

CHIT CHAT CLUB

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“Dick, Pat and Henry’s Excellent Adventure: The Nixon Trip to China as History and as Opera”

Gentlemen, this evening, we will be revisiting one of the most dramatic diplomatic and political events of the 1970s – President Richard Nixon’s visit to China in February 1972. As many of you know, that trip has also inspired an opera entitled “Nixon in China”. Viewed with some skepticism when it premiered in 1987, “Nixon in China” – with a score by John Adams, and a libretto by Alice Goodman -- is now one of the most highly regarded and frequently performed modern operas. The *New Yorker* has said that “not since ‘Porgy and Bess’ has an American opera won such universal acclaim,” and has characterized it as “a modern classic.”¹

A comparison of the actual events surrounding the Nixon visit with the John Adams opera sheds light on how selective a work of art must often be in presenting history. Although the opera makes no mention of it, a great deal of work by both President Nixon and Henry Kissinger preceded the visit. Kissinger is portrayed almost as a buffoon in the opera, saying little and even being cast as a villainous landlord in the “revolutionary” ballet that the Nixons actually did see. Although Mao Tse-tung is initially shown as being doddering, later he appears to be in good health and affectionate, even lustful, toward his wife, Jiang Qing, although in fact he was quite ill and had come to detest his wife. Despite these and other dramatic liberties, the strategic vision and political shrewdness of both Mao and Nixon are convincingly suggested. A comparison of the opera with the historical facts also allows us to speculate about whether this dramatization of the 1972 trip may serve, several centuries hence, to keep alive an interest in the actual historical events.

The Vietnam War and Soviet-Chinese Tensions As Background for the Trip

The origins of President Nixon’s trip to China are related, as were so many other events in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to the war in Vietnam. During the 1966 election, when he campaigned energetically for Republican candidates, Nixon began to recognize that while a majority of Americans still supported the Vietnam war, their support was growing thin, and that an increasing number were eager to find a way out of the conflict.

This feeling was reflected in an article that Nixon wrote as part of his preparations to run for President in 1968. The article, entitled “Asia After Vietnam,” appeared in the

¹ *The New Yorker*, February 14 & 21, 2011, “Goings On About Town,” p. 26.

October 1967 issue of *Foreign Affairs*.² While Nixon devoted most of the article to an argument that the United States needed to encourage collective action by the increasingly strong non-Communist nations of Asia to contain Chinese ambitions, and stated that he opposed “rushing to grant recognition to Peking [and] admit[ting] it to the United Nations”, Nixon also observed:

Taking the long view, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation.³

After his narrow victory in the 1968 presidential election (in which the Vietnam war was one of the principal issues), Nixon offered the job of National Security Advisor to Dr. Henry Kissinger, who had been recommended by Nelson Rockefeller. In their initial meetings, Nixon and Kissinger agreed that along with managing the difficult relationship with the Soviet Union, their first priority was to bring the Vietnam war to an honorable end. However, when Nixon made it clear that he also wanted to reexamine the American policy of isolating China, Kissinger was skeptical, and remained so until at least the fall of 1969. According to Margaret MacMillan, there is no doubt that during most of the first year of the new Administration, Nixon rather than Kissinger was the driving force behind a reexamination of U.S. policy toward China.⁴

Events shortly after he took office showed that Nixon’s judgment was prescient. On March 2, 1969, the Chinese and Soviet armies engaged in an armed clash along a portion of their border that included the Ussuri River. While previous incidents of outright hostility between Soviet and Chinese forces had been kept quiet, this clash – which became known as the Ussuri River incident – caused the two sides to hurl public invective at each other.

Nixon received conflicting advice about how he should respond to the Ussuri River incident. Assistant Secretary of State Marshall Green encouraged Nixon to engage in some conciliatory gestures toward China, since that might make the U.S.S.R. more inclined to seek better relations with the United States and less likely to take the U.S. for granted. However, veteran diplomats Charles Bohlen and David Bruce urged the President not to “use” China against the Soviet Union, which in their opinion could only

² At least one recent author claims that the article was ghostwritten for Nixon by Ray Price, one of his principal speech writers. Jeffrey Frank, *Ike and Dick: Portrait of a Strange Political Marriage* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2013), p. 318

³ Richard M. Nixon, “Asia After Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 46, No. 1, October 1967), pp. 111, 121.

⁴ Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2007), pp. 50, 55-56. Hereinafter, this book is referred to as “MacMillan”.

increase tensions with the Soviet Union.⁵

By the summer of 1969, Nixon had decided that some gestures should be made toward China, in large part to increase pressure on the Soviet Union. The shift in approach took several different forms. First, when the Soviets informed the U.S. that they were considering air strikes against China's growing nuclear facilities, and asked how the U.S. might respond to such strikes, it was made clear that the U.S. would not take the Soviet side.⁶

More importantly for future developments, Mr. Nixon decided to use Pakistan as his key intermediary in communicating with the Chinese. Nixon had been favorably disposed toward Pakistan since his days as Vice President, and he knew that Pakistan and China enjoyed a cordial and supportive relationship, in part because of their mutual antipathy toward India. The first message sent to China via Pakistan was that the U.S. would no longer maintain a permanent patrol of U.S. destroyers in the Strait of Taiwan, but would instead resort to in-and-out visits by other U.S. warships.⁷

Another step was to reactivate the informal talks with Chinese diplomats that the Johnson Administration had occasionally held in Warsaw. During a September 1969 visit to the U.S., Ambassador Walter Stoessel was instructed to tell the Chinese that the U.S. would be open to serious talks. Because Chinese and American diplomats in Poland rarely encountered each other, Stoessel was not able to convey this message until December, but when he did, the Chinese were immediately interested. Informal talks were held in December and early January, and a formal meeting was set for January 20, 1970.

Kissinger and the State Department had conflicting views about what should appear in the U.S.'s January 20 message, and the one actually delivered reflected both sets of ideas. The message offered some easing of trade and travel restrictions, as the State Department wanted, but in keeping with Kissinger's views, it also offered the Chinese high-level talks and an assurance that the U.S. "would not join in any condominium with the Soviet Union directed against China."

The January 20 meeting went well, and at a second formal meeting held in February, the Chinese offered to receive a U.S. emissary for more extensive discussions. However, the differences between Kissinger and the State Department remained large, and these differences were not resolved until mid-April. At the end of April, a third formal meeting was set for May 20.

⁵ William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), pp. 102-04. This insightful assessment of Nixon's foreign policy (which contains a careful analysis of the 1967 article referenced in footnote 3) is hereinafter referred to as "Bundy".

⁶ *Id.* at 106.

⁷ *Id.* at 105-06.

As it turned out, the May 20 meeting was never held because of the invasion of Cambodia, which began on April 29, 1970. The invasion was a joint operation in which U.S. forces participated along with the South Vietnamese. Although the Cambodian operation went well initially, it caused an uproar in the U.S. and around the world. On May 18, the New China News Agency denounced the U.S. action as “brazen” and said that talks could not proceed. That was the end of the Warsaw channel, and also of any significant communication with the Chinese for six months. As we shall see, it also resulted in Kissinger freezing the State Department out of any developments regarding China until July of 1971.⁸

The Secret Channel That Led to the Announcement of the Nixon Trip

The communications that eventually led to the July 1971 announcement of President Nixon’s trip to China began in the fall of 1970, when world diplomats converged on New York for the 25th anniversary of the United Nations. During this period, Nixon stated in an interview that he hoped to visit China during his lifetime. He also told Pakistani leader Yahya Khan that a rapprochement with China was essential, that the U.S. would not join in any “condominium” with the Soviets against China (echoing Kissinger’s language), and that the U.S. was willing to send a high-level emissary to Beijing. Nixon also gave Khan a formal letter that the latter presented to the Chinese during a November visit, which raised the question of a visit by the U.S. President to China. The letter also stated that this proposed visit would be preceded by a visit from Kissinger, who would be authorized “to discuss the Taiwan question.”

Nixon’s willingness to discuss Taiwan was important, because it strengthened the hand of Chou En-lai, who was engaged at that time in a power struggle with Marshall Lin Piao. It now seems clear that by 1970, Chou En-lai was open to a more normal diplomatic relationship with the United States, but that Lin Piao – who had been designated as Mao Tse-tung’s successor -- was not. Lin thought the most promising road for China was a closer relationship with the Soviet Union, despite the recent enmity between the two nations. By indicating that it was willing to discuss the Taiwan question, the biggest issue between the two nations, the U.S. strengthened Chou’s hand in the party struggles with Lin Piao.

The Chinese responded to the Nixon letter with a letter of their own, which was presented to the White House by the Pakistani ambassador on December 8, 1970. The handwritten letter was from Chou, Lin Piao and Mao himself. Most significantly, it stated that “in order to discuss the subject of the vacation of Chinese territories called Taiwan, a special envoy of President Nixon’s will be most welcome in Peking.”⁹ The President and Kissinger responded a week later, suggesting that a number of issues *including* Taiwan should be discussed, and importantly adding that the policy of the U.S. government was “to reduce its military presence in the region of East Asia and the Pacific

⁸ *Id.* at 107-09.

⁹ *Id.* at 166-67.

as tensions in this region diminish.”¹⁰ The response to this letter came on January 11, in the form of a letter from Chou En-lai that was delivered by the Romanians. Chou’s letter referred to Taiwan as the “one outstanding issue,” but did not object to the other subjects that Nixon had raised for discussion. Perhaps most strikingly, the letter stated that Mr. Nixon, who had already visited Belgrade and Bucharest, would also be welcome in Beijing.¹¹ The White House immediately sent a positive response.

However, owing once again to developments in the Vietnam war, communications between the White House and the Chinese went dead at this point, because of a South Vietnamese offensive into Laos. The participation of the U.S. in this offensive raised doubts in the U.S. about whether American policy really was to withdraw from Vietnam, and in all likelihood it raised such doubts in the minds of the Chinese, as well. However, Nixon’s public assurances that the Laotian offensive was not directed against China, the limited role of the U.S. in the Vietnamese withdrawal from Laos, and Nixon’s announcement in April 1971 that an additional 100,000 troops would be withdrawn from Vietnam, all served to reassure the Chinese. That same month – in addition to inviting the U.S. table tennis team to Beijing – the Chinese government sent Nixon another letter, which laid the groundwork for Kissinger’s secret visit in July.

The letter, a handwritten one from Chou En-lai, was delivered by the Pakistani ambassador on April 27. It stated that a restoration of Sino-American relations required the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Taiwan, and continued that this issue required direct discussion, for which China was prepared to receive a special envoy (“for instance Mr. Kissinger”), or the Secretary of State, “*or even the President*” (emphasis supplied). The letter continued that all the arrangements for the visit of this envoy could be worked out through Yahya Khan, the Pakistani president. Within a day Nixon designated Kissinger as his envoy, and Kissinger directed the U.S. ambassador in Pakistan to begin planning for the trip, using a special communications link to the White House. Nixon’s formal response to Chou was sent on May 10, and said that (1) the first meeting between the two sides should be secret, and (2) both sides must be free to raise any issue they wished. Chou’s acceptance of these conditions came in early June, and the parties soon agreed that Kissinger’s visit would take place on July 9-11, 1971.

The Nixon Administration went out of its way to ensure that the Kissinger trip would sound dull and not attract much press attention. On June 30, the White House announced that Dr. Kissinger would be leaving the next day on a fact-finding trip to Vietnam, that he would end up conferring with Ambassador David Bruce in Paris about the peace talks, and that along the way he would stop in Thailand, India and Pakistan.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 231.

¹¹ *Id.* at 166-67. The Chinese were well aware of the positive effect that a visit by President Nixon to their country could have on his political fortunes. According to a 1972 account by Edgar Snow, a friend of Mao and long-time visitor to China, Mao “casually” remarked in late 1970, when discussing the possibility of a Nixon visit, “that the presidential election would be in 1972, would it not? Therefore, he added, Mr. Nixon might send an envoy first, but was not himself likely to come to Peking before early 1972.” Edgar Snow, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 182-83, *quoted in* Bundy at 167.

The plan worked perfectly. On July 8, the day after having dinner in India with Indira Ghandi, Kissinger arrived in Rawalpindi in western Pakistan. At that point, his aides announced that Dr. Kissinger had taken ill with a case of “Delhi Belly”. That evening, Kissinger had dinner with the Pakistani president and continued to complain about his stomach. Yahya Khan said Kissinger should go to the president’s mountain bungalow, where the air would surely revive him. While Kissinger’s U.S. government plane remained conspicuously parked on the runway, the National Security Advisor himself was driven secretly through the streets of Rawalpindi wearing a disguise, and then boarded a Pakistani International Airlines plane on which the small Chinese party included Mao’s personal interpreter. A few hours later, the plane arrived in Beijing.¹²

It is no exaggeration to say that the meetings during the next two days were among the most important of the Nixon Administration. If they had gone badly, the President’s trip might not have taken place. However, the meetings went well, owing in considerable part to the good chemistry between Kissinger and Chou En-lai, who enjoyed each other’s intellects and styles of diplomatic discussion. The issue of Taiwan was discussed early and only briefly, when Kissinger said the U.S. recognized that there was only a single China, and did not support the notion of one China and one Taiwan. This seemed to satisfy Chou, who indicated that China did not intend to use force to reunite the mainland and Taiwan as long as it perceived that the U.S. was making progress in withdrawing from Taiwan and granting diplomatic recognition to the People’s Republic. The two men found less agreement on Vietnam. Kissinger argued that the pace of U.S. withdrawal from Asia had to be linked to what happened in Indochina, but Chou refused to be drawn into making any promises about using Chinese influence on the Vietnamese.¹³

Kissinger had more success with the issue of Japan. Although Chou was known to be concerned that Japan’s economic success might rekindle the nationalism that had led to Japan’s participation in World War II, Kissinger assured him that the 1951 treaty between Japan and the U.S. – while it was originally directed against China – now reflected the two countries’ alliance against the Soviet threat. In particular, Kissinger noted that the renunciation of offensive military capabilities reflected in the Japanese constitution benefitted China, and that the assistance the U.S. provided Japan was suitable only for defense of Japan’s home islands and surrounding areas. These arguments apparently reassured Chou.

Much of the discussion was devoted to each side’s perceptions of the Soviet

¹² MacMillan at 190-93. I have personal reasons for dwelling on the cloak-and-dagger aspects of Kissinger’s trip. I was taking classes for the California bar examination at Stanford University in July 1971, and one morning happened to see a small wire service story in the San Francisco *Chronicle* that Dr. Kissinger had become sick in Pakistan and would be spending a few days there to recuperate. Thus, when Kissinger returned to the U.S. and the Nixon trip was announced on July 15, I had a personal “aha” moment about that wire service story.

¹³ Bundy at 234-35; MacMillan at 194.

threat. As both sides were aware, since early 1970 the Nixon Administration had been obliged to devote a great deal of effort to countering Soviet actions in the Middle East, Cuba, and elsewhere. China, for its part, had had no success in negotiating a border settlement with the U.S.S.R., and tensions along the border had remained high since the Ussuri River incident. Kissinger took the unusual step of giving Chou sensitive intelligence about the Soviets, including information derived from intercepts of Soviet communications and high-resolution satellite photography.¹⁴ According to his memoirs, Kissinger also explicitly promised Chou that the U.S. “would continue to deal with Moscow, but we would inform Peking in detail of any understanding affecting Chinese interests that we might consider with the Soviets, and we would take Chinese views into account.”¹⁵

Concerning this latter commitment, Bundy states:

In diplomacy, this is as far as one nation can go toward another. Nixon and Kissinger were promising to treat [C]hou and the Chinese leaders on essentially the same basis as America’s closest allies, in fact more candidly than with several. Moreover, they were establishing a double standard between the two great Communist powers. . .

In short, from the very beginning the new U.S.-China-Soviet triangle was unbalanced. It was based not on equal treatment of the Communist powers but on a pronounced favoring of China.¹⁶

After his discussions with Chou, Kissinger flew to Paris for the meeting with David Bruce, and then on to California. On July 15, President Nixon went on national television to announce that during Dr. Kissinger’s round-the-world trip, he had detoured to Beijing, that President Nixon had been invited to visit China, that the President had accepted with pleasure, and that the trip would take place before May of 1972. The public reaction to this surprise news was overwhelmingly positive, and the criticism from the right-wing China lobby that favored Taiwan was surprisingly muted.¹⁷

Where, you may ask, was the U.S. State Department in all of this? The answer is that the State Department remained in the dark about Kissinger’s secret trip until July 8, when President Nixon told Secretary Rogers about it during the Secretary of State’s visit to San Clemente. On July 13, Rogers was told about the outcome of the Kissinger trip, and was assigned the task of notifying affected governments. One of those was the government of Japan, which had repeatedly made clear to the State Department that it

¹⁴ Bundy at 235-38.

¹⁵ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), p. 765

¹⁶ Bundy at 238.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 240.

needed to know in advance about any proposed change in U.S. policy toward China.¹⁸ However, since Nixon insisted on secrecy about his announcement until the last possible minute, Rogers was able to reach the Japanese Ambassador, Ushiba Nobuhiko, only an hour before Nixon's national announcement. Ushiba was astonished and immediately sought to notify the Japanese prime minister, Eisaka Sato, but the prime minister had only three minutes' notice before Nixon went on television. The prime minister's vague and flustered response to the Nixon announcement was a major embarrassment to Sato's government, and U.S.-Japanese relations were never as close afterward.¹⁹

One of the biggest questions concerning the Nixon Administration's approach to China in 1970-71 is whether the secretiveness that surrounded it was counterproductive. As we have seen, the results of that secrecy were major embarrassment for the Japanese government, a close ally, and exclusion from the process of the State Department, which had valuable expertise to offer. Although he is critical of the Nixon Administration in other respects, William Bundy – who had served as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in the Johnson Administration -- concludes that, on balance, the secrecy was both justified and necessary:

In policy terms as well as in public relations, the achievement of instant high drama was important. This kind of change was best taken at a gulp. Kissinger was right that if the news of it had leaked or if it had come about in stages, caviling in many quarters might readily have knocked the project off course. Secrecy was correct in the circumstances, and might have been hard for a more orthodox administration to sustain. (Bundy at 245.)

Before we turn to the actual Nixon visit, it should be noted that a great deal of additional preparation took place. The most important part of this was a second visit by Kissinger to Beijing in October 1971. This visit was not a secret, and its twin purposes were (1) to work out the details of the trip, and (2) to reach agreement on the language of the communique that the two governments would issue at the conclusion of Nixon's visit. On the first point, it was made clear to the Chinese that Nixon wanted maximum publicity and exposure for his trip. Since the President had asked to come and the Chinese had traditionally received visitors as a matter of grace in the "Middle Kingdom", they raised no objection to this request, or to the large party of officials and media that Nixon proposed to bring.²⁰

The communique proved more difficult. The Americans presented an initial draft that Chou En-lai rejected as too vague and meaningless. Chou then proposed that on the most difficult issues (such as Taiwan), the parties should simply "agree to differ." In

¹⁸ The possibility of not receiving such notification was known in the Japanese Foreign Ministry as the "Asaki Nightmare," after a dream an early Japanese ambassador to Washington had in which he had not received such advance notification. *Id.* at 239-40.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 238-40.

²⁰ *Id.* at 242-43.

other words, each side would state its position without attacking the other's. Kissinger accepted this approach, which enabled both sides to placate important interests. The Chinese needed to maintain their standing with other Communist and Third World countries, and the U.S. needed to mollify the China lobby, as well as Asian allies who for a generation had relied on the presence and leadership of the U.S. to hold China's ambitions in check.

Chou's approach was especially helpful in dealing with the issue of Taiwan. On this, Kissinger ended up using a formula from a planning document the State Department had prepared in the 1950s. His proposed language read: "The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain that there is but one China. The United States government does not challenge that position." As Bundy points out, this language recognized that both Beijing and Taipei lay claim to being the sole government of China, and implied that these claims should be resolved peacefully between them. Kissinger and Chou reached agreement on a virtually complete text for the communique, subject to final approval by Mao and Nixon.

A Comparison of the Actual Nixon Visit With How It Is Depicted in the Opera

President Nixon's visit to China finally took place in late February, 1972. The plane, dubbed "the Spirit of 76," left Washington on February 17 and flew first to Hawaii, where the Nixon party rested and prepared for several days. The President and his party then flew to Guam, where they spent the night. The next morning, February 21, after a short flight to Shanghai and breakfast, Chinese pilots came aboard and piloted the Spirit of 76 to Beijing, where it landed at 11:30 a.m.²¹

After a polite but austere welcome at the Beijing airport, where Nixon memorably had a long handshake with Chou En-lai -- unlike in 1954, when John Foster Dulles had refused to shake Chou's hand at the Indochinese peace conference in Geneva -- the Nixon party was driven to their guesthouses in the Diaoyutai, a large compound for foreign visitors set in a park that had once been used by the emperors. After the arrival, the Chinese gave the Americans a nice lunch and the left them to settle in.²²

At 2:30, Chou En-lai suddenly appeared and told Kissinger that Mao wanted to meet the president, and "fairly soon." Kissinger went upstairs to tell Nixon, and then the President, Kissinger, NSC aide Winston Lord and one Secret Serviceman -- just four people -- got into a limousine for the trip. The Secret Serviceman was able to alert Dwight Chapin, who told Chief-of-Staff Bob Haldeman what was going on. Within a few minutes, the President's party had entered the heavily-guarded compound where Mao lived, and shortly thereafter, they were ushered into Mao's study.²³

²¹ MacMillan at 3-4, 18.

²² *Id.* at 63.

²³ *Id.* at 65-66, 69-70.

Although photos of the meeting show Mao looking well, in fact he had been very ill with congestive heart failure for months, and had had a serious bout of pneumonia a month earlier. Only after the pneumonia was he willing to take medications. However, he had a strong constitution, and by the time of Nixon's arrival, Mao's doctors thought he was strong enough to show to the Americans. Mao was very excited when he awoke on the day of Nixon's arrival, and in fact had to be persuaded by Chou to let Nixon settle into his villa before being brought for a visit. Mao was shaven for the first time in months, and put on a new suit and shoes that were necessary to accommodate his puffiness. When Nixon entered his study -- where only Chinese photographers were present -- Mao took Nixon's hand and shook it warmly for a long time.²⁴

Their meeting, which had been scheduled for 15 minutes, ended up lasting a bit over an hour. Nixon began by praising Mao's books, which the Chairman said were not that significant. Mao, in turn, praised *Six Crises*. When Nixon sought to segue into international issues, Mao waved him off, saying those questions were for Chou En-lai, and that he discussed only "philosophical questions." Mao had some fun teasing Kissinger about his well-publicized girlfriends, while Nixon praised Kissinger as a "very wise assistant." As the end of the meeting approached, Nixon observed that neither the U.S. nor China sought to dominate the world, but that the same could not be said of some other nations. Mao did not take the bait to discuss the Soviet Union, and soon asked Chou En-lai whether he thought they had covered enough for the day. Before the meeting ended, Nixon praised Mao for having taken the risk of inviting him to China, an invitation that had been difficult for the Americans, as well. Mao closed by telling Nixon he was not well; when Nixon said he looked good, Mao replied that looks could be deceiving. With that, there was a last round of handshakes and the Americans took their leave.²⁵ While the meeting had seemed curiously unsubstantive, there was no doubt as to its importance, because -- as William Bundy points out -- "it put the stamp of Mao's supreme authority on everything that followed."²⁶

The first day ended with a formal welcoming banquet, a tradition in Chinese diplomacy. The banquet was held in the Great Hall of the People, a huge, modern facility in central Beijing close to the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square. About one thousand people attended. A Chinese band played American folk tunes as waiters brought one savory dish after another. During the meal and before the toasts, Chou En-lai told Pat Nixon that China would send two pandas to the U.S., a gesture the Chinese traditionally reserved only for important and friendly states; Mrs. Nixon was delighted.²⁷

²⁴ *Id.* at 64-65, 68-70.

²⁵ *Id.* at 71-74.

²⁶ Bundy at 304.

²⁷ MacMillan at 146-48.

Then the toasts began. Chou En-lai welcomed President Nixon on behalf of Chairman Mao, and noted that Mr. Nixon was visiting “at the invitation of the Chinese Government.” He then went on to note that the Chinese people sent cordial greetings to the American people, and that although there were great differences between the two, neither people wanted war, and both were willing to work together on a basis of mutual respect. He finished by lifting his glass of mao-tai in a toast to both the Americans and the Chinese in the room, and then came down from the stage where he had been, circling the tables of the official party, and toasting each person in turn.

After a few more courses, Nixon replied. He began by thanking his hosts for the magnificent food and complimenting the Chinese Army band for its rendition of American tunes. While acknowledging that there were many differences between the Chinese and American peoples, he said that both peoples could work together to build a peaceful world. Toward that end, he urged both sides to “start a long march together” toward a world structure built on peace and justice in which each nation would be free to determine its own form of government. Nixon then quoted 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.” Nixon then raised his glass in toast to Mao, Chou, and the friendship of the Chinese and American peoples. After this toast, he stepped down from the stage and did the same round of individual toasts at the important tables that Chou En-lai had performed.²⁸

I have taken the time to describe in detail the events of the Nixon visit’s first day because the reality of those events is often sharply at variance with what John Adams depicts in the opera. In the first act, while the welcome at the Beijing airport is depicted essentially (and excitingly) as it happened – except, of course, for Nixon’s aria “News,” about the importance of the news cycle and how it can make history – the depiction of the meeting with Mao and the toasts at the banquet bear a more tenuous resemblance to reality. Based on the second scene in Act I, you would think that Mao had conducted a rambling monologue about the evils of capitalism, and after getting this off his chest, collapsed into his chair. In fact, however, Mao was alert and considerably more elliptical in some of his responses; he was also more cordial to Nixon than his character as depicted in the opera. While Nixon the president had difficulty drawing Mao into a substantive discussion of issues such as the Soviet Union, Nixon the opera character has difficulty getting a word in edgewise!

The same is true of the banquet scene, which is final scene in the first act. After a realistic depiction of Chou offering his toast (although his character’s words are more wistful than they actually were), Adams moves into a more fantastical world with Nixon’s responsive toast. The President sings at first about his fixation with the powers of satellite technology. The pace then picks up when Nixon quotes Mao’s line about “seizing the day”. The guests at the banquet then toast each other energetically, and perhaps overcome by too much mao-tai, Nixon sings apologetically, “I opposed China; I was wrong.” The real Nixon never said this and would never have said this; his actual

²⁸ *Id.* at 155-58.

response to Chou's toast was as carefully choreographed as anything on the trip. In the opera, the exultant air created by Nixon's statement about the change in his views continues as the curtain comes down.

The second act of the opera zeroes in on two events during the visit that led to a lot of memorable pictures. The first scene is devoted to Pat Nixon's visits to a glass factory, a communal farm and the Summer Palace, and the second scene to a ballet that the Nixons attended at the behest of Mao's wife, Jiang Qing. In the first scene, Mrs. Nixon – dressed in her red coat – wakes up to music suggesting she has had trouble sleeping and she ruminates on her life, noting that she came from a poor family, that trivial things are not for her, and that she tries to “treat each day like Christmas.” The Chinese take her first to a glass factory, where she is presented with a green elephant, which she sings is “the symbol of our party.” She then visits the commune, where she is asked to stroke a pig. Finally, she is taken to the Summer Palace and its grounds, where she says, “this is prophetic. Why regret life which is so much like a dream?” Eventually a large stone elephant appears on the stage, while a chorus of guides chants in a way that suggests the proletarian masses.

The second scene in Act II is the ballet, which Mao's wife – a hardliner who had been strongly anti-American in the past – presented for the presidential party. In addition to its colorful subject matter, Adams may have chosen to dramatize this because so many 19th Century operas, especially the French ones, include a ballet. The subject of this ballet is a peasant girl who is tied to a post and about to be whipped. Suddenly, the villainous landlord appears, and he is none other than Henry Kissinger! After he attempts to molest the peasant girl, she gets loose and kicks him, and he runs away, to music that evokes Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. After a few moments the landlord Kissinger reenters with a sword and strikes the peasant girl. At this point, Pat Nixon, who has been watching the ballet quietly with the official party, says the landlord resembles “you know who.” When the landlord orders the peasant girl to be whipped to death, Pat intercedes!

As Pat cradles the girl in her arms, the President removes his jacket, since it is raining, and the curtains close. After a short, angry aria by Jiang Qing, the curtains reopen and a soldier comes and gets the girl, who is given a red drink that revives her. The Nixons then leave the stage as the landlord Kissinger reenters, saying he has come “to liaise with the backroom boys, who know how to live.” Nixon himself reappears in the rear, talking to the backroom boys. After Jiang Qing angrily shouts “it's your cue,” the peasant girl shoots the landlord Kissinger. Jiang Qing then sings another angry aria, “I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung,” in which she insists that the people hang on her every word, but that she speaks only “according to the book,” holding aloft a copy of Mao's Little Red Book. As she does this, a scene reminiscent of pictures from the Great Cultural Revolution unfolds on the stage, as people wearing dunce caps and signs with slogans are kicked around by members of the ballet corps. The dancer playing the peasant girl appears terrified of Jiang Qing, on whom Chou En-lai casts a contemptuous stare. This is the scene as the curtain comes down.

Needless to say, the reality that inspired the two scenes in Act II was quite different. Pat Nixon had studied Chinese culture in preparation for the trip, including reading some of Mao's poetry and selected portions of the Little Red Book. She was also a good team player, so she appeared to enjoy the places she visited. When she visited the pig farm, for example, she asked what breed of pig she was seeing. When a female journalist snapped "male chauvinist," Mrs. Nixon laughed like everyone else. When she was shopping for souvenirs and the shopkeepers showed her some expensive jewelry, she quickly put it down before she could be photographed.²⁹

The ballet scene in the opera is, obviously, also a fantasy. As Max Frankel pointed out in his commentary on the Met's 2011 production, the Kissinger he knew "from years of professional contact is just a wee bit more fascinating and complicated than the lecherous lackey" depicted by Adams. In 1972, Chou En-lai had warned the Nixons about what they were going to see, saying obliquely that "it was difficult to combine classical ballet with revolutionary themes." The actual ballet did depict virtuous revolutionaries and evil landlords on Hainan Island, but no one – and especially not the First Lady – was moved to intercede. Although the President found Jiang Qing to be "unpleasantly abrasive and aggressive" as she questioned him upon his arrival for the performance, he enjoyed the ballet, and thought it had high production values.³⁰

After the meeting with Mao on the first day, Nixon devoted the great majority of his time to discussions with Chou En-lai and his own personal staff. Nixon considered most sight-seeing a waste of time, and left that task largely to his wife. However, as we know from the famous photographs, the President did visit the Great Wall and the Ming Tombs on February 24, and the Forbidden City on the 25th, his last full day in Beijing. The presidential party then flew on to Hangzhou, and after a day there, to Shanghai, where they worked late into the night to arrive at the final wording of the Shanghai Communique, the official communique concerning the Nixon visit.

A brief word is in order about the Shanghai Communique. When the State Department people on the trip finally saw the draft document, they realized that its language affirming U.S. defense commitments with various Asian nations was going to create trouble, because Taiwan was not specifically mentioned. They pointed out that the omission would create major problems with Taiwan's supporters in the U.S., and would raise questions in the minds of many countries about whether the U.S. was about to back away from its longstanding defense treaty with the Nationalist Chinese government of Taiwan. Kissinger was furious when he heard this objection, and initially Nixon was upset with the State Department, too, but after a conversation with Secretary Rogers, the President recognized that it was not a trivial problem. The solution was that the communique's language was changed to refer to an affirmance of U.S. defense commitments in Asia generally, and then at a press briefing, Kissinger was asked a planted question about whether the general affirmance included Taiwan, and he

²⁹ *Id.* at 277-78.

³⁰ *Id.* at 278, 282-83.

responded that it did. The Chinese were somewhat upset by the request for last-minute changes in the communique, which had already been approved by both sides, but after some bargaining, they agreed to them.³¹

Concluding Thoughts on the Nixon Visit and the Opera

John Adams's opera about the Nixon trip to China, like the trip itself, was groundbreaking in many respects. It broke a long-standing taboo about depicting people who are still alive in an opera,³² its characterization of Kissinger was at the edge of reasonable artistic license, and its rather traditional score filled with tonal harmonies and regular pulses was considered by the composer to be "ultra-American."³³ The opera's vivid and familiar story, combined with its elegant neo-classic music, has earned it a well-deserved place in the modern repertoire.

The opera's third act closes with Dick and Pat Nixon and Mao and his wife expressing affection for each other and reliving old times: in Nixon's case, his service during World War II, and in Mao's, the exertions of the Long March and the Chinese civil war. Chou En-Lai wonders what they have all accomplished. As we have seen, neither Nixon, Mao, nor Chou was that sentimental; all these leaders recognized above all the need for their countries to have a normal diplomatic relationship with each other. Today, more than 40 years later, we not only have a normal diplomatic relationship with China, but it is arguably the most important such relationship we have. That fact will, I hope, cause future generations to look behind Adams's powerful work of art to study the complex facts that, in 1972, led to the thaw in the Sino-American relationship.

³¹ *Id.* at 308-12, 314; Bundy at 305-06. The full text of the Shanghai Communique appears in MacMillan at 341-44.

³² Roger Parker, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 347.

³³ The Earl of Harewood & Antony Peattie, eds., *The New Kobbe's Opera Book* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1997), p. 3.