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Kristopher C. Erskine. "American Public Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics: The Genesis of the China Lobby in the United States, and how Missionaries Shifted American Foreign Policy between 1938 and 1941." *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 25:1 (2018): 33-59.

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Review by **T.J. Park**, West Virginia State University

In the history of Sino-American relations, whereas the Christian mission had long been a legitimate vehicle through which Americans could influence the Chinese public, the Chinese had no comparable instrument for influencing the American public. If anything, there was a skewed propaganda movement in the United States during the 1940s known as the 'China lobby.' But the façade of the China lobby was usually American because the Chinese relied on their American friends who were willing to work on behalf of them. This pattern had its origin in the years preceding World War II. Although there was hardly any conspicuous China lobby activity targeting the U.S. public at large, China's propaganda took a form of humanitarian campaign led by Americans with missionary backgrounds. Kristopher Erskine offers a valuable study on this early state of the China lobby. He argues that the American Committee for Non-Participation in Japanese Aggression (ACNPJA), an American voluntary group seeking to enact discriminatory trade embargoes on Japan, in effect served as a propaganda arm of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese government in the late 1930s. According to him, the ACNPJA was an early form of the China lobby in the United States that helped reshape American public opinion to the effect of imposing trade embargoes against Japan in 1940-1941.

Erskine's argument itself is not new. However, what makes his article distinctive is his ability to unfold the murky aspects of the early China lobby during the years of 1937-1938. By utilizing both American and Chinese sources, Erskine reveals that, shortly after the Japanese had launched the Second Sino-Japanese War in July 1937, Chinese propaganda officials Hollington Tong and Zeng Xubai planned to set up propaganda networks in the United States through two foreign journalists, Harold J. Timperley and Earl H. Leaf. In 1938, two China-born American brothers, Frank W. and Harry B. Price, joined the networks and formed the ACNPJA with a specific goal of ending or restricting U.S. sale of war materials to Japan. Erskine details how the Price brothers organized the ACNPJA along the direction provided by Tong and Leaf, who recruited them as propagandists.

Erskine therefore challenges the accounts of the ACNPJA provided in earlier studies. Donald J. Friedman's *Road from Isolation: The Campaign of the American Committee for Non-Participation in Japanese Aggression, 1938-1941* (1967) had been the only study exclusively focusing on the ACNPJA's campaign.¹ According to Friedman, the ACNPJA had little or no linkage to the Chinese government in view of its agenda and operation. Warren I. Cohen's study in 1973 also maintained that, despite some Chinese involvement, there was no conclusive evidence to indicate that the ACNPJA was inspired by Chinese authorities.² Erskine provides contrary evidence. His use of Chiang Kai-shek's files and Zeng Xubai's autobiography helps convince the reader that the Chinese Ministry of Information had crafted a detailed policy on propaganda in the United States as early as February 1938, which anticipated the formation of the ACNPJA through Frank Price. Frank and his brother Harry, however, had identified their group as an 'American committee' when they established it in late 1938 in order to distinguish it from China's official propaganda outlets and to avoid the registration required by the Foreign Agents Registration Act which Congress passed in June of that year. The ACNPJA thus appeared to stand apart from other foreign propaganda groups.

A highlight of Erskine's study appears on pages 46-47, where he explains Harry Price's decision to circumvent the registration required for any lobbying group working for a foreign principal. Harry, who managed the ACNPJA's propaganda campaign in the United States as the group's executive director, justified this evasion of the Foreign Agents Registration Act by insisting that his committee accepted American contributions only and refused contributions from Chinese or any other foreign sources. In order to identify the ACNPJA as an American lobbying group, Harry ensured that the committee's board consist entirely of American citizens, including two former State Department officials, Henry L. Stimson and Roger S. Greene. In addition, Harry secured a sponsorship from Stanley K. Hornbeck, then a most influential official in the State Department on Far Eastern affairs. However, as Erskine points out, Chinese influence on the ACNPJA continued through Frank Price, who regularly channeled directives and materials from the Chinese Ministry of Information to his brother. Erskine adds that although Harry declined direct financial contributions from the Chinese, Chinese funding went through the ACNPJA's local chapters or cooperating committees.

Erskine then analyzes and assesses the ACNPJA's propaganda campaign and its effectiveness in the United States. The ACNPJA provided 2.3 million pieces of literature in eleven kinds of publications between August 1938 and February 1941, targeting selected individuals and groups of significant influence in American society. He tells how the ACNPJA utilized its networks with other anti-isolationist lobbying groups as well as corporate consulting publicity consultant agencies to maximize the effectiveness of its propaganda campaign. Erskine rightly points out that the ACNPJA was the only influential group voicing moral concerns about America's material contributions to Japanese aggression in China. While admitting that the ACNPJA's impact on public opinion is hard to assess in quantitative terms, he links it to the U.S. decision to abrogate the Commercial Treaty with Japan in July 1939 and the passage of the National Defense Act in June 1940. As evidence to support the impact of the ACNPJA, he draws on congressional records and a few statements of the Price brothers and U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull.

¹ Donald J. Friedman, *The Road from Isolation: The Campaign for the American Committee for Non-participation in Japanese Aggression, 1938-1941* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

² Warren I. Cohen, "The Roles of Private Groups in the United States," in Dorothy Bog and Shumpei Okamoto, eds., *Pearl Harbor as History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 436.

Erskine contends that the ACNPJA helped cause a consequential impact on U.S. opinion and policy: “Had it not been for pressure groups like the ACNPJA and its 81 cooperating committees, isolationist public opinion in the United States might have prevented the U.S. government from placing an embargo on Japan, which could have reshaped the strategic circumstances before and during World War II and the political landscape of postwar Asia.” (54) It is, however, questionable whether concerns about the Asian conflict posed any serious challenge to the so-called ‘isolationist’ opinion that was focused on the events in Europe. Public sympathy with Great Britain, which was cultivated by propaganda networks much larger than the ANCPJA’s, did not translate into public approval of a policy risking war until the time of Pearl Harbor. The policy on trade embargoes against Japan was a security issue that might have developed separately from public opinion. Several major studies on this topic indicate that it is entirely possible to explain U.S. economic warfare on Japan as a matter concerning Washington bureaucrats without linking it to any outside public pressure.³ This is a topic that is far more complicated and larger than the issue of ACNPJA’s impact on public opinion.

Erskine includes too many aspects of his topic for a single article. As a result, it leaves a couple of propositions that it posited largely unexplained. His narrative gives little hint of the thinking of Washington officials about the Asian conflict and why “Nationalist China’s use of missionaries for this purpose [China lobby in the U.S.] was a realization borne of despair.” (34) What was America’s policy toward China that made China desperate enough to send out missionaries as its propagandists? The article’s focus is not on this political background. Instead, it emphasizes the publicity role of China missionaries on furlough in relation to the ordinary churchgoing people in the United States. Given the fact that most American spokespersons for China at that time were missionaries or their children, the church may have played the role of ‘social media’ concerning China. The article begins and ends by referring to this interesting phenomenon. It concludes that the “shift in public opinion was the consequence of thousands of American missionaries furloughing across the United States, week in and week out, thrilling pew sitters with stories of adventure, stories of salvation, and stories of hope.” (57-58) However, the article offers only a glimpse of how this missionary publicity of the church was related to the ACNPJA’s campaign.

Despite a couple of issues indicated above, this article is certainly a positive contribution to the historiography of Sino-American relations because it convincingly argues that the ACNPJA was a de facto China lobby agency inspired and directed, albeit informally through American intermediaries, by Chinese authorities. To make this point, Erskine seems to have looked into almost all relevant sources, including not only the papers of the ACNPJA, Roger Greene, and Stanley Hornbeck but also the declassified files of the U.S. Justice Department and the Chiang Kai-shek files at Academia Historica in Taiwan. His research on this matter is substantial and thorough. It is also noteworthy that, as he argues, the aims of this early China lobby were humanitarian rather than political. In a sense, the ACNPJA was the first organized attempt to forge a coalition of American missionaries and China lobbyists. In 1941, the missionaries and China lobbyists launched another coalition called the United China Relief. Until the end of World War II, their propaganda efforts were indeed focused on a humanitarian agenda. It is necessary to distinguish this early China lobby from the later China lobby that was overtly politicized during the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War.

³ See Michael A. Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987); Jonathan G. Utey, *Going to War with Japan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); Edward S. Miller, *Bankrupting the Enemy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007).

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