Speaking about China, Learning from China: Amateur China Experts in 1970s America

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“Realizing that soon the time will have passed when a two- or three-week trip to the ‘People’s Republic’ qualifies one as a ‘China expert,’ I want to seize the opportunity to join the ranks before they close.”1 With this droll confession, an American sociologist of science in the spring of 1981 began a short article in an academic journal. Speaking about China to the American public, he realized, was a privilege of those who had been there, not of professional China scholars.

Indeed, beginning with “ping-pong diplomacy” in April 1971, the renewal of relations between China and the United States ushered in a brief new era of “amateur China experts” in America.2 While academics with decades of research behind them struggled to arrange their first visits to the place they had studied for decades, scores of Americans who could not even order a bowl of noodles in Chinese secured invitations to tour China’s schools, factories, communes, and research institutions. Some were professionals eager to discover what their counterparts in China were doing. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai particularly welcomed scientists with advanced knowledge of subjects valuable to China’s modernization.3 Others were members of organizations like the U.S.-China

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People’s Friendship Association hoping to find in Chinese socialism the kinds of egalitarian institutions for which they agitated in the United States. The Chinese state had an interest in inviting such travelers as well, since they were the most likely to spread positive stories about China in the United States. While most scientists and activists arrived in China with relatively little background in Chinese history and culture, they returned as “experts” and found their impressions in hot demand.

This article will explore the phenomenon of “amateur China experts” and the picture of socialist China they helped create. It will focus specifically on the emphasis visitors placed on China’s socialist approach to science, technology, and medicine. As Zuoyue Wang has shown, scientific exchange played a central role in the 1970s reopening of U.S.-China relations. Moreover, science offers a “hard case” to test the limits of visitor enthusiasm for Chinese socialism. Why would people from a technologically developed superpower like the United States express excitement about science as practiced in a poor, technologically backward country like China? That many did so makes an especially strong statement about what Americans looked for in China. Both radical activists and professional scientists—whether writing in academic journals or giving slide shows in church basements and living rooms—returned to paint similarly flattering portraits of socialist Chinese science.

We will begin with the stories of several American delegations to 1970s China: why they went, what they experienced, and how they told their “China stories” when they returned. We will then turn to common threads in how the visitors handled issues of expertise and authority, and what they sought to learn from China. My analysis builds on—and in some ways amends—two key works: Paul Hollander’s Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society and Richard Madsen’s China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry.

Hollander examines the fascination Communist countries have held for Western intellectuals estranged from their own cultures’ values and institutions. While he provides several chapters that set the domestic context for such interests, the heart of his book lies in its accounts of those who traveled to the Soviet Union, Cuba, and China “in search of the good society.” Hollander delves deeply into commonalities in the visitors’ collective experiences to highlight uncomfortable truths about their limited understandings and even willful blindness regarding the societies they encountered. However, he says little about the people as