

BOOK REVIEW

On China, by Henry Kissinger, New York, Penguin, 2012, pp. 624 (pbk), £8.96, ISBN-10: 0141049421, ISBN-13: 978-0141049427

During the 1970s, Henry Kissinger served as National Security Advisor in the USA for President Richard Nixon. He later served as Secretary of State for Presidents Nixon and Gerald Ford. His book, *On China*, is replete with both historical information and his own personal observations and how others involved may have seen it. This book is key to understanding American diplomatic history, especially in the last 100 years.

In this book, Kissinger starts from early Chinese history and takes the reader to the present, in the last part of Hu Jin Tao's administration. Introduced first on page 13, and then referred to repeatedly during the following 600 pages, Confucius (*Kwanza*) appears to be central to understanding Chinese culture. To illustrate, Confucius argued that any ruler who did not care properly for the people would lose 'the mandate of heaven' such that the people would become sufficiently vocal in order to improve matters. I still remember going with a college student to a bookstore in Beijing during my first week in China. He encouraged me to buy Confucius' *Analects*. From this I recognized that Confucius did not support just any government that came along. Rather, he exhorted people to support leaders and governments that do well. Kissinger reminds us that a statue of Confucius was installed in Tiananmen Square in January 2011, and here we should remember that Mao's mausoleum is also on Tiananmen Square. According to Confucius, when a ruler no longer takes care of what the people need, then that ruler has lost 'the mandate of heaven', a concept given great attention and analysis here by Kissinger.

The book *On China* is full of historical and diplomatic information. Different people's personal observations, including those of Kissinger, are continually intertwined and discussed. And here I can offer a personal anecdote about Kissinger's standing in China. I wish to recall an event, as an example of how well known and appreciated Kissinger is in China. Once I was doing my best to communicate with a young Chinese person using the little Chinese I knew. I assumed the Chinese person spoke no English, until we unexpectedly came across a picture of Henry Kissinger, whereupon the young Chinese exclaimed: 'Kissinger!'

As far as possible conflicts between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the USA are concerned, Kissinger warns (p. 534) that 'the costs of war between major powers have grown out of proportion to its conceivable benefits'. Furthermore, he maintains (p. 535) that 'if challenged, the United States will do what it must to preserve its security (however) should not adopt confrontation as a strategy of choice'. One reason is because the USA would find 'China to be an adversary skilled over the centuries using prolonged conflict as a strategy' (p. 535). Furthermore, in the case of 'an actual conflict, both sides possess the capabilities and the ingenuity to inflict catastrophic damages on each other'. And because both China and the USA 'run great risk through confrontation; both sides need to concentrate on complex domestic (policy) adjustments' (*ibid.*). On this basis Kissinger argues (pp. 540–542) that having an adequate military resource offers the USA the best assurance of peace.

Recognizing the broader regional and global contexts of Sino-US relations, Kissinger gives detailed attention to examples of rivalry between the PRC and the Soviet Union, now Russia. These include competition for resources of land, waterways and ports. He reminds us that this rivalry is many centuries old while discussing and analysing the tri-polar relationship (the USA, China and Russia/Soviet Union) in great detail.

For this 2012 paperback edition of *On China*, Kissinger writes an afterword. This includes mention of a joint statement on 19 January 2011, issued by the USA and the PRC, proclaiming a shared commitment that looks forward to a ‘positive, cooperative and comprehensive’ USA–China relationship (p. 531). Under the auspices of this stated commitment, I recommend this book very highly to any student with an interest in this historically rich and immensely varied country. I also recommend it to any business practitioner or scholar looking to add to their understanding of China’s past, current and future role and status in Asia and the world from the type of informed and distinctive perspective that Henry Kissinger brings to this mammoth and vital task. I have read this book twice already and continue to learn from it.

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