In the months following Japan’s surrender and the end of World War Two, as many as 113,000 United States military personnel were stationed in China. Yet in comparison with the considerable volume of scholarship on the postwar US military occupations in Germany, Japan, and Korea, there has been little research on the activities of American soldiers in China. As Chunmei Du explains in her article “Occupational Hazard: American Servicemen’s Sensory Encounters with China, 1945-1949,” there are numerous reasons for this omission, including the comparatively small number of US troops stationed in China, the brief duration of their stay (the vast majority had left China by the end of 1946), and the “ambiguous and incoherent nature” of their objectives (56). Nevertheless, as Zach Fredman, one of the few other scholars who has studied the role of American servicemen in China, has pointed out, even though the US military presence in China was small in scale and brief in duration, it still constituted “the largest sustained engagement between Americans and Chinese that has ever taken place in China.” In addition to their official duties, GIs in China bought souvenirs, ate Chinese food, frequented bars and brothels, drove drunkenly through city streets in military Jeeps, engaged in both consensual and coerced relationships with Chinese women, and violently assaulted rickshaw drivers and other civilians over petty disputes. In this article, Du persuasively argues that these fraught encounters between US troops and Chinese civilians deserve detailed historical study as a formative moment that powerfully shaped Chinese perceptions of the United States and American perceptions of China over the ensuing decades.

Noting “the ubiquity in GI accounts of their visceral experiences,” Du analyzes the encounters between American soldiers and Chinese civilians through a sensory history approach that focuses on what GIs saw, smelled, tasted, heard, and touched in China—as well as how these sensory experiences both reflected and challenged preexisting Orientalist stereotypes and the unequal power relations between the United States and China (58). Building on recent work by Andrew Rotter, Susan Carruthers, and others who have shown how sensory perceptions were used to construct imperial and racial hierarchies in the context of British and American imperialism in Asia, Du sets out to understand how the senses were crucial to the “deployment of

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power” in the contentious military alliance between the United States and Nationalist China (58). She claims that “systematic biases towards the Chinese” powerfully shaped American soldiers’ sensory perceptions of China (83). Nevertheless, Du also argues that the sensory experiences of GIs sometimes challenged their preconceived notions about China, with lasting consequences both for American understandings of China and Chinese views of Americans.

Du structures her analysis not chronologically but rather sense-by-sense, with sections on sight, smell, taste, sound, and touch. As she skillfully illustrates, what American soldiers saw after they arrived in China was deeply influenced by what they wanted to see—expectations shaped by the circulation of Orientalist images in popular magazines like National Geographic and Life, Pearl Buck novels, and US Chinatown establishments that catered to tourists. If the “real” China that GIs saw with their own eyes on sightseeing tours sometimes seemed uncannily similar to the China of their imaginations, it was not always a coincidence. For example, Du relays the story of a bar in Qingdao that was redecorated with “vermillion curtains with embroidered flowers reaching the floor, dragons on two fake columns, and four or five palace lanterns in red gauze,” all purposely designed to recreate what American troops imagined to be an authentic Oriental atmosphere (62-63). Other sensory experiences were, if not unexpected, certainly unpleasant. The most ubiquitously negative of soldiers’ sensory encounters in China were those related to smell. Du quotes one Marine who stated that rank smells—from creeks used for sewage disposal to “honeydipper” carts that collected human excrement to be sold as fertilizer—were so pervasive that soldiers who could not learn to live with them were “constantly on the verge of gagging” (63).

In other instances, Du argues, sensory encounters managed to overturn some of American soldiers’ preconceived ideas about China. This was especially true when it came to food. Although much of the food they encountered in China was entirely unfamiliar (and often ran against prevailing health and medical guidance in the United States), many GIs quickly fell in love with a range of Chinese dishes, from Shanghai-style fried eel to dry-cured ham from Yunnan, and some even willingly tried “exotic” dishes like “Hundred-Year-Old Eggs” and bird’s nest soup. Returning home after the war, US soldiers who had served in China sought out the dishes they had eaten abroad, helping to spur the transformation of the Chinese restaurant industry in the United States from chop suey restaurants serving highly Americanized fare to more upscale establishments providing a diverse range of Chinese cuisine.

In some cases, Du’s focus on sensory history reveals important insights into Sino-American interactions that might not emerge from more conventional modes of historical analysis. For instance, Du shows how different customs connected to appropriate touching could cause cultural clashes, especially regarding interactions between American soldiers and Chinese women. Forms of casual touching between single men and women commonly accepted in the United States—dancing, handholding, draping an arm around a shoulder—could produce outrage and misunderstanding in China. This was such a problem that both the US military and the Chinese government issued publications designed to educate readers on the other side’s

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norms and expectations with regard to appropriate and inappropriate touching. In other cases, however, the sensory history framework appears to add less analytical value. For example, Du discusses the all-too-common incidents in which US soldiers violently attacked and even killed Chinese rickshaw drivers over fare disputes. This history of violence by American soldiers against Chinese civilians is deeply important, not least because it helps explain the rise of anti-American sentiment among wide swaths of the Chinese population in the post-World War Two years. Yet it is not entirely clear what a sensory history approach—or grouping these violent attacks together with other, more benign “haptic encounters”—adds to our understanding of their significance (77).

Du studies the sensory encounters of GIs in China primarily through critical analysis of the rich sensory language in their own descriptions of their experiences, which she has collected from an impressively wide source base that includes US military publications and the published writings of US military personnel—as well as unpublished memoirs, oral history records, and other documents held in the US Marine Corps Archives in Quantico and State Department records from the US National Archives. Du carefully contextualizes these American sources with research in Chinese published and archival materials, making especially good use of records from the municipal archives in Nanjing, Qingdao, Shanghai, and Tianjin to offer analysis of GI violence against Chinese civilians that goes beyond the deliberately obfuscating accounts of the accused Americans. Du’s rich and varied source base amply demonstrates the existence of source materials that can be used by scholars to provide textured, multi-sided accounts of the fraught history of Sino-American interactions. Moreover, Du’s multi-site archival research is also a reminder that continued open archival access in both countries is necessary for the production of balanced, nuanced studies on the history of US-China relations.

While it is an issue that is beyond the scope of Du’s study, an interesting avenue for future research would be a study on Chinese citizens’ sensory perceptions of American soldiers. What did the more than 100,000 American troops—the vast majority of them young white men—look, sound, and smell like as they coursed through city streets in military Jeeps and crowded into cafes, bars, and brothels? Are official and unofficial Chinese accounts of American soldiers as rich with sensory description as are American soldiers’ accounts of China? And how might sensory encounters with flesh-and-blood Americans have contributed to rapidly shifting Chinese views of the United States in the post-World War Two years? Citing an Australian Air Force publication, in one illuminating aside Du notes that “Allied soldiers became aware of their own body smells when the Chinese in the countryside held their noses and dogs bared their teeth whenever they passed” (64). A more detailed analysis of Chinese sensory perceptions of US soldiers would seem like a worthy subject for a separate study.

Historiographically, Du places her article in dialogue with the “the rich corpus of studies on the US military overseas,” work by scholars such as John Dower and Katherine H.S. Moon, who have shown that despite their promotion of “a new ideology of global integration accompanied by mutual understanding and benefits,” US military occupations reconstructed hierarchies of gender, race, and class inherited from earlier

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imperial institutions (55, 56). Du’s article contributes significantly to our understanding of the nature and consequences of the United States’ global military presence after the Second World War by adding an innovative study to our still-limited knowledge of the experiences of US troops in China. On the other hand, this study can also be placed into conversation with the explosion of studies on the history of Sino-American interactions that have been published over just the past couple of years. In treating US soldiers in China as “cultural diplomats” and “informal ambassadors,” Du’s work resonates with new monographs by Pete Millwood and Terry Lautz that emphasize the importance of a wide range actors (soldiers, scientists, athletes, and academics) in mediating US-China relations (59, 83). In its focus on the significance of racialized hierarchies in shaping relations between white American soldiers and Chinese citizens (the Nationalist government prohibited Black soldiers from being stationed in Chinese cities), Du’s work highlights the importance of race in shaping Sino-American encounters—an issue explored in recent work by Gao Yunxiang and Keisha A. Brown on the underappreciated roles of Black Americans in US-China relations. Du’s account of how the misdeeds of American soldiers helped fuel the rise of anti-American sentiment in China also aligns well with recent research by John Delury on the US Central Intelligence Agency’s covert activities in the People’s Republic of China—and how the fear of American subversion helped fuel Maoist campaigns to root out counterrevolutionary forces. In moving beyond the realm of high-level formal diplomacy to highlight how a much wider cast of relatively anonymous Chinese and American actors contributed to shaping Sino-American ties (sometimes for better, sometimes for worse), Du’s article is very much in line with recent scholarly trends, which may be considered a ‘grassroots turn’ in the historiography of US-China relations.  

Du’s work has the potential to push this emerging body of scholarship on grassroots Sino-American interactions in new directions by showing how sensory perceptions mediated American soldiers’ experiences of China not only by serving to maintain hierarchies of race, nationality, and gender but also by opening up the possibility for those hierarchies to be blurred, challenged, and resisted. At a minimum, Du’s article should encourage historians who study Sino-American relations to pay greater attention to the prevalence of racialized sensory description in their primary sources. Clearly contextualized, written in lively and accessible prose, and full of powerful anecdotes that are sure to spark classroom discussion, Du’s article also seems very well-suited to undergraduate and graduate teaching and could be very useful for classes on US-China

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Relations, the United States in the World, and global military history. In short, Du’s innovative and important article has much to teach scholars and students of both modern Chinese and American history.

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