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Review

Sino-Americana

Thursday 9 February 2012, by [ANDERSON Perry](#) (Date first published: 9 February 2012).

***Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* by Ezra Vogel, Harvard, 876 pp, £29.95, September 2011, ISBN 978 0 674 05544 5**

***On China* by Henry Kissinger, Allen Lane, 586 pp, £30.00, May 2011, ISBN 978 1 84614 346 5**

***The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China* by Jay Taylor, Harvard, 736 pp, £14.95, April 2011, ISBN 978 0 674 06049 4**

Books about China, popular and scholarly, continue to pour off the presses. In this ever expanding literature, there is a subdivision that could be entitled 'Under Western Eyes'. The larger part of it consists of works that appear to be about China, or some figure or topic from China, but whose real frame of reference, determining the optic, is the United States. Typically written by functionaries of the state, co-opted or career, they have as their underlying question: 'China - what's in it for us?' Rather than Sinology proper, they are Sino-Americana. Ezra Vogel's biography of Deng Xiaoping is an instructive example. Detached for duties on the National Intelligence Council under Clinton (he assures the reader that the CIA has vetted his book for improper disclosures), Vogel is a fixture at Harvard, where the house magazine hails *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* as the 'capstone to a brilliant academic career'.

Running to some 850 pages, the book is, formally speaking, a mismatch at two levels. Explaining that his motive in writing it was to 'help Americans understand key developments in Asia', Vogel clearly aimed to win a wide public audience. But its sheer bulk of detail on matters far removed from the interest of ordinary readers ensures that, whatever the number of copies sold, it will be little read. Another, more serious, misfit is between the author and his subject. By definition, if we exclude puffs or barbs about contemporaries, a biography is an exercise of historical imagination. Vogel, however, was trained as a sociologist, and in mental equipment has always remained one, with little admixture. The result is a study thick in girth and thin in texture. That would be limitation enough in itself. But it is compounded by a temperamental propensity more specific to Vogel. By nature, he is - putting it politely - a booster. The book which made his name, *Japan as Number One*, announced in 1979 that 'Japan has dealt more successfully with more of the basic problems of post-industrial society than any other country.' The Japanese themselves, he told them, had been too modest about their achievements. It was time they realised that in the overall effectiveness of their institutions, they were 'indisputably number one' - and time too that Americans woke up to the fact, and put their own house in order. Post-bubble, the book is no doubt remaindered in Japan. But at the time, Vogel's flattery electrified sales. Moving on to Korea, he explained with equal enthusiasm in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea* that Park was one of only four 'outstanding national leaders in the 20th century' who had successfully modernised their country. In this select pantheon, alongside Park was the next object of Vogel's admiration, Deng Xiaoping.

Vogel ends his new account of the Paramount Leader by asking: 'Did any other leader in the 20th century do more to improve the lives of so many? Did any other 20th-century leader have such a large and lasting influence on world history?' *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* is an exercise in unabashed adulation, sprinkled with a few pro forma qualifications for domestic effect. 'The closest I ever came to Deng was a few feet away at a reception ...' captures the general tone. Fortunately, Deng's family and friends were able to make good the missing encounter, with many a gracious interview illuminating the patriarch's life. Supplemented by much official - properly respectful - documentation from the Party, and a host of conversations with bureaucrats on both sides of the Pacific, the outcome is a special kind of apologia, where the standard of merit is less Deng's record as a politician in China than his contribution to peace of mind in America.

Thus Vogel devotes just 30 pages, out of nearly 900, to the first 65 years of Deng's life. The foreshortening is historically grotesque, but perfectly logical from his standpoint. Of what relevance to policy-makers and pundits in Washington is Deng's long career as a revolutionary, steeled in clandestinity, insurrection and civil war, and the founding and leading of the PRC under Mao? It is only when he is detached from this history, and can be safely treated as a victim of the Cultural Revolution whose triumphant comeback enabled a turn to the market - and the United States - that Vogel's story gets underway. To a general lack of any of the gifts of characterisation called for by a biography is added a lack of interest in the context that formed his subject.

The result is a portrayal not much less lifeless than a dossier in the Party's personnel department, assorted with anecdotes of irreproachable family life. Indeed, when it comes to other dramatis personae, those with whom Deng worked or disputed from the late 1970s onwards, Vogel proceeds exactly in such filing clerk fashion, tacking bureaucratic CVs (typically quite selective) onto the narrative in a clumsy appendix. The contrast with William Taubman's biography of Khrushchev - to take an obvious parallel - is painful. [1] Taubman started out much more explicitly than Vogel with the intention of studying his subject from the angle of his relations with the US, but became so imaginatively gripped by the figure of Khrushchev that he widened his vision and ended by producing a remarkably vivid and penetrating portrait, far removed from this wooden effigy.

Once Mao has died, Vogel can concentrate on the success story that it is his purpose to tell. Even here, however, there is a flagrant disproportion in his coverage. Nearly as many pages are dedicated to the three years 1977-79, when Deng was manoeuvring towards supreme power, as to the ten from 1979 to 1989, when the economic reforms with which he is usually credited were introduced. The conventional judgment is that these were his principal achievement as a ruler, and one might have expected them to loom equally large in Vogel's laudatio. But they occupy only three out of 24 chapters. If they add little to economic histories of the period, they do make clear - a merit of the account - that Deng himself, who was aware of his limited economic competence, was rarely the initiator of the domestic changes over which he presided. What possessed him was rather an enthusiasm for science, and a belief that to acquire its fruits China had to emerge from the isolation of Mao's last years. This, of course, is where Vogel's own attention and admiration lie. Not agrarian reform, by any measure the most beneficial single change for the people of China in the 1980s, but the Open Door becomes Deng's greatest achievement - its very name a welcome embrace of the slogan with which the US secretary of state John Hay bid for a slice of the Chinese market after the American conquest of the Philippines. Or, as Vogel puts it in today's boilerplate: 'Under Deng's leadership, China truly joined the world community, becoming an active part of international organisations and of the global system of trade, finance and relations among citizens of all walks of life.' Indeed, he reports with satisfaction, 'Deng advanced China's globalisation far more boldly and thoroughly than did leaders of other large countries like India, Russia and Brazil.' Understandably, pride of place in this progress is given to Deng's trip to the US, which occupies the longest chapter in the annals of 1977-79.

Anything in Deng's career that might seriously mar the general encomium is sponged away. Of the Anti-Rightist campaign of 1957-58 of which he was the executor, dispatching half a million suspects to ostracism, exile or death, we learn that he was 'disturbed that some intellectuals had arrogantly and unfairly criticised officials who were trying to cope with their complex and difficult assignments'. Suppression of the first halting demands for political democracy in 1978? 'As in imperial days, order was maintained by a general decree and by publicising severe punishment of a prominent case to deter others.' Incarceration of its young spokesman for 15 years? Arrests were 'infinitesimal' compared with days gone by, and 'no deaths were recorded.' Tibet? Despite enlightened efforts to 'reduce the risk of separatism', Lhasa has had to witness a 'tragic cycle' of 'riots' and 'crackdowns'; still, 'Tibetans and Han Chinese both recognise ... an improvement in the standard of living' and Tibetans are slowly 'absorbing many aspects of Chinese culture and becoming integrated into the outside economy'. Nothing shows Vogel's sense of decorum, and priorities, better than his decision to omit so much as a mention of the Stalinist show trial of Lin Biao's hapless subordinates, brigaded on trumped up charges with the Gang of Four, with whom they had nothing in common, a decade after the death of their commander, and on Deng's orders condemned to long terms in jail in the full glare of publicity - a top political episode of 1980-81. Instead, we are regaled with five pages on Deng's 'historic' - universally forgotten - speech to the UN in early 1974, while Mao was still alive, and such important episodes as the purchase for him in New York of a 'doll that could cry, suck and pee', which proved 'a great hit' when he got home, further laden with 200 croissants from Paris.

The great student rising and occupation of Tiananmen Square of 1989, with massive popular support in Beijing, naturally poses the stiffest challenge to Vogel's exercises in edulcoration. He rises to it in inimitable style. What the students, actuated by resentment that they were 'receiving fewer economic rewards for their ability and hard work than were uneducated entrepreneurs', really wanted was improvements in their living conditions. But learning from earlier failures, they 'used slogans that resonated with the citizenry - democracy, freedom' and the like - to win wider public support. A 'hothouse generation' with little experience of life, their callow orators 'had no basis for negotiating with political leaders on behalf of other students'. Wiser foreign reporters soon tumbled to the fact that most of those in the square 'knew little about democracy and freedom and had little idea about how to achieve such goals'. No surprise that Deng felt he had to put down these ungrateful beneficiaries of 'the reform and opening that he had helped to create and from the political stability that underpinned the economic growth'.

The result was a 'tragedy of enormous proportions' that stirred the West, but Chinese reactions varied greatly. After citing some that were critical, Vogel gives the last and longest word to those 'officials who admire Deng's handling of the Tiananmen demonstrations', ending: 'They acknowledge the seriousness of the tragedy of 1989, but they believe that even greater tragedies would have befallen China had Deng failed to bring an end to the two months of chaos in June 1989.' Of course, he adds unctuously, 'all of us who care about human welfare are repulsed by the brutal crackdown,' but who knows if they are not right? 'We must admit that we do not know. What we do know is that in the two decades after Tiananmen, China enjoyed relative stability and rapid - even spectacular - economic growth.' How little Vogel cares to know about the upheaval of 1989 can be seen from his extraordinary claim that there were days during it when no newspapers appeared. The imperative is to ensure that Deng's image remains intact.

To understand why this is so important, it is helpful to turn to Henry Kissinger's meditation *On China*, presented as 'an effort ... to explain the conceptual way the Chinese think about problems of peace and war and international order', from one whose career as a statesman and scholar has been devoted to the first of these: 'All my life I have reflected on the building of peace, largely from an American perspective.' Comparing the Chinese approach to inter-state relations with go, the

Western to chess, Kissinger offers a potted history of what he takes to be conflicts between the two from the late 18th to the late 19th century, before jumping to Mao in the Cold War, and the story, often retold, of the 'quasi-alliance' between the PRC and the US that he negotiated in Beijing in the early 1970s. In the years since his exit from the State Department, he explains, he has been to China more than fifty times, hobnobbing with its leaders, but his conversations with these epigones dwindle to banalities after the heights of his dialogues with Mao. The Chairman had treated him as a 'fellow philosopher'. Deng could not live up to the same standard, still less his successor.

Notwithstanding this drop in level, Kissinger gives Deng full credit for what he terms 'a turning point of the Cold War' and the 'high point of Sino-American strategic co-operation'. What was this? China's war on Vietnam in 1979. Here Vogel and Kissinger converge, applauding Deng's resolute action to thwart Vietnamese plans to encircle China in alliance with the USSR, invade Thailand, and establish Hanoi's domination over South-East Asia. Conscious that not even all Deng's colleagues approved the assault, which was far from a military success, Vogel separates by eight chapters and 150 pages Deng's tour of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore to ensure diplomatic cover for the attack he was planning, from the war itself. The first, presented - along with Deng's far more important tour of the United States two months later - as a triumph of far-sighted statesmanship, receives lavish coverage; the second, less than half the space. In part, this distribution is designed to protect America's image in the affair: Deng launched the war just five days after getting back from Washington with the US placet in his pocket. But it is also to gloss over Deng's misadventure on the battlefield as expeditiously as possible. The last word, as usual, goes to an apologist, through whom Vogel can convey his standpoint without being directly identified with it. Lee Kuan Yew, an ardent supporter of the war, has told the world: 'I believe it changed the history of East Asia.'

Vogel's account of China's war on Vietnam is that of a former servant of a Democratic administration. Showering Carter's point men in the tractations over Deng's visit with effusive epithets, he is careful to shield the president himself from any too explicit responsibility for giving the war the go-ahead. Kissinger, a Republican and once head of the National Security establishment where Vogel was an underling, can afford to be more forthright. Deng's masterstroke required US 'moral support'. 'We could not collude formally with the Chinese in sponsoring what was tantamount to overt military aggression,' Brzezinski explained. Kissinger's comment is crisp: 'Informal collusion was another matter.'

How is this zenith of Sino-American collaboration, as Kissinger repeatedly calls it, to be judged? Militarily, it was a fiasco. Deng threw 11 Chinese armies or 450,000 troops, the size of the force that routed the US on the Yalu in 1950, against Vietnam, a country with a population a twentieth that of China. As the chief military historian of the campaign, Edward O'Dowd, has noted, 'in the Korean War a similar-sized PLA force had moved further in 24 hours against a larger defending force than it moved in two weeks against fewer Vietnamese.' So disastrous was the Chinese performance that all Deng's wartime pep talks were expunged from his collected works, the commander of the air force excised any reference to the campaign from his memoirs, and it became effectively a taboo topic thereafter. Politically, as an attempt to force Vietnam out of Cambodia and restore Pol Pot to power, it was a complete failure. Deng, who regretted not having persisted with his onslaught on Vietnam, despite the thrashing his troops had endured, tried to save face by funnelling arms to Pol Pot through successive Thai military dictators.

Joining him in helping the remnants of the world's most genocidal regime continue to maul border regions of Cambodia adjoining Thailand, and to keep its seat in the UN, was the United States. Vogel, who mentions Pol Pot only to explain that despite his negative 'reputation', Deng saw him as the only man to resist the Vietnamese, banishes this delicate subject from his pages altogether. Kissinger has little trouble with it. No 'sop to conscience' could 'change the reality that Washington provided material and diplomatic support to the "Cambodian resistance" in a manner that the

administration must have known would benefit the Khmer Rouge'. Rightly so, for 'American ideals had encountered the imperatives of geopolitical reality. It was not cynicism, even less hypocrisy, that forged this attitude: the Carter administration had to choose between strategic necessities and moral conviction. They decided that for their moral convictions to be implemented ultimately they needed first to prevail in the geopolitical struggle.'

The struggle in question was against the USSR. In these years, Deng continually berated his American interlocutors for insufficient hostility to Moscow, warning them that Vietnam wasn't just 'another Cuba': it was planning to conquer Thailand, and open the gates of South-East Asia to the Red Army. The stridency of his fulminations against the Soviet menace rang like an Oriental version of the paranoia of the John Birch Society. Whether he actually believed what he was saying is less clear than its intended effect. He wanted to convince Washington that there could be no stauncher ally in the Cold War than the PRC under his command. Mao had seen his entente with Nixon as another Stalin-Hitler Pact - in the formulation of one of his generals - with Kissinger featuring as Ribbentrop: a tactical deal with one enemy to ward off dangers from another. Deng, however, sought more than this. His aim was strategic acceptance within the American imperial system, to gain access to the technology and capital needed for his drive to modernise the Chinese economy. This was the true, unspoken rationale for his assault on Vietnam. The US was still smarting from its defeat in Indochina. What better way of gaining its trust than offering it vengeance by proxy? The war misfired, but it bought something more valuable to Deng than the 60,000 lives it cost - China's entry ticket to the world capitalist order, in which it would go on to flourish.

Hysteria, calculation or a mixture of the two, Deng's motives at the time are one thing. Endorsement of the claims he pressed on his interlocutors - South-East Asian and American - to justify his aggression, in works supposedly of scholarship thirty years after the event, are another. Kissinger, for whom the history of the period is little more than a grab-bag for his own self-glorification as an actor in it, can be forgiven for maintaining that China's war on Vietnam was a vital blow against the Soviet Union and a stepping-stone to victory in the Cold War. That the Sino-American alliance he negotiated, and Deng escalated, had scant bearing on the dissolution of the USSR hardly matters. Whatever his other gifts, truth is not one that can reasonably be expected of him. Vogel, with more pretensions to scholarship, is a different case. His fawning account of the Paramount Leader's preparations for war - 'Deng had had enough' etc - not only repeats the fantasy of Vietnamese designs on Bangkok, imminent Soviet takeover of South-East Asia and the rest, but blacks out all mention of American aid and comfort to Pol Pot, in the common cause of resisting these phantasms. Kissinger's description of Carter's actions in assisting the perpetrators of one of the few true genocides of the last half-century - not killings on a far smaller scale, blown up as genocide to decorate 'humanitarian intervention' in Kosovo, Iraq, Libya or elsewhere - can stand for Vogel's treatment: informal collusion, in academic dress.

Deng, a far more uneven, explosive and complex figure, at once more radical and more traditional than the now standard images of him, awaits his biographer. That book will not be written as another page in US self-satisfaction. Works of Sino-Americana are not, it should be said, automatically characterised by servility or opportunism. Books of more spirit have been, and continue to be, written within its limiting framework. A case in point is a study that can be read as a pendant to Vogel's, Jay Taylor's biography of Chiang Kai-shek, *The Generalissimo*. In many ways, the starting points are close. Taylor too is a former official, a career diplomat in the intelligence apparatus of the State Department, with postings in Taipei, Beijing and Havana. His enterprise is likewise a eulogy. It relies on similarly brittle sources supplied by self-interested parties, redacted diaries or memoirs, conversations with family members and placemen. Its concerns are also thoroughly Americo-centric. Yet with all these failings, and more, the result is still refreshingly different.

In large part, this is because Taylor makes a real attempt to capture Chiang's tortuous personality. Seething with an inner violence that exploded in volcanic rages as a young man, once in power he succeeded in outwardly controlling it beneath a mask so rigid and cold that it isolated him even from his followers. Sexual rapacity was combined with puritan self-discipline, skills in political manoeuvre with bungling in military command, nationalist pride with retreatist instinct, threadbare education with mandarin pretension. In a narrative that is far more readable than Vogel's plodding compendium, Taylor gives us a vivid sense of many of these contradictions, even if he looks away from others. Writing to rehabilitate the Generalissimo, whose reputation is not high in the West, he is driven, not to deny outright, but to minimise the murders and mismanagements of his reign. He does so principally by giving him - repeatedly, although not invariably - the benefit of the doubt. A better sense of Chiang's vindictiveness, and of the low-grade thuggishness of his regime, in which torture and assassination were routine, can be gained from Jonathan Fenby's less inhibited account, *Chiang Kai-shek: The Generalissimo and the China He Lost*. [2]

A larger drawback of Taylor's approach is his single-minded focus on Chiang alone, detached from his peers. No other figure in the tangled constellation of the interwar Kuomintang acquires any relief in his story. The reasons why Chiang could rise to power require a contextual explanation, however. They do not lie in his individual abilities. For these were, on any reckoning, very limited. The extremes of his psychological make-up cohabited with his mediocrity as a ruler. He was a poor administrator, incapable of properly co-ordinating and controlling his subordinates, and so of running an efficient government. He had no original ideas, filling his mind with dog-eared snippets from the Bible. Most strikingly, he was a military incompetent, a general who never won a really major battle - decisive victories in the Northern Expedition that brought him to power going to other, superior commanders. What distinguished him from these were political cunning and ruthlessness, but not by a great margin. They were not enough on their own to take him to the top.

The historical reality was that no outstanding leaders emerged from the confused morass of the KMT in the Republican period. The contrast between Nationalists and Communists was not just ideological. It was one of sheer talent. The CCP produced not simply one leader of remarkable gifts, but an entire, formidable cohort, of which Deng was one among several. By comparison, the KMT was a kingdom of the blind. Chiang's one eye was a function of two accidental advantages. The first was his regimental training in Japan, which made him the only younger associate of Sun Yat-sen with a military background, and so at the Whampoa Academy commanding at the start of his career means of violence that his rivals in Guangzhou lacked. The second, and more important, was his regional background. Coming from the hinterland of Ningbo, with whose accent he always spoke, his political roots were in the ganglands of nearby Shanghai, with its large community of Ningbo merchants. It was this base in Shanghai and Zhejiang, and the surrounding Yangtze delta region, where he cultivated connections in both criminal and business worlds, in what was by far the richest and most industrialised zone in China, that gave him his edge over his peers. The military clique that ruled Guangxi, on the border with Indochina, were better generals and ran a more progressive and efficient government, but their province was too poor and remote for them to be able to compete successfully against Chiang.

Taylor's attention is fixed elsewhere, however. Central to *The Generalissimo* is the aim of reversing the verdict of Barbara Tuchman's book on the American role, personified by General Stilwell, in the Chinese theatre of the Pacific War. [3] For Taylor, it wasn't the long-suffering Chiang, but the arrant bully and incompetent meddler Stilwell who was to blame for disputes between the two, and failures in the Burma campaign. Stilwell was no great commander. Taylor documents his abundant failings and eccentricities well enough. But they scarcely exonerate Chiang from his disastrous sequence of decisions in the war against Japan, many of them - even at the height of the fateful Ichigo offensive of 1944 - motivated by his conviction that Communism was the greater danger. From the futile

sacrifice of his best troops in Shanghai and Nanjing in 1937 to the gratuitous burning of Changsha in 1944, it was a story without good sense or glory. Despite strenuous scrubblings by recent historians to blanco his military record, it is no surprise that, from a position of apparent overwhelming strength after the surrender of Japan, he crumpled so quickly against the PLA in the Civil War.

There too Taylor tends to attribute to the US substantial blame for the debacle - Marshall, who had picked Stilwell, cutting a not much better figure in this part of his narrative - which he hints could have been avoided had Washington been willing to provide the massive support needed to help Chiang hold North China or, failing that, a line south of the Yangtze. These are not the sentiments of the Republican lobby that denounced the 'loss of China' in the 1950s. Taylor has an independent mind. Describing himself as a moderate liberal and foreign policy pragmatist, he is quite capable of scathing criticism of US policies in full support of Chiang - attacking the 'breathtaking' irresponsibility of Eisenhower in threatening war with the PRC during the Quemoy crisis of 1955, and composing with Dulles a secret policy document on the same island three years later, 'extraordinary for its ignorant and far-fetched analysis'. What remains constant, however, is the American visor through which Chinese developments are perceived.

In the last third of Taylor's book, devoted to Chiang's years after his flight from the mainland, when Taiwan became a US protectorate, this is obviously less of a handicap. Taylor's grasp of the reconstruction of the KMT regime on the island, of which he was a witness, is much firmer than of its time in Nanjing. It is also, though admiring, less apologetic, not minimising the White Terror that Chiang unleashed in Taiwan, nor glossing over his use of General Okamura, commander of the Japanese occupation of China and author of the 'Kill All, Burn All, Loot All' order responsible for the deaths of more than two million civilians, to help him out on the island. For Chiang, patriotism came second to personal power. But now able to rule as an extraneous force, with full-bore American assistance and without ties to local landlords, he could preside over an agrarian reform designed by US advisers, and industrialisation funded by US capital, in a society that fifty years of modernisation under colonial rule had left substantially more advanced in popular literacy and rural productivity than the mainland. Economic success stabilised but scarcely liberalised his regime, which ended as it had begun under martial law.

Taylor concludes his story with the claim that Chiang has triumphed posthumously, since the China of today embodies his vision for the country, not that of the Communists he fought. This trope is increasingly common. Fenby retails a lachrymose variant of it, quite out of character with the rest of his book, a tourist guide in the PRC - as good as a taxi-driver for any passing reporter - telling him what an unnecessary tragedy KMT defeat in the Civil War was. In such compensation fantasies, Deng becomes Chiang's executor, and Western visions of what China should be, and will become, are reassured.

Perry Anderson

P.S.

* The , Vol. 34 No. 3 · 9 February 2012, pages 20-22:
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n03/perry-anderson/sino-americana>

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Footnotes

[1] Khrushchev: The Man and His Era was reviewed by Neal Ascherson in the LRB of 21 August 2003.

[2] Reviewed by John Gittings in the LRB of 18 March 2004.

[3] Stilwell and the American Experience in China (1971).