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On China

by Henry Kissinger

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Col Wortzel served two tours of duty as a military attaché at the US Embassy in China. Wortzel was director of the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College from 1997-1999.

In *On China*, Henry Kissinger has written an excellent history and analysis of China's political culture. He emphasizes the historical influences on how China approaches relations with other countries and strategy. Also, based on his own experience and extensive research, Kissinger discusses how Chinese leaders approach negotiations. The book is well researched and takes advantage of a variety of sources, including Kissinger's own records of conversation.

Throughout the book, Kissinger looks at what he sees as key events that shape how Chinese leaders, indeed, even the general populace, draw on China's traditions and classical culture when developing domestic or foreign policies. Henry Kissinger portrays China's classical past as key to understanding how Beijing relates to other countries. Powerful emperors isolated themselves and treated other states and peoples as vassal states over which the "Middle Kingdom," China, or *Zhongguo*, exercised suzerainty.

In the prologue, Kissinger deftly weaves in the blend of Confucian thinking and the military maxims of Sun Tzu, which influence interpersonal relations and military thought today. Yet, in some places, Kissinger is surprisingly narrow and dogmatic. On page 15, he tells the reader "The Chinese never generated a myth of cosmic creation. Their universe was created by the Chinese themselves, whose values . . . were conceived of as Chinese in origin."

In reality, while interpersonal relations and the structure of Chinese society is heavily influence by Confucius, there are creation myths in China. Central to them are a sense of a primordial, comingled, and chaotic heaven and earth. According to one Taoist myth, a god, *Pangu*, separated earth from heaven like a yolk from an egg. Parts of his body became wind, water, the moon, mountains, dirt, and stone. In another myth, of Taoist and Buddhist origin, a successor goddess, *Nuwa*, used clay to make men and animals. Enough mythology; the point is that while Kissinger's research staff was excellent, the reader must realize that Henry Kissinger is writing the history of China in a way that also validates his interpretation of events. To get beyond Kissinger's own biases or mistakes, one must read more widely and not take *On China* as gospel.

There are other historical interpretations that challenge Kissinger's description of the Opium Wars. In *On China*, Kissinger adopts the Chinese perspective and describes invasion and domination by foreign powers, which weakened the Qing Dynasty and led to the warlord period. Kissinger explains how the forced creation of extraterritorial zones in China created the sense of

a “century of humiliation” that pervades Chinese education and influences the sensitivity of Chinese leaders to matters of sovereignty. But there are other interpretations. Julia Lovell, in *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China* (Picador, 2011), describes how the Qing Dynasty crumbled because of poor leadership, corruption, affectation, and ritual. For Lovell, the reasons for China’s decline and the imperial successes of Western powers were because the Qing had created “an impressive but improbable high-wire act, unified by ambition, bluff, pomp and pragmatism.”

These flaws aside, *On China* has strengths that make it an important book for students of China and US diplomatic history. Kissinger describes personal contacts and meetings with some of the most influential and important figures in recent Chinese politics. His accounts of encounters with Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Hua Guofeng, and a host of other Chinese leaders are superb. And Kissinger is able to discuss the events surrounding the meetings in the context of the policy issues facing the United States. The accounts in *On China* are accurate when compared to the descriptions in Ezra Vogel’s *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Belknap Press, 2011).

In describing the arrival of the American delegation sent by President Nixon to China, Kissinger provides outstanding detail on how the American team prepared for its July 9, 1971, visit. He complements this with a parallel description of the way that Zhou Enlai had prepared the Chinese diplomatic team to receive and escort the Americans. Zhou had selected the Chinese diplomats two years earlier when “the idea of opening to the United States” was debated at the highest levels of China’s civilian and military leadership. Marshall Ye Jianying greeted Kissinger in Beijing. Ye was one of four PLA marshals tasked by Mao Zedong to analyze strategic options for China.

There is probably no other senior figure who can discuss how a series of American presidents maintained continuity in China policy than Henry Kissinger. He includes a critical description of the policy options explored by President George H. W. Bush after the massacre of Chinese workers and students when the People’s Liberation Army ended the Tiananmen Square demonstrations on June 4, 1989. Bush had to navigate between Americans who “argued for Confrontation, urging the United States to resist undemocratic behavior or human rights violations,” and proponents of engagement, who argued that “human rights progress is generally better reached by a policy of engagement.”

The same debate is raging today in the United States, compounded by questions about China’s currency valuation and the nation’s investments in American treasury bonds. When dealing with a nation that is a member of the Permanent-Five in the United Nations Security Council, it is difficult for any president, or for realists in Congress, to subscribe to a single-issue foreign policy. Kissinger is always the pragmatist and by reading *On China* one comes away with a sense of the policy dilemmas facing America’s leaders as well as the decisionmaking process inside China.