

Seize the Hour

When Nixon met Mao

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When I came to Harvard in the fall of 1971 my Perkins Hall dorm mates opposite were graduate students of Chinese. Thus I often joined them and their fellow students for Chinese dinners in the China town of South Boston. I learned to use chopsticks, but for some reason I never at the time felt any curiosity for learning Chinese characters. Also the Harvard Math department at the time still shared a building on 2 Divinity Avenue with the Chinese department (incidentally headed by the legendary Fairbanks, who assumed a guru status among my dorm mates), a fact providing yet another link with them¹. On February the next year, Nixon visited China, and the event naturally excited my friends a lot, as they among other things envisioned enlarged professional opportunities. Nixon was very much an object of resentment and hate in the academic circles I moved in, and the Chinese leaders were somehow idealized, so I recall feeling that Chou and Mao actually debased themselves to some extent by receiving those American visitors. The event was considered momentous at the time, and it was understood that only an old Communist-eater like Nixon could have gotten away with it. Now, individual events can never be judged in temporal isolation, and the characterization as historical, although often invoked, often with little discrimination, at the time of taking place, can only be applied retrospectively. As it turned out Sino-American relations have steadily been improving for the past thirty years, making that initial step seem very crucial. However, history should not be confused with mathematics, it is not that at some point some crucial initiative is taken, and that the subsequent development follows a predetermined trajectory, although it is often very tempting to think so when you actually try to take control over the future.

The book is engagingly written, with a professional sense of staging and pacing, and how to organize the material, throwing the reader into 'media res' and then at appropriate intervals as the narrative unfolds throwing in background materials, instructing the reader not only on the personalities of the major players (Nixon and Kissinger on one hand, Chou and Mao on the other), but also on those with supporting roles, as well as reminding the reader of the general features of foreign affairs at the time. And, not to be forgotten, adding updates on what happened later. Still the focus is very much on that week in February, which, in the words of Nixon, shook the world. On the other hand the ease of reading comes with a price, the prose is a bit too much of 'newsweekese', one does not really divine any real depth in her presentation, and one suspects that most of the information has been gleaned from the memoirs of Nixon and Kissinger. Thus there are

¹ The mathematics department moved to the newly erected Science Center a block or so away on Oxford street in the summer of 1972, and the East Asian scholars could finally seize the entire building, as they no doubt had been dying to do for some time.

too many trite remarks as well as a certain condescending attitude of not taxing the reader unduly. Still any book can be read between the lines, and if so done, what do we learn?

The 50's and 60's were dominated by the Cold War. For us who grew up in the shadow of the bomb it provided a sense of doom and the fear that history was about to come to an end. This also, I think, more than during any other period, made abstract world politics really matter in the quotidian concerns of people. As a child I certainly followed the course of events with apprehension, anxiously gauging the temperature in Soviet-American relations, around the center of which, all global politics turned. Ultimately it was all about the War, not the one from which mankind had recently emerged, but the inevitable coming one - the War literally to end all wars, and thus everything was viewed in the light of what relation it had to such a development. There was the Vietnam War, ostensibly waged because of the so called Dominio theory, whose human tragedy for some of us was dwarfed by its potential for far wider mayhem². During the brief six-day war in 1967, I was terrified at the imminent outbreak of a Third World War to spell disaster for us all. However, the deep freeze of the previous decades did experience a thaw in the 70's with the idea of 'détente' and cooperation. In the beginning of the 80's things deteriorated and becoming again more confrontational, only to take an abrupt turn with the emergence of Gorbachov. And the rest is, as we say, history.

The central adversary was the Sovietunion, but formidable as it was, there was a feeling that behind it, there was another power, of potentially even far greater import, namely China. The notion of huge numbers of people swelling above its constraints, and threatening to inundate the rest of the world, was actually of some ancient vintage, as testified by the nowadays impossible racist expression of the so called 'yellow peril'³. The idea of the potential of China, temporarily weak and subjected by western and especially Japanese powers, thus dates well before the Communist take-over. The Swedish explorer Sven Hedin talks about it as a slumbering giant, and independently Bertrand Russell voiced similar views in the 1920's. Thus the notion of 1949 that the Americans had lost 'China' and that they had backed the wrong horse. This 'loss' rankled, and made especially after the bitter confrontation during the Korean War⁴ relations between the two countries particularly acrimonious⁵. So what made this turnaround possible? Clearly, so called 'Realpolitik' played the crucial role, not sentimentalism, even if as often decisions were made to be dressed up in such garb. The monolithic nature of the Communist states turned out to be a grave misconception, ideology being trumped by more fundamental human traits, such as nationalism, often developing into xenophobia and concomitant

² I remember that I at a fairly early stage decided that maybe it was not such a dangerous thing after all, that it in fact served the interests of the Soviet Union, which could only be gratified with this quagmire of military distraction its rival had foundered into. It is quite probable that my analysis was not too far off the mark.

³ As a young child I recall my father noting that every fourth person in the world was Chinese, and then he counted around the dinner table, me turning out as number four

⁴ of which incidentally the Vietnam war was seen as a mere shadow as it started to escalate

⁵ The shrill propaganda against the imperialist paper tigers, is of course a case in point. I remember that when Kennedy was killed, gestures of condolence was offered by Chrujsjov, while the Chinese provided a cartoon showing the Imperialist Kennedy biting the bullet.

racism. Of course early indications of such a discord came early on by Titos defection and the intertribal tensions of the Yugoslav state, but those were to marginal to be of much concern, different though with the border clashes between China and Sovietunion, revealing that the two Communist super-powers were at loggerheads. The temptation to play the China card, to cultivate better relations with both Sovietunion and China than they had with each other was strong as this clearly would play to American interests. Now Nixon was obsessed by foreign policy, domestic concerns he found boring and mundane. As noted above global politics in the era of the Cold War took on a significance it had never had before, making isolationism impossible⁶, and Nixon clearly wanted to play for the history books, an ambition as grand as dangerous. With Kissinger he found the perfect 'soulmate', although of course personal relations were rather strained, as personal relations always were with Nixon, who could only get along with his wife by ignoring her⁷. Kissinger had his ambitions too, having in his youth written approvingly of the machinations of a Metternich. What was remarkable was that the two ambitions meshed so well and did not clash, friction being more in the nature of jealousy than in strategic and tactic conflict. Their sense of comaradie was further enhanced, not to say made possible by, the informal workingship, elevating the office of the advisor of the NSC (the National Security Council⁸) above that of the State Department headed, probably intentionally, by the non-entity of Rogers. The conduct of secrecy was congenial to both of them, playing up to their paranoid tendencies. It was often held that secrecy and duplicity were absolutely essential in dealing with such a sensitive issue as the opening up to China, any leaks (inevitably from such a large institution as the State Department) being potentially disastrous.

It takes two to tango, and what were the motivations for China? It is tempting to ascribe those as well to the Soviet threat and the desire to break out of their isolation and play a similar game as would the Americans. Chinese isolation was legendary, maybe on par with that of present day North Korea. For over twenty years foreign visits to China were exceedingly rare⁹. In a world more and more taken to consumerism, the austere isolation of the most populous country in the world was somehow reassuring. The spectacle of Mao and his worship, was both embarrassing and fascinating to the western audience. Mao certainly caused a lot of tragedy, and it is not unreasonable to attribute to him more victims than to Stalin and Hitler combined, yet the main point to realise is that the disaster wrought by dictators are not necessarily the fruits of evil, as much as a simple lack of proper scale. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, and

⁶ The Americans could in principle have sat out the Second World War, as they almost did with the First one, being economically selfsufficient and buffered by two large bodies of water on either side. With the advent of nuclear weapons and intercontintental missiles, such options were no longer in the books.

⁷ The lack of personal charisma of Nixon is legendary. In my opinion this is somewhat endearing, and in the future people may regret the media obsession which makes it impossible for someone not attuned to get a public office.

⁸ formed initially by Truman

⁹ Nowadays, MacMillan quotes a figure of 900'000 annual American visitors alone. This is somewhat sad, because in spite of all the hype about international relations to promote friendship and peace, too much of a good thing often spoils the broth completely. Mass tourism being one of the scourges of modern life, to us purist cynics far worse than terrorism.

the very power to have your whims gratified is at the root of all misery. In fact most people, perfectly reasonable when constrained by everyday strictures, would become true monsters, were the world as malleable to them as their own daydreams. The fancies of Mao, such as the great leap forward, or the cultural revolution, are examples of hairbrained schemes almost anyone could dream up. How often do we not solve the problems of the world through some simple radical ideas. Luckily for us, and especially for the world, we lack the means of implementing them. This of course brings up the question whether dictators such as Mao really were so remarkable people, maybe intellectual averages, having greatness thrust upon them by forces outside their control. The hard thing is always to become a dictator, not to be one. The first calls for struggle, and is in retrospect the only time when the subject is really alive; after having achieved power, there is a kind of death. Yet, power fascinates, and absolute power fascinates completely. China being such an isolated entity, it became a perfect foil for many a collective phantasy. Had not China existed, it would have been necessary to invent it.

Now the approachment of two such powers almost antipodally placed was of course remarkable, but not unheard of. In fact history is filled with similar *volte en face*, one example being the Franco-Russian alliance of the late 19th century, whose ramifications would turn out to be so fateful according to Kennan. Such radical re-evaluations often turn out to be very fruitful. They involve much re-thinking and thus acts invigoratingly. To the Sino-American rapprochement there was a lot of dynamical effects, which were quite likely to take on a life on their own. But of course there were some practical obstacles. The question of Taiwan was one, and the American involvement in Indo-China another. Still those obstacles the source of so much virulent rhetorics, were not insurmountable, and more in the nature of bargaining-chips than really essential aspects of national integrity. The Americans were more than eager to extricate themselves from Vietnam, but before that they famously embroiled themselves in Laos and Cambodia as well, the ramifications of which turned out to be truly disastrous¹⁰, and they were hoping for Chinese aid in saving face¹¹. Taiwan on the other hand was a source of National humiliation of the Chinese, and the fact that the island claimed to represent Mainland China in international organizations was clearly unacceptable. The two issues were of course unrelated, but if there ever was a stroke of genius to the Kissinger conception of international diplomacy it was the notion of linkage. In principle any two issues could be linked, if not directly at least by some chain of linkages. In this way there was always an escape from an impasse, as one could instead of confronting an issue directly, negotiate on other issues, the outcome of which would have ramifications rippling throughout the system. One should not think of this in moral, or even principled terms, it simply introduced into the world of diplomacy a pragmatic element with technical implications. For all the grandeur of international power politics it treated it in rather mundane terms, not too different from business propositions. Of course

¹⁰ the alienation and subsequent downfall of Prince Sihanouk, who for thirty years or so had been playing a skilled game of political balance, destabilized the region probably more than the Vietnam war itself

¹¹ The notion of the Chinese being potentially willing to allow the Americans to save face was something I heard of already in the mid 60's, indicating that the groundwork had been laid many years before the Nixon-Kissinger initiative.

the ideas were not radically new, they had been present all along, and Kissinger certainly had many distinguished predecessors, Bismarck for one, to whom the expression 'politics being the art of the possible' is rightfully attributed. What Kissinger did was of course to make it more pronounced, which perhaps was not an altogether diplomatic move. But Kissinger, just as Nixon, was vain, and certainly wanted to have maximal credit assigned to him.

So Taiwan and Vietnam was linked. The Americans eventually extricated themselves from South East Asia, and as they did so their legacy crumbled within a few years. Taiwan was stripped of its representative powers and China was acknowledged as the only China. This happened fairly promptly, but to this day Taiwan remains an independant country and its inclusion in China has been put on hold, seemingly indefinitely¹².

The meeting took place. Nixon went to China, bringing along an extensive press-coverage to make sure that he did get maximum political mileage out of it. He held continued talks with Chou, although in the end they did not have too much to say to each other, and at a final banquet in Shanghai they appeared thoroughly disgusted with each others company. More spectacularly Nixon and Kissinger got to meet with Mao. A momentous meeting. Both American effused about the sagacity of Mao, subjecting the most inane of his utterings to the most careful scrutiny drawing conclusions worthy of their efforts. This was realpolitik. No matter how objectionable a character of the dictator Mao may have been, the fact of his power made such compuncions irrelevant. Had they been meeting with Hitler under similar circumstances, there is no reason to assume that their enthusiasm would have been more tempered. And why did Mao suffer those Imperialist Swines so gladly? He had before intimated that he prefered to deal with Rightists, they were more honest.

Not much in terms of the concrete was accomplished during the visit, and that was not the point. The fact that the meeting took place, and with such open display of friendliness to boot, was more than enough. Substance was clearly subordinated to form.

As noted above this initial opening of the China door was not followed by a closing of the same, for that the intrinsic dynamism was strong enough, as well as other extraneous circumstances. The old guard in China was dying away. Maos health was already very bad at the time of the meeting, and it would detoriate further. But of course at this stage he had ceased to be a living force and was more or less fossilized into an icon which served its purposes by itself. In fact although he died in September 1976, his iconic stature has not changed since then, only becoming increasingly irrelevant. The old guard was replaced by another guard, who did not care about the color of the cats as long as they caught mice. After an extended cultural revolution, Chinese society reverted back and with a vengeance, now catching mice being identified with making money. And so it has continued. Political ideology still being strong as a means of supporting power, but completely irrelevant as far as guidance and inspiration. Where those tendencies always inherent? If so the Sino-American conciliation was inevitable. Open hostility only lasted for some twenty-two years. Maybe long for those of us who grew up in that period, but from the perspective of history but a brief interlude. The author reminds us that the hostility between Iran and the States has soon persisted for thirty years, and show no signs of abatement, rather the opposite

¹² But if the Chinese could wait 99 years for Hong Kong, it certainly can wait for 199 years for Taiwan

(and of course a country needs enemies as well as friends). And the irregular situation with Cuba will soon enter its sixth decade.

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