Sometime in the late 1950s while in primary school in California, I participated in a model United Nations for students. Among the topics of our discussion was the admission of "Red China." If I recall correctly, I was assigned, despite my objection, to argue against its admission. Even at that early age and from a mildly anti-Communist family, I thought it obvious that a country with "500 million people" should be seated in an organization that claimed to represent the world’s family of nations. My teacher, wanting me to challenge my beliefs, however, required that I represent the Republic of China in the debate.

I read the available literature about the admission issue, which regularly appeared in the popular press. My study, though, only strengthened my view favoring the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Supporters of that position were already making a good public case. Nevertheless, during the assembly, I had to try to convince my classmates that opposing the seating of Communist China was the moral and strategically proper thing to do. Although I cannot recall who won the debate, I remember it being a hard fight. My position had been the unpopular one, and I recall my teacher praising my valiant effort, perhaps to soften the blow of what had probably been defeat.

The point of this story is that it helps illustrate how during the late 1950s China was a lively topic of popular discussion, even among some school children. I did not know who or what was Joe McCarthy and McCarthyism, but I did have an opinion about China that was at odds with Washington's hostile position. Even though Red China did not officially exist according to U.S. policy, it was constantly before the public, provoked by the news of the seemingly annual offshore island crises, tantalizing reports about what was going on behind the Bamboo Curtain (I recall my family seeing Felix Greene speak about China to an overflow crowd in one of San Francisco’s largest auditoriums in the early 1960s) and commercial culture. China, its people, and its revolutions served as the backdrop for scores of 1950s–60s movies, such as Blood Alley (1955), Love Is a Many Splendored Thing (1955), The
World of Suzie Wong (1960), Dr. No (1962), The Manchurian Candidate (1962), 55 Days at Peking (1963), and The Sand Pebbles (1966), among many others. Recalling all this helps put into social context the discussion of elite and inner government opinion about China policy in the 1950s and 1960s that Jean Kang, Victor Kaufman, and Priscilla Roberts examine in their essays.

All three essays reveal that among political elites, influential and powerful voices regularly expressed dissatisfaction with American China policy; mid- and high-level officials through three administrations mused about or even proposed initiatives to introduce at least a modicum of flexibility in policy toward the mainland. A lot more was going on among policymakers than the general public suspected at the time. And all three authors show that the PRC leadership’s own hostility, American domestic politics, or White House considerations of other critical foreign policy issues undermined any effort to change the course earlier than when it came in the Nixon administration. Indeed, one can argue that it took nothing less than the extraordinary convergence of historical forces of epic proportions—the escalation of the Sino-Soviet split toward war, the international isolation and domestic ruin of China due to the Cultural Revolution, and a social and political crisis unseen in the United States since the Civil War—to end the freeze in U.S.-China relations. It took a lot more than humanitarian food relief proposals or primary school debates to get U.S. policy unstuck.

As I read these essays, it occurred to me that it might be useful to pose a different set of questions to try to generate new ways of thinking about what might be called the “Great Interregnum,” the twenty-year period of “nonrecognition” in U.S.-China relations. As time passes, the Great Interregnum, rather than characterizing U.S.-China relations, appears now as more of a historical aberration. It is worthwhile recalling that the years of normalized relations now outnumber those of the nonrecognition period.

The Great Interregnum is sandwiched between two weighty historical events: on the one hand, the founding of the PRC and the breaking of relations with the United States in 1949; and on the other, the reestablishment of regular intercourse in the Nixon administration two decades later. Historical scholarship has been preoccupied with these events, writing about the in-between period as either a consideration of “what might have been,” if different decisions had been made in 1949–50 (“missed opportunities”), or a prelude to the 1972 rapprochement (“premature initiatives” before Nixon’s trip to Beijing). But how might one break from this sandwiched approach and think about the period of nonrecognition differently?