

Canada and China: A Fifty-Year Journey

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There are actually two journeys that Bernie Frolic takes us on in this book. One is a well-crafted history of the relationship between Canada and the People's Republic of China during the 50 years following the establishment of diplomatic relations in October 1970. Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's decision in 1968 to recognize the PRC turned out to be a development of historic proportions, since the so-called "Canadian formula" that Chinese and Canadian diplomats negotiating the terms of Canada's formal recognition stumbled upon triggered a wave of recognitions by other states, and eventually led to the PRC being seated at the United Nations. The journey ends a half-century later, with the Canada–China relationship in a deep freeze as the result of the Canadian government's decision in 2018 to arrest Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Huawei Technologies Ltd., on an extradition request from the United States, and the Chinese government's tit-for-tat arrests of two Canadian citizens in China on charges of espionage.

Frolic explores this 50-year relationship in a novel but effective way: by examining ten key stories that illustrate how the relationship evolved over time. Those stories are told using what Frolic calls three "narratives." One "narrative" is that of the Canadian government. Frolic was granted unusual access to unreleased government files; in addition, he was able to interview an extraordinary range of Canadian policy-makers, including prime ministers, foreign ministers, all 15 Canadian ambassadors to the PRC during this period, and other diplomats and officials. The files and his interviewees enabled Frolic to write what will be the authoritative history of this period that will stand at least until the full release of all the files in another two decades. The second "narrative" is the Chinese perspective, using Frolic's many sources in the PRC, and the interviews he conducted with Chinese officials.

But the third "narrative" is his own perspective – and that is the other journey that Frolic takes us on. For his own journey tracked these 50 years. He was not only a student of Chinese politics and Canada–China relations, but also a participant-observer. He travelled frequently to China, to undertake research and to administer aspects of Canadian policy towards China. He was engaged by the Canadian International Development Agency and the Ontario provincial government to help deliver government-funded programmes in China. Then, for 20 years he ran a York University training programme for officials, educators and businesspeople from the PRC. During these 50 years, he kept a diary, which is frequently quoted in the book. Frolic's own narrative means that this book is more than a history; it is a history interlaced with a very personal telling.

Frolic's history reveals the degree to which the journey was, for Canadians, an essentially emotional one. It is clear from this history that many Canadians were emotionally invested in the relationship: some keen to make the relationship work, some keen to profit from the opportunities that China's rise presented, some convinced that economic engagement would liberalize the country, and some keen to change China. It is perhaps this emotional attachment that explains why in the last five years Canadian policy-makers have had such a difficult time in shaping a coherent Canadian policy towards China. For while Canadian public opinion has swung remarkably in the last ten years, many Canadians – in government, in business, in politics and in academia – have continued to be emotionally attached to a vision of Canada as a *lao pengyou* – an old friend – of

China, and as a result have struggled mightily with the shifting geostrategic realities unfolding in contemporary global politics – specifically, the sharpening of great-power rivalry between China and the US.

Frolic's 50-year journey comes to an end before the government of Justin Trudeau launched a new chapter in the relationship. In the autumn of 2022, Ottawa formally shifted its China policy, bringing Canada more into line with the US. Announcing this shift, Canada's foreign minister, Mélanie Joly, recalled the efforts of Trudeau *père* to bring China into global institutions in 1970. But, she said, "the China of 1970 is not the China of today. China is an increasingly disruptive global power. It seeks to shape the global environment into one that is more permissive for interests and values that increasingly depart from ours." The harder line suggests that that in the next stage of the relationship, Canadians will no longer be so emotionally invested in the relationship. The story of this next phase of the relationship will eventually be told. But in the meantime, the journey that Frolic has taken us on will stand as the definitive account of the first 50 years of diplomatic relations between Canada and the PRC.

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