

Stanford historian analyzes the history of America's preoccupation with China

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Civil rights activist W.E.B. Dubois, right, meets Chinese leader Mao Zedong in 1959. DuBois was among many American cultural figures whose ideas were influenced by the Chinese, as Stanford historian Gordon H. Chang describes in a

new book. Credit: Wikipedia

Stanford historian Gordon H. Chang says that Americans have long placed China as pivotal in shaping America's self-identity and destiny, despite highs and lows in that relationship over the last 300 years.

In his new book, *Fateful Ties: A History of America's Preoccupation with China*, just published by Harvard University Press, Chang describes the development of the tight and conflicted emotional connection between the two Pacific powers over three centuries.

"China has been a central ingredient in America's self-identity from its very beginning," says Chang, whose research interests link foreign, in particular trans-Pacific, relations and race in America.

The United States has of course always had a bond with Europe through ancestry and history. But, Chang argues, "When Americans thought about the future and the destiny of their country, they often looked toward the Pacific and the Far East, and China in particular."

Painting vivid portraits of men and women who participated in cultural, political, and economic exchanges between America and China from the 1700s to this day, Chang argues that a unique relationship exists between the two countries.

Through vignettes of figures, both famous and ordinary – among them John Dewey, Ernest Hemingway and Richard Nixon – Chang demonstrates that this relationship is much richer historically than the headlines of today might suggest.

Traditionally, books on the history of Sino-American relations focus on

politics and diplomacy. By contrast, *Fateful Ties* emphasizes the set of cultural, intellectual and ideological beliefs that have shaped American understanding of the importance of China through the centuries.

"My study," Chang writes, "encourages reflection on the American past as the country navigates into an uncertain future with a country that is in the midst of unprecedented and monumental transformation."

Inspired by the Chinese

Columbus stumbled upon America while trying to find a shorter route to the rich Chinese market. In 1773 the tea thrown overboard at the Boston Tea Party, marking the beginning of the American Revolution, was from China. Chang sees these events as symbolically indicative of Americans' wish to pursue the vital China trade without the strictures of the English crown.

This American dream of Chinese cultural and economic markets has pervaded American history every since, says Chang.

Chang points to the construction of the transcontinental railroad, which he says was first driven by a desire for the China connection. In the mind of its 19th-century promoters, Chang's book shows, the railroad would make the United States the only truly great two-ocean power and provide the critical link between its political center on the East Coast and the alluring Chinese market.

But alongside the desire to trade with China there has also been both an admiration of Chinese culture and a horror at its perceived backwardness and difference. American artists and thinkers gained inspiration from Chinese arts while at the same time missionaries from the United States sought to "civilize" the Eastern empire.

As Chang's research documents, various cultural figures were fascinated by China and its culture. In the 1930s Ernest Hemingway extolled the prodigious capacity for labor of Chinese workers, while in the 1970s Shirley MacLaine praised the country's gender equality and "commitment to working for the common good."

African American writers fighting for black liberation in the 1960s found inspiration in the Chinese Revolution. As the American political elite increasingly demonized its communist rival, prominent black cultural and political leaders, including NAACP co-founder W.E.B. DuBois and Huey Newton of the Black Panther Party, saw China as a model for their cause.

Conversely, Chang's book shows that American fears for their future have often been occasioned by the East Asian superpower. In the early 1900s, Jack London penned a short story imagining a dark future dominated by China. The past couple of decades have seen a revival of similar alarmist literature linking a dystopian future with China. For Chang, this is an iteration of the centuries-long fear of a "yellow peril" threatening America.

Nineteenth-century Americans also fretted over the possibility of an overwhelming influx of Chinese immigrants. This fear culminated with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which put an end to this country's open immigration policy.

Yet others envisioned a future intermingling of the Chinese with the Americans as inevitable. In the view of some prominent Americans, "it was the culmination of an epic human drama that began in the earliest moments of human civilization," writes Chang. "[It was] an idealized vision of migration and the intermingling of the white and yellow 'races' that had been separated in the distant past but were destined to meet again and amalgamate in America."

Mutual ignorance

As Chang writes, the cessation of diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China after 1949 was an especially emotional rupture because of the long, special bond that had existed between the two nations.

"How could China, with its long history of friendship with the United States; the extensive religious, economic, and social ties between Americans and Chinese ... have fallen to the Communists?" This was the big question that Americans, both politicians and the general public, asked themselves, according to Chang.

While America maintained diplomatic, business and social contacts with the USSR throughout the Cold War, it severed ties with China altogether for almost three decades.

"It was a relationship without precedent in international relations, one of mutual ignorance that encouraged extremism and flights of imagination, both nightmares and dreams," Chang writes.

This helped occasion a "hot war" in East Asia, as evidenced in the Korean and Vietnam wars.

The diplomatic standstill would last until the early 1970s, when a series of American visits to China rekindled normalized political relations, as well as the American public's infatuation with Chinese culture.

With the 2016 presidential elections looming on the political horizon, Chang expects that much will be said about America's relationship with China.

"Hopefully, my book can make people a little more prudent, a little more

introspective and thoughtful about the long-term [relationship](#) the two countries have enjoyed and will continue to build," Chang said.

Provided by Stanford University

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