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### H-Diplo Article Review of “New Perspectives on Cold War History from China.”

*Diplomatic History* 42:2 (April 2017): 241-304

- Yafeng Xia and Zhi Liang. “China’s Diplomacy toward the United States in the Twentieth Century: A Survey of the Literature.” <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhw055>.
- Dong Wang. “Grand Strategy, Power Politics, and China’s Policy toward the United States in the 1960s.” <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhw041>.
- Xin Zhan. “Prelude to the Transformation: China’s Nuclear Arms Control Policy during the U.S.-China Rapprochement, 1969–1976.” <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhw056>.

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The election of Donald Trump in 2016 brought various challenges to U.S.-China relations. One of the most important areas Trump has vowed to change in relations with China is the large trade deficit that he repeatedly claims to be “raping” the United States.<sup>1</sup> In terms of the scholarship on U.S.-China relations, there is also a deficit, but one that favors the American side. Essentially, there has been much more English literature on America’s policy toward China than China’s policy toward the United States. The three articles in this issue of *Diplomatic History*, by scholars mostly based in China, with Yafeng Xia as the exception, are valuable additions.

In “China’s Diplomacy toward the United States in the Twentieth Century: A Survey of the Literature,” Yafeng Xia and Liang Zhi offers an introduction to the literature that benefits non-Chinese readers, given its descriptions of the latest scholarly developments in China.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it provides an important resource and perspective for researchers with further interests in the relevant periods. The authors claim to have discovered three major ‘turns’ in the historiography of the last twenty-five years. First, they find that the Nationalist government was more “flexible and adaptable,” giving diplomats more room to navigate than

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Diamond, “Trump: ‘We can’t Continue to Allow China to Rape Our Country,’” CNN, 2 May 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/01/politics/donald-trump-china-rape/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Yafeng Xia and Liang Zhi, “China’s Diplomacy toward the United States in the Twentieth Century: A Survey of the Literature,” *Diplomatic History* 41:2 (2017): 241-254.

previously thought. Second, they highlight the importance of individual diplomats such as Gu Weijun or Wellington Koo, and Song Ziwen or T.V. Soong. Third, they have discovered a greater diversity of arguments that debate or “conflict” with each other (242). Since the lion’s share of the works on U.S.-China relations has been focused on the Cold-War era, the inclusion of studies on China’s republican years has extended the horizon and drawn a more comprehensive picture about China’s diplomacy in the twentieth century.

The use of the ‘three turns’ is effective in outlining the developments in the field. However, the authors have not provided a clear context for these turns. Beyond summarizing the major works in the field, an important part of a historiographical study is to explain the political, economic, and social milieu in which they were produced. The authors point to the large amount of literature with revisionist views about Nationalist rule. Questions as to whether these changes have been caused by the discovery of new sources, whether they have anything to do with the political climate in China, or whether they have any connections with Beijing’s efforts to woo the Nationalist party in an attempt to isolate the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan, remain unanswered.

At the end of the article, Xia and Zhi urge Chinese historians to study “the social structure and context of China’s U.S. policy formulation, elucidate nongovernmental influences on China’s foreign relations, study the relationships between public and private elites, analyze elite perceptions, values, and motives, and place events in a comprehensible temporal continuum” (264). They are quite to the point in characterizing the status of the field. This statement is also in line with the three weaknesses they have identified in the Chinese literature: the ‘unsystematic’ problem, meaning some topics need more in-depth study; scarcity of declassified documents; and the lack of achievements by mid-career and young scholars. The scarcity of declassified documents in China has severely affected scholars’ ability to engage in definitive studies of policy-making at the highest level. However, by focusing on the social structure and context of China’s policy formulation, scholars can overcome the document issue and shed new light on China’s relations with the United States in the larger context of the Cold War. In this sense, the untapped territories and new perspectives spelled out in this article have provided a useful guide for young and mid-career scholars as fruitful avenues of future research.

In “Grand Strategy, Power Politics, and China’s Policy toward the United States in the 1960s,” Dong Wang uses new evidence, particularly the recently declassified documents at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, from the perspective of power politics.<sup>3</sup> He argues that instead of being “ideological, intransigent, and aggressive,” Chinese leaders were “shrewd strategic players” and that there was “more continuity than change in China’s foreign policy” (266).

In order to show that the Chinese foreign policy was not driven by radical ideology, Wang studies Chinese policy on the Laotian civil war in the 1960s and finds evidence of Beijing’s willingness to compromise in Foreign Minister Chen Yi’s notes (268). As Wang argues, Chinese leaders chose to maintain an anti-U.S. posture because they believed it would maintain China’s leading position in the national liberation movement. However, the avoidance of direct involvement in the Laotian civil war and the Vietnam conflicts revealed the “limits” of Beijing’s anti-U.S. posture, implying its flexibility in policy-making (269). The study

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<sup>3</sup> Dong Wang, “Grand Strategy, Power Politics, and China’s Policy toward the United States in the 1960s,” *Diplomatic History* 41:2 (2017): 265-287.

of China's policy toward the United States in the early 1960s from the Laos perspective is indeed refreshing, since most of the literature deals with the conflicts in Vietnam.

Wang emphasizes the importance of Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969 as the turning point in China's relations with the two superpowers. As he argues, "the limits to the Sino-Soviet split made China feel secure taking an anti-U.S. stance" and that "it was not until the outbreak of the Zhenbao Island conflict in 1969 that the Soviet threat to China's security came to the forefront of Chinese leaders' minds" (267). The eruption of Sino-Soviet border clashes is important indeed, but the author may underestimate the Sino-Soviet conflicts while exaggerating the level of Sino-American tensions before 1969. The article does not consider the significant changes in China's relations with the two super powers in the period from 1966 and 1969, which witnessed the escalation of the Vietnam War on one hand, and the peak of the Cultural Revolution on the other.

With regard to the Vietnam War, Wang argues that it "brought Beijing and Washington to the brink of their largest confrontation" since the Korean War and that it "effectively made the Sino-American reconciliation untenable" (279). This argument probably overestimates the tension between China and the United States, and does not consider the situation where leaders in Beijing and Washington signaled to each other their intentions about non-confrontation in Vietnam. On the other hand, the conflicts in Vietnam caused Sino-Soviet tensions to deteriorate further due to Beijing's strong opposition to the increasing Soviet influence in North Vietnam.

Rather than bringing China and the United States to the brink of war, the Vietnam War created an environment in which public opinion toward China changed in the United States. Among the few scholars who have done in-depth studies of Lyndon Johnson's policy toward China, Michael Lumbers emphasizes the importance of the Fulbright Hearings in the 1960s, particularly those in 1966, because they "depoliticized" the China issue, "legitimized" the airing of views that would have been considered "heresy" in the 1950s, and "emboldened" those advocates of China policy reform inside and outside the government to push that agenda.<sup>4</sup> During the peak of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1969, when the domestic environment in the United States was becoming favorable for a change, Chairman Mao Zedong did not take steps to further antagonize the United States due to the chaos at home. More importantly, when China and the United States entered a tacit agreement about non-confrontation in Vietnam, Sino-Soviet tension escalated sharply, which, as Wang points out, led to the dramatic increase of Soviet deployment of troops along the Chinese border (280). Therefore, the chaos in China during the Cultural Revolution and the American involvement in the Vietnam War, to some extent, created a condition of stability between the two countries, which would lay the foundation for President Richard Nixon's overtures to China starting from 1969.

In support of his argument about U.S.-China hostility during the 1960s, Wang argues that China was worried about U.S. threats even after the eruption of Sino-Soviet border clashes in March 1969. He points out "military leaders attending the Ninth Party Congress were particularly concerned about the U.S. strategic and military threat." The evidence Wang provides involves a closed-door group discussion where top air force officers were talking about the surveillance flights conducted by U.S. troops (282). One question worth

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Lumbers, "Staying out of This Chinese Muddle': The Johnson Administration's Response to the Cultural Revolution," *Diplomatic History* 31:2 (April 2007), 285 and idem, *Piercing the Bamboo Curtain: Tentative Bridge-Building to China during the Johnson Years* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 155.

asking is how serious these leaders were about the American threat. Even if they were, people may wonder whether the evaluations by leaders of the air force, which was more radical than other branches of the military during the Cultural Revolution, reflected the views of the Chinese leadership. Another source, the February 19, 1969 reports on “some international issues” by the “old marshals—Marshals Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Nie Rongzhen, and Xu Xiangqian” (282), which the author claims to be the “product of the finest strategic and military minds” of China at the time (283), reveals that they did not have serious concern about American military threat, particularly if it is put in contrast to the level of Soviet threat at the time.

The third article, “Prelude of the Transformation: China’s Nuclear Arms Control Policy during the U.S.-China Rapprochement, 1969-1976” by Xin Zhan places China’s attitude toward nuclear disarmament in the larger context of Sino-American rapprochement from 1969 to 1976.<sup>5</sup> The author describes three stages in Beijing’s policies. In the early 1970s, Mao was eager to work with the United States to constrain the “common bastard”—the Soviet Union (290). In the second stage, Beijing became increasingly suspicious of Washington when Nixon pursued nuclear disarmament with the Soviet Union during and after his trip to Moscow in 1972. During this period, Beijing’s criticism was milder towards Washington than the Soviet Union. After 1974, when U.S.-Soviet détente was making progress, Beijing began to launch equal attacks on the two superpowers. In discussing the third period, the author uses Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai’s remark that “We must take precautions in case the two hegemonic powers start a world war, and we must be prepared” as evidence of Beijing’s worry about a nuclear war. One may wonder whether Zhou was seriously worried about a world war. As the author points out, he was criticized by Mao for “expressing weakness” in talking with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger when the later offered “nuclear umbrella” to China (300-302). Zhou might have been assuming a radical posture in order to save himself from the attacks of Mao and the radicals.

The author frequently refers to Beijing’s public pronouncements in analyzing its nuclear policy. One wonders about the real motivation of the Chinese government because even Mao himself admitted that the Chinese propaganda machine often “fire[ed] empty cannons.”<sup>6</sup> For example, when Beijing was attacking the two super powers for nuclear monopoly and arms race, are these accusations the real concerns of Beijing? Beyond nuclear disarmament, Beijing was probably more concerned with a possible collusion between them against China. One can also question Zhan’s interpretation of Beijing’s consistent rejection of nuclear disarmament. Beijing has good reasons to deprive Moscow of a diplomatic accomplishment. When the Chinese government repeatedly insisted on the total prohibition and complete destruction of nuclear weapons, the author argues that this shows how “revolutionary and idealistic” the Chinese nuclear strategy was (304). As Wang in the previous article argues, Chinese leaders were “shrewd strategic players” (266). Beyond the “revolutionary and idealistic” components, they must have had ‘realpolitik’ considerations in mind because these proposals seem to be unrealistic and hard to implement. By doing this, Beijing could place the blame on the two superpowers for rejecting its “peaceful proposal” even though the Chinese government itself refused to sign any nuclear

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<sup>5</sup> Xin Zhan, “Prelude of the Transformation: China’s Nuclear Arms Control Policy during the U.S.-China Rapprochement, 1969-1976,” *Diplomatic History* 41:2 (2017): 288-304.

<sup>6</sup> In his interview with Snow on 9 January 1965, Mao told Snow, “Wherever there is revolution, we issue a statement and hold rallies to show support... We like to fire empty cannons, but we don’t send troops.” See *Mao Zedong waijiao wenxuan* [Selected Works of Mao Zedong on Diplomacy] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe and shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1994), 558.

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disarmament treaty. In essence, Beijing would not easily give up its hard-won nuclear arsenal. These proposals were thus simply efforts to keep its own hands from being tied, particularly if the disarmament proposal was initiated by the Soviet Union.

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