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In Case You Missed It: The China Fantasy

Kate Merkel-Hess

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Though published last year, James Mann’s *The China Fantasy* takes on renewed relevance in light of the recent Tibetan riots and various responses to them. In this little book (just about 120 pages), Mann argues that the grab bag of American policymakers, business leaders, and academics he calls the “China elites” have convinced Americans that more trade will lead to more freedom in China. Mann asserts that this vision, which he calls the “Soothing Scenario,” has led the United States to overlook human rights abuses it would not otherwise.

Mann is certainly correct in pointing out that the belief that greater engagement will bring political change in China directs current American foreign policy and popular opinion (and he does an admirable job of sketching the evolution of that policy over the past four decades). But his assertion that this viewpoint has been foisted on the US by a set of China-friendly elites—and he particularly singles out for blame academics who were trained in the 1970s and 1980s—simply doesn’t bear out. As Mann explains:

“For decades, the China hands proceeded through their careers without impediment. Indeed, some of them became so well established and so closely linked to American policy that they moved back and forth between academia and the U.S. government. But they continued always to be wary of a new return to McCarthyism. Hence, any upsurge in criticism of the Chinese regime, particularly in Congress or in the news media, was viewed as potentially threatening...It is against this background that we can examine the unfolding series of rationalizations put forward by American intellectuals over the past decades to explain away the continuing suppression of political dissent by the Chinese regime.” (43).

To whom does Mann refer here? He never elaborates or names names (other than David Lampton, *with whom he debated* the book’s central tenets in *Foreign Policy*). Nor does Mann articulate the transition in thinking of many American China scholars between the late 1960s and 1970s, when some did support movements like the Cultural Revolution, and the late 1980s and early 1990s, when, as the full picture and history of the Communist government’s actions emerged, many China scholars began to speak out against the Tiananmen crackdown and other situations.

Mann’s premise that the United States should re-examine its assumptions about the link between capitalism and democratic change is sound, as is his argument that the U.S. has ignored serious concerns with China’s policies in order to establish business or political relations (for instance, Google’s acquiescence two years ago to self-censor its searches in China). But Mann writes as though, in this view, he counters widely held opinions in business, politics, and academia. This is simply not true. Pragmatists may advocate engagement (can we truly imagine, say, imposing sanctions on China?), but the majority of China scholars hold a more nuanced view of the political realities.