REVIEW ESSAY

Turmoil in the Special Relationship:
The Last Twenty Years of U.S.-China Relations

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During the hour just before President Richard Nixon stepped off Air Force One in Beijing to shake the hand of Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1972, CBS aired the now classic documentary, Misunderstanding China. The film surveyed one hundred fifty years of the tumultuous relationship between China and the United States to help clear away the romanticism, political passion, racial prejudice, and other emotional baggage that had plagued America’s effort to understand China. It was hoped that Americans could leave behind the past images of China, so “hazy and quixotic,” and get to know the Chinese people as they really are.

Much has happened between the two countries over the last twenty years but, as the two books under review make clear in their own ways, one feature in the relationship stubbornly persists: each country continues to hold wishful thinking, contradictory expectations, and downright illusions about the other that together bedevil the construction of a mature mutual understanding. And each side, all the while, remains deeply fascinated with the other. The legacies of history and culture that Misunderstanding China illustrated through its use of pulp magazine covers and clips from Hollywood movies have been more difficult to overcome than the film, and most Americans, ever anticipated.

Profoundly different cultural traditions, social and economic systems, leadership psychologies, national interest and policies, and history help clarify but do not completely explain why the “special relationship” of the United States and China has been fraught with instability and emotion. Arguably, the United States has engaged no other diplomatic relationship with as many ups and downs, with as much apparent closeness and open contention—not with Japan, India, France, Israel, or even the Soviet Union—as it has with China during the last two decades. After almost three hundred pages of analyzing China’s specialists of America in Beautiful Imperialist: China

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Perceives America, 1972–1990 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), David Shambaugh just about throws up his hands in frustration when he tries to explain why their understanding of the United States "remains very shallow" even with twenty years of increasingly extensive direct contact. "At the root of these misperceptions," he says (with unfortunate phrasing) is "the fact that the America Watchers are Chinese" and they "bring all the attendant cultural, sociological, political, and historical baggage to bear on their analyses of the United States." Conversely, of course, the same is said about America's China Watchers. While obviously true, such an explanation does not leave one hopeful for much improvement in the relationship.

Harry Harding, in A Fragile Relationship: The United States and China since 1972 (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1992), a comprehensive chronicle and analysis of Sino-American relations since the Nixon demarche, devotes little attention to trying to explore the frustrating question of why the Sino-American relationship has been as fragile as it has been. Rather, he, as no one else has done, examines with care and balance the actual evolution of the policy relationship, particularly its political, economic, and security aspects. He sees that the relationship has evolved around four central issues over the last two decades: Taiwan, human rights, strategic relations, and economics. The main sore point in the relationship has moved from Taiwan to human rights, while the main cornerstone has shifted from common security concerns to economics. Harding studies these issues from both the American and Chinese sides, and examines the different forces at work and their points of view to understand the complexity of decision-making. He meticulously discusses details of issues in the relationship—from disputes over defecting tennis player Hu Na to Chinese arms sales to Saudi Arabia—in roughly narrative order.

Periodically plaguing the relationship, Harding points out, has been unrealism and wishful thinking on both sides, which in turn lead to disenchantment and resentment as those expectations remain unfulfilled. The normalization of relations at the end of the 1970s promoted the expansion of economic and cultural ties that "vastly exceeded earlier predictions." Many in America concluded that China was throwing out Leninist totalitarianism in favor of capitalism and democracy (p. 141). With such an assumption, Time magazine made Deng Xiaoping "man of the year" twice in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As we now know, the course of reform in China, however,