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Review of Gordon Chang, *Fateful Ties*

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Book review

Fateful Ties: A History of America's Preoccupation with China (Gordon H. Chang)

In *Fateful Ties*, Gordon Chang guides us through the approximately 240-year relationship between China and the United States, beginning in the late eighteenth century when the latter formally came into existence. The aim, he explains, is “to encourage reflection on the American past as the country navigates into an uncertain future with a country that is in the midst of unprecedented and monumental transformation” (p.8). Chang follows in the footsteps of such esteemed authors as John King Fairbank (e.g. *China Perceived: Images and Policies in Chinese-American Relations*) and Warren I. Cohen (e.g. *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*), by tracing the meandering course of this most fascinating and complex history of mutual engagement.

Indeed, in many respects the book covers plenty of well-trodden terrain, examining in its opening chapters for example the early expeditions to China of American missionaries such as Elijah Bridgeman and David Abeel, and pioneering nineteenth century diplomats like Caleb Cushing and Anson Burlingame. Interweaved into the story however is fresh material and focus, such as on Henrietta Hall Shuck, the first female American missionary to China, and on Chinese writers of American society and politics, such as Liang Qichao (chapter 1). Chang's inevitably brief examinations of forced Chinese labor within the nineteenth century United States (chapter 2) and the imagery of solidarity with China espoused by African-American radical groups during the Civil Rights/Vietnam War era (chapter 6) are additional highlights.

Chang explores all the key moments in China-US relations, from the tentative establishment of early trade relations in the late 1700s; to US involvement in the so-called opium wars of the 1840s and 1850s; to the mistrust and antipathy which characterized their engagements and avoidance throughout much of the Cold War; to President Nixon's famous trip to China in 1972 and the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989. In doing so the volume traverses their eighteenth and nineteenth century Ties of [economic] Opportunity' (chapter 1) and 'Physical and Spiritual [or religious] Connections' (chapter 2), to their twentieth and twenty first century interactions as 'Allies and Enemies' around the time of the Second World War (chapter 5) and the 'Old/New Visions' (chapter 7) which frame their modern day ties.

The title of the book is potentially misleading, and on occasion the US “preoccupation” with China is arguably overstated. For example, the American colonization of the Philippines from the late 1800s was at least as much about realizing historical ambitions to confirm the US as a true global power to rival those of Europe and elsewhere, as it was about securing trading lines with China (p.101). Chang asserts elsewhere that in the early years of US development, as colonial settlers moved across the North American continent, “the Far East was the reason to reach the Far West” (p.3). While the lures of the mythical China trade

were as powerful as Chang describes, the motivations for expansion were of course extremely varied. This was particularly true among individuals with little or no connection to the China trade which, particularly throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—as Chang points out—accounted for a relatively tiny proportion of US economic activity. Sinophilia spread quickly in the nascent United States, but as Chang himself points out prominent figures like Benjamin Franklin “took an *unusually* active interest in China” (p.23, emphasis added). Indeed, the book is typically—and justifiably—framed around the preoccupations towards China of certain key individuals, rather than of the nation itself; the vast majority of Americans (like Westerners in broader terms), particularly before the advent of the mass media, have historically exhibited little in the way of day-to-day interest or awareness in China.

The tone of the book is generally balanced and sober, showing a keen eye for both sides of the story. This shifts only on occasion, such as when Chang points scathingly to a “river” of twenty first century American writings on the so-called ‘China threat’ to modern day US interests and security, “which are generally long on misinformation and short on facts and reason” (pp.249-250). More commonly he avoids condemning, or becoming an apologist for, either China or the United States at any stage of their relations, a tendency often found throughout the existing literature towards which Chang directs our attention.

Fateful Ties offers no radically new thesis or reworking of the history of Sino-US relations. There is little in the way of dramatic reconsiderations of events or existing wisdom. Yet readers relatively new to the history of Sino-US relations will likely gain much from the volume, the language of which is fluid, succinct, and highly engaging. Those already familiar with the subject will find new nuggets of information, and a volume which builds from and updates those of Fairbank, Cohen and others by exploring the most immediate twenty first century history of Sino-American relations. To this extent the book complements existing and comparable works more than it does imitate them. The book will likely be of most appeal to students and scholars of US-China and US-Asia history and international relations, but also to a broader interested readership because of its highly accessible style.

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