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**H-Diplo Review Essay on Dong Wang, *The United States and China: A History from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.**

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**T**his is a survey of the history of Sino-American relations from the first encounter in 1784 to the present. According to Dong Wang, this history can be divided into three periods: from 1784 to the mid-nineteenth century, when a young nation-state (the United States) encountered an empire (Qing China); from the mid-nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century, it was an interplay between two nation-states; from the mid-twentieth century to the present, it was and has been wide-ranging encounters between a nation-state (the People's Republic of China) and an empire (the United States) (1).

The book is arranged chronologically with three thematic propositions, covering political, economic, and cultural aspects of the relationship. The first proposition is that U.S.-Chinese relations constitute an ongoing contest between two states in a changing global context; second, that China has been catching up economically with America's capability and desire to control change; third, that America's role as an important model for China has been challenged from the beginning (2-13).

The book consists of an introduction, twelve chapters in three parts, and an epilogue. The first part (from 1784 to 1911) has four thematic chapters, covering early U.S.-China encounters. U.S.-China relations originated from economic activities – the “old” China trade of 1784-1844. Wang writes that the U.S. debut in the China trade system “constituted the triumphant entry of a new nation into an expanding international system of politics and trade controlled by then hegemonic Britain and other European powers” (38). It also demonstrated “the systemic gap between the enterprising institutions of a young nation and the threadbare economic organization of a declining empire” (21). U.S. policy toward Qing China is one of the most debated topics in both Chinese and English-language literature. The Opium Wars, the unequal treaties forced on China by the Western powers, and the development of the “Open Door” doctrine were defining issues in Sino-American political relations from the 1840s to the early twentieth century (45). For many years, scholars characterized early U.S. policy toward China as following the lead of Great Britain. Along this line, the 1899 Open Door policy has often

been perceived as a watershed, signifying a shift in America's China policy from one based on the idea of the U.S. as de facto "follower" of British diplomacy to one that viewed the U.S. as an "independent" player in the country (64). This line of interpretation has recently been challenged. In Wang's view, "American involvement in China has a quintessentially American flavor, the American Way ... America acted pragmatically, sometimes undermining the other powers' efforts in China, and at other times encouraging or collaborating with other nations..." (65).

Chinese immigration to the United States has been an important aspect of Sino-American relations since the mid-nineteenth century, and chapter 3 deals with the topic. Wang questions "the perception that Chinese in America were merely 'silent sojourners, passive victims, and the model minority,' keeping a low profile under unfavorable circumstances" (73). She notes that "current research has moved beyond two well-versed story lines: one focusing on the push-pull factors driving Chinese emigrants to a strange land, the other exploring the racist and sinophobic treatment they encountered in their new homes" (90). Chapter 4 covers "the international and domestic context of the American missionary movement and its broad impact on Qing China" (97). Wang notes that the experience of Christianity in China was contradictory, involving both conflict and accommodation. From 1840 to 1910, there were more than 1500 violent anti-Christian incidents directed against missionaries, church property, and Chinese converts in China (105). Wang further analyzes the two main causes of the "American missionary problem" – first, Christianity had to compete with other religions and beliefs such as Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, and folk beliefs for souls and allegiance; second, Chinese resented foreign missions' privileged position and treaty protections (105-107).

Part II, which includes chapters 5 through 8, covers U.S.-China relations from 1912 to 1970. Chapter 5 deals with Sino-American relations from the First World War to 1931. Wang highlights three major developments. The first involves China's pursuit of equitable treatment as an equal nation-state on the world stage in the era of revolutions and nationalism. The United States was the first to sign a treaty with China in 1928 granting China tariff autonomy, an important step appreciated by the Nationalist Nanjing government. This laid the foundation for the friendly relationship between the United States and Nationalist China; the second concerns the increasing voice of America in Chinese affairs, set against the influence of Japan, Russia, Germany, Britain, and other European powers; and the third involves China's increasing visibility on the U.S. domestic political horizon (123).

Chapter 6 discusses China's relations with the United States from 1931 to 1949. Wang discusses the complex series of interactions between various players, such as the warlords, the Nationalists and Chinese Communists, and foreign powers (Japan, Germany, Britain, the U.S, and the USSR). She also argues that revolution, nationalism, and anti-imperialism were at work as major forces of change in China and Asia, and asserts that American foreign policy was aimed at maintaining a regional and global balance of power that suited its own interests in the Asia-Pacific. The period witnessed a steady U.S. power growth in China. She further suggests that the domestic debate in the United States on the "China question" dominated Sino-American relations (165). Wang concludes that "the traditional approach downplays the positive achievements of this period, such as the unprecedented cooperation between

Nationalist China and the United States on the diplomatic, economic, military, and cultural levels” (145-146).

Through the stories of several prominent Chinese, such as Wellington Koo (a well-known diplomat of the Republican era) and Chen Xujing (a U.S. educated scholar and the president of Lingnan University, 1948-52), and Americans such as Pearl Buck (the most popular and most translated American writer on China) and Edgar Snow (a leftist U.S. journalist and writer, and author of *Red Star over China*), chapter 7 illustrates how personalities (agents of encounter) and particular circumstances shaped the rich array of U.S.-China encounters. Wang observes that American learning (values, ideals, and institutions, as well as innovations and manufacturing) both inspired and assisted many American-trained Chinese from varying backgrounds to embark on their future careers, in the belief that China should learn from the American model. She further asserts that for many Americans, their experience in China not only gave them knowledge of the East but also raised their consciousness with respect to both countries, and also points out that Chinese-American ties at the personal level underlined the imbalance of power between the American and Chinese states with Americans enjoying more political respect and favorable trade and commercial benefits (173). Chapter 8 gives a very brief account of major issues in Sino-American political and diplomatic relations in the 1950s and 1960s. These include the recognition and representation issues of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Korean and Vietnam wars, the Taiwan issue, among others. It thus offers a snapshot of the gradual transformation of U.S.-China relations from hostility to reconciliation.

Part III covers U.S.-China relations from 1970 to the present. Chapter 9 offers a brief account of the evolution of Sino-American political and diplomatic relations from 1970 to 1989. It includes discussions on the U.S-China rapprochement and normalization in 1979, and strategic adjustments and adaptations in both America’s China policy and China’s America policy in the 1980s. Wang notes that “the improvement in relations during the 1970s and 1980s also grew out of China’s renewed, century-long search for a strong, unified nation and from America’s conscious efforts to redefine its role in a changing, diversified world” (223). Chapter 10 consists of a discussion of U.S.-China economic and trade relations from 1971 to 1989. Wang notes that the growing involvement of Congress and political lobby groups in making China policy reduced the power of the executive branch, and further argues that many problems in this relationship were largely a natural consequence of the rapid advances in communication between two vastly different societies. She also explores surging American anxiety over the U.S. trade deficit with China (266-268).

Chapter 11 discusses Sino-American political and diplomatic relations from 1990 to 2012. In the 1990s, the relationship was severely strained over the issues of human rights, Taiwan, and numerous other areas,<sup>1</sup> while leaders in both countries attempted to improve the relationship and work toward a constructive strategic partnership (279). Wang notes that “compared with the ten years from 1990 to 2000, during the first decade of the twenty-first century the overall capacity of the bilateral relationship expanded at all levels, most notably in

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<sup>1</sup> For example, American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 and the Midair collision between a Chinese jet fighter and a U.S. reconnaissance plane over the South China Sea in April 2001.

communications and crisis management" (297). Chapter 12 charts the broad contours of American-Chinese trade relations in the 1990s and 2000s, and investigates U.S.-China ties in the areas of society, religion, and culture (320). Wang concludes the book with an optimistic note "that political cooperation between the world's two economic powerhouses is in the interests of the United States, China, and indeed the world in the twenty-first century" (331).

It is indeed a very challenging job for the author to get everything right in such a comprehensive survey text. Occasionally, Wang's narrative is based on less convincing or outdated materials. For instance, In August 1955, the U.S. interest in the Sino-American ambassadorial talks "was to work out the technical details for the release of American citizens and, if possible, to keep the Chinese under check through negotiations ... Beijing expected to persuade Washington into serious discussions over significant issues, including recognizing PRC's legitimacy, resolving the Taiwan issue, and acknowledging China's rightful place in world affairs."<sup>2</sup> Wang's claim that "The Americans came to the negotiation table with the aim of securing the renunciation of force in the Formosa Strait, while the Chinese – sticking to their claim to Taiwan – were aiming to secure American withdrawal from the region" (204) is on shakier ground. Wang's discussion of China's internal political struggle and its impact on U.S.-China relations in the 1972-1976 period (232-235) is simplistic and unconvincing. China's defense minister and Mao's heir apparent Lin Biao's death in September 1971 has little relevance to this period (233). Readers are advised to go to some recent studies on this topic.<sup>3</sup> The Sino-Soviet alliance was still in honeymoon phase in 1956, and the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations began in 1958, *not* in 1956 (208). Wang's list of the five elements contributing to the collapse of the Sino-Soviet alliance is outdated ( 209). We now know that "Soviet aid played an important role in laying the foundation and basic framework for China's nuclear industry and its subsequent development of the atomic bomb and missiles."<sup>4</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress raised the Stalin issue, which prompted a series of deep questions regarding the socialist road and development, and had a latent impact on the evolution of Sino-Soviet relations. According to the available records, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Mao Zedong was not against First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization program. Recent scholarship demonstrates that the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress had no negative impact on Sino-Soviet relations. Subsequent development showed

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<sup>2</sup> Yafeng Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy: U.S.-China Talks during the Cold War, 1949-1972* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> Kuisong Yang and Yafeng Xia, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente: Mao's Changing Psyche and Policy toward the U.S., 1969-1976," *Diplomatic History* 34:2 (April 2010), pp. 395-423; Yafeng Xia, "Myth or Reality: Factional Politics, U.S.-China Relations, and Mao Zedong's Psychology in His Sunset Years, 1972-1976," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 15 (fall 2008), pp. 107-30.

<sup>4</sup> Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia, "Between Aid and Restriction: The Soviet Union's Changing Policies on China's Nuclear Weapons Program, 1954-1960," *Asian perspective*, vol. 36, no. 1 (Jan. –Mar. 2012), p. 115.

that the Sino-Soviet relationship became closer without signs of serious divergence in the wake of the Congress.<sup>5</sup>

There are also a number of errors in the book. China entered the Korean War on October 19, 1950. The PRC and the United States faced off in Korea in 1950-53 (rather than 1951-53, 7). John Jay served as the second Secretary of Foreign Affairs from 1784 to 1789 (and was not “U.S. foreign minister,” 29). “A 171 pound of rice” is surely supposed to be “A 171 pound bag (or sack or the equivalent) of rice” (161). *Zhongjian didai* has generally been translated into the “intermediate zone,” not the “mid-zone” (167). The [San Francisco Peace Treaty](#) signed on September 8, 1951 marked the end of the Allied occupation, and it [came into force](#) on April 28, 1952. It is not accurate to say that the occupation lasted from 1945 to 1953 (210). Zhou Enlai was premier (1949-1976) and foreign minister (1949-1958) of the PRC, but he was not foreign minister during the Cultural Revolution (227). In December 1969, China did not have an ambassador in Poland. It was Lei Yang, China’s *chargé d’affaires* who invited U.S. ambassador Walter Stoessel to the Chinese embassy for tea on December 11 (229).<sup>6</sup> In May 1973, the U.S. and the PRC opened liaison offices in Beijing and Washington, headed by the senior diplomats David Bruce and Huang Zhen (not *Huang Hua*, 232) respectively. The Soviet intervention of Afghanistan was from 1979 to 1989, not 1977-78 (235). In December 1978, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress (not the 11<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the 13<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress, 252).

Each of these twelve chapters stands on its own and several chapters were previously published as journal articles, but the author makes no effort to tie them together into a cohesive and coherent narrative. Wang provides no transitional sentences or paragraphs from one chapter to another. Notwithstanding these quibbles, she has produced an excellent and lucid survey text on Sino-American relations. It will be useful for undergraduate and graduate courses on U.S.-China relations and East Asian-American relations. The comprehensive bibliography, including both Chinese-language and English-language sources provide readers with additional sources for further study.

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<sup>5</sup> Shen Zhihua, chief ed., *Zhongsu guanxi shigang, 1917-1991* [A Survey of the History of Sino-Soviet Relations, 1917-1991] (Beijing: Xinhua Chubanshe, 2007), pp. 145-161.

<sup>6</sup> Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy*, note 61 on p. 278.

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