The Myth of America’s “Lost Chance” in China: A Chinese Perspective in Light of New Evidence

Did there exist a chance in 1949–50 for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the United States to reach an accommodation or, at least, to avoid a confrontation? Scholars who believe that Washington “lost a chance” to pursue a non-confrontational relationship with the CCP generally base their argument on two assumptions—that the Chinese Communists earnestly sought U.S. recognition to expedite their country’s postwar economic reconstruction and that the relationship between the CCP and the Soviet Union was vulnerable because of Moscow’s failure to offer sufficient support to the Chinese Revolution. These scholars thus claim that it was Washington’s anti-Communist and pro-Guomindang (the Nationalist party or GMD) policy that forced the CCP to treat the United States as an enemy. This claim, though seemingly critical of Washington’s management of relations with China, is ironically American centered, implying that the CCP’s policies toward the United States were simply passive reactions to what Washington was doing toward China. This essay, with insights gained from new Chinese and, in some places, Russian materials, argues that, in the final analysis, the CCP’s confrontation with the United States originated in the Party’s need to enhance the inner dynamics of the Chinese Revolution after its nationwide victory, and that from a Chinese perspective, no chance existed for Communist China and the United States to reach an accommodation in 1949–50.

Contrary to the assumption of the advocates of the “lost chance” thesis, Chinese materials now available demonstrate that in 1949–50, Mao Zedong and the CCP leadership were unwilling to pursue Western recognition, let alone to establish diplomatic relations with Western countries. In November 1948, shortly after Communist troops occupied Shenyang (Mukden), the largest city in China’s northeast (Manchuria), the CCP leadership initiated a policy of “squeezing out” (jizhou) American and other Western diplomats in the “liberated zone.” A Central Committee telegram (drafted by

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Zhou Enlai) to the party's Northeast Bureau on 10 November maintained that because the British, American, and French governments had not recognized Chinese Communist authorities, the CCP would not grant official status to their diplomats, treating them as common foreigners without diplomatic immunity. The telegram further instructed the Northeast Bureau to take “certain measures” to confine the “freedom of action” of the Western diplomats, so that “they will have to withdraw from Shenyang.”1 On 17 November, Mao Zedong instructed Gao Gang, the CCP leader in the northeast, to act resolutely to force the British, American, and French diplomats out of Shenyang.2 The next day, Mao authorized the Communists in Shenyang to seize the radio transmitters in the Western consulates.3 When the Americans refused to hand over their radio equipment to Communist authorities, the Communists, following Soviet advice, placed Angus Ward, the American consul, and his staff under house detention on 20 November and would not allow them to leave China until December 1949.4

The CCP’s challenge to Western presence in Shenyang resulted in part from immediate concerns that Western diplomats might use their radio transmitters to convey military intelligence to the GMD in the ongoing Chinese civil war.5 But, in a deeper sense, the challenge reflected the Party leadership’s determination to “make a fresh start” in China’s external relations, which required the Party to “clean the house before entertaining guests,” as well as to “lean to one side” (the side of the Soviet Union).6

The above three principles became the guidelines of Communist China’s early diplomacy. In a telegram to the Northeast Bureau on 23 November 1948, the CCP Central Committee expounded its view that the Party would refuse to recognize diplomatic relations between the GMD government and the West.7 In the Central Committee’s “Directive on Diplomatic Affairs” of 19 January 1949, Mao Zedong declared that “with no exception will we recognize any of those embassies, legations, and consulates of capitalist countries, as well as the diplomatic establishments and personnel attached

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1. CCP Central Committee to CCP Northeast Bureau, 10 November 1948. Part of the telegram is published in Jin Chongji et al., Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1898–1949 [A chronicle of Zhou Enlai] (Beijing, 1989), 796. The unpublished part of the telegram, the part concerning “squeezing out” Western diplomats in Shenyang, can be found in Chinese Central Archives, Beijing (hereafter CCA).
2. Mao Zedong to Gao Gang, 17 November 1948, CCA.
3. Mao Zedong to Gao Gang, 18 November 1948, CCA.
5. For a discussion see ibid., 154–55.
to them accredited to the GMD.” The directive also made clear that the CCP would treat American and Soviet diplomats differently “as the foreign policy of the Soviet Union and the other new democratic countries has differed totally from that of the capitalist countries.” 8 At the Central Committee’s Second Plenary Session in March 1949, the CCP leadership reached the consensus that the new Chinese Communist regime should neither hastily seek recognition from, nor pursue diplomatic relations with, the United States and other Western countries. “As for the question of the recognition of our country by the imperialist countries,” asserted Mao, “we should not be in a hurry to solve it now and need not be in a hurry to solve it even for a fairly long period after country-wide victory.” 9 During 1949–50, CCP leaders repeatedly emphasized that establishing diplomatic relations with the United States or other Western countries was not a priority. 10

As is well known, after the Chinese Communists occupied Nanjing, the capital of Nationalist China, in late April 1949, John Leighton Stuart, the American ambassador to China, remained. In May and June, Stuart held a series of meetings with Huang Hua, director of the Foreign Affairs Office under the Communist Nanjing Municipal Military Control Commission. They discussed, among other things, conditions on which relations between the CCP and the United States might be established. 11 In the meantime, CCP leaders asserted on several occasions that if Western capitalist countries cut off their connections with the GMD and treated China and the Chinese people as “equals,” the CCP would be willing to consider establishing relations with them. 12 Advocates of the “lost chance” thesis use these exchanges and statements to support their position.

It is true that for a short period in the spring of 1949, Mao and the CCP leadership showed some interest in having contacts with the United States, which, we now know, was probably triggered by a secret message Stuart sent to the CCP through his personal friend Chen Mingshu, a pro-

Communist “democratic figure.” A previously unknown memorandum kept at the Chinese Central Archives indicates that on 25 and 26 March, Stuart had two secret meetings with Chen in Shanghai. The American ambassador, according to the memorandum, expressed two major concerns on the part of the United States: “(1) that the CCP might attach itself to the side of the Soviet Union in a confrontation with the United States . . . , and (2) that the CCP, after unifying China by force, would stop its cooperation with the democratic figures and give up a democratic coalition government.” Stuart promised that “if a genuine coalition government committed to peace, independence, democracy and freedom was to be established in China and if the CCP would change its attitude toward the United States by, among other things, stopping the anti-American campaign” the United States would be willing to “maintain friendly relations with the CCP and would provide the new government with assistance in new China’s economic recovery and reconstruction.”

After receiving Chen Mingshu’s report, Mao and the CCP leadership speculated that because “the old U.S. policy of supporting the GMD and opposing the CCP has failed,” Washington “is turning toward adopting a policy of establishing diplomatic relations with us.” As long-time players of the “united front” strategy, Mao and his comrades were determined to stick to their principles, but they could not at the same time ignore an opportunity to weaken the threat from enemies and potential enemies. Mao therefore authorized Huang Hua’s May–June contacts with Stuart, instructing him “to listen more and talk less.” The CCP chairman also made clear that unless the Americans were willing to sever relations with the GMD and to treat China equally, the CCP would not consider having relations with the United States.

In retrospect, these two conditions were impossible for the Americans to meet. Fulfilling the first condition, cutting off connections with the GMD, would require the complete turnover of America’s China policy since the

13. Memorandum, “Mr. Chen Mingshu’s Report on American Ambassador’s Secret Visit to Shanghai,” 26 March 1949, CCA. The secret meetings between Stuart and Chen Mingshu and the statements made by Stuart as reported in the memorandum are previously unknown. They cannot be confirmed by currently available American sources. This suggests that Stuart may have gone beyond the authorization of the State Department in an effort to provoke a CCP response that would help bring about a Sino-American accommodation.


15. As far as the timing of Stuart’s message is concerned, one should keep in mind that the PLA was preparing to cross the Yangzi River and “liberate” Nanjing and Shanghai, China’s largest industrial and commercial center. The CCP leadership worried that this movement would result in America’s military intervention and was eager to find ways to reduce its possibility. For a more detailed analysis see Chen Jian, China’s Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation (New York, 1994), 52–53.

16. CCP Central Committee to CCP Nanjing Municipal Committee, 10 May 1949, in Zhang and Chen, eds., Chinese Communist Foreign Policy and the Cold War in Asia, doc. 2.24.
end of World War II, and realizing the second, treating the Chinese as “equals,” presented the Americans with a profound challenge in a historical-cultural sense. Indeed, Mao viewed “equality” as a historical problem, pointing out that Sino-American relations had been dominated by a series of unequal treaties since China’s defeat in the Opium War of 1839–1842. He believed that in a moral sense the United States and other Western powers owed the Chinese a heavy debt. As the first step toward establishing an equal relationship, he argued, the United States had to end, as well as apologize for, its “unequal” treatment of China. Only when the historical phenomenon of unequal exchanges between China and the West ended would it be possible for the new Chinese Communist regime to establish relations with Western countries. So, Mao’s definition of “equality” meant a total negation of America’s roles in China’s modern history and also posed a crucial challenge to the existing principles of international relations followed by the United States and other Western countries. In Mao’s opinion, America’s willingness to change its attitude toward China represented a pass-or-fail test for policymakers in Washington, and he simply did not believe that they would pass the test.17

Thus, it is not surprising that the Huang-Stuart meetings failed to bring the CCP and the United States any closer. Stuart emphasized the legitimacy of American interests in China and tried to convince the Chinese Communists that they had to accept widely recognized international regulations and principles. Huang, on the other hand, stressed that the CCP’s two conditions were the prerequisites for any further discussion of establishing relations.18 In late June, with the Stuart-Huang contacts still under way, the CCP publicly charged Ward and his staff in Shenyang with espionage activities and then initiated a new wave of anti-American propaganda.19 When Stuart returned to the United States and the U.S. State Department published the China White Paper in August 1949, Mao personally directed an anti-American propaganda campaign in the CCP media, a central theme of which was that it did not matter if the Americans were unwilling to treat China and its people as equals because the Chinese people would gain their equality in the international community through their revolution.20

As the CCP’s relations with the United States reached an impasse, its relations with the Soviet Union grew closer. Indeed, new Chinese and Russian evidence reveals that the relationship between the CCP and Moscow in 1949 was much more intimate and substantial than many Western

17. Mao Zedong’s conclusion at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee, 13 March 1949, CCA.
President Harry S. Truman presides over a meeting of the National Security Council, January 1951. CREDIT: Harry S. Truman Library Collection.

scholars realized. While it is true that problems and disagreements (sometimes even serious ones) existed between the Chinese and Soviet Communists, as well as between Mao Zedong and Stalin (as in any partnership), the new evidence clearly points out that cooperation, or the willingness to cooperate, was the dominant aspect of CCP-Soviet relations in 1949.

During China's civil war in 1946–1949, the CCP's relations with Moscow were close but not harmonious.\(^1\) When it became clear that the Chinese Communists were going to win the civil war, both the CCP and the Soviet Union felt the need to further strengthen their relationship. From late 1947, Mao actively prepared to visit the Soviet Union to “discuss important domestic and international issues” with Stalin.\(^2\) The extensive telegraphic exchanges between Mao and Stalin resulted in two important secret missions in 1949. From 31 January to 7 February, Stalin sent Anastas Mikoyan, a Soviet Politburo member, to visit Xibaipo, CCP headquarters at that time. Mao and other CCP leaders had extensive discussions with him, introducing to him the CCP's strategies and policies. Mao particularly explained to Mikoyan the CCP's foreign policy of “making a fresh start” and “cleaning the house before entertaining guests.”\(^3\) From late June to mid-August, Liu Shaoqi, the CCP's second most important person, visited Moscow. During the visit, Stalin apologized for failing to give sufficient assistance to the CCP during the civil war and promised that the Soviet Union would give the Chinese Communists political support and substantial assistance in military and other fields. Moreover, the Soviets and the Chinese discussed a “division of labor” to promote the world revolution and reached

\(^1\) For a discussion see Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War*, 65–69.
a general consensus: While the Soviet Union would remain the center of the international proletarian revolution, promoting revolution in the East would become primarily China's duty. Liu left Moscow in mid-August, accompanied by ninety-six Russian experts who were to assist China's military buildup and economic reconstruction.\textsuperscript{24} Mikoyan's mission to China and Liu's visit to Moscow greatly promoted Sino-Soviet cooperation.\textsuperscript{25}

During this period, the CCP frequently exchanged opinions with Moscow on how to evaluate the "American threat" and how to deal with relations with the United States. In November 1948, the CCP Northeast Bureau accepted Soviet advice to seize the radio transmitters of the American consulate in Shenyang.\textsuperscript{26} Early in January 1949, when Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) and the GMD started a "peace initiative" to end the civil war, Mao originally intended to rebuff it completely. But, Stalin advised the CCP leaders that the Americans were behind Jiang and that it would better serve the Party's interests if, instead of simply rebuffing Jiang's proposals, it proposed its own conditions for ending the war through non-military means. (Stalin emphasized that the CCP should make these conditions unacceptable to Jiang.) After a few exchanges, Mao Zedong "completely agreed with" Stalin's opinions and acted accordingly.\textsuperscript{27} In the spring of 1949, Stalin warned the CCP about possible American landing operations in the People's Liberation Army's rear, convincing the CCP leadership to maintain a strategic reserve force in northern coastal China when the PLA's main force was engaged in the campaign of crossing the Yangzi (Yangtze) River.\textsuperscript{28} During Liu Shaoqi's visit to the Soviet Union in June–August 1949, the CCP presented to Stalin a detailed memorandum, summarizing the Party's domestic and, particularly, international policies (including policy toward the United States).\textsuperscript{29}

Particularly revealing are Mao's communications with Stalin on how the CCP should handle Huang Hua's contacts with Stuart. After receiving Chen Minshu's report about his secret meetings with Stuart in Shanghai, the CCP immediately informed Moscow of the contact.\textsuperscript{30} In a meeting with

\textsuperscript{24} For a detailed account of Liu's visit to Moscow see Shi She, "With Mao and Stalin: The Reminiscences of Mao's Interpreter, Part II: Liu Shaoqi in Moscow" (trans. Chen Jian), \textit{Chinese Historians} 6, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 67–90.

\textsuperscript{25} For a more detailed analysis see Chen Jian, \textit{China's Road to the Korean War}, 69–78.


\textsuperscript{27} The Russian originals of these telegrams between Stalin and Mao were published in the \textit{Journal of Modern and Contemporary History} (Moscow), no. 4–5 (1994): 133–39. For an English translation see "Communications between Mao and Stalin, Seven Telegrams, January 1949" (trans. Song Datu), \textit{Chinese Historians} 7, no. 1–2 (1994): 61–72.

\textsuperscript{28} Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, \textit{Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War} (Stanford, 1994), 43.

\textsuperscript{29} For the text of the memorandum see Zhang and Chen, eds., \textit{Chinese Communist Foreign Policy and Cold War in Asia}, doc. 2.31.

I.V. Kovalev, Stalin's representative to China, on 9 April 1949, Mao Zedong asked him to report to Stalin that the CCP was preparing to make minor adjustments in its foreign policy by conducting some "limited contacts" with Western capitalist countries, including the United States. But Mao also promised that the CCP would not formalize these contacts; nor would it legalize the relationship emerging from them. On 19 April, Stalin instructed Kovalev to advise Mao: "(1) We believe that China's democratic government should not refuse to establish formal relations with capitalist countries, including the United States, given that these countries formally abandon military, economic, and political support to Jiang and the GMD government. . . . (2) We believe that, under some conditions, [the CCP] should not refuse to accept foreign loans or to do business with capitalist countries." 31 During the Huang-Stuart meetings, Mao informed Stalin about the substance of the meetings, emphasizing that "it is unfavorable that the embassies of the United States and other [capitalist] countries remain in Nanjing, and we will be happy to see that these embassies of all capitalist countries get out of China." Stalin, while expressing his gratitude to Mao for informing him about the meetings, advised him that for tactical considerations, "we do not think this is the proper time for the Soviet Union and Democratic China to demonstrate extensively the friendship between them." 32

One may argue that when Mao informed Stalin of the contacts between the CCP and the United States, he might have been trying to pressure Stalin so that the Soviet Union would strengthen its support to the CCP. Yet, this interpretation cannot explain the extensive and substantive exchanges between the two Communist leaders concerning CCP-U.S. contacts. Judging from the contents of the Mao-Stalin exchanges, it is more logical to regard these exchanges as a means to strengthen the foundation of the relationship between the CCP and the Soviet Union. From a Chinese perspective, the CCP's "lean-to-one-side" policy was more than lip service.

IV

There is no doubt that Washington's continuous support of the GMD during China's civil war played an important role in the CCP's anti-American policy. But America's pro-Jiang policy alone does not offer a comprehensive explanation of the origins of the CCP-American confrontation. In order to comprehend the CCP's policy toward the United States, we must explore the historical-cultural environment in which it emerged, thus understanding the dynamics and logic underlying it.

The Chinese Communist Revolution emerged in a land that was historically known as the "Central Kingdom." The Chinese during traditional

32. Ibid.
times viewed China as civilization in toto. In modern times, this Chinese view of the world had been severely challenged when China had to face the cruel reality that its door was opened by the superior forces of Western powers, and that the very survival of the Chinese nation was at stake. The generation of Mao and his comrades became indignant when they saw Western powers, including the United States, treat the old, declining China with arrogance and a strong sense of superiority. They also despised the Chinese governments from the Manchu dynasty to the regimes of the warlords, which had failed to protect China’s national integrity and sovereignty. An emotional commitment to national liberation provided a crucial momentum in Mao and his comrades’ choice of a Marxist-Leninist style revolution. For Mao and his comrades, the final goal of their revolution was not only the total transformation of the old Chinese state and society they saw as corrupt and unjust; they would also pursue changing China’s weak power status, proving to the world the strength and influence of Chinese culture, and redefining the values and rules underlying the international system. In short, they wanted to restore China’s central position in the international community.

Therefore, Mao and his comrades never regarded the Communist seizure of power in China in 1949 as the revolution’s conclusion. Rather, Mao was very much concerned about how to maintain and enhance the revolution’s momentum after its nationwide victory. Indeed, this concern dominated Mao’s thinking during the formation of the People’s Republic and would occupy his primary attention during the latter half of his life. Consequently, Mao’s approach toward China’s external relations in general and his policy toward the United States in particular became heavily influenced by this primary concern. Throughout 1949–50, the Maoist discourse challenged the values and codes of behavior attached to “U.S. imperialism,” pointing out that they belonged to the “old world” that the CCP was determined to destroy. While defining the “American threat,” Mao and his fellow CCP leaders never confined their vision to the possibility of direct American military intervention in China; they emphasized long-range American hostility toward the victorious Chinese Revolution, especially the U.S. imperialist attempt to sabotage the revolution from within. Indeed, when Mao justified the CCP’s decision not to pursue relations with the United States, his most consistent and powerful argument was that doing so would deprive the Americans of a means of sabotaging the Chinese Revolution.

33. In actuality, after the PLA occupied Shanghai, Qingdao, and China’s other major coastal cities in the summer of 1949, Mao and the CCP leadership no longer regarded direct American military intervention as a real danger, although in open propaganda, the CCP would continue to call the Chinese people’s attention to it. For a more detailed discussion see Chen Jian, China’s Road to the Korean War, 16–17.

It is also important to point out that while Washington's hostility toward the Chinese Revolution offended Mao and his comrades, the perceived American disdain for China as weak and the Chinese as inferior made them angry. In the anti-American propaganda campaign following the publication of the *China White Paper*, Mao sought to expose the "reactionary" and "vulnerable" nature of U.S. imperialism and encourage the ordinary Chinese people's national self-respect. In other words, Mao changed the anti-American discourses into means of mobilizing the masses for his "continuous revolution," a practice that would reach its first peak during the "Great War of Resisting America and Assisting Korea" (the Chinese name of China's participation in the Korean War) in 1950–1953.

It is apparent that the CCP's adoption of an anti-American policy in 1949–50 had deep roots in China's history and modern experiences. Sharp divergences in political ideology (communism versus capitalism) and perceived national interests did contribute to the shaping of the Sino-American confrontation; and suspicion and hostility were further crystallized as the result of Washington's continuous support to the GMD and the CCP's handling of such events as the Ward case. But, from a Chinese perspective, the most profound cause underlying the CCP's anti-American policy lay in its connection to Mao's grand plans of transforming China's state, society, and international outlook, and the policy was made an integral component of these plans from the very beginning. Even though it might have been possible for Washington to change the concrete course of its China policy (which was highly unlikely given the policy's own complicated background), it would have been impossible for the United States to alter the processes and goals of the Chinese Revolution, let alone the historical-cultural environment that gave birth to it. America's "lost chance" in China must therefore be regarded as a myth.