

## CURRENT BOOKS

# *The Strangest Courtship*

ABOUT FACE:

*A History of America's Curious Relationship with China,  
from Nixon to Clinton.*

By James Mann. Knopf. 420 pp. \$30

by Anne F. Thurston

The relationship between the United States and China since the Nixon-Kissinger opening of 1972 has been one of the “strangest, most extraordinary . . . America has had with any nation in this century.” So claims James Mann, former Beijing bureau chief of the *Los Angeles Times*, in his eminently readable, often provocative chronicle of American policy toward China during the last quarter-century.

Mann’s title refers to the wide swings of U.S. foreign policy—from the giddy partnership with China that began under Nixon, to the sometimes punitive distancing following the bloody military suppression of popular demonstrations in Beijing in 1989, to President Bill Clinton’s constructive engagement. Mann is not the first to note the swings in U.S. perceptions of China. Images of Genghis Khan and Mao Zedong, cruel and inhumane, have long competed in the American mind with pictures of a Confucian China, stately and staid, cultured and proud. And these misperceptions have often guided U.S. policy.

*About Face* describes the latest shifts in thinking. But Mann’s real contribution, what gives the book life, is his account of the formation of American policy. Relying on interviews with key officials, as well as documents, diaries, and notes (some obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests), Mann builds the case that policy-making about China has been extraordinarily secret, personalized, and elitist, frequently circumventing the ordinary processes of government.

Mann’s revelations will surely reopen old wounds. He provides, for instance, a new interpretation of the banquet debacle that

tarnished President George Bush’s visit to Beijing in 1989. Fang Lizhi, a physicist who was China’s leading dissident, had been invited to the American-hosted dinner. Chinese security personnel stopped him before he reached the banquet, and the resulting controversy became the media focus of Bush’s visit. National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft later alleged that the American embassy had blindsided the White House by neglecting to flag Fang’s name on the invitation list. U.S. ambassador to China Winston Lord was replaced shortly thereafter. Mann, however, quotes two declassified cables from Lord and the Beijing embassy that make explicit mention of Fang’s invitation, predict official Chinese annoyance, and warn of likely media attention. The response of former officials promises to be as revealing and lively as the book itself.

A central thread of Mann’s story is the evolution of U.S.-China relations. Through friendship with China, President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger sought to shift the international balance of power in order to goad the Soviet Union into détente. “With conscientious attention to both capitals,” Kissinger told Nixon in 1973, “we should be able to have our maotai and drink our vodka, too.”

Over the years, however, the rationale for U.S.-China relations became more blatantly anti-Soviet. “America was not fighting communism in general, but the Soviet Union in particular,” Mann observes. Especially after the establishment of diplomatic recognition in 1979, the Carter administration gave “a military, anti-Soviet cast to America’s relationship with China, creating ties in which

the interests of the Pentagon and the CIA became all important.” The United States established listening sites in northwest China, where Americans shared intelligence information on the Soviet Union with their hosts. When China invaded Vietnam only weeks after diplomatic recognition, Chinese ambassador Chai Zemin received nightly intelligence reports from President Jimmy Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, “far beyond anything Chinese intelligence could have collected.”

In 1980, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the shift was complete. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown visited China, and Carter for the first time authorized the sale of “non-lethal” military equipment to China, such as air defense radar and transport helicopters. Europe, meanwhile, was already selling China lethal weapons, with the encouragement of the Carter administration.

Mann singles out a (then) young China scholar from Columbia University, Michael Pillsbury, as the progenitor of this military relationship. In 1972, Pillsbury met Chinese general Zhang Wutian at a United Nations reception hosted by the government of Albania. The two men continued to meet, and Pillsbury reported on their conversations to the Department of Defense, Air Force intelligence, and the Central Intelligence Agency. (Mann assumes that Pillsbury was working with American intelligence agencies.) Pillsbury, variously described as idiosyncratic, bright, garrulous, and undisciplined, began suggesting a new military relationship to prevent rapprochement between China and the Soviet Union. The Joint Chiefs scoffed when Pillsbury first broached the proposal privately, but tacitly approved when he floated it in *Foreign Policy* in 1975.

But Pillsbury was on the far fringes of power when, under Carter, something akin to this recommendation became official policy. Mann gives Pillsbury undue credit for the development of U.S.-China military ties. Military and intelligence ties were important even during the Nixon administration. These connections strengthened under Carter, when diplomatic relations made closer ties possible.

Other connections also grew stronger during the Carter administration. Cultural, academic, and scientific exchanges proliferated. American tourists began pouring into China as Chinese students and researchers flocked to American universities. Mann is nonetheless critical of the Carter administration for giving China “virtually a blanket exemption for the



human rights policies [it] so readily applied elsewhere.”

That criticism is overstated but highlights a continuing dilemma in U.S. policy—how to recognize China’s undeniable progress in human rights while protesting continuing violations. Several Democracy Wall activists (including the recently released Wei Jingsheng, now in exile in the United States), were arrested during the Carter years. But China also made great advances. Living in China during 1981–82, I intensively interviewed victims of the Cultural Revolution—individuals who had suffered grievous abuse for more than a decade. Most had only recently been rehabilitated after returning from years in jail or exile. They were just moving back into homes that had long been occupied by “revolutionary rebels.” Families were reuniting, husbands and wives moving in together again, fathers and sons greeting each other, stunned and transformed, for the first time in a decade. In the universities, the entering classes of 1977 and 1978 had passed the first college exams offered since the start of the Cultural

Revolution. These students were the best and brightest of China, and starved for knowledge. In the countryside, the people's communes, which had brought untold suffering to China's peasants (somewhere between 27 million and 43 million people died during the famine that followed the formation of the communes in 1958), were being dismantled. The land was being returned to family control.

Carter's single term of office coincided with what many Chinese called their second "liberation." For the United States to have suddenly elevated human rights to the decisive issue would have made a mockery of the suffering from which so many Chinese were recovering. This time, American policymakers got it right.

Since the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the United States has had difficulty formulating a new policy toward China. No longer are a handful of elites defining the rela-

tionship. One leading China specialist and former government official describes the process today as "policymaking by franchise," with business interests, human rights groups, Congress, and the broader public all pushing to make their voices heard.

If the American relationship with China is one of the strangest in this century, it will surely be one of the most important in the next. Mann notes a lingering Cold War mentality in the United States, a continuing need for an enemy, and the possibility that China might qualify. But new enmity is not in the interests of the United States, China, or the rest of the world. If Mann's book engenders not merely controversy but serious public debate on the nature of the U.S.-China relationship, we may actually learn something from history.

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## *Cedar Tavern Days*

*THE LAST AVANT-GARDE:*

*The Making of the New York School of Poets.*

By David Lehman. Doubleday. 433 pp. \$27.50

by Martha Bayles

The classic New York School poem is probably Frank O'Hara's "The Day Lady Day Died." Written on the afternoon of July 17, 1959, the date of jazz singer Billie Holiday's death, it begins with a lazy stroll through Manhattan: a shoeshine, a malted, a stop in a bookstore for "a little Verlaine," buying some Strega and Gauloises for friends on Long Island, and finally seeing "a NEW YORK POST with her face on it." In the final stanza, the vague, insouciant warmth of the previous 25 lines focuses to a burning intensity: "and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of / leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT / while she whispered a song along the keyboard / to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing."

In the last four decades, countless poets have imitated O'Hara's casual, tossed-off style, making it hard to imagine its original freshness. In fact, one cannot walk into a poetry reading (or "slam") these days without hearing echoes of O'Hara and his friends John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler. For that reason alone, this fascinating but flawed book about the "New York School" of poets is welcome.

O'Hara once described his style of writing as "I did this, I did that." The formula may work for poems such as "Lady Day," but "this one did this, that one did that" proves to be a poor approach to organizing the first 90 pages of an ambitious literary study. Lehman, the author of *Signs of the Times*: