

AMERICAN DREAMS OF CHINA

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Gordon H. Chang, *Fateful Ties: A History of America's Preoccupation with China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); 314 pages; \$32.95.

In recent years, the “Rise of China” has dominated discussions and preoccupied policymakers in the United States. China has drawn both the interest and ire of many Americans as it seemingly offers endless economic opportunities on the one hand, but significant threats to American interests and values on the other. In this vein, a plethora of books and articles have been written about the implications of China’s rise for the United States and the rest of the world, many of which deem the United States and China to be on a “collision course.”

In *Fateful Ties*, however, Gordon H. Chang resists this trend by delving into the rich history of US-China relations to provide a clearer picture of how and why America is so concerned with China today. Chang deftly weaves together a historical narrative of US-China relations and asserts that America’s supposedly recent obsession with China is, in fact, not so recent. Indeed, Chang argues that since the founding fathers, and even well before them, China has held a special place in the imagination of Americans and continues to do so today.

To convey this overarching argument, the book utilizes a thematic framework with a chronological flow to trace how China has played a central role not only for US foreign policymaking, but for how Americans construct their own identity. Chang first contextualizes China’s centrality in American history by linking European dreams of the Orient, punctuated by the search for a new route to the Far East by Columbus and others, to American convictions that China was “essential for America’s fate.” Yet according to Chang, Americans went beyond the “China mystique” of Europeans as “the idea of ‘China’ became an ingredient within the developing identity of America itself” and the national destiny of America “became ineffably linked to that of China.”

Covering the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Chang skillfully interweaves the more familiar historical events and characters of American history with fascinating threads of Chinese influence and involvement. The dumping of Chinese tea at the Boston Tea Party, the image of Confucius next to Moses in the U.S. Supreme Court, and George and Martha Washington's collection of Chinaware are but a few interesting examples used to illustrate China's presence in American history.

After fleshing out how early Americans held glowing or glaring views of China and its material opportunities, Chang proceeds to highlight the spiritual connection between the US and China. It was the missionaries, not the military or merchants, who had "the most enduring effect on China and on Americans back home" as "millions of Americans formed their opinions about the Chinese for the next 100 years" based on missionary accounts of China. And despite the failure to convert significant numbers of Chinese to Christianity, it was the missionaries who helped create the "westernized, liberal, professional elite" that would shape China in the twentieth century. Politics between China and the United States, says Chang, followed only after missionaries and merchants. Compared to the European powers, American power in East Asia was limited before the twentieth century. This led the Chinese to assume that the United States "was a different sort of foreign power." Yet the early positive and equitable relations with China, symbolized by the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, began to deteriorate at the end of the nineteenth century. The ostensible moral high ground the United States occupied in its defense of an Open Door policy in China was actually more an ambiguous "mix of idealism and political calculation" that would shape American foreign policy for the next few decades. Chang highlights how Qing China's demise coincided with the United States' emergence at the turn of the century, as Americans asserted their political and economic interests in China by expanding across the Pacific and establishing the United States as a world power.

While necessarily engaging in "grand politics," Chang does not limit his analysis to political machinations but refreshingly details the numerous ways in which Chinese culture caught the attention of early Americans. Chinese arts and crafts, luxurious clothing, Chinese paintings, dinner ware, and even mahjong penetrated the daily lives of many Americans, not just the elites. American intellectuals "caught a China fever in the early twentieth century" and engaged deeply in Chinese learning. Chang's assertion that "the cultural turn toward Asia... was pronounced and formed an important part of America's abiding interest in China" adds another layer to US-China

relations that is often left out of the discussion.

The remaining section of *Fateful Ties* examines how wars and revolutions in the mid-twentieth century ushered in an era of chaotic, but evolving, relations between the United States and China. Using a variety of intriguing portraits of both well-known and obscure figures, Chang illustrates how Americans in China and at home perceived and portrayed China and its leaders. Chang cites former US ambassador to China, John Leighton Stuart, who, like other leading Americans, held an “abiding belief in the deep importance of China to America and that China could be remade in America’s image.” Through such figures, Chang argues that “the U.S. position had very little to do with any existing material stake in China but everything to do with America’s attitude, developed over many years, of simultaneously coveting China and considering itself China’s special protector and benefactor.” This assumption once again points to the theme of the book: American attitudes toward China, not simply policies, are crucial to understanding US-China relations.

From 1949 to 1979, the United States and China lacked diplomatic relations, but Americans continued to hold “both nightmares and dreams” about China. Open and repeated threats to use nuclear weapons against the “Red and Yellow Peril” were contrasted by the praise given to revolutionary China by many African-Americans, including prominent thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois. Chang thus recognizes the variance in American views as some “believed China was the greatest danger to peace and civilization,” while others such as the Black Panthers “hailed Mao as their great revolutionary inspiration.” Chang notes that the lack of ties during this period created gaps in the American understanding of China, which presented the opportunity for the careers of individuals like John K. Fairbank to flourish. And after the once-ardent Cold Warrior Richard Nixon paved the way to re-establishing diplomatic relations with China, the opening of China “woke dormant wells of fascination” among Americans. Chang claims that Nixon and his successor Reagan went “beyond economics and geopolitics” and led Americans to develop “a powerful psychological connection between everyday Chinese and Americans.”

Chang concludes by arguing that “American views of China have always been quixotic,” and whether “peril or profit,” China has inspired the imagination of Americans for centuries. Chang makes a compelling argument that “no other country has so inspired American imaginations over so long a time, from the beginning of the country to the present.” Although persuasive, Chang relentlessly hammers away with this theme to the point

of overstating his argument. The cases for the centrality of other countries in the American imagination could surely be made along similar lines. Moreover, his rather feeble assertion that other countries' importance to the United States "have been episodic and tied to contemporary concerns" remains unsubstantiated, as this could arguably apply to China, as well. In addition, many of the fears and hopes regarding China seem applicable to Asia as a whole, and Japan, in particular. China may indeed be at the center of American curiosity and fears of Asia, but Chang conveniently uses examples regarding Asia, in general, to refer to China, specifically. By interpreting all American interactions in Asia through the lens of US-China relations, Chang risks doing a disservice to the importance of other Asian countries to the United States and their place in the American imagination.

Finally, Chang's liberal use of the term "American" is problematic, at times. Chang presents a wide range of individual American views on China, but when speaking more generally it remains unclear *which* Americans he is referring to. A portion of one chapter is dedicated to how African-Americans viewed China, but the rest of the book fails to clearly establish the views of other "minority groups." Ironically, almost lost in his analysis are the views of Asian (particularly Chinese) Americans, with little more than a paragraph exploring their views. Comparing and contrasting their voices with those presented in the book could have further illuminated how Americans struggle to conceptualize China in different ways.

These minor snags notwithstanding, *Fateful Ties* provides an insightful look into US-China relations and draws attention to the multiple layers of interest Americans have had in China. The engaging and thorough analysis provided by Chang is undoubtedly an invaluable introduction to Sino-American relations, as well as a thoughtful examination of how Americans have viewed China, and indeed themselves, throughout history.

An accessible and engaging read, *Fateful Ties* allows the average reader with any interest in China to dive into the depths of US-China relations without feeling bored or overwhelmed. At the same time, Chang offers tremendous depth in his work, providing an impressive variety of sources and levels of analysis that grapple with "the intangible, feelings, and will, as well as the promise or potential of the relationship" between the US and China. Going beyond the typical diplomatic history, Chang analyzes the cultural history of US-China relations and utilizes literature, art, philosophy, psychology, and media to bring life to his arguments and make *Fateful Ties* a fascinating read with lots to chew on for students and experts alike. **Y**