



## Welcome to our February book, Historians!

Our first meeting of the spring is on Tuesday, February 6 at 6:30 to discuss *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom: America and China, 1776 to the Present* by John Pomfret. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century as he promoted the Open Door Policy toward China, Secretary of State John Hay said that China would be the most important country in the world for the next century. Henry Kissinger will echo this statement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Under President Obama, the United States will pivot toward Asia, ensuring that our preoccupation with China continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Why this fascination with China? As Pomfret explains in his overview of American-Chinese relations, both countries share a love-hate relationship that is uniquely ours, different from both countries' relationships with other parts of the globe.

Pomfret's own fascination with China began as an exchange student from Stanford, studying in China in 1980. It has continued through many years of living and working in China as a journalist for *The Washington Post*. Using both Chinese and American sources, *The Beautiful Country* seeks to give the American reader an overview of 250 years of dealings between the two countries. As Simon Winchester writes in his review of the book, "It is shown to be an acquaintanceship of bewildering complexity and capriciousness with periods of admiration interrupted by decades of suspicion, loathing, and fear." In short, can this relationship be saved?

Focusing on the stories of the people who have worked to create this special relationship, Pomfret is a wonderful storyteller. You will meet familiar names from the diplomatic and military worlds as well as little known figures who were instrumental in bringing American ideas to China and Chinese art, culture, and philosophy to the United States. And let's not forget that we have been important trading partners from the beginning. Squabbling over Chinese trade relations is not a new phenomenon.

Among the little-known figures that Pomfret introduces are men such as Frederick Townsend Ward who became the first foreign officer in the Qing army and thus the first in a long history of American involvement in Chinese military reforms. Adele Fielde was an American missionary who taught Chinese women to read as well as basic western hygiene and medical care. In fact, she is only one of the women doctors and teachers who flourished in China where their expertise was welcomed, unlike in 19<sup>th</sup> century United States where these same women were not allowed to do surgery in operating rooms or to teach in universities. Overall, you will be amazed at the many contributions that Americans made to Chinese society and that Chinese made to American society.

*The Beautiful Country* is a survey history, so feel free to skim and read more deeply in the parts that interest you the most. Our discussion will focus on those elements in the histories of both countries that have held us together and that have divided us over time. What changes and what remains the same? Of the people that Pomfret introduces you to, who surprises you and why? And what do you learn about US/Chinese relations that you did not know? For example, did you know that Mao Zedong admired Ben Franklin, George Washington, and Theodore Roosevelt?

Pomfret is an optimist who believes, like many before him in both countries, that it is possible for the United States and China to exist in "Great Harmony." Other historians and China hands have argued that the Chinese will always condescend toward the United States, seeing us as a barbarian upstart nation without proper respect for the thousands of years of Chinese history. What do you think? Join us for a fascinating discussion when we gather on Tuesday, February 6 at 6:30 for The Historians. I look forward to seeing you!

*Dr. Donna McBride*