



Omnipresent Eye

by Patrick Wright

Seize the Hour: When Nixon Met Mao by Margaret MacMillan · John Murray, 384 pp, £25.00.

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It is a cold, clear morning, and the soldiers gathered at the airfield are singing 'The Three Main Rules of Discipline' as an American jet labelled 'The Spirit of 76' lands and taxis over to its appointed resting place. A hatch opens to reveal President Nixon. The former Red-baiter blinks before launching himself down the ramp slightly ahead of his wife, who is wearing a scarlet coat. China's prime minister, Zhou Enlai, begins to clap as the Americans descend. After pausing to reciprocate, Nixon steps onto the tarmac and walks towards his welcoming host for the first of many carefully held handshakes.

That, as Margaret MacMillan confirms, is more or less what took place at Beijing airport on Monday, 21 February 1972. It's also the opening scene of John Adams's opera *Nixon in China*, premiered in Houston in 1987, and staged again at the London Coliseum over a few evenings last summer. An actual occurrence then, but also, as Adams and his librettist Alice Coleman understood, a brightly lit performance with carefully staged arias as well as often repeated choruses and, as Nixon never forgot, a vast audience of television viewers in America.

Having successfully launched the show that Nixon himself would shortly call 'The Week That Changed the World', the Americans boarded a motorcade that swept them through Tiananmen Square to the Diaoyutai, a secure compound of modern villas built on an ancient site known for its lakes, groves and blossoms. Dwight Chapman, Nixon's appointments secretary, observed that Nixon seemed reluctant to meet Zhou Enlai's eye as the two leaders exchanged pleasantries from adjacent sofas in Villa 18. In the early afternoon, a State Department interpreter noted that Nixon's pancake make-up was also yielding to stress: there was, he recorded, 'a large glob of Max Factor hanging from a hair in the middle of the groove at the end of his nose'.

Graver problems beset Mao, who was waiting some distance away in his house in the walled Zhongnanhai compound, impatient for news of Nixon's arrival. Dressed in a new suit and shoes, the aged dictator was uncomfortably swollen: he was suffering from heart failure. Having kept his visitors in suspense, in a

manner that one American official considered typical of an ancient Chinese emperor, he summoned them in the afternoon. Nixon, Henry Kissinger and an aide called Winston Lord quickly got into a limousine with Zhou and set off, leaving Bob Haldeman, the White House chief of staff, frantic with worry over their security. They entered Mao's house, finding it 'simple and unimposing', as Kissinger noted, and with a ping-pong table in the hall. Then they encountered Mao himself: shuffling, speaking with difficulty, supported by one of his 'pretty young assistants'.

The meeting with Mao may have represented a momentous 'earthquake in the Cold War landscape' as MacMillan claims, but it was hardly the 'serious and frank exchange of views on Sino-US relations and world affairs' that would be claimed in the Shanghai Communiqué signed by Nixon and Zhou at the end of the visit. Indeed, its main coinage consisted of banalities tossed like untethered grappling irons between a passing ship and a just floating hulk. Nixon proclaimed that 'the Chairman's writings moved a nation and have changed a world.' Mao replied: 'Your book, *The Six Crises*, is not a bad book.' When he tried to get a grip on more serious issues, Nixon was fended off by Mao, who insisted that the relations between the two countries should be reserved for Nixon's discussions with Zhou: 'I discuss philosophical questions.' Nixon nevertheless impressed the Chinese leader, who later told his doctor that he far preferred America's straight-talking anti-Communist president to 'the leftists, who say one thing and mean another', and also to the Soviet Russians, 'who talk about high moral principles while engaging in sinister intrigues'.

The first welcoming banquet was given by Zhou the following night. The Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square was adorned with a friendly array of national flags. The military band played American folk songs before proceeding (to the horror of China's European ally Enver Hoxha, who was watching the proceedings from Albania) into a mixed repertoire in which 'Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman' coexisted, more or less peacefully, with 'America the Beautiful'. Having earlier reassured Zhou that he was not a militarist, but rather the peaceable son of a Quaker and an admirer of Woodrow Wilson, Nixon now demonstrated his carefully rehearsed ability to use chopsticks. Though unable to hold his drink, Nixon also survived the toasting. The latter ordeal, famous for felling Western visitors to Communist countries, was opened by Zhou, who raised his glass of maotai and commended the fact that 'the gate to friendly contacts has finally been opened.' Nixon returned by quoting an ode by Chairman Mao: 'So many deeds cry out to be done, and always urgently. The

world rolls on. Time passes. Ten thousand years are too long. Seize the day, seize the hour.'

The two countries, which had been effectively walled off from one another since Mao took power in 1949, then made a ritual exchange of gifts. China prompted an alleged shriek of glee from Pat Nixon by bestowing two giant pandas on the visitors. America returned the compliment with a pair of musk oxen named Milton and Mathilda and some redwood trees (officials had already left behind a much admired photocopier at the end of a preparatory visit). The American TV networks provided live coverage of the banquet for a full four hours. That is likely to have pleased Nixon. As Kissinger once wrote, 'television in front of the president is like alcohol in front of an alcoholic.'

There was, of course, considerably more to 'The Week That Changed the World' than these opening manoeuvres. There were further receptions and banquets, including the final one in Shanghai, where Nixon drank more heavily than his officials considered advisable and, awash with friendliness, came alarmingly close to promising that the US would defend China against any foreign aggressor. Other events were not incorporated into the TV show. Nixon's private conversations with Zhou extended through the week. Another series of meetings – judged 'lively, but rather inconsequential' by their American interpreter – took place between William Rogers, the US secretary of state, and Ji Pengfei, China's foreign minister. In Kissinger's account, these dealt with lesser matters, such as trade and exchanges. Kissinger himself had bigger fish to fry, not least in his late-night meetings with Qiao Guanhua, the deputy foreign minister, at which, and without the knowledge of the State Department, he gave the Chinese the results of US intelligence-gathering about their former ally, the Soviet Union.

Pat Nixon, meanwhile, admired the pandas at the Beijing Zoo and smiled sympathetically as a student band in Shanghai fought its way through 'Can She Bake a Cherry-Pie, Billy Boy'. Though he found the sightseeing tiresome, Nixon joined his wife on some of the trips for the sake of the photo opportunities. He smiled obligingly at the Great Wall, declaring that 'a people who could build a wall like this certainly have a great past to be proud of and a people who have this kind of a past must also have a great future.' He attended a performance of one of Madame Mao's zealous operas, declaring *The Red Detachment of Women* 'certainly the equal of any ballet that I have seen, in terms of production'. He commended the famous chinoiserie of Hangzhou, just south of Shanghai. Lodged here, among the magnolias and pavilions of an island named 'Three Towers Reflecting the Moon', the Nixons were pictured tossing breadcrumbs to

enormous goldfish. According to Theodore White, it was a 'grisly afternoon, all organised for television crews and cameras, for symbolism and manipulation, with posts and positions roped off, stake-outs set, each journalist assigned his two square feet of observation'.

As a carefully rigged performance, the week depended on fastidious fixing behind the scenes. Kissinger compared the preparations to an 'intricate minuet'. Preliminary visits had been necessary, including Kissinger's own secret mission, launched from Pakistan the previous year. Once the initial agreement was in place, great care had been expended on preparing camera angles and setting the stage for the visit. The off-screen frenzy continued throughout the week, sometimes breaking through to trouble the performance itself. There was considerable rivalry and feuding in the American party. Rogers was browbeaten by Kissinger, who was happy to exclude him and his officials from the most important decisions.

The tensions between the White House and the State Department came to a head over the wording of the Shanghai Communiqué. Much of this had been prepared by Kissinger and his assistant Alexander Haig during earlier visits. The State Department was left out of the negotiations over its wording and refused access to the full text until it was completed. When they finally saw it, Rogers and his officials raised alarms about the failure to assert America's commitment to Taiwan. An embarrassed Kissinger, who had previously reassured Taiwan's ambassador in Washington that 'nothing is going to change' as a result of Nixon's trip, was forced to reopen discussions with Qiao, and also to insert an acknowledgment of Rogers's previously unmentioned talks with Ji.

After a last meeting with Zhou, in which Nixon sought reassurance that the record of their private talks would remain secret, the Americans flew home wearing smiles that were almost certainly not just put on for the cameras. They arrived at Andrews Air Force Base to be greeted by an enraptured crowd of 15,000. The Vietnam War dragged on and the Watergate burglary was only a few months away, but a 25-year freeze in relations between America and China had thawed. A wedge had also been inserted between China and the USSR, and the West was no longer lined up against a monolithic Communist bloc. There was dismay in Taiwan, quite justifiably, since the way was now opened for a severance of diplomatic relations, and for the recognition of the People's Republic of China, which was finalised under President Carter in December 1978, four years after Nixon's resignation.

I first heard of *Seize the Hour* when driving across Ontario last October. The Canadian edition had just appeared and Margaret MacMillan was being interviewed on the radio. The presenter used her book to prompt a wider discussion of 'great turning points in history': brief but decisive moments when the fate of the world seems to hang on the initiative of leaders prepared, in Nixon's phrase, to 'give history a nudge'. It was an appropriate question. MacMillan's book is a sequel to *Peacemakers* (2001), her study of the Paris Conference of 1919, which bore the subtitle 'Six Months That Changed the World'.

MacMillan triumphed with that earlier volume, an unexpected bestseller that was praised by Tony Blair as 'a fascinating piece of history'. *Peacemakers* is a brilliantly vivid study, which succeeds remarkably in evoking procedures and arguments that might well have seemed exhausting, remote and dry as dust. It also made clear that MacMillan is not confined to the short duration of her chosen turning points. Aware that even decisive moments can hardly be self-contained, she often reaches back to investigate earlier precedents or to look into biographical factors. Even so, however, there are risks of oversimplification attached to this way of framing history.

Like Zara Steiner, in her more recent study of the 1920s, *The Lights That Failed* (2005), MacMillan is critical of latter-day commentators who blithely condemn the Paris Conference as a failure that placed the Second World War in the wings. Yet to focus on an apparent 'turning point' as she does is also to risk a kind of realism in which that outcome is seen as being just about as good as anything that could have been achieved at the time. In the case of *Peacemakers*, this susceptibility was evident in the book's reluctance really to engage with the historical expectation that the Paris Conference disappointed in its own time.

In *Seize the Hour*, MacMillan thickens the drama by probing the background of the two leaders and their lieutenants, reviewing the polarised way in which China and America had figured in each other's imaginations, and also covering the preparations for an encounter that was actually the culmination of 'a long and delicate process'. She reviews the wider changes that made the visit possible, both in American and Chinese policy, and opened the mutually advantageous possibility of casting Russia into a new isolation. The book is not always enlivened by these explanatory excursions, and MacMillan is sometimes badly let down by the main actors in her drama, who tend to come across as bored: unconvinced of the real significance of their own carefully scripted gestures and,

in Mao's case, at least half-dead. The result is a book with a less unified voice than *Peacemakers*.

Having set aside the highly critical view she held at the time of these events, MacMillan offers *Seize the Hour* as a reappraisal of Richard Nixon and his presidency – a project she appears to share with her acknowledgee, Conrad Black. She was surely never among the Western students who took to wearing Mao jackets in honour of the Cultural Revolution (and in imagined solidarity with the distant peoples who had long been projected as 'blue ants' in anti-Communist propaganda). Yet even readers who doubt her partial rehabilitation of Nixon might wish that she had widened her frame to review the revolutionary chinoiserie espoused by the Western left as they lined up in opposition to Nixon and the Vietnam War.

The theatre of East/West misrecognitions is many centuries old and MacMillan doesn't necessarily escape it even when, like members of Nixon's party, she reaches far back into Chinese history to connect the attitudes of the Communist leadership to old imperial traditions. This may be one way of affirming the desired separation of China's Communist leaders from their former allies in the USSR. However, it risks projecting Maoist China less into Chinese history than into the 19th-century Western idea of China as a flowery vegetable kingdom where time stood still: a 'land of embryos', as Victor Hugo put it, where all signs of innovation were arrested on conception.

Seize the Hour is a very suggestive study of the theatricalisation of perceptions that was such a pronounced feature of the Cold War. Nixon knows that he is in Beijing, but he is also aware that his handshakes are being instantaneously beamed back home, where, in the words of Coleman's libretto, 'the three main networks' colours glow/ Livid through drapes onto the lawn.' MacMillan leaves no doubt as to the attention paid to preparing the scenes. The chief fixer here was Bob Haldeman, formerly an advertising man in Los Angeles, who despised the press and saw the world entirely from a PR perspective. As Nixon's chief of staff, this experienced scene-shifter had encouraged Nixon to adjust his public performances to 'the brave new world of the omnipresent eye'. The carefully rigged China visit was, in the estimate of one White House staffer, to be his 'Sistine Chapel'.

The Chinese assisted the Americans in their presentational manoeuvres, giving them first access to photographs and footage of key meetings, including Nixon's encounter with Mao. The pictures of the American party seated among Mao's

books were even cropped at Kissinger's request to remove Winston Lord. The Chinese matched Haldeman's manoeuvres with manipulations of their own. Thanks to these, Pat Nixon strolled past walls that had been carefully cleansed of anti-American posters. She saw market stalls piled high with goods, and was presented with flowers by the same fetching little girl in various different cities. Carefully prepared and remarkably similar speeches were presented at factories and other workplaces, and the visitors saw many children skipping and smiling with rouged faces. Despite the cold weather, families dressed in bright new clothes were to be seen picnicking and enjoying revolutionary songs on transistor radios, which, as one Canadian journalist noted, were briskly collected after the visit by an official. Zhou eventually came clean about all the rigging: 'We admit that this was wrong.'

Perhaps there was some imperial precedent for these tricks, but they were surely also descended from earlier Communist 'techniques of hospitality', as when the first Western delegations to visit Bolshevik Russia were accused of being duped by Potemkin villages. This tradition of manipulated appearances also extends forward, surviving the fall of the Berlin Wall to find its contemporary arena in Iraq: Blair's 'dodgy dossier', the carefully filmed toppling of Saddam's statue in Firdos Square in Baghdad, the remaking of Jessica Lynch into a female Rambo, and the moment in 2003 when George W. Bush landed his jet on the homebound aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln*, and stepped into the cameras to welcome America's returning and supposedly victorious troops. As Frank Rich recently pointed out in *The Greatest Story Ever Sold*,[*] this coup had been prepared by Bob Haldeman's descendant, a White House 'media maven' called Scott Sforza, who had boarded the *Lincoln* several days earlier to prepare the carrier, which was draped with the notorious 'Mission Accomplished' slogan, and positioned to ensure that open sea rather than San Diego appeared in the background.

Footnotes

* Penguin, 352 pp., \$25.95, September 2006, 978 1 59420 098 4.



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