Foreword

This book is important for three main reasons. First, it enhances our understanding of one of the most important bilateral relationships of our era. Sino-American relations have moved in regular cycles between periods of hostility and somewhat grudging coexistence since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Most of the rest of the world has been affected by the changing state of those relations: they have had a major impact on regional security, on great power alignments, and on the central norms of the global system that involve matters of war and peace.

In the early twenty-first century, we have arrived at a point where the relationship is perceived to have stabilized. For some, it warrants the description that it is the best it has ever been, or at least the best since President Nixon’s landmark visit to China in 1972. Dr. Goh’s study offers an opportunity to reflect on that comparison, usefully reminding us of some of the factors that contribute to a continuing fragility in those bilateral ties. Above all, her work helps us to understand what has made it possible for negative U.S. images of China to be transformed into descriptions of the country that are positive enough to permit bilateral cooperation in the three major domains of security, economics, and culture.

Second, the study is particularly valuable because of its approach. In the past, the relationship between these two countries has almost entirely been examined through a realist lens, with shifts in the balance of power regarded as the key to explaining how periods of conflict have given way to eras of cooperation. Dr. Goh’s book, however, shows that there were several options available to U.S. administrations as they struggled to make sense of the opportunities provided by the Sino-Soviet split. Instead of relying on balance-of-power logic, she takes the ideas that underpinned
U.S. arguments for reconciliation with China seriously and shows how debates about the nature of the Chinese state and its capabilities provided openings for significant adjustments in the direction of U.S. policy. The study therefore tells us a great deal about the process of policy change, about how new pathways can be laid to assist in the reversal of previously deeply entrenched policy stances.

By drawing with great skill on the archival material that has steadily been declassified in the United States over the last decade or so, Dr. Goh demonstrates convincingly how China’s identity was redefined over the course of several U.S. administrations. Her interpretive approach underscores the point that sensitivity to the historical record can productively be married with international relations concepts – in this instance, particularly with the conceptual insights that come from constructivism. This has allowed her to offer an illuminating and strikingly new interpretation of this bilateral relationship, and to present it in such a way as to appeal to a wider audience than would otherwise have been the case. Certainly, she can be credited with encouraging beneficial interdisciplinary dialogue.

Finally, I come to the author herself. I first met Dr. Goh when she became an M.Phil. student in international relations at the University of Oxford. As she moved into research for her D.Phil., I had the privilege and pleasure of working with a capable and promising student and of watching her fulfill her potential as a scholar worthy of joining the academy. Evelyn was one of the most stimulating and rewarding of the students whom I have supervised – independent of spirit, tenacious in following through her arguments, and always setting herself the highest of standards. This book is based on her earlier doctoral research, but it represents a significant deepening of that earlier treatment of the Sino-American relationship, rounding out the discussion of the Chinese side and reflecting with a new maturity on the wider significance of those bilateral encounters. It is her first book, but it will certainly not be the last in what I am sure will be a long and distinguished academic career.

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