

Leading Matters Los Angeles
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Session Notes

United States–China Relations in Historical Perspective: 250 Years of Contact
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In this lecture, I hope to convey the importance of the past to the present, to provide cultural context to present problems.

Napoleon Bonaparte said, “Let China sleep. For when it wakes, it will shake the world.”

U.S.-China relations were at work in the Boston Tea Party of 1773, since the tea that the patriots poured into the harbor was oolong tea from Fujian, China. Another important early event was the 1784 sailing of the *Empress of China*, the first ship carrying the American flag, to Canton, China.

Throughout most of history, China has played a prominent role in world affairs; the lull from the 1800s to the recent past is a blip.

I see five trends or patterns in U.S.-China relations: opportunities, fears, fascinations, sentimentality and power.

Opportunities: In the past, elites in New England participated in trade with China. Our own Leland Stanford brought Chinese laborers to the United States to work on railroads. Today, China is seen as an emergency superpower, as evidenced by the countless books we see at bookstores

Fears: The Chinese have frequently been seen as a racial, cultural and economic threat to Americans. One book that captures this sentiment is *Yellow Peril*, published around the time of the Boxer Rebellion. A *Time* magazine cover from 1950 with the words “Mao’s Revolution” also reflects this sentiment.

The perceived threat was clear in Dean Rusk’s testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1967. When he was asked “Why are we fighting in Vietnam?” his answer was “Red China.”

Other media coverage that reflects fear of China is an April 1996 *Newsweek* cover with the heading “China: Friend or Foe?” and a May 2007 issue of *The Economist*: “America’s Fear of China.”

Fascinations (focusing on the government): There is a cultural fascination with China. We see this in former Stanford president Wilbur’s article “Our Pacific Destiny”; a *Time* magazine cover from 1972, Nixon’s “China Odyssey”; and *Time* Man of the Year Deng Xiaoping.

When we fast forward to the 2008 Olympics, we see a fascination with Chinese cultural display.

Sentimentality (focusing on the people): It's important to note the close relations between American Christian missionaries and the Chinese—it's closer than it is with the people of most other countries

In World War II, Americans wanted to help the Chinese, who were suffering at the hands of the Japanese. Today, a *Christianity Today* cover indicates a desire to make China a Christian nation.

Power: There has been a recent resurgence in Chinese nationalism, as evidenced by the Beijing Olympics. But it's not without a challenge: Consider the human rights protests leading up to the Olympics. Note the October 2005 *Atlantic Monthly* cover: "How We Would Fight China."

As for China's future, a recent *Newsweek* cover asks "What Drives China?" In that issue, the magazine ran an article called "China's Agony of Defeat."