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Peking and the Mysterious West

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PEKING AND THE MYSTERIOUS WEST

By Howard L. Boorman*

Fairbank, John K. (ed.). The Chinese World Order: traditional China's foreign relations. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968.

Young, Kenneth T. Negotiating with the Chinese Communists: the United States experience, 1953-1967. New York: McGraw-Hill, for the Council on Foreign Relations, 1968.

Harris, Richard. America and East Asia: a new Thirty Years War? London: Times Newspapers Ltd., 1968.

The task of keeping the Western world, or at least the United States, convinced that Chairman Mao and his current associates in the Forbidden City at Peking are madmen is both demanding and deadening. The Russian Communist leaders in Moscow, it is estimated, devote six days weekly to the chore, a stint paralleled by the Chinese Nationalist leaders in Taipei. Dedicated anti-Communists from New York to Long Beach contribute significantly to the effort. And the Chinese Communists themselves, not to be outdone, appear to allot roughly half their working hours to programs designed to convince the American Congress that they are not only intransigent but also intellectually insolvent and emotionally unbalanced. Given the din, it is hardly surprising that the intelligent layman surrenders both diagnosis and prognosis to the China experts.

But do the statements and actions of the United States government and the analyses and estimates of the China experts appear any less irrational to the Chinese Communists? In political analysis, even as in novel writing, point of view determines approach. To survey the explosions of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, for instance, from the rim of the volcano rather than from within the crater is inevitably to make assumptions and to spin conclusions which are at best vicarious and speculative. To judge Washington from the doctrinal vantage point of Peking must be, no less, to substitute imagination for reason and to see mysterious conduct as the product of disordered reason.

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One challenge to the China-watcher is to counter irrationality where he can: at home. To this end, these three books were written: one, to place in perspective China's traditional expectations with regard to foreign relations; the second, to describe a current behind-the-scenes exercise in Sino-American diplomacy; the third, by an Englishman, to counsel rational reappraisal of realities by the United States.

East Asia, so Mr. Richard Harris of The Times (London) concludes in America and East Asia, "is different." In The Chinese World Order, Professor John K. Fairbank, professor of history and director of the East Asian Research Center at Harvard, has mobilized a substantial research effort designed to assess one aspect of this difference: the distinctive system of tributary relations through which China dealt with non-Chinese states and rulers during the later centuries of the imperial era.

The traditional Chinese world order was a graded, Sino-centric system revolving around the Central, or Middle, Kingdom. It embraced three principal zones: first, areas most closely connected by geography and culture with the inner Chinese empire: Korea, Vietnam, the Liuch'iu (Ryukyu) islands, and, occasionally, Japan; second, an Inner Asian zone, including tribes and states of the nomadic peoples of Central Asia beyond the Great Wall which marked the inland frontier of agrarian China; and, third, an outer zone encompassing "barbarians" who came from states of South and Southeast Asia and from Europe.

During most of the Ch'ing (1644-1912) dynasty--with which The Chinese World Order deals--as in earlier centuries, China's relations with surrounding areas in East Asia were, Fairbank points out, strongly colored by the concept of Sinocentrism and by the implicit assumption of Chinese superiority. China conceived itself cultural mother of the area, giving Korea, Vietnam and Japan such traditional features of Chinese civilization as the ideographic system of writing, the Confucian system of ethical rules governing political and social behavior, and the examination-based pattern of public administration as institutionalized in the bureaucratic Chinese empire. In practical and power terms, China also assumed itself the hub of East Asia: external relations were an extension of the principles of political and social order that formed the basis of the traditional Chinese state and were, accordingly, hierarchic, ritualistic, and nonegalitarian.

One problem of China's pre-modern foreign relations lay in relating Sinocentric theory to tributary realities. The papers in The Chinese World Order--brewed by an impressive team of scholars, both Asian and Western, distilled through an international conference held in 1965, and bottled by the Harvard University Press--are generally of a high level and present an

organized array of data regarding the interaction of theory and practice in the system. Particular mention should be made of the papers by Wang Gungwu, the broadest survey yet available of evidence concerning the psychological and political bases of pre-Ch'ing tributary relations, by Joseph F. Fletcher on China and Central Asia (1368-1884), and by John E. Wills, Jr. on the Ch'ing court's relations with the Dutch (1662-1690).

Traditional Chinese perceptions regarding world order form a major chapter in the history of man's political experience. Implicitly the Fairbank volume, written by (and primarily for) professional historians, assumes some indeterminate relevance between history and contemporary politics. Negotiating with the Chinese Communists, by Mr. Kenneth T. Young, a former official of the American government, stems from the corridors of Cold War diplomacy and opens windows to reflect on some of the larger issues--strategic, psychological, and historical--involved in the current wrestling match between the United States and the People's Republic of China.

Deputy representative at the armistice talks held with the Communists at Panmunjom in Korea in 1953-54, Mr. Young later served as American Ambassador to Thailand from 1961 to 1963 and is now president of the Asia Society in New York. His objective in the Negotiating volume is to provide description and analysis of the protracted discussions between official representatives of the United States and Communist China from the Korean armistice of 1953 to 1967 and to assess the utility of these confrontations. The Ambassadorial Talks, aptly labeled the "longest established permanent floating diplomatic game" in modern history, present a paradoxical record: virtually empty of results, but potentially, in Mr. Young's view, full of consequences. Born of a little-noted public statement made by Chou En-lai at the time of the Bandung Conference in the spring of 1955, the Talks, conducted first at Geneva and later at Warsaw, may be divided into two periods. The first, which lasted for roughly three years after 1955, was essentially a long-distance diplomatic duel between Chou En-lai and John Foster Dulles, then American Secretary of State, marked by a single agreement successfully concluded between Washington and Peking on the repatriation of civilians, and characterized by Chinese Communist initiatives and by American rebuffs. A second period, which has lasted from the Taiwan crisis of 1958 to date, has been dominated by intermittent initiatives from Washington, rejections from Peking, and a pattern of diplomatic stalemate.

This unique and little-understood pattern of sub-diplomatic relations between the most powerful nation and the most populous nation of the world has, in Mr. Young's view, served the interests of both governments and sustained a useful, if extremely circumscribed, channel of communications despite the political chasm

separating the two countries. Writing as a former professional diplomat, he argues for continuation and expansion of the talks as a further move that may at some point lead to substantive negotiations on basic political issues. Negotiating with the Chinese Communists is a major addition to the sketchy literature on Sino-American relations since 1950, and is certainly the most comprehensive survey that can be given while the official record of negotiations remains unavailable for research purposes. Yet the very professionalism of the account constitutes its principal shortcoming. Because the author remains committed to the official Washington view which sees the United States as a "vigorously dynamic world-oriented" power providing the "primary strategic restraint" on an irrational, bellicose, and expansionist China, he fails to place the particular conflict situation within a general analytic framework. In key respects, United States policy assumptions were formulated in the emotional environment precipitated in 1950 by the outbreak of the Korean war and remain largely unaltered eighteen years later. Similarly, the pattern of the diplomacy of stalemate was set by the Panmunjom talks in 1953 and has not--despite significant shifts in the official rigidity of Washington's position--indicated eagerness to confront the central roadblock to substantive negotiations: the status of Taiwan. United States political and military support of the Government of the Republic of China continues to involve the United States in buttressing what Peking deems a counter-revolutionary regime.

In America and East Asia, Mr. Richard Harris offers a thoughtful British appraisal of the present pattern of conflict in the Far Eastern theater and of the factors underlying a situation which could become a new Thirty Years War. China-born, with extensive experience in China, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia, Mr. Harris is now assistant foreign editor of The Times with responsibility for analysis of contemporary Asian problems. Based in part on a series of three articles published in London in early 1968, this trenchant discussion is premised on the assumption that the major international confrontation of the second half of this century may be the clash between East Asia (symbolized by mainland China) and the United States, a conflict shaped by the distinctive nature of these two civilizations and exacerbated by the phase in their histories through which each is passing.

East Asia, Mr. Harris begins, is more than a mere geographical area which escaped conventional Western colonial rule. East Asia is essentially a civilization which, as it matured over the centuries, developed a cohesive pattern of ideas common to its constituent parts: principally China, Japan, Korea, and northern Vietnam. This civilization was ideological in the sense that government was conducted there in accordance with particular assumptions regarding the nature and proper destiny of man and society: beliefs whose truth was held by the articulate elite

to be rational, self-evident, and unchallengeable. Because of the political character of East Asian civilization and because of the doctrinal norms that guided political and social life, the area, despite internal differences, could be attacked but never assimilated by the imperialist powers, either European or Russian. China, for reasons of geographical extent, tradition, power (either actual or potential), and prestige, held the central position in the indigestible East Asian culture area. China, as the English historian C. P. Fitzgerald has pointed out elsewhere, "is the only large area which has never, at any period, been brought under the rule of Western men, the only region in which an alternative tradition, equally ancient [with that of the West], has flourished and persisted down to modern times."

The present American clash with East Asia (of which both the Sino-American impasse and the Vietnam conflict are manifestations) is at once a major feature of contemporary international politics and a product of irrational and unsophisticated prejudices on the part of both major actors involved. The relationship has become virtually symbiotic: United States alarm that its system is permanently threatened by Chinese Communism compounds China's inherent xenophobia, now inspired by modern revolutionary nationalism and by the virulent brand of anti-imperialism which Mao has squeezed from Leninism. Paradoxically the United States, despite its vaunted pragmatism, is, like China, increasingly an ideological civilization. The doctrinal foundations of Americanism, based on the classical texts of the late eighteenth century and now resurgently propounded in the late twentieth, appear elemental and self-evident to most Americans. Yet in effect these tenets have bred an American civilization which, in the view of even sympathetic non-Americans, appears increasingly arrogant and inflexible, decreasingly relevant to most areas of the world outside the middle latitudes of North America.

In effect, Mr. Harris argues, the post-1950 involvement of the United States with East Asia constitutes an ideological clash in which both contestants share a similarly primitive view of the centrality of ideology. In a concluding discussion of 'What the Americans Are Up Against,' he stresses again the psychological imperviousness of East Asia and the fact that its historical evolution over two millenia bred a civilization which, in style and texture, differs profoundly from other civilizations elsewhere in Asia or Africa or Latin America. For centuries that civilization had a notably strong sense of identity, an attitude that has included--or at least behaved as if it included--supreme confidence that outsiders could not penetrate its walls and comprehend its workings. Because East Asia is a politically intractable civilization now going through an unprecedented process of accelerated regeneration, it is likely to be even more resistant than formerly to external efforts at direction. East Asian Communism,

it is suggested, is particularly adapted for indigenous purposes and thus inherently unexportable. East Asia, is, of all geographical and cultural areas of the non-Western world, the least promising market for American ideals of liberalism and individualism. Mass democracy in the American sense runs counter to all East Asian political assumptions and social traditions and will scarcely be implanted by outsiders.

These three books stem from different backgrounds and premises. Yet, taken together and seasoned with common sense, they suggest that realistic appraisal of the present knotted tangle of American preconceptions, policies, commitments, misunderstandings, and aspirations towards Asia deserves priority on the new administration's agenda. Given present demands in the United States and elsewhere in the world, Washington might begin to reassess some official attitudes and policies. One step would be to take a hard look at probable pay-offs on the present level of massive American investment in the Far Eastern theater. The United States may still be affluent. The problem is whether it can still afford to be mysterious, even irrational, in East Asia.