Editor’s Introduction / Book Review

When I searched dissertation titles to find topics that relate to empire, I ran across a thesis entitled *A Partnership for Disorder: China, the United States and their policies for a postwar disposition of the Japanese Empire 1941-1945*. When I contacted the author, Xiaoyuan Liu, I found that the thesis had been turned into a book.

On our website you will find a tantalizing (to me) excerpt from the book’s opening chapter and, below, an interview with Prof. Liu on the specifics and the legacy of that brief partnership. It is a fascinating moment in the recent past when the two nations worked closely together. One of the partnership’s false assumptions, according to the author, was the idea that a government can speak for an entire nation. As a result of this fiction, the two countries’ grand plans for the Pacific fell apart almost immediately. China itself fell into four years of civil war which changed everything about Asia; other revolutions drastically altered the entire Pacific region. America was left with an inflated plan on paper that bore little relevance to political realities.

Miscalculations abound in this narrative. Here is what Prof. Liu writes about the split between the Kuomintang (KMT) aspirations and reality (page 181):

... KMT officials awakened to the reality that their aspiration of “restoring China’s spiritual leadership in East Asia for millennia” through patronizing Japan was unattainable.

Yikes! The KMT could not only NOT patronize Japan, they could not contribute a single soldier to the effort of occupying Japan, nor could they control their own hold over China.

On page 15, Prof. Liu quotes Chiang Kai Shek regarding his assessment of other cultures:

*We have nothing to learn from the Japanese – their goods are too cheaply made. The Americans are too fancy, the British too slow. Germany is the only country from which we can learn something.*
What the heck? Too “fancy”? I can see FDR being thought of as fancy, but what about TR? Woodrow Wilson? Abraham Lincoln? America was equally bewildered by China, and somewhat clueless as to the internal machinations. Here (from 208) is FDR’s grasp of internal affairs within China:

*I think we are going through a transition period – especially the part relating to North China.*

This “transition period” would, of course, turn out to be the resumption of full-scale civil war and the rise of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party that still rules China today. Prof. Liu praises FDR’s acumen but criticizes him for being cautious in acting “ahead of events.”

If all this sounds familiar, it should. America is today deeply involved in the exact same kind of bewilderment at internal affairs of other nations – it seems to be part of global life. Americans may need to remind themselves that China’s history is nothing like American history. While this should be no surprise, it is easy to see today’s industrialized China and forget how very different our 20th centuries were. Prof. Liu gives us a wonderful, in-depth look at how two nations can completely misread both one another as well as political reality, something that is easy to do for all of us.

*A Partnership for Disorder: China and America in World War II*  
by Xiaoyuan Liu

**Interview with Xiaoyuan Liu (June 2011)**

*How did the World War II partnership between China and America begin?*

The wartime cooperation between China and the United States can be qualified as a partnership, not an alliance, because the American side wanted to stay non-allied at the time. The beginning of the partnership against Japan can be traced back to American, albeit disguised, financial aid to China’s war effort in the late 1930s, and voluntary American military personnel fighting on the Chinese side before Pearl Harbor. After Pearl Harbor, this partnership for war was formalized with a bilateral agreement about China’s receiving U.S. Lend-Lease materials. Yet this well-known aspect of the wartime Sino-American cooperation for war is not the book’s main concern. The book explores their partnership for peace, or for envisioning and framing a new international order in postwar East Asia. Due to the meager performance of the Chinese Government in war and its rapid collapse after the war, scholarships prior to this book did not even hint the existence of a Washington-Chongqing collaboration in searching a postwar order. In both capitals, postwar plannings were

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World War II was one of the [few] shared moments between China and America in history.
initiated tentatively and assumed momentum only at a certain stage of the war. The forging of the Sino-American partnership in this sense therefore had to be slow and cautious. There was no single date or event marking the beginning of this partnership, but a process consisting of important or inconsequential communications and mutual visitations between the two sides. The Roosevelt-Chiang meeting at Cairo in the winter of 1943 was certainly a landmark for the partnership, but the partnership was already in place before the Cairo Conference.

**How would you characterize that partnership? Were we simply common enemies of Japan?**

The belligerents’ alignments in World War II, or those in any major war involving multiple participants, can be likened with two games, chess and Chinese checkers. In the two-sided military confrontation the belligerents lined up in the same way as the game of chess. Meanwhile a multi-sided political contest of Chinese-checker type was unfolding, in which each belligerent had its own stance, goals, and ways of maneuvering. Whereas China and the United States shared a common war aim of destroying the Japanese enemy, their respective political designs for rearranging postwar East Asia diverged. In issues such as postwar treatment of Japan, a role for the Soviet Union in postwar Asia, Korean independence, and return to China its “lost territories,” the two governments harbored rather different ideas.

These disagreements occurred repeatedly in inter-allied diplomacy and bilateral contacts. Not serious enough to undermine the common war effort against Japan, these problems nevertheless illustrated different projections of national ambitions and presaged a far more contentious relationship between China and the United States in the years to come.

**Who were the key figures in the development of this relationship?**

Until the Sino-American cooperation peaked at the Cairo Conference, this inter-national relationship was highly inter-personal. On the American side President Franklin D. Roosevelt used personal envoys to establish intimate contacts with Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang reciprocated by using his America-educated wife and in-laws such as T.V. Soong and H.H. Kung to front his dealing with American leaders. Although the bureaucratic establishments

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**World War II was a turning point for both nations’ positions in East Asia. The war let the United States turn the Pacific into an “American lake.” China, in the meantime, was reaching the bottom of its historical fall and began to turn around. The war therefore saw the beginning of China’s re-rise.**

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on both sides were sidelined for a while, their ideas would eventually prevail. In wartime a range of planning committees of the State Department carefully deliberated America’s postwar political and economic strategies in Asia. Position papers and policy memos generated by the inter-departmental planning agency, State-War-Navy Coordination Committee, put down the basics for America’s initial policies in postwar East Asia. Chiang Kai-shek, while autocratic in
disposition, never tried to be his own diplomat like FDR did. He ordered the organization of an "international questions study group" under his Supreme National Defense Council. The group became the principal planning body for China’s postwar policies. He consulted closely with Waijiaobu (ministry of foreign affairs) and showed a uncharacteristic respect to seasoned Chinese diplomats, such as Wellington Koo who did not always see eye to eye with Chiang in respect to China’s foreign affairs.

Americans tend to think of “China” as a unified or single entity, when in fact there were many coalitions within China at that time (just as there were in the U.S.). Can you give a brief background of the various factions within China during this time period.

China was a fragmented place after 1911. After 1931 the situation deteriorated even further because of Japan’s invasion. During the war the Chinese Government could control but the southwestern corner of China, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ruled a “Border Region” in northern Shaanxi. In addition to its colony of Taiwan, Japan maintained several puppet regimes in China, such as the Manchukuo headed by Pu Yi, Prince Te’s “Mongolian Frontier” in Inner Mongolia, and the Wang Jingwei regime in Nanjing. In the meantime, Tibet and Outer Mongolia claimed independence from China and Xinjiang remained aloof from the Chinese Government’s effective control. In terms of historical development, however, World War II was a time for China to stop its disintegration and began to achieve internal coherence again. The two Chinese parties, Kuomintang (KMT) and CCP, collaborated at least nominally, and both promoted Chinese Nationalism and wanted to

**In a Confucian spirit of forgiving and forbearance, Chiang advocated a policy of letting the Japanese people decide their own political fate.**

reunify China, that is, a China that would include all the territories mentioned above. Aware of China’s political and territorial divisiveness, American policymakers understood that China, more than the Japanese Empire, constituted a real challenge to their postwar policy planning for East Asia. Some of the key questions were whether or not the Chinese could stop infighting, and to what extent China’s claimed territorial integrity should be endorsed.

*What were the Sino-American plans for Japan after Hiroshima?*

The Chinese and Americans agreed on such general principles of dissolving the Japanese Empire, occupying Japan for a period in order to carry out post-surrender policies, and making Japan harmless to peace and security in the future. The devil was however in details. The two sides harbored different ideas about Korean and Vietnamese independence. The United States wanted to use a trusteeship formula to prevent total collapse of Western influence in colonial Asia, satisfy the principal allied powers’ respective interests, and give Washington a leading role in Northeastern and Southeastern Asian affairs. The Chinese Government concerned itself
more with restoring China’s traditional influence in these areas by assuming a “big brother” role. Chinese strategic planners hoped to get substantial economic and financial compensations from Japan as a way to basically change the relative national strength of China and Japan and to shift Western attention from Japan to China. American strategists were divided in this matter. There were people in the State Department and the American military who proposed to economically demilitarize Japan thoroughly. Opponents to this approach doubted that China, or even Western powers, would be able to replace Japan in the economic and trade networks of Asia. Similarly controversial was a policy toward Japan’s imperial system. Reform-minded American policy planners wanted to correct the historical direction of Japan’s political life. But they could not agree among themselves whether the Japanese emperor should be treated as a war criminal and target of revolutionary changes, or a figure head through whom liberal reforms could be implemented smoothly. Similar ideas circulated among Chinese officials,

… In the past thirty years or so, China [has] just begun to materialize the ambitions held by Chinese strategists during World War II.

but the predominant thinking came from Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang saw Japan’s defeat a chance of reconciliation between East Asia’s two most important countries. In a Confucian spirit of forgiving and forbearance, Chiang advocated a policy of letting the Japanese people decide their own political fate. When the war actually ended, of course, whatever idea about Japan held by the Chinese Government became irrelevant. China was again engulfed by its civil war and would not contribute a single soldier to the allied occupation of Japan.

What were the misunderstandings that each culture had about the other?

World War II was one of the shared moments between China and America in history. Their wartime cooperation necessarily resulted in mutual flattering and distortions in favorable ways. In wartime diplomacy, however, Chinese officials resented a paternalistic attitude exhibited by some of their American counterparts, and American policymakers were often puzzled by the inability of their Chinese partner to behave like a “nation” in international affairs. The difficulties in the wartime Sino-American relationship were caused as much by the two sides’ different understandings of international-relations culture as by their different power statuses and ranges of interests. These made the sole Sino-American summit meeting at Cairo an occasion of complete mismatch. Although preparing a list of China’s postwar concerns for discussion with FDR, Chiang set a rule for himself: he would not raise these issues at all unless they were brought up by the Americans first. President Roosevelt also had his own assumptions about China’s postwar aspirations. After the two’s meeting Chiang believed that he had had a candid exchange with the president, but FDR felt that he had never been able to really understand the Chinese leader. In the final analysis, although teaming up among the so-called “Big Four,” the United States, an ascending Western superpower, and China, a recent “national state” and reincarnation of an old Eastern empire, had rather different mentalities,
visions, means of policy, and sets of goals when coming to the issue of reorganizing the international order of East Asia.

Why did you think the partnership foundered? Was it a partnership destined for “disorder,” or could it have been preserved?

The inter-allied strategic plannings and diplomacy for postwar East Asia finally produced a new status quo on paper, or a power arrangement consisting of the secret Yalta Agreement among the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, the Sino-Soviet treaty of 1945 negotiated in Moscow, and related understandings. The principal components of this planned Yalta-Moscow system included American dominance in the western Pacific, Soviet sphere of influence in Northeast Asia, regime stability for the Chinese Government in China proper, and restoration of British influence in Southern and Southeastern Asia. This system began to disintegrate when the CCP defeated the KMT and fundamentally altered the elements and direction of postwar international politics of East Asia. Although history is

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contingent and nothing is inevitable, there was a vital oversight in the wartime Chinese-American partnership for constructing a new peace in Asia, which concerned Asia’s revolutionary nationalism. At the time “international relations” were conducted as inter-governmental ones, and the forces out of power might be noticed but would not be counted. The underlying assumption in the wartime planning was that as long as “big powers” were satisfied, everything else could be managed. It turned out that in postwar years the revolutionary forces in China, Korea, and Indochina were much more spontaneous and effective than wartime officials thought. Perhaps this is why, although able to peacefully transform their military-political balance of power in Europe at war’s end into a lasting Cold War confrontation, the two superpowers could not stop the destruction of the Yalta-Moscow system by a series of hot wars waged by Asian revolutionaries.

Which elements of this story apply to today’s uneasy relationship between the two nations?

World War II was a turning point for both nations’ positions in East Asia. The war let the United States turn the Pacific into an “American lake.” China, in the meantime, was reaching the bottom of its historical fall and began to turn around. The war therefore saw the beginning of China’s re-rise. Even then, the Sino-American wartime strategic planning and related diplomacy already contained signs of potential rivalry between the two powers on the two sides of the Pacific. In a sense, in the past thirty years or so, China just began to materialize the ambitions held by Chinese strategists during World War II. China has had many life cycles of
rise and fall. Today’s China and China of the 1940s belong to the same one. The current relationship between the two nations of course is much richer and more complicated than that told in the book. But as far as America’s present position in the Asia-Pacific region and those so-called “core interests” of China are concerned, which are mainly regional and geopolitical, their origins can be traced back to the time of World War II. A fundamental lesson from the story told in the book is that modernized, revolutionized, and reformed or not, China can neither depart from its geostrategic environments nor leave behind its civilizational legacies.

Can we draw comparisons between specific figures in the “partnership for disorder” and figures today? Between economic and political forces then and now?

Maybe Deng Xiaoping can be compared with FDR in his ability to find a vision and chart a path. But Deng had Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon ahead of him to open a new era for the Sino-American relations. While the trajectory of the American superpower seems clear, more puzzling is the connection between today’s China and its recent past. There is a view in the field that the “dark era” of the Mao years was sandwiched by two brighter periods of relative openness and engagement with the outside world, suggesting an interrupted continuity between the Republic of China period in the mainland and the People’s Republic of China since Deng’s reforms. My own opinion is that since China lost its centrality in Asia in the mid-19th century, the country’s search for regaining a deserved place in the world has never been interrupted or reversed. In different periods the means for the goal varied significantly, and so did their respective results and degrees of respectability in the eyes of Western commentators.

Excerpt

— The publisher has asked that we present the excerpt from Prof. Liu’s book in its own file, which can be downloaded here.
Xiaoyuan Liu is David Dean Professor of East Asian Studies & Professor of History at University of Virginia. He earned his Ph.D. at Iowa State University. He teaches courses on modern China and the history of Chinese civilization. He has also taught at the State University of New York. He is the author of A Partnership for Disorder (Cambridge University Press, 1996) as well as Recast All Under Heaven: Revolution, War, Diplomacy and Frontier China in the 20th Century (Continuum, 2010).

**Postsecondary Lesson Plan to Accompany “A Partnership for Disorder”**
by Tom Durwood

1. What is the author’s thesis?

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2. What brought China and the U.S. together? What were their common goals?

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Figure 3. 1945 photo of General Lewis A. Pick and Chinese leader TV Soong at the Burma China border. U.S Department of Defense.
3. According to Xiaoyuan Liu, why were the two nations unable to devise a realistic plan for the postwar Pacific?

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4. When and why did Japan bomb Pearl Harbor? Was that a smart move?

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5. Who won the fight between Japan and China in World War II? What was the Rape of Nanking?

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6. Please read this article on a new China-U.S. partnership:


What are the “other parties” who might be left out of this new announcement? What assumptions are being made that might jeopardize this partnership? What might the Chinese and U.S. officials not understand about one another? Do you think this new partnership will work? Why or why not?

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7. Please read these two short articles on Japan and China and their current relationship:


How would you describe the current relationship between Japan and China? Do any of the same qualities from the “partnership for disorder” period still exist today?

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