Introduction

A Deeper Engagement: People, Institutions and Cultural Connections in Canada-China Relations

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Few knowledgeable individuals today would dispute Canada's status as a Pacific nation. Yet ongoing debate has marked its relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC), the world's most populous state and Asia's leading economic and military power. From early trade and missionary ties with China to Ottawa's decision to recognize the PRC in 1970 to more recent changes of policy, Canadians have regarded Asia's colossus with a mixture of fear and hope, suspicion and optimism. Until recent years, most Canadians had little first-hand knowledge of China, making them particularly susceptible to myth-making. After visiting China in 1960, Pierre Trudeau and Jacques Hébert, two intrepid French-Canadians, sought to move beyond prevailing stereotypes. Raised in a Quebec fearful of “Red China” as “the natural home of all scourges: pagan religions, plagues, floods, famines, and ferocious beasts,” they saw a dire need for deeper understanding.1 As they observed,

it seemed to us imperative that the citizens of our democracy should know more about China. If when we were children the grown-ups had told us

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anything besides rubbish on this subject, and if they themselves had ever been encouraged to reflect that the unthinkable sufferings of the Chinese people deserved something more from the West than postage stamps, opium, and gunboats, China today might be a friendly country.  

How to foster such a friendly China, however, remained a point of contention. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the narrative regarding relations oscillated between isolation and engagement. For decades, Canadians debated whether it was better to isolate or rather to engage China to encourage reform on human rights, democracy, and fair trade. Within weeks of the birth of the PRC, Secretary of State for External Affairs Lester Pearson declared Canada’s desire to recognize the new state, much as it had done with postwar regimes in Eastern Europe. Yet early attempts at engagement were soon frustrated by public opinion, American influence, and the outbreak of the Korean War. Only when Pierre Trudeau became prime minister in 1968 did Canada start negotiations to recognize the PRC, accomplished in 1970. Canadian writers have long hailed the Trudeau government’s recognition of the PRC as the triumph of engagement and example for later recognitions, such as that by the United States in 1979. But was it? Under subsequent governments, both Liberal and Conservative, Canadians remained divided over which strategy might be more effective in “changing” China. Over the past decade, renewed calls to pressure Beijing to adopt democratic reform have given way to efforts to engage the PRC through a “strategic partnership” and “Pacific gateway.”

For better or worse, attempts to change China, whether through isolation or engagement, have often focused on politics and diplomacy. Yet, from the start, Canada’s ties with China—as with Asia more generally—have been multilayered. Now the world’s second-largest economy, China is poised to surpass the United States as the world’s foremost economic power by 2020. It also has become a chief donor of development assistance to Africa and other regions. Given such realities, it is not surprising that Ottawa has reformulated its China policy in favor of a clear stance of engagement, if only to benefit from the PRC’s rising global status. In this regard, the earlier assessment from Hébert and Trudeau rings true in concluding how

the real threat is not the Yellow Peril of our nightmares; it is the eventual threat of economic rivalry in the markets of the world, and the nearer threat of

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2 Ibid., 3.