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H-Diplo Article Review of Mao Lin. "More Than a Tacit Alliance: Trade, Soft Power and U.S.-Chinese Rapprochement Reconsidered." *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 24 (2017): 41-77.

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Review by **Tao Wang**, Iowa State University

This article examines the underexplored topic of U.S. trade diplomacy toward China from 1966 to 1978. Drawing on both American and Chinese sources, Mao Lin argues that trade played a “crucial,” (47) if not decisive, role in the normalization of U.S.-China relations.

Lin’s article opens with a discussion of the new consensus that came into being within the policy community that saw China in 1966 as a “frustrated modernizer,” whose Communist model of modernization had failed, rather than a “Red Menace.” This idea was greatly promoted by Senator J. William Fulbright’s famous Congressional hearings on U.S.-China relations in March 1966. The implication was the U.S. could take advantage of China’s needs for modernization and use trade to remodel China. For the Americans, using trade to reopen relations with China was safe, as it was the “least sensitive” and one of the lowest-risk tools of diplomacy (52). Senator Mike Mansfield further enhanced the idea. In an effort to end the Vietnam War, Mansfield publicly advocated relaxing the trade embargo, which the U.S. had imposed on China during the Korean War, in order to improve relations with China. Finally, the Johnson administration decided to supplement the containment of China with “free flow of ideas and people and goods” to moderate China’s radical diplomacy and draw China toward the West (54). As the first initiative, it relaxed the trade embargo in the summer of 1966.

President Richard Nixon and his assistants accepted the rationale behind the perception of China as a “frustrated modernizer.” When China suffered from both domestic (the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent Great Famine) and international failures (the Sino-Soviet split), Nixon believed he had a better chance of luring China to adopt moderate policies and ultimately to give up its Communist model of modernization. From 1969 to 1970, Nixon “consistently used trade to initiate a dialogue” with China (59). He relaxed the trade and travel controls, and sent signals for trade to test the Chinese intentions. Encouraged by the Chinese responses, the Nixon administration formulated a three-stage strategy of developing trade with China in February 1971. The goal was to draw China into the Western system in four to eight years.

Once a strategic dialogue started after Nixon's visit to China, he continued to promote trade in order to build trust and spread Western values in China, as well as benefiting U.S. businesses. The Nixon administration reduced controls on export to China, established the National Council for U.S.-China Trade to promote trade, and managed to grant China the most favored nation treatment (MFN) in the 1974 Trade Act, despite its restriction against granting MFN to Communist states.

American business leaders shared the perception of China as a failed modernizer that needed U.S. technology to realize its modernization. Lin argues that many Americans saw themselves as "unofficial diplomats," who used U.S. soft power to influence China's modernization, in addition to merchants seeking profits from China (67). Therefore, despite the early frustrations they suffered when engaging in business with China, such as the rigid Chinese bureaucracy, cumbersome trade practices, and lack of interest in consumer goods, many U.S. traders persevered, believing China would eventually embrace the American model of modernization.

The Americans were not disappointed. Gradually Chinese trade officials adopted American business practices, paying more attention to packaging and marketing skills, earning profits, using loans and credits, and eventually moderate Chinese leaders accepted market economy. After the moderate leaders came to power following Chairman Mao Zedong's death in 1976, China's foreign trade policy fundamentally changed. When Deng Xiaoping came back to power in 1977, the Chinese government decided to "learn from America' in various areas," in its efforts to realize the "Four Modernizations" (modernization of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology) in China (75).

Lin's article provides a new perspective on the literature on U.S.-China rapprochement. While current works have predominantly focused on geopolitical concerns,¹ Lin convincingly demonstrates that trade diplomacy was instrumental throughout the process of normalization of U.S.-China relations: the recognition that the U.S. could use trade to change China's modernization contributed to Nixon's decision for rapprochement; his trade initiatives facilitated the opening of diplomatic relations; once his visit brought about a strategic alliance with China, he used trade to carry on the momentum and consolidate the alliance; and, finally, the expanding trade relations paved the way for the establishment of formal diplomacy in 1979. Coupled with his research on the cultural exchange programs in the period,² Lin's works substantially advance our understanding of U.S.-China relations at an important turning point in the Cold War.

With his focus on trade and cultural exchange, Lin joins a growing club of scholars who go beyond the traditional emphasis on high politics in the study of U.S.-China relations. Instead of focusing on policymakers and geopolitics, scholars are now paying more attention to non-state actors and exploring such nontraditional subjects as immigration, gender, identity, and culture.³ Lin's research sheds light on such

¹ For example, see James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 13-77; Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "Taiwan Expendable? Nixon and Kissinger Go to China," *The Journal of American History* 92:1 (June 2005): 109-135; and Evelyn Goh, "Nixon, Kissinger, and the 'Soviet Card' in the U.S. Opening to China, 1971-1974," *Diplomatic History* 29:3 (June 2005): 475-502.

² Mao Lin, "To See Is to Believe?—Modernization and U.S.-China Exchanges in the 1970s," *The Chinese Historical Review* 23:1 (May 2016): 23-46.

³ For example, Meredith Oyen, *The Diplomacy of Migration: Transnational Lives and the Making of U.S.-Chinese Relations in the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); and two panels at the 2017 meeting of the Society of

important organizations as the National Council for U.S-China Trade and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, which participated in the making of U.S.-China relations but have been neglected in academic works.

Lin's analysis of the consensus of using trade to influence China and the Johnson administration's trade initiatives, once again, shatters the myth that Nixon's decision for rapprochement was "revolutionary" and thus only Nixon could have gone to China. However, in terms of the continuity of U.S. policy, Lin might have pointed out that the idea of trade diplomacy had long existed. As early as the 1950s, both President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles thought of using trade to end Chinese Communism and split the Sino-Soviet alliance. Interestingly, Chinese leaders were aware of the "imperialist conspiracy of promoting a 'peaceful evolution'" in socialist countries.⁴

This leads to follow-up questions: how did the Chinese leaders perceive of the American intentions when Johnson and Nixon were pursuing their trade diplomacy? Did the threat of the United States' "peaceful evolution" strategy ever come into Mao's mind when he decided to bring Nixon to China? How did the Chinese leaders sell the rapprochement to the Chinese officials and the public, who had been told to fight the "number one imperialist" for over two decades? Lin touches on political factions but does not further explore the Chinese perception of the U.S., given his focus on U.S. trade diplomacy.⁵ Perhaps this will become the topic of his future work.

To sum up, this is a piece of innovative scholarship based on solid research. Lin has exhausted available American and Chinese sources. His footnotes provide a complete list of secondary works on U.S.-China normalization. The article should be read by students in any seminar on U.S.-China relations or the Cold War in East Asia.

Tan Wang, Ph.D., is assistant professor of history at Iowa State University. His research focuses on history of U.S.-China relations and the Cold War in East Asia. His most recent publication is "Neutralizing Indochina:

Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR): Panel 36 "Orientalism and Its Discontents: the U.S. Public and the Transpacific Cultural Cold War," and Panel 90 "American Power and Local Identities in East Asia, 1941-1979."

⁴ Qiang Zhai, "Mao Zedong and Dulles's 'Peaceful Evolution' Strategy: Revelations from Bo Yibo's Memoirs," and Bo Yibo, "To Prevent 'Peaceful Evolution' and Train Successors to the Revolutionary Cause," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6-7 (Winter 1995/1996), 227-230; Qing Simei, "The Eisenhower Administration and Changes in Western Embargo Policy Against China, 1954-1958," in Warren I. Cohen and Akira Iriye, *The Great Powers in East Asia, 1953-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 121-142.

⁵ For China's political factions and the impact of U.S. trade diplomacy, see Min Song, "A Dissonance in Mao's Revolution: Chinese Agricultural Imports from the United States, 1972-1978," *Diplomatic History* 38:2 (April 2014), 409-430. For approaches of different factions during the rapprochement, see Yafeng Xia, "Myth or Reality?: Factional Politics, U.S.—China Relations, and Mao Zedong's Mentality in His Sunset Years, 1972-1976," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 15 (2008): 107-130, and Kuisong Yang and Yafeng Xia, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente: Mao's Changing Psyche and Policy toward the United States, 1969-1976," *Diplomatic History* 34:2 (April 2010): 395-423.

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The 1954 Geneva Conference and China's Efforts to Isolate the United States," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19:2 (Spring 2017): 3-42. He is now revising his first book manuscript "Isolating the Enemy: U.S.-China Interactions, 1953-1956," which studies the 1954 Geneva Conference, the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, and the Bandung Conference.

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