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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

A Note on the 40th Anniversary of Nixon's Visit to China

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Forty years ago President Richard M. Nixon visited China. Few events in the world of international politics deserve the term “Diplomatic Revolution,” but this was one. There was the original Diplomatic Revolution of 1756, when a Prussian-British *rapprochement* reordered the world of European alliances. There was the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939, which presaged a new partition of Poland and freed Germany to attack in the West. And there was “Nixon in China,” a visit of great drama and much myth.

In terms of pure power politics, this anti-Soviet *entente* gave both Washington and Beijing welcome leverage against a mutual adversary, the Soviet Union. As in the Chinese-American alliance of 1942-45, Chinese-American relations were defined almost exclusively in terms of what they were against: a common enemy. (Thus in several years the Americans would join the Chinese in support of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, for it, too, was at least indirectly “anti-Soviet.”) And just as in the 1940's, when Chinese-American relations faltered upon the defeat of Japan, the demise of the U.S.S.R. after 1991 would take from U.S.-China relations much of its original geopolitical ballast.

But what were Chinese-American relations *for* during and after President Nixon's visit? I always ask this question when I assign my students the minutes of the meeting between Nixon and Mao Zedong of February 21, 1972. They are usually speechless. I ask them what Nixon and Mao said about trade. Here too they are silent, and they are not wrong, for the word “trade” is mentioned but once, by Mao, as among the “smaller issues” that need not delay them.

There was, in short, no vision of the world in which we now live, only four decades later. China's extraordinary economic growth, predicated upon its re-entry into global systems of trade, has made it what it clearly was not in 1972: a power of the first rank. China's cultural presence abroad comes not in the form of supporting third world revolutionaries but through hundreds of “Confucius

Institutes.” The United States and China are now economically interdependent and inter-culturally connected as never before.

These outcomes would surely have dismayed Mao Zedong and surprised Richard Nixon. And perhaps neither could have imagined that these changes could be accompanied by the continued rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Yet it may be that Nixon did as much as anyone to assist the survival of Communist rule in China.

The China in which Nixon landed in February 1972 had survived twenty-three years of CCP rule—barely. In its management of the economy, the PRC had presided over the destruction of historically vibrant and internationally-connected economic sectors. It had murdered, exiled, or otherwise destroyed China’s entrepreneurial and technical talent. Agriculture, the foundation of the economy, was in ruins. Mao Zedong’s hare-brained “Great Leap Forward” would lead to a political famine in which (we now believe) as many as 50 million Chinese perished. As the rest of East Asia prospered in the postwar era, China was comparatively stagnant, and fell backward.

The PRC’s record in foreign relations was no better. In 1945, Nationalist China was poised to be, if by default, the leading power in Asia, and by agreement, in the United Nations, one of the great powers of the globe. That did not happen, and Chinese power was largely contained—one might almost say *self*-contained—as China unincorporated itself from both global communities: first from that of the West, and then, a decade later, from its Soviet and East European allies. By the late 1960’s China found itself diplomatically quarantined, economically isolated, and in nearly catastrophic military isolation, when it faced attack by either, or maybe even both, superpowers. In brief, China had “stood up,” twice, to find itself in the most dangerous strategic position of its modern history.

The early PRC claimed to have provided a greater level of national unity and stability than its predecessors. Unity, perhaps: for only under a strongly unified political system could a policy such as the Great Leap Forward reach into every Chinese village with such lethal consequences. Stability? No. The first decades of the PRC were witness to major, destabilizing, political upheavals, one of which, the Cultural Revolution, was still in its last acts when Nixon visited China. And such unity as existed had been bought at horrific costs. Communist power was consolidated in the early 1950s by the executions of between three and five million “counter-revolutionaries.” It was aided further by reigns of terror and the establishment of Soviet-style gulags, into which—as Klaus Mühlhahn has now shown—as many as forty million citizens, or one-twentieth of the population, was incarcerated by the late 1950s.

It may well be that if the Americans had known how unstable China was in the autumn of 1971 (their knowledge of the Lin Biao incident was sketchy at best) and how unsound, medically and mentally, Mao Zedong himself was at that time, or indeed if they had known the full scope of the crimes committed by the CCP leadership, they never would have sent the American president to China. Although Mao told Nixon that “[t]hroughout the whole world, the U.S. intelligence reports are comparatively accurate,” the fact is that American intelligence on Chinese domestic affairs was quite limited.

But bad intelligence has never deterred American foreign policy. So Nixon came, and a diplomatic revolution ensued. The Republic of China on Taiwan lost its seat in the United Nations virtually overnight, in anticipation of Nixon’s visit. The People’s Republic gained the international legitimacy of the “China” seat not only in the United Nations but also in its Security Council. The image of Mao Zedong (in Kissinger’s memorandum to Nixon on the eve of the trip) as “the philosopher, the poet, the grand strategist, the inspirer, the romantic,” would come to dominate discourse in the West on his life until correctives (and only mild ones at that) would be issued by the CCP itself in the early 1980s. And the portrait of the man who shared honors with Hitler and Stalin as among the tyrants of the twentieth century still hangs from the Gate of Heavenly Peace, underneath the national symbol of the state that survived him.

To be sure, the legitimacy of CCP rule in China was not simply America’s to confer—though the United States had contested it for two decades before Nixon’s visit. Perhaps the Chinese Communist Party’s control of the military and public security would have allowed it to weather any storm. But perhaps, too, Nixon’s visit gave a strong, political, shot-in-the arm to a state and a patient when they needed it most. Perhaps it contributed to the longevity of Communist rule that would survive Mao’s death and receive something very rare in history: a second chance.

As Henry Kissinger told Nixon in the memorandum prepared for the President’s trip: “Over the long term, the intangibles of your China visit will prove more important than the tangibles.”

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