

Jing Li. *China's America*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011. xiii + 302 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-3517-6.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The field of Chinese-American relations is *en vogue* these days. China's increased power in the last decade has led to the perception that conflict between it and the United States is looming. The "China threat" has spawned a publishing boom in alarmist literature, but there has also been an increase in scholarship on the development of the Sino-American relationship through the twentieth century. A recent improvement has been the inclusion of newly available Chinese sources to help us understand the Chinese perspective, such as Chen Jian's *China's Road to the Korean War* (1996) or Simei Qing's *From Allies to Enemies: Visions of Modernity, Identity, and U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1945-1960* (2007). But the field still focuses largely on state-to-state relations, especially when studying the People's Republic of China (PRC). Fortunately, there has been some work that explores economic and social connections. *Land without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present* (1993), by R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee, presents the writings of a wide variety of Chinese who visited the

United States. Published around the same time, David Shambaugh's 1993 *Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives American, 1972-1990* was a major step in trying to understand how the Chinese perceived the United States after the Nixon-Mao rapprochement. These books represent the relatively small collection of works in English that focus on Chinese impressions of Americans. Helping to develop this field is Jing Li's *China's America: The Chinese View the United States, 1900-2000*, which presents a strong new perspective on how the Chinese people understood the United States. Looking mainly at Chinese intellectuals, he shows how they saw the United States as a model of modernity, but also with severe weaknesses. The Chinese marveled at American prosperity and power, but were skeptical of its corruption, instability, and imperialist tendencies.

As Li explores how Chinese views of the United States changed over the course of the twentieth century, he begins with some well-travelled territory. He starts with Chinese politicians like Liang Qichao, Sun Yat-sen, and Chiang Kai-shek's views

of the United States and the applicability of its system in China. He then jumps ahead to the first decade of the People's Republic, where he looks into how American-trained intellectuals were swimming against the political tide as they criticized the subjugation of science to ideology. These sections are quite interesting, but mainly offer some interesting detail rather than new interpretations.

The middle sections of the book, dealing with the later 1950s and 1960s, are a little more muddled than the rest of the book. Li generally does a good job of tying changes in Chinese perceptions of the United States to the larger events of the time. But when discussing the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, he becomes very focused on Mao, to the exclusion of many other issues. To some degree, this should be expected as Mao was the driving force during most of the period. Unfortunately, the focus on Mao's statements ignores the reaction to the propaganda and allows only limited discussion of the effects of mobilization of the Chinese people. Strangely, Li also glosses over some of the key issues that further hurt the Sino-American relationship. In particular, he does not discuss the first Taiwan Straits crisis and barely mentions the second. This is quite frustrating because each of those generated new resentment towards the United States and new campaigns against it.

This section does have some interesting insights, however. I was surprised to see the attention that Mao paid to the U.S. domestic situation, including the recession of 1958 and the upheaval of the civil rights movement, which he equated with class struggle. He went so far as to say that only rich whites were persecuting blacks, while poor whites were helping them. As with so many of Mao's assertions, he probably should have spent more time researching it.

Li hits his stride in the latter part of the book when the United States goes from an enemy to a friend. He shows how two decades of propaganda

could not be reversed overnight, so the Communist Party had to switch its position subtly. It had to present the United States as desperate and willing to admit that its China policies had failed to avoid appearing revisionist. That switch, which radical elements led by Jiang Qing resisted to the end, led to people like Deng Xiaoping coming to power because they were practical and willing to bend to promote stability and growth. Qing, having caused so much suffering during the Cultural Revolution, could not switch her position so she doubled down on the Cultural Revolution and lost.

The last four chapters are the most compelling and most innovative. Li uses sources that are relatively untapped in English-language analysis, including publications and consumer information for the last two decades of the twentieth century. Li first looks at *The People's Daily*, a Communist Party-run newspaper, and *Dushu*, a journal that explores ideas from the West. The contrast shows the difficult dynamic of Deng Xiaoping's China, which encouraged economic growth and the exchange of ideas, but within limits. The waxing and waning of opinions reflect the power struggles within the party, even though *Dushu* was technically independent. Then Li switches to the post-Tiananmen era, where there was less political freedom, but a rising standard of living. Li shows that although the hyper-nationalist rhetoric coming from Beijing and from many publications inflamed China's sense of victimization, there were still mixed views of the United States. The Communist leadership knew that good relations with the United States was crucial for China's growth, but also used U.S. missteps to enhance its legitimacy at home. The Chinese people deeply resented U.S. imperialist policies, but drew a distinction between the government and the people. They still appreciated and possibly envied U.S. culture, which was reflected in their purchases and advertising.

China's America is easy to read but is a little uneven. It tells the story of the twentieth century

without much continuity, with each section largely standing by itself, especially when discussing the early part of the century. The analysis of the pre-Communism era covers little new ground and does not really set the stage for the rest of the book. The book improves when discussing the early Communist period, but focuses too much on the top ranks of the leadership, especially Mao, and is in danger of oversimplifying the forces that influenced Chinese attitudes. The book's strength is clearly in the last part. Li offers some very interesting analysis as he discusses the improvement in relations beginning the 1970s. There he shows the connections between the leadership's decisions and the ways the rest of the country was changing its opinions of the United States. He juxtaposes government sources with private and semi-private publications, as well as consumer data, to construct a fascinating picture of a China trying to reconcile the various images of the United States as a model of modernity, an ally in achieving that modernity, and a rival that could corrupt or undermine that modernity.

Even though the book is not consistent in the quality of its analysis, it makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of China's view of the United States in the late twentieth century. I recommend it for anyone interested in how Chinese public opinion has been shaped in recent decades or for those interested in recent U.S.-China relations. I intend to use the latter parts of the book in my own course to help my students explore how the current relationship was built on the Chinese side.

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[1] Chen Jian. *China's Road to the Korea War*, (New York City, Columbia University Press) 1996; Simei Qing. *From Allies to Enemies: Visions of Modernity, Identity, and U.S. – China Diplomacy, 1945-1960*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) 2007.

[2] Arkush, R. David and Lee, Leo I. ed. *Land without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of American from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press) 1993.

[3] Shambaugh, David. *Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives America, 1972-1990*, (Princeton University Press) 1993.

[4] Jing Li. *China's America: The Chinese View of the United States, 1900-2000*, (China's America: The Chinese View the United States, 1900-2000)

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