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Jeffrey Wasserstrom

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Humiliation and Normalization: A Tale of Two New China Books

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by Jeffrey Wasserstrom

Henry Kissinger and Robert Bickers don't have much in common. One is a U.S.-based octogenarian; the other a U.K.-based scholar roughly half as old. Only one, Kissinger, has been characterized by [Christopher Hitchens](#) (among others) as a perpetrator of war crimes. And only one, ironically Kissinger again, has won a Nobel Peace Prize. Kissinger spent some time as a professor, but then went on to work as a diplomat and business consultant. Bickers, however, while writing about diplomats and entrepreneurs (along with policemen and other kinds of people), has made his career solely within the academy. This list could be expanded almost indefinitely. And yet, I've been thinking a lot lately about something that links Kissinger (whom I've never met) to Bickers (an old friend). Namely, their most recent books, Kissinger's *On China* and Bickers' *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832-1914*, have some interesting shared traits.

For example, *On China* (which I recently [reviewed](#) quite critically for *Time*) is aimed squarely at the intellectually curious general reader, and the same goes for *Scramble for China* (which I recently praised in passing when introducing a "China Beat" [Q & A with Bickers](#)). In addition, both books have been published by parts of the Penguin publishing empire and both are long (*On China* clocks in at around 600 pages, *Scramble for China* at around 500). More significantly, both books are largely concerned with illuminating broad patterns and narrating key moments in the history of Chinese relations with other countries (though, not surprisingly, Kissinger is most concerned with U.S.-China ties and tensions, whereas Bickers pays more attention to policy decisions associated with Whitehall as opposed to the White House). And both are by authors who assume that to make sense of today's China, we need to understand the clashes between China and the West (and later China and Japan) of what in the PRC is called China's "century of humiliation," lasting from the 1840s through the 1940s.

These last two parallels are no doubt what led the *Financial Times* to turn to the same person, Chris Patten, to review each book. Now, Sir Chris and I may be almost as different from each other as Kissinger is from Bickers, but I was happy to discover that when it comes to these books, the former Hong Kong Governor and I seem to be (pardon the pun) on the same page. His [review](#) of *On China* is, like mine, one that takes issue with key parts of a book that, while earning some outright pans, has been treated with kid gloves in a surprising number of high profile venues. And if you place Patten's [review](#) of *Scramble for China* beside his review of Kissinger's book, you get the feeling that he, again like me, would say that if you only have time to read one big Penguin book on China this summer, make it be the one by Bickers, which he calls a "fair and fascinating" study of major issues in modern Chinese history.*

In a sense, it is unfair to compare the two books, given how different they are in terms of style and approach, and the crucial fact that Bickers ends his account in 1914 (with some attention to legacies of the past in recent times), while the real heart of *On China* (and its best parts) deal with the era when Kissinger was a player on the diplomatic scene. What does seem appropriate, though, is to ask which author proves a more illuminating and trustworthy guide in helping readers think about specific issues that concern both Kissinger and Bickers. How on target are the books, for example, in explaining why Chinese relations with the West took such a rocky and tortured course from the late 1700s through the early-to-mid 1900s? And how effectively do they draw attention to the similarities as well as differences between Chinese and Western ways of thinking about history and diplomacy? On these fronts, I see *On China* as deeply flawed (for reasons I hinted at in my *Time* review), while it is precisely in these areas that *Scramble for China* shines.

One way to sum up a key contrast between the two books involves the notion of "normalizing" Chinese actions, which Bickers does very effectively but is something in which Kissinger shows

no interest. For those primarily interested in U.S.-China relations, the term “normalizing” brings to mind the steps taken during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations that led to the “normalization” of ties between Beijing and Washington—moves for which Kissinger deserves (and in *On China* claims) a good deal of credit. In academic China studies circles, though, the phrase also conjures up efforts by various scholars to get away from assuming that everything about the world’s most populous country is inscrutable, understandable to outsiders only if they have been initiated by experts into the strange workings of an exotic culture that share few common referent points with the West. To speak of “normalizing” China is to call for an approach that, while acknowledging the distinctive aspects of Chinese culture and history, also makes room for seeing the country as capable of conforming to general patterns.

A now classic illustration of a “normalizing” move comes in Paul Cohen’s seminal study of the Boxers, *History in Three Keys*. Without downplaying the many things that made the Boxers extraordinary, Cohen argues against seeing their calling on spirit soldiers to help drive Christianity from their land as a completely “exotic” phenomenon. He reminds his readers that not only have there been many settings in which the coming of the West inspired similar responses from colonized or partially colonized populations, but, even more strikingly, he notes that missionaries attacked by the Boxers often called on supernatural powers to help them to their aid. *The Scramble for China* provides an equally compelling illustration of the pay-off of “normalizing” moves. This comes in Bickers’ discussion of tropes of “humiliation”: he insists that a sense of wanting to make up for having been “humiliated” in the past has not just shaped contemporary Chinese foreign policy moves but also British moves against the Qing in the mid-1800s.

Kissinger makes it clear that he will have none of this, and the fact that he titles his very first chapter “The Singularity of China” is telling. Throughout *On China*, he takes pains to stress that both what we should admire and fear about “the Chinese” (often presented in monolithic terms: no room in his account for divisions between elite and popular culture, regional differences, etc.) are the things that make them radically “other,” unlike us. There is no reason to doubt that this approach reflects Kissinger’s view of China, as it has been shaped by his visits to the country and his wide reading on its history (though when it comes to pre-20th century events, Kissinger relies heavily on works published decades ago: you will look in vain for nods to works like Cohen’s and other landmark monographs of recent vintage). It is worth noting, though, that presenting China as exotic makes his diplomatic achievements of the 1970s seem especially notable. And it is also true that a vision of Chinese culture as very difficult for outsiders to understand works to the benefit of groups such as Kissinger Associates, Inc. (an organization whose activities relating to the PRC, as Elizabeth Economy notes in her [insightful review](#) of *On China*, is not mentioned in the book, but should have been) by making their particular kind of specialized knowledge seem indispensable.

I’ll end by using just one example of a phenomenon that Kissinger often uses to play up the exotic nature of China, but which could just as easily have been put to normalizing use. This has to do with historical allusions. Kissinger often claims there is something “ironic” and distinctively Chinese about the way that Mao Zedong and his lieutenants presented themselves as opposed to Chinese tradition, yet were fond of describing their plans of action in terms of parallels to events from the distant past to defend strategic choices. Part of the “Singularity of China,” according to Kissinger, is the country’s distinctive relationship to history, which results in an enduring, unchanging, and unique strategic mindset unaltered even by professed iconoclastic tendencies. There are, however, two big problems with this. First, Mao, while presenting himself as an unsparing critic of one strand of Chinese tradition—the imperial variant of Confucianism—often claimed to be deeply attached to various other strands, especially those represented by rebels of the past. And even when they invoked periods, people, and texts that were ideologically out of favor at a given moment, Mao and his comrades in arms were not doing something particularly exotic. No more so than Western atheists who say that a Biblical tale, like that of Solomon, illustrates a valid point, or American generals living in a country supposedly much less interested in the distant past than China

feeling confident that when they refer to a strategy as being like “Caesar crossing the Rubicon,” everyone in the room will know what they have in mind.

** The view that Scramble for China is more essential and illuminating reading than On China is not shared by book buyers: it's impossible to compare statistics for the U.S., as Bickers' book isn't out here yet, but in the U.K., Kissinger ranks #1 (for the hardback edition) and #4 (for the Kindle one) among Chinese history books at Amazon's site, while Bickers comes in at a, still very respectable, #9. As for likely U.S. sales, it's hard to imagine, alas, that we'll soon be seeing stacks of Scramble for China at Costco comparable to those of On China I noticed at my local branch (perhaps tempting some people looking for Father's Day gifts) last weekend.*