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Uncoiling the Modern Sino-American Relationship

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Through proper comparison and critical analysis one can objectively discern the nature of any given object of study. Understanding the differences in approach and nuances in presentation is crucial in being able to formulate a substantiated opinion on not only one’s own scholarship, but also everything else one engages in throughout life. For this particular paper I seek to qualify the true nature of the Sino-American relationship as it has developed over the last quarter of the twentieth century. To more fully appreciate the complex relationship that evolved between such seemingly antithetical nations, I will critically review both James Mann’s *About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, From Nixon to Clinton* and Margaret MacMillan’s *Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World*. This paper will specifically focus on evaluating the similarities and inconsistencies between Mann’s and MacMillan’s theses, elucidate the structural differences between each author’s arguments, and analyze each author’s interpretation of specific events, leaders, and issues in order to establish a broader cohesive understanding of the modern Sino-American relationship.

Before one can fully recognize the strengths and weaknesses of any given source it is important to establish exactly what question that source is ultimately seeking to answer. This question – the thesis – must be clearly articulated and understood in the mind of the reader in order to assess the applicability of that source to any given phenomenon, as well as compare it to any other work. Mann’s underlying objective in writing his book is to “explore, describe, and interpret American policy toward China over the past quarter-century” with the intention of overcoming America’s “collective ignorance” and shedding light on the “very recent past.”¹ In contrast, MacMillan’s objective is to highlight the significance of President Richard Nixon’s and Chairman Mao Tse-Tung’s initial surprise meeting in the spring of 1972 and argue that this single event serves as both a culmination of important events in the U.S.’s and China’s past, as well as the beginning of a very important, albeit complex, relationship for the future.² Despite the fact that Mann and MacMillan are both addressing U.S.-Chinese relations in a broad sense, it is important to emphasize that they are clearly not seeking to answer the same question. It is precisely the discrepancies between these questions that this paper seeks to explore more specifically.

One of the most significant differences between Mann’s and MacMillan’s theses is the role that the audience is prescribed. Mann’s audience is an active motivation behind his research. He makes it very clear that he is interested in teaching an American audience something specific about America’s political history as it relates to its Chinese counterpart. In
this way, Mann is arguably building upon the longstanding traditions of previous American journalists and scholars by using China as a convenient mirror into which he can compare the American image. For example, as editors of *Land Without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present*, R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee pieced together multiple primary source materials written by Chinese individuals in order to benefit Americans by elevating American understanding of their own society. While Mann may not be alone in his attempts to use China as a sounding board for espousing important lessons to American audiences, it is noteworthy to point out that this in no way undermines the legitimacy or necessity of his scholarship; rather, it stands more as a curious reminder of America’s inherited past.

To understand what sets Mann apart from his predecessors, and for this paper’s specific purposes MacMillan’s work, one can point to the fact that he purposefully goes beyond the surface of the historical timeline to reveal the extenuating circumstances that precipitated each calculated overture the U.S. government took towards building diplomatic relations with China. For example, Mann emphasizes that the enormity of the Nixon-Mao meeting in 1972 was largely predicated upon the “clandestine secrecy”, “undisclosed bargaining”, and unofficial backhanding that the U.S. president was willing to accept in return for his own personal political profit. Mann also iterates the details behind President Clinton’s “retreat on extending MFN [Most Favored Nation] status to China” in 1994 when Chinese officials failed to adequately meet the human rights preconditions he had executively prescribed for China the year before. The rest of Mann’s book details highly sensitive and momentous occasions between China and the U.S. in this similar format. More importantly, Mann’s critiques of American politics lend tremendous insight to Americans regarding the way they view their own government and urge them to possibly reconsider and appreciate the U.S.’s relationship with China in its larger context of manipulation and political orchestration.

Like Mann, MacMillan addresses an American audience with her thesis; however, contrary to his audience, her audience serves as a passive motivator behind her research. In other words, she is not trying to teach Americans specific lessons about themselves. Instead, she aims to impress upon Americans from all walks of life – businessmen, scholars, politicians, and unassuming ordinary citizens – the general significance of the U.S.’s current relationship with China by illuminating the extensive measures that were taken to make Nixon’s and Mao’s momentous meeting in 1972 even possible. Particularly set on underscoring the lengths to which both Chinese and U.S. officials had to stretch themselves, MacMillan asserts that “Nixon would not have been in Beijing [thus the foundations of the modern Sino-American relationship would be null and void] if both sides had not been prepared, for their own reasons, to break out of the old patterns”. In most instances, exalting the delicacy of the historical moment supersedes the audience. For example, MacMillan insists, “opening that gate had been a tricky and difficult process, and there had been many times when it looked as though it would never occur”. She goes so far in defending the necessity of Nixon’s trip to China that she justifies the extent of secrecy and unofficial procedural policies enacted with suggestions like, “while secrecy is not always necessary in human affairs, in negotiations of this delicacy, with such huge potential for misunderstandings, it was essential”. In other words, MacMillan feeds into the logic Nixon and his administration were spinning at the time. Instead of challenging the audience to critically question the underhanded tactics of their government like Mann does in his book, MacMillan argues for her audience to accept the conduct as natural and acceptable in light of the historical moment.
While the essence of Mann’s and MacMillan’s theses, as well as their expectations for their respective audiences, have been properly situated, it is still necessary to critically compare the structural composition of their arguments. It must be noted that the structure of any argument is as impactful as the substantive nature of those arguments. Since both authors differ considerably on this front these variations must be understood if one is to adequately interpret the consequences of such divergent manifestations. Mann’s book is laid out chronologically and each chapter more or less follows a linear timeline of events as they evolved from President Nixon’s visit to China in 1972 up to the 1996 U.S. presidential election. The first three chapters overlap quite obviously with MacMillan’s points of emphasis in that the events surrounding 1972 are discussed. Chapters four and five highlight President Jimmy Carter’s relations with China, then President Ronald Reagan’s relations with the Chinese are discussed in chapters six, seven and eight. Mann then provides an extensive analysis of President George H.W. Bush’s accords with China in chapters nine through fourteen, and finally concludes the story with the culmination of President Bill Clinton’s first term in office in chapter fifteen through eighteen. It must be pointed out that Mann’s timeline is strictly measured by American standards; more precisely, the American political cycles – elections, re-elections, new congresses, new presidents, and new advisors – dictate Mann’s narrative. While one can see that Mann emphasizes the continuity of American policies and politics in relation to China, one can also see the inherent limitations of his authority on the entire Sino-American relationship.

MacMillan’s structural format is not as straightforward as Mann’s. While there is an underlying linear progression of events in relation to Nixon’s trip, the book is in no way limited to the confines of a single week’s highlights. MacMillan actually uses Nixon’s trip as a backdrop through which she explores how various complex histories converged. Most of the chapters are constructed around particular subject matters that MacMillan uses to reinforce the depth of each participant’s and geographical setting’s importance and role within the grander historical significance of the U.S.-Chinese relationship. For example, there are separate chapters for Chou Enlai (chapter three), Mao Tse-Tung (chapter six), the Soviet Union (chapter nine), Taiwan (chapter fifteen), Indochina (chapter sixteen), Haldeman and the American press coverage of Nixon’s momentous week (chapter seventeen), and so forth. MacMillan successfully interweaves and transforms these storylines into an extraordinary supporting cast for her much adulated main event, Nixon being able to overcome history and go to China. Both MacMillan and Mann structured their particular arguments in a fashion that best suited the scope of their intentions. MacMillan stretched back in history to build the platform onto which the monumental week in 1972 could be highlighted; Mann kept the information current in order to challenge contemporary American citizens with easily recognizable and relevant lessons from a nearby history. In both instances structure supported and influenced substance.

Finally, the most important basis on which Mann’s and MacMillan’s books must be compared is how their individual interpretations of the historical facts relate to one another. At the core of MacMillan’s research is the notion that “it took individuals – four men, in this case – to make it [America’s re-opening to China] happen.” MacMillan asserts that President Richard Nixon and General Mao Tse-Tung had the “necessary vision and determination” to forge a new relationship while Henry Kissinger and Chou Enlai had the “talent, the patience, and the skill to make the vision reality.” Much of MacMillan’s work meticulously details the direct roles each of the men played in forging a new era in international history. Lending credit to MacMillan’s interpretation of events, Michael Schaller’s *The United States and China: Into the Twenty-First Century* also emphasizes the role key individuals played in orchestrating Nixon’s meeting with
Mao. Schaller insists that “the foundation laid by Nixon and Kissinger and Mao and Zhou proved quite durable.” When both MacMillan’s and Schaller’s assessments are taken into consideration, one is lead to assume that history required these very men at that very moment for America and China to bridge the gap that existed between them culturally, economically, and politically. Whether this is a fair assumption or not, MacMillan’s emphasis on individuals is nonetheless a distinguishing trademark of her research and must be appreciated as such.

Much like MacMillan, emphasis on the roles of individuals is also largely at the core of Mann’s book. Presidents Nixon, Carter, Reagan, Bush and Clinton were all weighted figures in Mann’s research. Mann also makes reference to other instrumental figures who worked behind the scenes to nurture the precarious balance of relations, figures like Kissinger, Brzezinski, Allen, Lord, Lilley, and Perry. Unlike MacMillan, Mann’s emphasis on individuals was not so much by design but as consequence. Mann argues that “in both style and content, Nixon’s and Kissinger’s diplomacy guided America’s relationship with China for at least a quarter-century.” In other words, whether Mann agreed with the aggrandizing of the individual or not, Nixon’s and Kissinger’s precedent forced later individuals into a narrow mold of how to conduct diplomacy with China, thus forcing the historical narrative to be predominantly benchmarked by individual actors – presidents, secretaries of state, or otherwise influential persons.

Even though the opinions, ideals, backgrounds, and roles of individuals have played a big part in shaping both Mann’s and MacMillan’s interpretations of the American-Chinese relationship, Mann seems to lend more credit to the greater historical context and global events in which these key individuals were situated than MacMillan is willing to concede. Whereas MacMillan was committed to the notion that it was the people involved that dictated the nature of the two countries’ associations, going so far as to suggest that “without the right individuals to push the process ahead, it could have failed any number of times,” Mann challenges the assumption that the efforts of individual people were the sole determining factor in shaping the U.S.’s associations with China. One only has to examine Mann’s evaluation of President Carter’s policies toward China to understand his appreciation for the impact of external influence. For example, Mann suggests Carter’s conception of dealing with China was largely linked to “America’s immediate needs in the Cold War” and that much of Carter’s attention was distracted by “too many short-term problems [such as the Iranian revolution and high inflation in the U.S.] to think about the long-run, in China or elsewhere.” With anti-Soviet calculations at the forefront of American leaders’ and politicians’ minds, the ensuing military cooperation between the U.S. and China throughout the 1970s and 1980s is easily understandable as mutually beneficial for both countries’ interests. There need not be any special emphasis on the particular efforts of any one person in order to appreciate the direction America’s and China’s relations headed. In the end, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the U.S.’s special relationship with China, even Mann does not deny the unparalleled position of authority and credence particular American leaders have afforded themselves when it comes to shaping policies and general opinion of the Chinese. In this sense, Mann and MacMillan agree.

In conclusion, there is much that can be gained from the comparison of Mann’s and MacMillan’s works. Certainly there are great differences between the two books. This paper has illuminated a few major divergences – the role each author expects the audience to fulfill, the general structure of each author’s arguments and how such framework is fundamentally linked to espousing their message, and finally how each author has interpreted the facts and has centered their assertions and shaped their historical narratives on these interpretations. Even though Mann and MacMillan both speak about the same China, there are more differences than similarities.
between the two authors and thus there can be no single interpretation of Sino-American relations. Perhaps with something that is so complex and relatively new – America only opening up to the PRC forty years ago – multiple interpretations of Sino-American relations are to be expected, possibly even encouraged. It is also worth pointing out that these two sources’ scopes are inherently limited. As extensive and enlightening as they are in their own right, they still only tell part of the U.S.-China story because they are both chronicled in relation to what Americans deem monumental and important. The Chinese version of the Sino-American relationship probably reads much differently than both Mann’s and MacMillan’s books. If Americans are to ever fully appreciate and understand the true U.S.-China history, they will not only have to build upon the lessons of Mann’s and MacMillan’s research, they will have to integrate the lessons and perspectives of the Chinese scholars and people themselves. Only then will proper comparative analysis and critical evaluation shed a truly objective light on the Sino-American narrative.

References:

4 Mann, 15-16.
5 Ibid, 304.
6 MacMillan, 110.
7 Ibid, 160.
8 Ibid, 161.
9 Ibid, 338.
10 Ibid.
12 Mann, 50.
13 MacMillan, 160.
14 Mann, 96.

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