SYMPOSIUM:
RETHINKING THE LOST CHANCE IN CHINA

INTRODUCTION: WAS THERE A "LOST CHANCE" IN CHINA?

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was much talk about the Truman administration having "lost" China to the Communists. However nonsensical the notion that the United States had lost a nation it had never possessed or controlled, it proved a handy device for those who would discredit the Truman-Marshall-Acheson policy toward China. Presumably, the United States could have prevented Mao Zedong's (Mao Tse-tung) victory over Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) had it supported Jiang’s regime more vigorously. Foreign Service critics of Jiang’s regime, such as John S. Service and John Paton Davies, were accused of being naive at best, Communist agents at worst—and driven out of the Department of State during the McCarthy era.

By the late 1960s, particularly in the context of America’s war in Vietnam, a new critique of Truman’s policy toward China emerged. Some analysts now claimed that the United States had missed an opportunity to reach an accommodation with the Chinese Communists (CCP): It had lost the chance for relations with Mao’s regime that might have preempted the Sino-Soviet alliance or at least avoided the confrontation in Korea and the impulse to contain China that underlay the American role in Vietnam. This was the “lost chance” argument to which this symposium is directed.

I was an early participant in the debate when, in 1967, I published a pair of articles attempting to understand the evolution of Chinese Communist foreign policy. Working with CCP documents captured by Jiang’s forces during the Chinese civil war, I concluded that there had been a chance for friendlier relations between the United States and the CCP, but that this was an unlikely outcome given the CCP's ideological links to the Soviet Union: The United States would have had to outbid the Soviets for Chinese friendship. Mine was a crude effort, based on a documentary record that was spotty—but because these were captured and unedited documents, they


were probably more reliable than those the Chinese government has selected and edited for publication in recent years.

A few years later, Joseph Esherick, a student of Chinese history, published a volume of Service's dispatches entitled *Lost Chance in China.* In his introduction he praised Service and his colleagues for urging the United States to avoid commitment to Jiang's moribund regime and prepare for accommodation with the CCP, likely victors in the civil war. He insisted that they were arguing for realism in American policy. Had their advice been followed, decades of hostility with the People's Republic of China (PRC) might have been avoided. But first Roosevelt and then Truman rejected their recommendations. The Truman administration threw away the opportunity to befriend peasant revolution in Asia.

My own struggle with the Chinese language and the unavailability of additional Chinese sources in the 1960s and 1970s led me to look at the American side as the documents relating to China became available. I found to my astonishment that Dean Acheson had understood that Jiang was

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doomed and had sought accommodation with the Chinese Communists, even to the point of persuading Truman to abandon Taiwan to avoid conflict with Mao’s regime. The turning point had come in November 1948, when George Marshall and his advisers concluded that a Communist victory in China was inevitable and that the goal of the United States should be to prevent China from becoming “an adjunct of Soviet power.” I presented my findings in an essay in Dorothy Borg and Waldo Heinrichs, eds., Uncertain Years: Chinese-American Relations, 1947–1950. A few years later, a more sophisticated and better documented argument of similar purport was presented by Nancy Berkopf Tucker in Patterns in the Dust: Chinese-American Relations and the Recognition Controversy, 1949–1950, giving rise to the notion of a “Tucker-Cohen thesis.” But a major question remained unanswered. If, as many of us had come to believe, the CCP sought to avoid dependence on the Soviet Union and was open to relations with the United States, and if, as Tucker and I argued, the Truman administration had sought accommodation, why did the United States not come to terms with Mao’s government? The most reasonable answer seemed to be domestic political restraints in the United States, plus misperception and miscalculation in both Beijing and Washington. Neither side understood the political imperatives of the other; neither side anticipated the Korean War.

In the Borg and Heinrichs volume, three leading students of Chinese foreign policy, Steven Goldstein, Michael Hunt, and Steven Levine, examined the Chinese side. Goldstein concluded that the ideological convictions of CCP leaders and the hostility of rank-and-file Communists embittered by American aid to Jiang’s forces precluded overtures from Beijing in 1940 and 1950. Hunt focused more sharply on Mao and argued that he was willing to suspend ideological judgments and respond rationally to the situation; that the real issue was the one Zhou Enlai (Chou En-lai) posed for Marshall: How far the PRC tilted toward the Soviet Union depended on what the United States had to offer. Levine noted that despite Mao’s mistrust of Stalin, he was not so alienated as to conceive of an alliance with the United States against the Soviet Union. CCP leaders had hoped to work with both


5. The notion was reinforced when Tucker and Cohen were married in 1988. Their critics were disappointed to learn that they had neither children nor pets named after Acheson.


7. In Hunt’s recent The Genesis of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy (New York, 1996), he finds Mao trying to demonstrate his loyalty to a mistrustful Stalin while simultaneously leaving room for relations with the United States.
countries, but once the Cold War developed, the CCP aligned with the Soviets. They would have liked formal contact and trade with the United States as well, but chose alliance with the Soviet Union in the face of an apparently hostile United States.

The analysis that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s suggested that both Chinese and American leaders were interested in and groping toward accommodation. A consensus seemed to develop around the idea that the Chinese were interested in contacts with the West to avoid dependence on the Soviet Union. Chinese leaders had to move cautiously because of Stalin’s suspicions of their loyalty. An alliance with the United States was inconceivable. China could not be weaned away from the Soviet Union. But a chance for civil political contacts and modest economic relations between the United States and China had existed—and was lost in 1949–50. Thomas J. Christensen develops this case neatly in a recent article. There may not have been a chance for friendship, but there was a chance for peaceful relations.

The challenge to the consensus that seemed possible among American specialists on Chinese-American relations in the 1980s came from China. In 1986 Chinese and American scholars met at a conference in Beijing to discuss relations between their countries from 1945 to 1955. American participants were surprised to hear many (but not all) of the Chinese present, diplomats as well as scholars, dismiss the lost chance idea as fanciful. They had not been interested in friendship with the United States in 1949. Interviews that I conducted with men and women who had worked closely with Zhou Enlai in the 1940s sounded the same theme. The United States was perceived as an implacable enemy by 1946, if not earlier, and friendly overtures toward Ambassador J. Leighton Stuart and others had been tactical, designed to avert a major military intervention by the Americans. It seemed clear that this was the party line in 1986, but was it true?

Over the next decade, analysis of the Chinese side dominated the discourse. The Chinese government released selected documents; a number of histories intended for internal distribution (neibu) were seen by American and European as well as Chinese scholars—many can be found in the United States. More recently a cascade of relevant documents has been poured upon us from the archives of the former Soviet Union, many telling stories conflicting with those put forth by the Chinese. Which of these documents is authentic? which representative? which reliable? In the 1990s, John Garver, Michael Hunt, Odd Arne Westad, and Chinese scholars, both those working in the United States, such as Chen Jian, Michael Sheng, Zhai

Qiang, and Zhang Shuguang, and mainland specialists, such as He Di and Niu Jun, have worked with many of the new documents—and come to interesting conclusions, some of which are presented in this symposium.

All of the essays that follow dismiss the lost chance thesis, although each conceptualizes that chance differently. Westad, a Norwegian scholar, complains that the whole argument over the lost chance is too U.S.-centered. Sheng vehemently rejects the idea of a Chinese-American alliance against the Soviet Union. Chen and Garver focus on the presumably more reasonable chance for diplomatic relations and trade—positions argued forcefully by Tucker and Hunt—and reject even the possibility of these limited contacts. Chen insists that anti-Americanism was integral to Mao's plans to transform China's state and society. He, Sheng, and Westad stress the close relationship between Mao and Stalin. All agree that Mao did not want an American connection in 1949. Garver contends that the Chinese knew that the United States was seeking accommodation and rejected American overtures. He also accepts the Tucker-Cohen thesis implicitly, noting that the U.S. archives reveal that the Truman administration did precisely what lost chance critics wanted it to do, to no avail.

As I write in February 1996, the lost chance idea seems to have been buried by recently released Chinese and Soviet documents, but I doubt that the debate is over. Hunt and Tucker are unconvinced. Someday scholars may gain access to Chinese and Russian archives comparable to that they enjoy (or complain about) in the United States and Great Britain and we all may feel a little surer then that we have learned the truth. For now, the new evidence, used carefully, critically, has given us more knowledge and a greater understanding of what was going on in Beijing and Moscow, as well as in Washington, in the 1940s and early 1950s. I, at least, am persuaded, as I have been for nearly twenty years, that the Americans tried to reach an accommodation with Mao's China in 1949 and 1950. There is general agreement that Mao was suspicious of the United States and hostile, both for ideological reasons and because of American efforts to prevent his victory from 1945 to 1948. Returning to the point made most recently by Thomas Christensen, I continue to believe there was room for a modest level of diplomatic and economic contact, as the United States had with Hitler's Germany in the 1930s and with Stalin's Soviet Union in the 1940s, a position with which I believe He Di and Niu Jun would be comfortable. But the idea that such contact would have developed into warmer, friendlier relations is belied by the current state of Chinese-American relations. Ideology matters now. It mattered in the 1940s. Americans would never be comfortable with a major power hostile to their political values. Chinese Communists would never trust American imperialists. This ideological difference was central to Cold War tensions generally—and certainly bodes ill for the future of Chinese-American relations. My greatest fear is that fifty years from now another generation of scholars will be arguing about how Beijing and Washington lost a chance for peace in the 1990s.