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Source: *The China Quarterly*, No. 137 (Mar., 1994), pp. 144-158

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the School of Oriental and African Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/655690>

Accessed: 29/11/2009 21:33

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The Most Respected Enemy: Mao Zedong's Perception of the United States*

He Di

Mao Zedong's key concern in his analysis of the United States was always how to estimate American influence on the survival and security of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and, after 1 October 1949, of the People's Republic of China (PRC). But on 21 February 1972, Richard Nixon, the first American president ever to set foot on Chinese soil, began what he called "the week that changed the world."¹ This was also perhaps the most significant day in the 200-year history of Sino-U.S. relations. To prepare for it Nixon read extensive background materials on China, listened to specialists' advice on how to deal with his Chinese counterparts, and even practised eating with chopsticks. Nevertheless, he still felt nervous, fearing that he might be subjected to the humiliation previously encountered by Western barbarians who had journeyed to the court of the Chinese Emperor in an earlier age.²

Nixon never imagined that within Beijing's Forbidden City, Mao Zedong, an old Chinese man who wielded immense power, was gripped by even greater anxiety as he awaited the arrival of his guest. For this eventful day, Mao put on a new suit and a new pair of shoes. His hair was freshly cut and his face cleanly shaved. Although he had been unwell for some time he clearly remembered that Nixon was to arrive, and he badgered his aides for details of the exact arrival time and subsequent schedule.

Suddenly, to everyone's surprise, Mao instructed his secretary to inform Premier Zhou Enlai that he wanted to meet Nixon straight away. Thus only three hours after Nixon's arrival at Beijing airport Zhou, hastily adjusting the schedule, collected him from the State Guest-house and escorted him to the Zhongnanhai to meet Mao.³ Nixon recalled that as soon as he entered Mao's study, his worries and anxieties vanished. "He stretched out his hand. So did I. He shook my hand for as long as about one minute."⁴ This one-minute handshake symbolized the end of hostilities between China and the United States that had begun more than

* I am grateful to Allen S. Whiting, David Shambaugh and Steven J. Levine for their encouragement and assistance in preparing this article.

1. *Public Papers of the President* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972), p. 379.

2. Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), pp. 557–58, 560.

3. Zhong Yufong, "Baobing huijian Ni Kesong" ("A meeting with Nixon during Mao's illness"), *Woyanzhong de Mao Zedong (As I saw Mao Zedong)* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1990), pp. 267–69; also Editing Office of Diplomatic History of Foreign Ministry of PRC, "Dakai zhongmei guanxi de lishi jin Cheng" ("Opening the historical process of Sino-American relations"), *Dangde wenxian*, No. 3, 1991), p. 82.

4. Nixon, *RN*, p. 562.

25 years earlier with the failure of General George Marshall's attempted mediation and the renewed outbreak of China's civil war.

Mao Zedong had fought for many years to arrive at this moment. The president of the American superpower, the man who was the leader of the Western world, had finally recognized "Red China" (even if not in law) and travelled to Beijing. This significant achievement gave Mao a tremendous sense of fulfilment in his later years, when he was faced with the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, loneliness from betrayal by his associates and frustrations from nearly two decades of mistakes and failures.⁵ Mao said to Nixon: "We do not like those presidents from Truman to Johnson [but] I cast a vote for your election ... I like rightists."⁶

Chinese like to use the expression "old child" to describe old people whose mentality returns to that of their childhood. Mao's feelings toward the United States at this historic moment could well have gone back to his youthful fascination with, and admiration of, the United States, beginning with George Washington. Xiao San, Mao's friend from his younger days, vividly recalled how Mao sat up all night reading *Great Heroes of the World*, translated and compiled from American books, which discusses Wellington, Washington, Lincoln, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Gladstone and Napoleon. But it was Washington who gripped Mao's imagination:

We need great people like these. We ought to study them and find out how we can make China rich and strong, and so avoid becoming like Annam, Korea, and India ... China is very weak; she will grow strong, rich, and independent only after many years; but the important thing is that we must learn these things. And it is not impossible. After six years of hard fighting, Washington defeated the British, and began to build up America.⁷

Throughout his life, in speeches to his inner circle and in talks with foreign guests, irrespective of whether the United States was currently an enemy or a friend, Mao frequently mentioned Washington's name in positive fashion.

Mao's image of America's relationship with China also raised hope in his early years of close collaboration, if not formal alliance. In 1916 he wrote to his friend:

The time would be in ten years. The place would be in the Pacific. It has been talked about for a long time that the U.S. and Japan will go to war. In ten years, China and America will join the just cause. We attack the Japanese army, the U.S. attacks the Japanese navy. Then Japan would be defeated in no time. The two republics of the east and west would be friendly and close. This would be a contribution to economic development. It would benefit future generations.⁸

5. *Guanyu jianguo yilai dangde ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi (Resolution on Certain Historical Issues of the Party Since the Founding of the PRC)* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983).

6. "Dakai zhongmei guanxi de lishi jincheng," p. 82.

7. Robert Payne, *Mao Tse-tung* (New York: Henry Schman Inc., 1950), pp. 35–36.

8. Mao Zedong, "Zhi Xiao Zisheng xin" ("Mao's letter to Xiao Zisheng"), 25 July 1916, *Mao Zedong zaoqi wengao (Early Writing of Mao Zedong)* (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1990), pp. 51–52.

Finally, after almost 60 years and near the end of his life, Mao witnessed the relaxation of tensions between China and the United States and the beginning of joint efforts to resist, not Japan, but the Soviet Union. In this sense Nixon's visit signified the realization of Mao's youthful dream. Like Washington, Mao had led his country to achieve independence and basic unification and he had finally won recognition from America, the world superpower. In Mao's eyes, this showed that the Chinese people had stood up. At the same time, Nixon's visit created an emotional tie with America, a country Mao had looked up to for his whole life but had regarded as an enemy for half that time.

The paradox was that Nixon's visit resulted from the fact that China and the United States now shared a common goal, namely resisting the other superpower, the Soviet Union. For most of his life Mao had looked upon the Soviet Union as a teacher and friend, but in his later years it became the number one enemy. Now, as the wheel of history came full circle, the United States was his most respected enemy and the Soviet Union his most hated friend.

Newly declassified archives and documents, personal interviews and recently published memoirs reveal how Mao's articulated perceptions of the United States were shaped, how they changed, and their influence on Chinese foreign policy as well as on Sino-U.S. relations. They also suggest the degree to which misperception may have affected this relationship. More fundamentally, the new data help to understand how Mao's knowledge structure, theoretical framework and belief system were shaped by his personal experience, his psychology and China's heritage of relations with foreign powers in the hundred years prior to the establishment of the People's Republic.

From the time of his famous encounter with Edgar Snow in 1936 until the end of the Second World War, Mao was absorbed with the possibility of enlisting the United States as a *de facto* partner in China's struggle against Japan and the CCP's struggle against its Nationalist rivals. Knowing little of the inner workings of the American government, Mao was unable to gauge accurately the real prospects for co-operation between Washington and the Chinese Communists.⁹ He was left embittered by his failure to realize his hopes for wartime co-operation. This was compounded by the failure of the Marshall mission in which Mao and his associates had initially invested considerable hope.

After the end of the Second World War, Mao welcomed the initial mediation of General George C. Marshall, seeing it as pressuring Chiang Kai-shek to slow down the march towards civil war and thus providing an opportunity to the CCP to achieve power and legitimacy. However the American move to support Chiang and oppose the CCP angered Mao,

9. See David Shambaugh, *Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives America, 1972-1990* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Michael Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

changing his view. As he said later: "We made mistakes in our work during the previous period ... It was the first time for us to deal with the U.S. imperialists. We didn't have much experience. As a result we were taken in. With this experience we won't be cheated again."¹⁰

This predisposed Mao to anticipate various American threats as he launched a full-scale CCP counter-offensive. He saw the first major danger as a U.S.-backed third force within the revolutionary group.¹¹ Secondly, although he felt large-scale American military intervention was unlikely, contingency planning had to consider the possibility of American troops occupying coastal cities, thus engaging CCP forces in direct combat.¹² Thirdly, Mao perceived American political, economic and cultural influence among urban citizens, especially intellectuals, together with American and Kuomintang spies and saboteurs.

Mao clearly overestimated American influence and the "third force" potential at this time. More seriously he totally misread Washington's military power, which was being rapidly demobilized, and the Truman administration's top priority of focusing on Europe. This misperception became critical after the establishment of the PRC by exaggerating both the will and the capacity for military action against the People's Republic.

Mao's view of the United States on the eve of 1949 followed logically from his recent experience. He calculated that "the imperialists who had always been hostile to the Chinese people will not change overnight to treat us on an equal level." Therefore he decided not to address the issue of recognition immediately. Meanwhile the CCP adopted the principle of "wiping out the control of the imperialists in China completely and with planned steps."¹³ Specifically, Beijing would not approve the legitimacy of foreign affairs institutions and officers of foreign countries in China, or any of the treaties they had signed with the Nationalist government. The Communists also sought to eliminate all the "imperialist" media, including restraining the activities of American journalists, all of whom Mao suspected of being spies. Foreign trade would come under unified control and the customs administration would be reformed. It was hoped this would eradicate all imperialist influence in China, attack espionage activities, and show that the Chinese people were standing up.

The counterpart of this anti-American programme was the policy of "leaning to one side" (the Soviet Union). Mao hoped, on the one hand, that the Soviet Union would support China's national security, international recognition and economic reconstructions in anticipation of

10. "Mao Zedong wei huansong Xu Xiangqian de yanhui shangde jianghua" ("Mao's speech at a farewell banquet for General Xu Xiangqian"), July 1947, in the unpublished memoir of An Ziwen.

11. Mao Zedong, "Carry the revolution to end," *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 4 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1961), p. 301.

12. Mao Zedong, "Muqian xingshi he dangzai 1945 de renwu" ("The current situation and the task for our party in 1945"), in *Collected Works of Mao Zedong on Military Affairs* (Beijing: Zhanshi chubanshe, 1986), p. 329.

13. Mao Zedong, "Report on Second Session of Seventh Central Committee," *Selected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 370-71.

American military interference and economic blockade. On the other hand, Mao wanted to assure Stalin that he would not emulate Tito and China would not become a “second Yugoslavia.” To this end he kept the Kremlin informed about the handling of the Angus Ward incident involving the American consul-general in Shenyang, and his contact with J. Leighton Stuart, the American ambassador to China who remained behind after Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan.¹⁴

Most importantly, Mao launched a propaganda offensive to criticize the U.S.–Chiang peace talks and the illusion of adopting the middle road. He grasped the opportunity provided by publication of the U.S. White Paper on China to launch a repudiation of American imperialism. This criticism was aimed more at the so-called “third force” than at the United States. But at the same time, Mao described the past 100 years of Sino-American relations as a history of American manipulation of China. The United States was depicted as the head of the imperialist camp and all reactionary forces after the Second World War, and as attempting to colonize China.

In short, the United States became the main threat to China’s security in Mao’s mind. He deliberately shaped a distorted image of the United States for consumption by the Chinese people and especially Communist cadres and soldiers. These two groups were basically composed of peasants, and thus Mao sought to create a mass foundation of anti-Americanism in China. At the same time, realizing that some intellectuals still eulogized America, Mao proposed the theory that “for a considerable time, the U.S. will emphasize a spiritual invasion more than other imperialist countries.”¹⁵ Mao saw the “democratic individualists” or “free middle roaders” as the social base of an American imperialist plot to sabotage the Communists from within. It was therefore logical for him to wipe out this social base.

Thus, from 1936, when Mao gave up his policy of opposing all imperialists and suggested to Edgar Snow he would like to form an international united front with the United States against fascism, to 1949 when he decided to wipe out all American influence in China, he seemed to have come full circle. He concluded that the nature of American imperialism was totally incompatible with his political ideology and goals during a decade when he had the most contact with Americans of his whole life. After the founding of the PRC, Mao never had the personal interaction as he did with the American military observers in Yan’an, not to mention his unpleasant encounter with Ambassador Hurley. His strong distrust of Americans and the humiliation of perceived unequal treatment were to affect Mao’s perception of, and policy toward, the United States for decades thereafter.

14. He Di, “From the Ward case to Stuart’s efforts,” unpublished paper; interview with Sergei Goncharov, Russian expert on Sino-Soviet relations in April 1992.

15. Mao Zedong, “Friendship or invasion?” in *Selected Works*, Vol. 4, p. 448.

U.S. Imperialism As The Main Threat: 1950–57

Although Mao adopted a series of anti-American policies and polemics in order to consolidate the new government, he was very cautious about actual military struggle. In 1949 he wondered whether the Americans would land in north China when the Communist troops were pushing south toward the Yangzi. Their failure to do so reassured Mao that this was no longer a threat, although in reality it never had been. Then in 1950 he was concerned about American interference if the Communists attacked Taiwan. On the one hand he worried that a separate status for Taiwan would give Washington an excuse for future military intervention, while on the other he was eager to unify China and remove an obstacle to Western (and American) recognition of the PRC. Therefore after completing “liberation” Mao gave priority to planning the military takeover of Taiwan.¹⁶

During Mao's visit to Moscow from December 1949 to February 1950, President Truman and Secretary of State Acheson issued statements on U.S. China policy that Mao believed were a plot to set China against the Soviet Union. At Stalin's request, Mao wrote a speech repudiating Acheson.¹⁷ Meanwhile he reaffirmed his earlier judgment that the United States would not interfere by force in China. However, importantly, Mao opposed Kim Il-sung's persistent proposal to attack South Korea, arguing that an international treaty would be broken and American involvement was inevitable, which would drag China into the conflict.¹⁸ While in fact there was no such treaty, Mao correctly calculated the American response, apparently contrary to both Stalin and Kim. Because of his suspicion of U.S. expansionism in Asia, Mao formed the North-east Border Army to guard against a possible invasion.

After August 1949 Mao warned Kim Il-sung about an American landing at the narrow waist of Korea behind the People's Army.¹⁹ After the Americans landed at Inchon, Stalin warned Mao that they would approach the Yalu River and pose a direct threat to Manchuria. He hoped China would send troops to aid Korea and offered Soviet air cover for them.²⁰ If China did not send troops, Stalin requested that Kim Il-sung be

16. He Di, “The last campaign to unify China: the CCP's unmaterialized plan to liberate Taiwan, 1949–1950,” *Chinese Historian*, Vol. V, No. 1, pp. 1–15.

17. *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao (Mao Zedong's Manuscripts Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China)*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1987), pp. 245–48; Shi Zhe: *Zai lishi juren shenbian (By the Side of the Historical Giant)* (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1991), p. 454.

18. After visiting Moscow on 17 April 1950, on 13–15 May Kim Il-sung came to Beijing and told Mao that he had won permission from Stalin to attack South Korea. Mao warned him repeatedly about possible U.S. involvement. China's opposition to the attack had arisen in discussions among North Korea, the Soviet Union and China. Interviews with Shi Zhe in 1981–82, January 1986 and May 1991, and Lei Yingfu in June and July 1990; Sergei Goncharov, V. P. Tkachonko, then head of the Korean Division of the Soviet Foreign Ministry; and I. V. Kovalev, the adviser from the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party stationed in China.

19. Interviews with Lei Yingfu.

20. Shi Zhe, *Zai lishi juren shenbian*, pp. 492–93; interview with Goncharov; Goncharov's notes of his interview with Kapitsa; also Li Yinqiao, *Zouxia shentan de Mao Zedong (Mao*

allowed to retreat to China to form an exile government and conduct a guerrilla war.²¹

Washington declared it had no intention of fighting a war with China and American troops would not cross the Yalu River. But on 13 October Mao cabled Zhou Enlai in Moscow: "If we do not send troops and let the enemy press to the bank of the Yalu River, the reactionary forces at home and abroad will be more active. This will be counterproductive to the rear, especially to the north-east."²² Mao hesitated in making the decision to intervene because he was not certain "whether Chinese troops could wipe out U.S. troops in Korea." Even if the Americans crossed the Yalu, Mao calculated that the United States would not launch a full-scale invasion of the mainland. But if Chinese "volunteers" could not defeat the Americans in Korea, China could face a worst case scenario: stalemate with the United States in Korea and a conflict that would destroy plans for economic recovery domestically.²³

Three years of the Korean War eliminated Mao Zedong's uncertainty about American military power. He gained self-confidence and pride from the war, becoming convinced that China could truly stand up only by fighting the United States, the most powerful country in the world. He declared that Chinese troops

have all gained practical experience in fighting the U.S. aggressors. If you have never taken them on, you are liable to be scared of them. We have fought them for 33 months and got to know them for what they are worth. U.S. imperialism is not terrifying, nothing to make a fuss about. Such is our experience, indeed an invaluable piece of experience.²⁴

However this did not make Mao reckless. He recognized the superiority of American technology in the war. He later said that "[the] U.S. soldiers were capable of fighting. Their weapons were more and better."²⁵ This made him more cautious during the subsequent Taiwan Straits crises and the Vietnam war. Although Mao acted recklessly in these conflicts, he tried to avoid direct confrontation with American troops.

With the new Eisenhower administration urging the "unleashing" of Chiang Kai-shek, Taiwan increased provocative activities against the mainland. Mao had judged that the United States would attack China from Korea, Vietnam and Taiwan. But with ceasefires in Korea and

footnote continued

Zedong Who Was No Longer a God (Beijing: Zhongwai wenhua chubanshe, 1989), p. 122–133. Li was the head of Mao's bodyguards at the time.

21. Shi Zhe, *Zai lishi juren shenbian*, pp. 496–97; interviews with Shi Zhe, Lei Yingfu and Goncharov.

22. *Jianguo yilai*, Vol. 1, p. 556.

23. *Ibid.* pp. 539–540.

24. Mao Zedong, *Selected Works*, Vol. 4, p. 117.

25. "Mao Zedong's speech in his meeting with Cuban cultural, trade union, youth delegations," 26 July 1963, in *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* (*Long Live Mao Zedong Thought*) (Beijing, 1976), Vol. IV, p. 84.

Vietnam, he saw Taiwan as the main source of attack.²⁶ He was very concerned that the U.S. Mutual Defence Treaty with Taiwan would permanently separate the island from the mainland, as had occurred with the division of North and South Korea and North and South Vietnam.²⁷ On 23 July 1954, he cabled Zhou Enlai and criticized him for not raising the Taiwan issue at the Geneva Conference. Meanwhile Mao launched a nation-wide propaganda campaign to “liberate Taiwan.” In this context he began the shelling of Quemoy on 3 September. But he did not intend a general offensive against the United States. On the contrary, Mao restrained the PLA from “liberating” the Dachen Islands, and sought to avoid a direct confrontation with the Americans.²⁸

From this crisis Mao perceived that Eisenhower had temporarily given up his aggressive policy of urging Taiwan to attack the mainland and had returned to a “defensive” policy of separating Taiwan from the mainland, as practised during the Truman period.²⁹ He thought that the U.S.–Taiwan treaty did not cover the offshore islands and that Chiang had been forced to withdraw from the Dachens under pressure from the United States. Actually Washington had no intention of helping Chiang to “recover the mainland” (*guangfu dalu*), as had become evident to Taiwan.³⁰

To defuse the crisis, China placed high hopes on the Sino-U.S. ambassadorial talks opened in Geneva. Eleven American prisoners were released to facilitate dialogue and create a positive atmosphere of co-operation. China hoped that numerous problems in Sino-U.S. relations could be resolved.³¹ From the second half of 1955 to the first half of 1956, Mao many times mentioned possibilities for developing relations. As he said to the Eighth CCP Conference in September 1956: “The current situation is turning better. We figure that war is unlikely to break out. If there is no war, the capitalist countries will face economic difficulties. Our door is open. In 12 years, Britain, America, West Germany and Japan will all want to do business with us.”³²

26. The concept of a U.S. attack from Korea, Vietnam and Taiwan first appeared in the *People's Daily* editorial of 6 November 1950. Pu Shan claims it was in 1953 that China formed a special research group because of this strategic perspective; interview with Pu Shan in May 1991.

27. He Di, “The evolution of PRC’s policy toward offshore islands,” in Warren Cohen and Akira Iriye (eds.), *The Great Powers in East Asia, 1953–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 224–25; and interviews with Pu Shouchang in November 1987 and January 1988.

28. He Di and Gordon Chang, “New perceptions of a Cold War episode: Sino-American confrontation in Taiwan Strait, 1954–1955,” unpublished m.s.; *Jianguo yilai*, Vol. 5, pp. 533, 629; interview with Zhang Aiping in June 1988.

29. “Instruction from the Central Committee of CCP on propaganda concerning U.S. intervention with our liberation of Taiwan,” 21 February 1955, in Chinese Communist Party Central Archives (hereafter CA).

30. Disillusioned Nationalist officials dubbed the “unleashing” of Chiang Kai-shek as a “lend-leash” policy; interviews in 1954 by Allen S. Whiting.

31. Wang Bingnan, *Zhong-Mei huitan jiu nian huigu (Recollections of Nine Years of Sino-U.S. Talks)* (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1985), p. 82; interview with Wang Bingnan in August 1988.

32. Sun Gang and Sun Dongsheng, “An important meeting at a turning point in history,” in *Dangde wenxian*, No. 3 (1991), p. 14.

Mao Challenges a Declining American Imperialism: 1958–69

The year 1958 marked a radical turn to the “left” in China’s domestic and foreign policies, in part caused by Mao Zedong’s perception that the balance of power between East and West had shifted. He saw American imperialism as waning (*shou*) whereas socialism was gaining (*gong*). Mao also believed that because the United States would not change its policy toward Taiwan the Sino-American ambassadorial talks could make little progress, and he felt he had been proved right when the United States declared its intention of stopping the dialogue in December 1957. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Dulles reiterated three principles: the United States would not recognize the PRC, would not admit it to the UN, and would not lift the trade embargo.

These actions made Mao doubt the correctness of seeking to ease tensions with the United States. In June 1958, he remarked that his idea of seeking contacts with Americans at the Geneva Conference deviated from his usual views. He believed his old ideas were better, that is to insist on fighting the United States and never seeking any kind of relations with Washington. “We should take the advantage of the American three principles to lock our door and carry out socialist construction with our own efforts.”³³

Unlike Khrushchev’s policy of easing tensions, Mao adopted a more aggressive stance. He felt that the socialist block should be tough, develop its own potential and support the national independence movements so as to restrict American imperialism throughout the world. In 1958 the Middle East crisis gave Mao an opportunity to act. On 15 July the United States dispatched troops to Lebanon and on 17 July to Jordan. In order to test his ideas and the reactions of the United States and the Soviet Union, Mao decided simultaneously to resume the shelling of Quemoy. This was China’s contribution to “pinning down U.S. imperialism.”³⁴

Yet Mao was not wholly sure of himself. On 1 August he confided in Khrushchev (at a secret summit in Beijing) that for some years he had been uncertain about who was afraid of whom. “Whenever something happens, I tend to test my ideas. But sometimes it does not work. I have the feeling that we are afraid of them a bit more. But sometimes my idea works. They are afraid of us a bit more.”³⁵ On 7 September, when the U.S. Seventh Fleet escorted Nationalist cargo ships, Mao directed his commanders not to attack the Americans. Even if they fired first the PLA should not respond without his permission.³⁶ On 8 September, when the Communists attacked the Nationalist ships, the American fleet withdrew.

33. Cited from Chen Yi’s speech discussing the world situation, 17 June 1958; Archives of the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

34. Han Huaizhi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo* (*The Military Affairs of Contemporary Armed Forces of China*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1988), pp. 386–87.

35. Mao’s talk with Khrushchev, 1 August 1958, CA.

36. *Ibid.*; interviews with Lei Yingfu and Ye Fei in August 1990; also see *Memoirs of Ye Fei* (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1988), pp. 654–55.

This military test convinced Mao anew that American policy towards China and the Soviet Union was primarily defensive rather than offensive. He argued that the imperialist camp's intensified international anti-China, anti-Soviet campaign was only a pretext. It really aimed at expanding American domination over the Third World, the "intermediate zone," to contain the indigenous rise of nationalism and communism. Mao also revised his basic projection of the likelihood of war between China and the United States. He now asserted that both were afraid of war, but "they are more afraid than we are." Hence war was unlikely.³⁷

Mao reasoned, therefore, that to avoid war America would have to "get out of Quemoy and Matsu." He believed Washington really wanted to abandon the islands and that American public opinion agreed. He calculated this would mean pulling 110,000 Nationalist troops off the islands.³⁸ Mao was right about Washington's wish not to engage in war over the offshore islands; however he was wrong about Chiang's forces withdrawing. A short-lived crisis resulted. At this time Mao entertained another illusion, thinking that all future negotiations with the United States should be on the basis of "one lump sum." If the Taiwan question could not be resolved, there was no point in talking about other issues.³⁹ But Mao's illusion was soon dispelled and from this point he ceased trying to ease tension and adopted increasingly tough policies.

If the United States was weakening and afraid of war as well as socialism, then what was the direction of American foreign policy? Mao reached two important conclusions. First, American policy was aimed at changing socialist countries through "peaceful transition" (*heping yanbian*). In November 1959 Mao analysed three Dulles speeches and concluded that the policy was "to change countries like ours, and to carry out sabotage activities so as to change the nature of society into what they like." He emphasized that Dulles wanted to change China peacefully to take advantage of certain social bases in the socialist countries – meaning the Soviet Union abroad and Peng Dehuai at home.⁴⁰

Mao's second conclusion depicted American imperialism as trying to control the former colonies in the vast "intermediate zone" under the guise of attacking China and the Soviet Union. To Mao there were three "isms" in the world; communism, nationalism and imperialism. Of these, communism and nationalism were more alike.⁴¹ Thus Mao advocated supporting nationalist movements around the world so as to pin America down. Mao later referred to this as the strategy of "cutting off fingers." Of the ten fingers of imperialism, three had already been cut off, that is the Soviet Union, China and the other socialist countries. The remaining

37. Mao Zedong, "Talk at the meeting of the Supreme State Conference," 5 September, 1958), *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui*, Vol. I, pp. 169–174.

38. *Ibid.* pp. 175–78.

39. Wang Bingnan, *Zhong-Mei huitan jiuinian huigu*, pp. 70–71.

40. Li Jie, "Recollections and reflections on Mao Zedong's idea of preventing a peaceful transition," in *Dangde wenxian*, Vol. 3 (1991), p. 56. At the Hangzhou meeting in November 1959, Mao had three of Dulles' speeches circulated.

41. Mao Zedong, "Talk at the Supreme State Conference," pp. 169–170.

fingers were Asia, Africa and Latin America in which some countries had won independence and others were fighting for it. Mao thought these remaining fingers of imperialism were vulnerable.⁴²

In the early 1960s Sino-Soviet ideological disputes threatened China's national security and border tensions worsened the relationship. At the same time, after the Cuban Missile Crisis, American policy-makers and public opinion saw China as more dangerous than the Soviet Union. These changes alerted Mao to consider the possibility of a U.S.–Soviet joint attack on China.⁴³ He switched from his earlier belief that imperialists would not like to fight a war and that war was unlikely to break out and instead stressed the inevitability of war and mobilized for it on both the domestic and foreign fronts.

At home Mao allocated half the national investment in capital construction (\$25–30 billion) to build the “Third Front.” He also actively promoted the militia system and speeded up development of nuclear weapons. Abroad Mao increased support for national insurgencies, hoping to divert the outbreak of world war through regional war. He wanted to use conflicts of all kinds to restrain the Soviet Union and the United States from attacking China.

Sources of Mao's Ambivalent View of America

As demonstrated above, Mao Zedong's primary concern in Sino–American relations stemmed from his perception of the threat from the United States, whether by direct invasion from Korea, proxy invasion from Taiwan or subversion through peaceful transition. This preoccupation led to his exaggeration of American intentions in 1950 in Korea and again in the Taiwan Straits in 1954–55 and 1958. In both instances Mao acted to deter the threat but in so doing contributed to the anti-China lobby in American politics. He also failed to avoid a costly collision in Korea, although he succeeded in avoiding war in the Taiwan Straits. He also managed to avoid direct conflict with the United States in Vietnam through the forward positioning of PLA regulars in North Vietnam between 1965 and 1968.

Beyond security, however, a second key concern was whether the United States would treat a new China on an equal footing. In the 1950s Dulles' policy of containing and isolating China convinced Mao that his concern was justified: “We are a big country with 600 million people. But Dulles does not take us seriously.” Mao later declared, “The U.S. has always bullied us so Quemoy should be bombarded and China should challenge U.S. arrogance.”⁴⁴

As the head of “New China,” with its long experience of humiliation, invasion and division by foreign powers, Mao was extremely sensitive to

42. “Mao Zedong's talk with African guests,” 7 May 1960, *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui*, Vol. III, pp. 48–50.

43. Interviews with Lei Yingfu and Lin Ke in March and May 1990.

44. “Notes of Mao Zedong's talk with Montgomery,” 7 May 1960, *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui*, Vol. III, p. 89.

whether foreign powers – especially the United States – would grant China true equality. He regarded this as the test of whether the Chinese people had truly stood up. Finally, in early 1971 when Mao learned that President Nixon wanted to visit China, he saw this as a sign that the United States finally recognized the existence of the PRC after 22 years of conflict. He remarked to Edgar Snow at the time: “Between Chinese and Americans there need to be no prejudices. There could be mutual respect and equality.”⁴⁵

Mao's personality also influenced his perception of the United States. He had always demanded that his subordinates act neither humbly nor arrogantly before foreigners. As early as August 1944 when the American Military Observers Group arrived in Yan'an, a CCP Central Committee circular directed workers in foreign affairs neither to worship, fawn on or fear foreign countries, nor to despise, hate or exclude them.⁴⁶ But when he met Henry Kissinger nearly 30 years later, Mao admitted, “Chinese are very anti-foreign. You [Americans] can accept many nationalities. But there are few foreigners in China ... There are 600,000 Chinese in America. But I am afraid we do not have even 60 Americans in China. I do not know why ... Chinese have never liked foreigners.”⁴⁷

Despite this observation, Mao showed contrary sentiments. For example, his personal esteem for George Washington emerged in many private talks.⁴⁸ He also saw the American people positively. Even in 1965 when China and the United States were in serious confrontation in Vietnam, Mao said to Edgar Snow,

The United States had first fought a progressive war of independence from British imperialism and then fought a civil war to establish a free labour market. Washington and Lincoln were progressive men of their time. When the United States first established a republic it was hated and dreaded by all the crowned heads of Europe. That showed that the Americans were then revolutionaries.⁴⁹

Snow later recalled his 1971 talk with Mao: “He would be happy to see a party emerge [in the U.S.] to lead a revolution, although he was not expecting that in the near future.”⁵⁰

Mao had once called on the Chinese people to combine Russian revolutionary enthusiasm with American realistic spirit.⁵¹ He held that American capitalists were more trustworthy than the Soviets,⁵² and criticized subordinates for not telling the truth, saying “American capital-

45. Edgar Snow, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 171.

46. “Central Committee of CCP instructions to the workers in foreign affairs,” 18 August 1944, CA.

47. “Mao's talk with Kissinger,” 17 February 1973, CA.

48. For an early instance see Xiao San's reminiscences of Mao's youth in Robert Payne, *Mao Tse-tung* (New York: Henry Schman Inc., 1950), pp. 35–36.

49. “Mao Zedong's talk with Snow on 9 January 1965,” Snow, *The Long Revolution*, p. 203.

50. *Ibid.* p. 171.

51. “Mao's talk at the Second Session of Eighth Congress of CCP,” 8 May 1958, *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui*, Vol. II, p. 29.

52. Anna Louise Strong, “Three conversations with Chairman Mao Zedong,” *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 103 (September 1985), p. 505.

ists believe in studying the facts.” He cited the American spokesman’s comment on Ho Chi Minh sending troops to Laos: “The bourgeoisie are more honest than we. They don’t speak if they don’t know anything.”⁵³

But Mao’s understanding of the United States was also a Leninist one, based on the notion that it was ruled by the monopolist capitalists. America manifested all the shortcomings of capitalist societies, especially economic crises. Mao did not have a deep understanding of democracy or the principle of checking government power. Nor did he fully understand the spirit of American individualism and individual freedom. He even misinterpreted the meaning of “inalienable rights” as the source of power of the ruling class. He also believed there were no equal human rights in bourgeois society.⁵⁴ He was confused by party politics in the United States, believing that the separation of powers was meant to fool the people.⁵⁵ He lacked a thorough understanding of the American economic structure and the market economy of capitalist countries.⁵⁶

Yet Mao exhibited particular interest in the American federal system, for the light it might throw on his handling of relations between the central government and local authorities. He also took an interest in race relations as part of his hope that the American people would rise up in revolution. However, even here, his understanding was superficial in the extreme as shown by his failure to see the racial antagonism that split the working class, manifest in trade union resistance to the civil rights movement and affirmative action.

Mao had access to a lot of information about international affairs and the United States in particular, compiled on a daily basis from selected materials by the Xinhua News Agency, intelligence reports, embassy cables, and six newspapers from Hong Kong and Taiwan, such as *Dagong Bao*, *Wenhui Bao* and *Ming Bao*. He spent at least two to three hours every day reading materials on international affairs and would make comments and notes on them.⁵⁷

Mao’s perceptions of America comprised three elements: Marxism-Leninism and the theories of Stalin; Chinese traditional culture, diplomacy, and art of warfare; and his own personal experience as a revolutionary and leader. Of these, Mao’s own experience formed the foundation of his knowledge. By comparison, Marxism played only a part in Mao’s thinking. He remained ignorant of the essence of Western political philosophy and Marxism’s relationship to it. Although he had read some Western works when he was young and at one time believed in the dualism of Kant, especially his idealism, he subsequently felt he had changed to be a Marxist. Having become a revolutionary he said,

53. “Mao Zedong’s speech at the Work Meeting of Central Committee,” 13 January 1961, *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui*, Vol. III, p. 105.

54. “Mao’s talk at Hangzhou meeting,” 21 December 1965, *ibid.* Vol. IV, p. 391.

55. Edgar Snow, *Random Notes on Red China* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 65.

56. When Snow told Mao that American food was produced by farmers who comprised only 8% of the population, Mao reacted, “how could that be?” Snow, *The Long Revolution*, p. 215.

57. Interview with Lin Ke.

“those [other Western] theories are not useful.”⁵⁸ From then on he seldom read Western political or economic theory and when he did so he would approach them to criticize, not to appreciate or evaluate.

It is true that Mao's theories bear some resemblance to the concepts of balance of power and the bipolar system of Western international relations theory. But his interpretation of the “intermediate zone,” advanced in 1946, derived from his experience of the united front with the Kuomintang and his interpretation of China's national interest. He then developed this into one of two main camps and an intermediate zone. In the mid-1950s he propounded a theory of two camps and three types of countries – socialist, imperialist and nationalist. In the 1960s he spoke of two intermediate zones. In the 1970s he put forward the theory of the “three worlds.” In every case, Mao took China as the centre and focused on all kind of conflicts and contradictions to change the balance of power. This stands in marked contrast to the Western concern with how to achieve stability through the balance of power among sovereign nations in the international system.

Because Mao over-emphasized his own experience, he lacked a language in common with Western leaders to deal with problems of international security and issues of peace and war. This contributed to his alienating his allies, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. His theories of international relations, his analysis of world affairs and his observations of the United States were all removed from the reality of a rapidly changing world where nuclear weapons and international economic developments determined the perceptions of power and the allocation of status.

Mao's parochialism also affected his world view. He knew no foreign language and had never been abroad before he went to Moscow in 1949. Except for his second trip there in 1957, he never again left China. Mao was cold-shouldered by the established intellectuals at Peking University as a youth, attacked by the pro-Soviet faction within the Chinese Communist Party in early adulthood, and even ridiculed by his wife Jiang Qing as a “bumpkin.”⁵⁹ An acute sensitivity to slight and prejudice coloured his approach to foreign relations as well as domestic politics. This defensiveness was fused with the success of the Chinese revolution and the accolades Mao received as the supreme leader into a new psychological amalgam of his own personal pride and China's national dignity.

Thus proud of China's independence and unification, but insecure in the face of American military containment and political isolation, Mao was understandably very suspicious of the United States' intentions towards China. He therefore took the initiative to challenge its position in the world, a central feature of his public declarations and propaganda campaigns throughout the first two decades of the People's Republic.

The Taiwan issue best illustrates Mao's feelings about what counted

58. “Mao Zedong's talks on problems of philosophy,” 8 August 1964, *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui*, Vol. IV, p. 256.

59. Li Yinqiao, *Zouxia shentan de Mao Zedong*, p. 205.

most in Sino-American relations. Li Yingqiao, Mao's head bodyguard, recalled that every year after 1953, whenever Mao stood at the seashore, he would mention that China had not liberated Taiwan. Li thought this was one of Mao's constant regrets until he died.⁶⁰ The preoccupation remained because Mao regarded the Taiwan question as the focal point among issues of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and China's status in the world. It also explains why he took such a rigid position in dealing with the United States over Taiwan. This reflected the feelings of the Chinese people, including most intellectuals, whose national pride was deeply offended by Dulles' repeated attacks, particularly his three principles of non-recognition, non-admission to the United Nations and total economic embargo.

Mao's proclamation that "the Chinese people have stood up" and his statement that "Asia belongs to the Asian people" were consonant with the strong desire of a people who had suffered from oppression and who desired independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. But this nationalism had an ironic core: the Chinese people, including Mao himself, were unable to believe they had truly stood up unless this fact was recognized and validated by the big powers, notably by the United States. The traditional Chinese Middle Kingdom mentality was reflected in the self-contained structure of Mao's view of the outside world and his egocentricity. Two factors reinforced this epistemology. First, Mao believed that the centre of the world proletarian revolution had shifted initially from the West to Russia and then eastward to China.⁶¹ Secondly, the American policy of containing and isolating China in the 1950s prevented Mao from gaining the personal experience that might have expanded his world view and establishing a more balanced frame of mind. As a result, Mao spent almost his entire life fighting the United States, his most respected enemy.

60. *Ibid.* pp. 216–17.

61. "Mao's speech at the Second Session of Eighth Party Congress," 17 May 1958; "Mao's notes on Soviet Textbook of Political Economy (Socialist Part)," 1959, *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui*, Vol. II, pp. 35 and 83.