

Book Review

A review of *The China Hands: America's Foreign Service Officers and What Befell Them* presented by Jim Steddum, Department of Leadership and Management, U.S. Army Warrant Officer Career College

Written by E.J. Kahn, Jr. Published by Viking Press, New York, N.Y. 1975. 337 pages.

E. J. Kahn Jr.'s, *The China Hands*, stands as a testament to Kahn's prowess as a journalist, WWII veteran, and historian. Kahn tells the overlooked stories of the American diplomats who played crucial roles in shaping U.S. policy towards China during and after World War II. He focuses on the experiences of a group of U.S. Foreign Service officers known as the "China Hands," who were stationed in China during a tumultuous period marked by the Chinese Civil War and the rise of communism under Mao Zedong. The book provides insight into the complex web of diplomatic relations, personal experiences, and political machinations with a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by these diplomats.

The historical context covered in "The China Hands" is crucial for understanding the evolution of U.S.-China relations. Kahn expertly navigates the period from the 1930s through the 1950s, encompassing the alliance between the U.S. and China during World War II, the subsequent Chinese Civil War, and the early years of the Cold War. This era saw dramatic shifts in U.S. policy towards China, from support for the Nationalist government to the severing of official ties following the Communist victory in 1949 and the subsequent marginalization of diplomats during the McCarthy era.

True to his reputation as a master storyteller, Kahn employs his signature anecdotal and detailed reporting style in "The China Hands." His approach, honed through decades of work at *The New Yorker*, combines rigorous research with engaging narrative prose. Kahn's ability to weave personal stories with broader historical events brings the "China Hands" to life, making their experiences accessible and relatable to readers still today.

The book is fifty years old in 2025. While the book may seem irrelevant, readers will gain a historical perspective as well as a better understanding of history itself. Said differently, the study of history is as important as the study of the perspectives of history over time. Most Soldiers today would not know that Soldiers were stationed in China during WWII as described by Kahn, who was appointed Warrant Officer in the early 1940s. As a War Correspondent, Kahn fought for his country and fought to preserve history through journalism and writing; a true Harding fellow.

The China Hands remains highly relevant in the context of contemporary U.S.-China relations. Kahn's work provides valuable historical perspective on the roots of this complex relationship. The book's exploration of how individual diplomats can influence foreign policy resonates with current debates about expertise and decision-making in international relations. Moreover, the themes of ideological conflict, misunderstanding, and the personal costs of diplomatic service explored in "The China Hands" continue to be pertinent in today's geopolitical landscape. The book serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of allowing domestic political pressures to overshadow nuanced foreign policy approaches, a lesson that remains relevant in current U.S.-China relations.

