The Power of Culture, edited by Professor Priscilla Roberts of Hong Kong University, is comprised of 31 essays by Chinese and international scholars of American Studies, each discussing some aspect of how the history, politics, and culture of the United States and China shaped the two countries’ interaction over the centuries. In her preface, Ambassador Julia Chang Bloch describes the U.S.-China Education Trust (which she founded and still leads) that has supported the field of American Studies in China for over a decade, producing many outstanding PRC scholars and an annual conference in China of the American Studies Network (ASN). Papers presented by Chinese scholars during the 2013 and 2014 conferences form the core of this publication, along with chapters by some of their students and by scholars from other countries including the United States. These two conferences focused heavily on cultural issues, and this resulting publication, according to Bloch, demonstrates the “growing sophistication of Chinese research and writing on the broader underpinning of US culture and society, which hopefully will help reduce the risks of misperceptions and miscalculations in US-China relations” (xiii).¹

Roberts’s extensive introductory essay also highlights the importance of deeper cultural understanding by scholars and diplomats in each country, and the growing use of ‘soft power,’ or cultural diplomacy, by China’s government, as a counterweight to America’s longstanding projection of soft power around the world, both formally through government-led efforts and informally through the appeal of U.S universities and popular culture. Her helpful overview of current U.S.-China relations and their competition for global influence puts into context the varied approaches of chapter authors, which range from scholarly reviews of early American history and close textual analysis of U.S. presidential speeches, to the contributions of Chinese think tanks in projecting soft power despite the challenges they pose to a government which is uncomfortable with independent thinking on issues of national importance. She also notes the challenges that women still face in China (and in the media of both countries) and how “their concerns are to a large degree driving the development of American Studies in China” (xliv).

Interestingly, out of 39 contributors to the volume, 28 are women, an atypical ratio for scholarly publications and one that reflects Roberts’s longstanding support for women scholars both in her own institution and more widely.

The many fascinating essays in this book are usefully grouped into three sections: Perspectives on Sino-American Relations, Educational Exchanges, and Cultural Encounters: Representations, Appropriations and Interpretations. While there are some overlapping topics among the three categories, these groupings help the reader focus on the common themes and varied perspectives these important topics elicit from scholars in China and internationally.

In the first section, several Chinese authors reflect on America’s reputed view of its cultural superiority, manifest destiny, and conviction that the world was divided into the civilized and the barbarians, with America as leader of the civilized world. It would have been interesting to include counterpoint discussion that these papers surely generated among participating Americans in the conference, since the same descriptors could be applied to China as well, given its self-proclaimed identity as the center of the civilized world, to which other lesser countries (including the Western invaders) paid tribute. Professor Zhang Yuan of Zhejiang University presents an analysis of U.S. presidential rhetoric, showing how often the American people are described by their leaders as moral, law-abiding victims of aggression by others, inevitably labeled immoral, unlawful and irrational aggressors (70). Again, it is not hard to find similar language used by Chinese leaders throughout its history and even today, with Americans and Japanese accused of ‘irrational’ aggression’ in the East China Sea against the law-abiding Chinese, as the latter build up their landing strips on former reefs across the Pacific.

Many of these essays, in articulating the Chinese scholarly view of America, help to deepen the non-Chinese reader’s awareness of the historical lens and current perspective of Chinese academics and government leaders. At the same time, they remind us how frequently and un-self-consciously political analysts attribute to other countries and cultures a set of characteristics that are shared by most major world powers, especially the conviction that our values and geopolitical needs trump those of others, requiring constant vigilance in resisting those outside our borders. After reading the first few essays, I began to wonder whether a set of essays by America’s leading China scholars might be read by Chinese readers with equally useful realization of the similarities between the two countries – in the rhetoric and apparent lack of self-awareness with which scholars on each side analyze the particular traits of the ‘other.’

Other essays in Part I delve into the reasons for America’s relative success in wielding its ‘soft power’ around the globe, and offer some advice to Chinese leaders on what may be impeding China’s success. Qiu Lingguang, an MA graduate in American Studies from Beijing Foreign Studies University, offers a stimulating chapter entitled “Challenging America’s Cultural Primacy: A New Chinese Long March”, assessing the relative global appeal of American and Chinese high and popular culture, and why “in soft power terms, any ‘China threat’ is a myth” (124). She suggests that China’s traditional culture was effectively undermined by China’s two major ideological campaigns of the twentieth century (the May 4th movement and the Cultural Revolution) and that China’s popular culture has relied too much on what Lu Xun called “borrowism” (132) – compared to America’s dominating presence in popular music,

fashion, food, and movies, and to Japan’s unique and internationally-appealing contributions to popular culture in the forms of manga and anime. Confucius Institutes worldwide may try to win friends for China through the sharing of its traditional culture and modern language, but she notes that their curriculum relies on simplified characters and ignores much of China’s pre-1949 literary and artistic heritage. The author suggests that China cannot compete globally until it develops new forms of popular culture that are “distinctively Chinese”, which will require a “more tolerant and comfortable environment for individual innovation.” (134)

A deep analysis by Professor Xiao Huan, of the People’s Liberation Army University of Foreign Languages, in a chapter on “How US Think Tanks Influence Cultural Security”, offers some important suggestions for strengthening the impact of China’s think tanks, including the need to “place greater emphasis on path-breaking and innovative research” (145). While she may overstate the role of the Soros Foundation’s Open Society Institute in precipitating the “Color Revolutions” of Central Asia, she correctly notes that other American think tanks, such as Rand, are not as independent of U.S. government influence and support as their websites and research reports might suggest. This same point has been made even more forcefully in a recent New York Times article.3

Nine very interesting essays in Part II focus on the role of Educational Exchanges in deepening mutual understanding, projecting ‘soft power’ and helping shape the careers and behaviors of those involved in these activities. The opening chapter offers a fascinating recounting of The Asia Foundation’s role (with covert funding from the CIA) in the creation of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The author’s heavy reliance on original documents in The Asia Foundation archives, however, may have overstated its role and minimized the impact of other key actors.4

Two chapters in this section look closely at how the bi-national Fulbright Program in China helps scholars on both sides better understand each other and develop more nuanced views, even while the academic environment in China may limit returned Chinese Fulbrighters’ ability to put into practice what they learned abroad. The authors’ survey of American and Chinese alumni suggests how these Fulbright scholars were affected professionally by their yearlong stays at host universities, and how they came to view more sympathetically their host country. While the research involved relatively small pools of respondents, the findings were consistent with Fulbright alumni studies in other countries, including a sophisticated analysis of U.S.-Japan Fulbright alumni and a control group of peers who lacked extended international experience, conducted by Professor Eugene Uyeki of Case Western Reserve University) over twenty years ago for the Institute of International Education.5

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Several interesting chapters in the final section on American Studies in China highlight the value of ‘transnational American Studies,’ a term explicated by Professor Shelley Fisher Fishkin of Stanford University in her very illuminating essay that concludes section II. Assistant Lecturer Zhang Qingheng of Sichuan International Studies University describes how the early exclusion of female immigrants from China shaped the Chinese immigrant culture in California and the home villages back in China, as well as efforts made to ‘Americanize’ later waves of Chinese women immigrants through education and social programs. Other essays look at the impact of American movies and TV in China and how Chinese media view American women.

As with any collection of conference papers, the quality ranges from workman-like to inspired. The collection also show that a welcome transition from more traditional scholarly research methodology in China (relying heavily on summarizing prior scholars’ analysis) is yielding to more creative approaches in mobilizing original sources to prove new hypotheses. The impact of the American Studies Network and its annual conferences shines thru in the essays by younger scholars with important new perspectives to share. Roberts has done them and the field of American Studies in China a great service in editing this fascinating collection of essays.

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