Caught Up in the Patterns of History

Fateful Ties: A History of America’s Preoccupation with China
By Gordon H. Chang
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Reviewed by John Delury

I HAD MY FIRST ENCOUNTER with “the East” as a high school student growing up in suburban California, where I stumbled on the writings of the Taoist sage Zhuangzi and felt an inexplicable connection to his ancient, absurdist philosophy. A few years later, I found myself spending a summer in Beijing, which was still recovering from the scars of June 1989, and felt myself falling deeper in love with all things Chinese. Today, some 20 years later, each time I board the short flight from Seoul to Beijing or Shanghai, I fear the magic will be gone, that the toxic air, rampant materialism, or political repression will ruin my sense of connection with China. Yet every time I step off the plane, my fears are proven unfounded, and I am drawn deeper still into a lifelong quest to better understand China.

Most American-born China scholars have a similar tale, emphasizing a special feeling of connection across the Pacific. Gordon H. Chang’s engrossing meditation on US-China relations, Fateful Ties: A History of America’s Preoccupation with China, shows how such sentiments are but the most colorful expressions of a mainstream, centuries-old pattern of American preoccupation with China. Chang argues that the extraordinary adventures of individual China hands, which he narrates superbly, express a deep chord in the national psyche that identifies China as an essential part of the identity of Americans, as the nation’s destiny. “The idea of ‘China’ became an ingredient within the developing identity of America itself,” he writes, “and America’s national destiny, which preoccupied (and continues to preoccupy) Americans, became inextricably linked to that of China in the great national enterprises and the expansive ventures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.” It is a bold thesis, and at times perhaps overstated, since scores of countries from the Old World, New World, and Orient could claim the same kind of “special” place in the American imagination. But even if Chang, professor of history at Stanford University, can be faulted for overstating the uniqueness of China, this splendid book is no less worth reading. In the dry literature of US-China relations, here is a trans-national history that lights a spark that could start a prairie fire of new interpretation.

Chang begins his story with the Age of Exploration and Conquest, pointing out that Christopher Columbus bumped into the Americas on what he always hoped to be a passage to the legendary kingdom of Marco Polo’s Travels, a copy of which he carried with him on the Santa Maria. Fast-forwarding to the colonial era, Chang casts the familiar tale of the American Revolution in a new light, pointing out how the tea dumped into Boston harbor in 1773 was grown in China, and how the first trading vessel to sail from an independent United States of America was the Canton-bound Empress of China.

Americans of the early republic had great expectations of the China trade, which helped to motivate the westward expansion inspired by Manifest Destiny. Through war, purchase and genocide, America’s white leaders dramatically expanded the country’s territory in a manner not entirely unlike how the Qing Empire’s expansionist Manchu rulers had in the previous two centuries. For most of the 19th century, the US harbored no territorial ambitions in China, and lacked the naval strength to project power into the western Pacific. After all, in 1790, the newly independent colonies boasted a population of 4 million, whereas Qing China was on its way to the 400 million mark by mid-century. Yet despite its size, the Qing dynasty was bloated and weak. Asia’s predatory modern “great powers” — England, France, Russia and Japan — fed with insatiable appetite on a China bleeding from rebellion and in terminal decline. Chang stresses how Washington stood on the sidelines, abstaining from carving out a “foreign concession” on Chinese soil, and negotiating the only “equal treaty” (in 1868) of the late Qing’s sorry diplomatic record.

This American posture of disinterest, born as much of necessity as virtue, expressed itself in the Open Door policy, according to which imperial powers were supposed to restrain themselves from gorging on the Chinese body politic whole-hog, while China’s rulers were expected to keep their gates open to the “barbarians.” Especially important for the Americans was that the door remain open to the souls of “heathen Chinese.” Chang draws heavily on the important history of American missionary activity to show how the Open Door expressed America’s missionary impulse toward China, and self-righteous sense of a special duty to redeem the world’s most populous country for Christ. Missionary zeal combined with merchant fantasies of the China trade to create the American tradition of “wishful thinking about China” — exposed in the 1850s in the hopes of some missionaries that the unorthodox sect known as the Taiping rebels would open a new glorious era of Christian China, when in reality their civil war led to the death of tens of millions.

Frustrated in their inability to find the right reformers within, missionaries often bought into an imperialist vision of opening China — although Americans focused on “liberalizing” the economy as the best means to saving souls. Chinese who were suspicious of American promises

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of benevolence had only to look at the anti-Chinese mob violence in cities in the American West, where white supremacist demagogues whipped working-class whites into a xenophobic frenzy. “Anti-Chinese sentiment was an emotional mixture of disdain toward a presumed inferior and deep fear … fear that is of the vulnerability of white supremacy.” It is a dark moment in America’s history of “preoccupation” with China especially worth remembering these days.

As Chang moves into the 20th century, the narrative tightens further, and the reader can feel him moving on to the ground he knows best. The conventional story of high politics gets told, as the US becomes the rising power in the Pacific and set on a collision course with Asia’s fast-rising power, Japan. But what makes Fateful Ties a great read is how Chang weaves the diplomacy around a delightful tapestry of literature, philosophy and the arts. Here is cultural history of international relations at its best, exploring, for example, how American artists and intellectuals, from Transcendentalists to Progressives, imagined a special bond to China. “A great many Americans over the years found themselves similarly connected, a phenomenon that is unique in the history of international relations in its depth, persistence, and implications.” Or to put it more poetically, in the words spoken by Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, “of course I am a Taoist.”

From the days of Christopher Columbus to today’s Confucius Institutes, China occupies a special place in the American national imagination, where it “fascinates and repels … intrigues and infuriates.” Chang has plumbed its historical depths and come out with a delightful and illuminating book, which thankfully he wrote for the benefit of “those beyond China specialists.” Even readers who vainly consider themselves China experts will find much to learn, including one of the great gifts of historical knowledge — the humbling recognition that one’s own “special” path is but a thread in much larger patterns and grander designs.

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