece. "Give us a *Mrs. Miniver* of China," Nelson Poynter implored studio executives in June 1942. The Miniver treatment produced a sentimental, warm-hearted response, but whether it would enlighten the public about complex international problems, as the bureau hoped, was doubtful.[2]

Britain and China received an extraordinary outpouring of American trust during the war. Though significant pockets of suspicion remained about Soviet intentions, Americans overwhelmingly believed, according to an OWI poll in mid-1942, that the British and Chinese could be counted on to cooperate with us after the war: 72 percent said yes for Britain and an astounding 86 percent did so for China.[3] This poll revealed as much about our own view of America as it did about how we believed our allies viewed us; in effect Americans were saying that their vision of the postwar world—whether that of Luce's "American Century" or Wallace's "Century of the Common Man"—was shared by other right-thinking countries. That, of course, was the point—Americans believed they shared with the British and Chinese an essentially compatible vision. Unity was the watchword. President Roosevelt met with Winston Churchill and Chiang K'ai-shek in Cairo in 1943 in a symbolic show of solidarity. Churchill and Madame Chiang spoke to standing ovations at joint sessions of Congress. Trying to eliminate a perception of differences among the allies, OWI homogenized America's quite diverse partners, to the detriment of our understanding of the complex world scene.

OWI worried that Allied unity could be undermined by a recrudescence of Anglophobia. The Motion Picture Bureau's manual noted there was a "tendency to be critical of the British." Though Americans probably felt as positive towards Britain as toward any country, the bureau realized that for both historical and contemporary reasons opinion could be ambiv-

alent. The strong fraternal ties between the U.S. and Britain dated from the turn of the century, when influential opinion makers in both countries sensed that the Empire's interests were compatible with America's, soon to be the mightiest industrial power. Those ties, augmented by skillful British propaganda, had helped propel America into World War I. In August of 1941, Roosevelt's secret meeting with Churchill off Newfoundland, where the Atlantic Charter was issued, underscored the profound identification felt between some Americans and Britishers even before the United States formally entered the war. As the war ground on, Roosevelt and Churchill cemented their countries' alliance with a personal friendship that was most unusual among heads of state.[4]

Problems remained, however. First there was Ireland. The British domination of Ireland engendered continuing bitterness among Irish-Americans and some anti-imperialists as well. Massachusetts Representative John McCormack sold the Lend-Lease bill to his Irish constituency as a bill to save the Vatican, not England. Then there was imperialism itself. The sun would soon begin to set on the British Empire, but it had not in 1941. Even among American Anglophiles there was considerable opposition to the empire. Isolationist sentiment between the wars had promoted the idea that the United States had gone to war in 1917 to save the British Empire and warned against a repeat in 1941. Among many liberals and blacks independence for India was a priority. The future of the empire was probably the single most contentious issue between FDR and Churchill, with the American president sometimes needling his Tory counterpart. Lastly, many Americans viewed Britain as a class-ridden society that was not truly democratic in spirit. Though the British upper classes fascinated Americans, they also produced an opposite reaction. Roosevelt thought Britain's trouble was "too much Eton and Oxford," a reference to upper class domination of British life. Like many Americans FDR was both Anglophile and Anglophobe—attracted to England culturally but deeply sceptical about her politics.[5]

Hollywood fed on British imperialism and class distinctions, and the empire afforded a setting for innumerable swashbuckling pictures. With an eye more toward the box office than diplomacy, the movie industry wanted to revive its imperial epics during the war. The topicality of the Pacific war combined with the romance of Rudyard Kipling, the empire's arch-poet, was seemingly irresistible. RKO wanted to re-release *Gunga Din,* Metro to reissue *Kim.* Citing the dangers such pictures posed for Allied unity, Lowell Mellett appealed to the studios to drop these plans, and they agreed. The empire caught OWI liberals in a bind between their personal distaste for imperialism and their professional commitment to selling the war. Since the Tories seemed determined to hold onto the empire, the propagandists resorted to a favorite tactic with embarrassing subjects—ignoring them.[6]

Hollywood's delight in portraying the British upper classes also had to be corrected. *How Green Was My Valley,* which won the 1941 Academy Award for best picture, was a rare exception with its depiction of the Welsh common people, industrial strife, and environmental ruin. Imperialism and aristocracy both threatened OWI's image of democracy. The propagandists' advice to Hollywood blended British heroism with democracy. "Where would we be today if Britain had not continued to resist in the critical year when she stood alone, unprepared, and without allies, against the Axis?" BMP asked. It urged the studios to stress the "stubborn resistance" of the British after Dunkirk. Britain was also part of the "people's war." BMP asked Hollywood to "fight the unity-destroying lies about England." In particular it urged the industry to tone down the typical image of a land of "castles and caste" and drop the stereotypical, monocled, "bah jove" Englishman. As a "comrade in arms" England fought for the same things America did—"a just and lasting peace and a world governed by law and order." The "castles and caste" were just harmless anachronisms. For propaganda purposes British society had to be democratized and its empire written out.[7]

Mrs. Miniver, though produced before OWI got into the act in Hollywood, embodied these themes for British society. The film introduces us to an "average English middle class" family in 1939, when England is composed of "happy, carefree people, who worked, played, and tended their gardens." We are forewarned, however, that they will soon be involved in a "desperate struggle for survival." The story begins on a busy street in London, where Mrs. Miniver, on a sudden impulse, asks the con-

ductor to stop the bus. She rushes into a store to buy the expensive hat she had seen earlier. Her prewar occupation is established: Mrs. Miniver is a professional consumer.

On her train ride to her suburban home she encounters Lady Beldon, the local aristocrat, who is wonderfully played by Dame May Whitty. Lady Beldon grouses constantly about the middle-class women she has encountered all day trying to buy things they cannot possibly afford: "I don't know what the country's coming to—everyone trying to be better than their betters—mink coats and no manners—no wonder Germany's arming." The English class system is established.

At the train station the local stationmaster, Mr. Ballard (Henry Travers), asks Mrs. Miniver if he could see her for a moment. He takes her into his office where he shows her a beautiful rose that he has spent years breeding. Ballard wants to enter the rose in the local flower show and respectfully asks if he can name the rose "Mrs. Miniver." She is taken aback, flattered, and consents. Ballard is delighted and tells her that he appreciated how nice she has always been to him over the years—always speaking to him and all that. Mrs. Miniver, unlike Lady Beldon, cares for people and does not distinguish between classes. Mrs. Miniver is a democrat.

The next scene introduces Clem Miniver, an architect. He is sitting in a fancy sports car in front of the Miniver home trying to bargain a better price for the car from the salesman. When the man won't lower the price Clem gives in and buys the car. The house is massive. They have two full-time servants, whom they treat with a dignity close to equality. They are consumers and good communicators as each worries how to tell the other about their purchase. Clem tries to establish that the old car is dangerous but finally blurts out that he bought a new used car—a very expensive one. Mrs. Miniver is delighted because the car will make her hat look trivial. As they are getting ready for bed—twin beds, and Clem's pyjamas are buttoned to the neck—Mrs. Miniver models her new hat. Dressed in an elegant nightgown, she is strikingly beautiful and erotic. Clem praises her beauty and then, as the code required, flips off the light, turns his back to her, and falls asleep.

Vin, their oldest son, returns from his first year at Oxford,

where he has learned social consciousness. He thinks the car was a waste of money. Over dinner he waxes indignant about the class system. "Look about you! What have we? As pure a feudalistic state as there ever was in the ninth to the fifteenth centuries! I'm appalled!" The parents treat Vin with tolerant amusement. The young man's idealism is a phase all young people go through. But the point the movie is making is that England was in a state of transition. Lady Beldon represents the old school: everyone in their place. The Minivers, the new emerging middle-class, are much more democratic in their views. And the next generation, Vin, is receiving a democratic and egalitarian education at Oxford. If England had a class system in the past it surely would not survive the emerging generation. England was an evolutionary democracy.

Enter Lady Beldon's granddaughter Carol Beldon, played by Teresa Wright. She is a bit embarrassed and hesitant. The Minivers are puzzled. Carol blurts out her concern. It's about the new rose named after Mrs. Miniver. Lady Beldon has always won the rose award without competition. Miss Beldon asks Mrs. Miniver is she could suggest that Mr. Ballard withdraw his rose so her grandmother can again win first prize. Before the startled Mrs. Miniver can respond, young Vin brings his new-found ideals of democracy to the front. Must Ballard withdraw his rose because he is not of the ruling class? he angrily asks. But Carol is no stuffy aristocratic female. She challenges him: if he believes so strongly that the system is wrong what is he doing about it? *She* spends her holidays doing settlement work, she points out, and thus puts Vin in his place as an armchair liberal who prefers speeches to action. Despite this, Carol is smitten with him. Again the point is made that the younger generation in England is different from the older ruling class. Carol Beldon is her own woman—an unusual characteristic for a 1940s film.

The parish church unites all Englishmen under the roof of God, though in class-segregated seats. In front sit Lady Beldon and Carol, to the side the Minivers, in the back the stationmaster, surrounded by his fellow workmen. As the minister begins her sermon he is interrupted. Sadly he announces that Germany has invaded Poland and that England is now at war: "I will say merely this, that the prayer for peace still lives in our

hearts, coupled now with the prayer for our beloved country. . . . Our forefathers for a thousand years fought for the freedom that we now enjoy and that we must now defend again." With that he dismisses the congregation. Can these people of England pull together as a single unit? Is their love for freedom and democracy stronger than their class system?

The rest of the film shows how the people unite. The workers are the first to rise to the defense of England: many join the army; others are in charge of local civil defense. And in this crisis the workers are suddenly giving orders to their betters. Lady Beldon again grouses about it but gives in. She obeys orders for a blackout and establishes an air raid shelter. The Minivers pitch right in, too. Vin joins the RAF. Clem is a member of a local watch patrol and joins the armada of small boats that rescues troops stranded at Dunkirk. Mrs. Miniver singlehandedly captures a wounded German flier.

The people live through the increasing air raids in the best stiff-upper-lip tradition. The Miniver home is bombed but the family carries on as if it were a mere inconvenience. The romantic angle is satisfied when Carol and Vin plan to marry. Lady Beldon announces to Mrs. Miniver her opposition to the marriage, and the audience naturally assumes it is because of their different stations in life. But Mrs. Miniver knows better. She gets Lady Beldon to admit that she too married during the first World War—at age sixteen. Her husband was killed just three weeks later, and she does not want Carol to go through the same agony she herself experienced. The lovers marry very simply, but everyone lives in fear that Vin will soon be killed.

The flower show must go on: It serves as a symbol of a united English democracy. Ballard's rose is the subject of much discussion in the village. Many of the common people are opposed to his entry—it is Lady Beldon's right, they argue. In a dramatic scene the decision of the judges is given to Lady Beldon to announce. She has again won first prize, even though Ballard's rose is clearly superior. But the spirit of democracy has overcome the matron who, after a moment of hesitation, reverses the decision and announces that first prize goes to Ballard, "our popular stationmaster." A spontaneous roar of approval erupts from the audience.

An air raid interrupts the flower show. Vin, who is at the

show with Carol and his mother, must be rushed back to his base. On their way home Carol and Mrs. Miniver are caught in an air raid on the village. The bombing and strafing are so intense that they must pull their car off the road. Carol is killed by a stray bullet.

The final scene takes place in the church. As the congregation files in it is apparent that several people are missing. The camera pans over the people and then slowly points upward revealing a huge hole in the roof. The minister begins his sermon: "We in this quiet corner of England have suffered the loss of friends." George West, a young choir-boy, killed. James Ballard, Stationmaster, dead just one hour after winning the rose competition. And, most tragically, Carol Beldon. "Why, in all conscience, should these be the ones to suffer?" he asks. "I shall tell you why! Because this is not only a war of soldiers in uniform. It is a war of the people—of all the people—and it must be fought not only on the battlefield but in the cities and in the villages, in the factories and on the farms, in the home and in the heart of every man, woman and child who loves freedom. . . . This is a people's war! It is our war! We are the fighters!" As the sermon concludes the camera moves from the minister to the hole in the church roof. With "Onward Christian Soldiers" playing on the sound track, the sky is suddenly filled with English fighter planes going off to battle. A united England will survive.

It was the right film at the right time. The public loved it, as did most of the critics. The *New Yorker* labeled it "stupendous." *Newsweek* brushed aside the charge that it was "contrived propaganda" and said it packed "more persuasive wallop than half a dozen propaganda films pitched to a heroic key." To *Time* the film represented "that almost impossible feat, a great war picture that photographs the inner meaning, instead of the outward realism of World War II." The *Catholic World* was so taken with the film that its reviewer wished "it had been some Catholic's privilege to have . . . directed *Mrs. Miniver.* Perhaps it was God's retort to anti-Semitism to have chosen William Wyler." Manny Farber of the *New Republic* cast a dissenting vote. He found the Minivers "prissy and fake." They behave, he wrote, "according to Will Hays and whoever wrote 'Little Lord Fauntleroy.'"[8]

From London the *Spectator* blasted the film as "well-meaning but unconsciously pro-fascist propaganda." The film offended its reviewer, Edgar Anstey, by showing the English as having no "inkling whatsoever" that war was coming in September 1939. *Mrs. Miniver,* he wrote, presented British war aims as a "defense of bourgeois privilege." He admitted, however, that the film settled down into a good war movie and correctly predicted it would be popular in Britain.[9]

Opinion within OWI was divided. Reviewer Marjorie Thorson found the film "so patronizing . . . it verges on insult." Poynter, however, praised it as a model. His instincts were correct. *Mrs. Miniver* was a sort of British *Since You Went Away.* Audiences accepted both pictures not in spite of their character's wealth and high status but because of it. A public that believed almost everybody was middle class eagerly embraced the myth that the characters played by Greer Garson and Claudette Colbert embodied their own situation transposed up a notch. Mrs. Miniver, despite her luxury, suffered grievously, responded heroically, and kept the common touch.[10]

The memory of *Mrs. Miniver* was fresh when another British extravaganza from Metro, *The White Cliffs of Dover*, hit Poynter's desk. OWI's lingering doubts about *Mrs. Miniver* had been augmented by two other MGM features. Producer Sidney Franklin, who made something of a wartime specialty of British subjects, supervised *Random Harvest* (late 1942), a love story which also starred Greer Garson, this time with Ronald Colman. The picture skirted the war, but BMP tried unsuccessfully to get the studio to show a more democratic Britain by sprinkling a few Labour members in the Parliament scene. OWI was even more distressed by *A Yank at Eton* (1942), branding it "poisonous from start to finish" for its story of a cocksure American (Mickey Rooney) who cuts a swath through England's most prestigious prep school. By 1943 the Motion Picture Bureau had had enough, and decided to take a stand.[11]

Alice Duer Miller's narrative poem, *The White Cliffs*, captured the plight of Britain and the island nation's tie with America. "I am American bred,/ I have seen much to hate here—much to forgive," she wrote. "But in a world where England is finished and dead,/ I do not wish to live." These sentiments created a sensation. More than 300,000 copies were sold in the United

Trying to resolve the dilemma of love and separation faced by millions of moviegoers, Ronald Reagan as stage manager of an armed forces entertainment troupe gets married to his sweetheart (Joan Leslie) in *This Is the Army.* They receive the benediction of the stage manager's beaming father, played by George Murphy, who also attained political stardom as U.S. senator from California. *(All photos in this section from MOMA)*

Wilson (1944), the most expensive picture made up to that time, tried to prepare the public for internationalist postwar policies by invoking the memory of the martyred president. Darryl Zanuck poured lavish resources into such scenes as the reenactment of the 1912 Democratic national convention. But the effort to humanize Wilson (Alexander Knox), greeting World War I doughboys, reduced most of the politics to platitudes.

States, and actress Lynn Fontanne broadcast the poem over the NBC Blue Network; Jimmy Dorsey recorded a musical version which proved to be one of the most popular songs of 1941; and MGM turned the poem into a major motion picture starring Irene Dunne and Alan Marshall.[12]

The White Cliffs is the story of Susan Dunn, a young American girl who visits England just as World War I breaks out. She falls in love with a young English aristocrat, Sir John Ashwood, and marries him. They have a son but her husband is killed in the war. Sue and her son return to the United States after the war only to find it dominated by prohibition, gangsters, and political scandal. Sue flees to civilized England, determined to bring up her son in the aristocratic tradition of his father. But England is no paradise either—it is dominated by arrogance, a rigid class structure, and appeasement. When war comes to England in 1939 Lady Ashwood complains bitterly that once again young men will fight and die for worthless causes. Her son joins the military and, like his father, is killed in battle. In the end Lady Ashwood realizes that these sacrifices are necessary to build a better world.

The script arrived at BMP headquarters in March 1943. The staff hated it. World War II was presented as a simple repetition of World War I. The global character of the war was ignored, as were the United Nations. Unlike the symbolic democracy of *Mrs. Miniver,* the war was reduced "to the scale of a cricket match, the stakes the preservation of Ashwood Manor, its lord and retainers," said BMP reviewers. The English were a nation of snobs. The entire Ashwood family, Susan included, was "condescending and patronizing" to its servants and the working class. Where is the England of today? OWI asked. "We are shown nothing which would indicate a total mobilization of the English people for war . . . [or] the great social change the war has already brought to England." Nor were the English the only problem. Americans appeared "snobbish, simple, and clumsy, or boorish." Susan's father was rude, crude, and an isolationist to boot. To OWI, Dunn was not representative of American attitudes and ideals. The agency suggested he be turned into a man like William Allen White.[13]

Nelson Poynter sent a long critical evaluation to Sidney Franklin and vice president Eddie Mannix. The major problem,

Poynter said, was that the script left the impression that the United States and Britain could only cooperate during a period of crisis. Could our common heritages be incorporated in the script "without bitching it up?" Mannix, however, was reluctant to make changes.[14]

Mellett also read the screenplay, but he did not want to fight this one. Most of the attitudes expressed in the film existed, and he was confident that the "common sense of American audiences" would draw positive feelings from the film. As in *So Proudly We Hail* and *Pittsburgh,* he thought Poynter had gone too far. He noted that if the studio took all of the OWI suggestions seriously the entire script would have to be rewritten. The result might be worse than the present script. Poynter objected to the young soldier's saying he is "dying for England." Poynter wanted him to deliver a death-bed sermonette on the concept of the United Nations and perhaps a salute or two to Chiang K'ai-shek or Stalin. But Mellett warned that if the screen writers attempted such a death-bed speech they might deliver "something pretty mawkish and unconvincing."[15]

Poynter backed off but the Hollywood office was not pleased with the film. Ulric Bell agreed with Poynter. He had established contact with two British representatives of the Ministry of Information, the British equivalent of OWI, and they agreed that the script was "just the sort of thing that shouldn't be done." Yet without support from Mellett there was little that Poynter or Bell could do. Poynter continued to work with the studio. Sidney Franklin admitted that he had been "indeed shocked" when he first read the OWI evaluation, but upon reflection admitted that many of the agency's criticisms were valid.[16]

Eventually MGM submitted some eighty pages of script changes to OWI. Following orders, Poynter told Franklin that the script would now be "of great value to Anglo-American friendship and understanding." But his staff did not agree with him. They judged the changes to be very minor. A few lines were inserted to indicate that England was changing, and an air of comedy was put in the film to lighten the impression of criticism. Egalitarianism was established by having John Dunn, the son of Susan, fall in love with and marry a tenant farmer's daughter. When the film was released in March 1944 BMP's overseas branch in Hollywood recommended against foreign

distribution. In December 1944 the New York office ruled that *The White Cliffs of Dover* could play in France and Italy but was otherwise restricted to American audiences.[17]

American reviewers agreed with OWI's criticism. *Newsweek* found the film a questionable confirmation of Anglo-American solidarity: "The English you are asked to love and identify with . . . are exclusively and belligerently aristocratic." James Agee likened watching the film to "drinking cup after cup of tepid orange pekoe at a rained-out garden party." *Time* thought the film would give "genuine admirers of good cinema and credible Englishmen the jimjams."[18]

The theme of England as a class-ridden society was perhaps most directly dealt with in the Darryl Zanuck production, *This Above All* (1942). Based on the novel by Eric Knight, the film was directed by Anatole Litvak. It starred Tyrone Power as a young, embittered, lower-class Englishman and Joan Fontaine as his upper-class lover. Philip Hartung of the *Commonweal* termed it "the most interesting movie that Hollywood had made about this war."[19]

The hero, Clive Briggs (Power), is a member of the British army who fought in France. He is rescued at Dunkirk, but deserts on his return to England because he feels the army is inefficient, unprepared, and run by upper-class snobs. He sees no reason to fight for a country that refuses to treat him as an equal. Enter Prue Hathaway (Fontaine), a member of a wealthy, aristocratic family. To the utter astonishment of her family she joins the WAF as a private. As in *Mrs. Miniver* the younger generation is rejecting the class structure of British society.

Clive and Prue immediately fall in love. Aided by a minister, she tries to persuade Clive that no matter what faults England has, life under Nazi Germany would be much worse. "Whatever happens," she says, "let us decide it, not the enemy." Clive agrees in the final reel. As the film ends, he says: "It's going to be a different world when this is over. But first we've got to win this war." He returns to his regiment, and one assumes that the war will not only defeat fascism but bring down the class structure.

Hollywood and OWI invoked similar sacred and sentimental symbols for both Britain and America to suggest identical interests between the two countries. As had happened with the American home front, these symbols were used to deny the per-

manence of gaping social cleavages in British life. The British could indeed unite against their common enemy, but that did not mean class cleavages would melt away as the democratic ethos wafted through the world. Fearing that any recognition of serious problems in British society would compromise American support, the Bureau of Motion Pictures sought a portrayal as false as Hollywood's great-house charades. Even with America's closest ally, OWI found it hard to take theater audiences into its confidence.

The problems OWI encountered with the depiction of Britain were minor, however, by comparison with those regarding China. The Chinese reality posed perhaps as great a propaganda challenge as did the Soviet Union, and the distortions wrought by the Bureau of Motion Pictures and Hollywood were nearly as serious as those of the pro-Soviet pictures. The wartime propaganda drive underscores historian Michael Hunt's point about U.S. perceptions of China throughout our history: "Americans with their unique historical experience and outlook are [likely] to ignore diversity in the world and instead reduce cultures radically different from our own to familiar, easily manageable terms."[20]

The wartime alliance between the United States and China was fraught with misunderstanding, frustration, and apprehension. The Japanese invaded China in 1937 and, overrunning much of the eastern part of the country, soon forced the Kuomintang (Nationalist) government of Generalissimo Chiang K'ai-shek to flee to Chungking in the south. Roosevelt increased his support for Chiang in the hope that he would counter Japanese domination of East Asia. FDR also gave Chiang equal billing with the other allies and proclaimed the U.S., Britain, Russia, and China to be the "four policemen" of the world. Washington poured large amounts of military aid into Chungking during the war and through its crusty military adviser in China, General "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell (who contemptuously referred to Chiang as "the peanut"), tried to reform—and at one point even take over—the Kuomintang army.[21]

But Roosevelt could not create through rhetoric and showmanship what the Kuomintang refused to build for itself. Chiang's government was mired in hopeless corruption and

tragic brutality that alienated large segments of the Chinese population; the Kuomintang was anything but the enlightened democracy and efficient fighting force pictured in government and private propaganda. Chiang hoarded the supplies Washington sent and contrived excuse after excuse to avoid engaging the Japanese. For he believed that his real enemy was not the Japanese but Mao Ze-dong's Communists. Chiang called the Japanese a "disease of the skin" but the Communists a "disease of the heart." As the Kuomintang stagnated, Mao gathered support among the peasantry, built an efficient fighting machine, and indicated his willingness to lead a patriotic crusade against the Japanese. After the war the Communists would topple the Kuomintang in the world's first successful peasant revolution.

If these realities were ignored by official Washington, the average American was not even aware of them. In mid-1942 pollsters asked citizens to locate China—a pretty good-sized place—on a blank outline map of the world; 40 percent could not do so. China was a far-off land of mystery, teeming with millions of people who spoke a strange language, ate with sticks, and worshipped their ancestors. But as the polls indicated, Americans' ignorance of the real China did not keep them from carrying on a long distance love affair with the world's most populous nation. Since the nineteenth century, when that alluring land had first attracted both dedicated missionaries and unscrupulous fortune hunters (many in the vile opium trade), Americans had felt their country enjoyed a special, if deeply patronizing, relationship with China.[22]

Hollywood reinforced these contradictory impressions of the Chinese with its occasional forays into the mysterious East, highlighted by such epics as D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and Thalberg's *The Good Earth* (1937). Movieland China was populated with evil mandarin villains like Fu Manchu, whose unintelligible spells baffled Westerners, and inhuman warlords who terrorized women and children; but it also embraced the simple, gentle peasants of Pearl Buck's vision, and the genial, wise Charlie Chan, a beloved detective who used Confucian logic to befuddle crooks. Whether benign or sinister, China consistently was pictured as backward, poverty-stricken, and unfamiliar with modern science and technology. China, it seemed, needed Western help to modernize and prosper.[23]