Comment: Mao, the Comintern and the Second United Front

John W. Garver

Sheng and I are in essential agreement that between mid-1935 and late 1936 repeated interventions by the Comintern induced changes in CCP policy which brought it successively closer to a united front with Chiang Kai-shek. We disagree about whether there were significant discrepancies between CCP and Comintern line on this issue at specific points. I argue there were. Sheng argues there were not. The Comintern did not itself adopt a true policy of a united front with Chiang until late 1936, Sheng implies. The Comintern’s policy of a united front with Chiang evolved slowly, and as it inched towards this goal it communicated the ideas to Mao who adopted them fully and promptly. “Mao was amenable to Stalin’s advice,” Sheng says; he was “sensitive and responsive” to Comintern directives. Any discrepancies between Comintern and CCP lines were differences of emphasis, not of substance, according to Sheng. I, on the other hand, argue that Mao’s policy was consistently more anti-Chiang than the Comintern’s.

There is no question that Comintern policy towards Chiang evolved slowly during 1935-36. Sheng cites the continuing anti-Chiang rhetoric in Comintern statements in late 1935 to prove that Moscow, like Mao, did not truly favour a united front with Chiang. In doing this Sheng discounts the novel statements of willingness to unite with Chiang which were buried amongst the hostile anti-Chiang rhetoric in Comintern statements of November–December 1935. It is these subtle proposals of unity, concealed within otherwise hostile statements, that I and other scholars have stressed. Sheng focuses on what I consider to be background rhetoric.

The Jiuguo bao appeal of 7 November 1935 is a prime example. Heretofore there has been a consensus that this statement’s assertion that under certain conditions Chiang might be included in the united front represented a call for unity with him. Not so says Sheng. Sheng stresses instead the anti-Chiang rhetoric of the article, and concludes that it was “not designed to encourage Chiang to form a united front with the CCP, but to discredit him.” There are several problems with this conclusion. First, no one disputes that Wang Ming inched towards the idea of unity with Chiang. On the one hand, Wang saw the need to unite with him and reluctantly conceded that need in the 7 November article. On the other hand, Wang still saw Chiang as the enemy of the Chinese people. This inconsistency can be explained in either psychological or tactical terms. In terms of the former, it takes time for a person’s mind to achieve what Robert Jervis calls irrational cognitive consistency. It took time, in other words, for Wang to convince himself that all arguments pointed in the same direction, that since Chiang was to be united with against Japan he was no longer a vile class enemy. In terms of tactical advantages, Wang may
have desired to cover himself against charges of naivety should Chiang reject proposals of unity. Neither the cognitive nor the tactical explanation denies the significance of Wang’s novel proposal of unity with Chiang.

Other articles in Jiuguo bao and Jiuguo shibao later in November and December 1935 were even more conciliatory towards Chiang, referring to him as “Mister” and “Commander.” These statements have been well researched, but it may be useful to quote one here as an example. A manifesto drawn up by the CCP Comintern delegation and issued in the name of the CCP in Jiuguo shibao on 9 December 1935 said: “No matter whether the forces of Commander Chiang, no matter whether the forces of any other party or faction . . . all should immediately bury old hatreds . . . immediately suspend all civil war, point all gun barrels toward the outside, and fight unitedly against Japan.”

Sheng dismisses such statements because in February 1936, after the CCP had launched its Eastern Expedition across the Yellow River into Shanxi, Jiuguo shibao’s treatment of Chiang showed “increased hostility,” in Sheng’s words. To Sheng this is proof that any shift in Comintern line towards Chiang in late 1935 was “mere propaganda” and not “sincere belief.” Here I would make two points. First, even during February–March, Jiuguo shibao’s treatment of Chiang was still much more generous than that of Hongse zhongguo in Baoan. Secondly and more importantly, Wang Ming and the ECCI had every interest in maintaining the appearance of unity between Baoan and Moscow. Unity towards the outside is one of the fundamental precepts of democratic centralism. Had Comintern publications continued to refer to Chiang as “Commander” while the Red Army was making war in Shanxi, internal differences would have been made open to the public.

The idea that a desire to discredit a person (Chiang Kai-shek in this case) is an indication that that person is deemed to be outside the united front shows fundamental misunderstanding of the Leninist concept of a united front. The international communist movement during the 1920s and 1930s was filled with debate over the merits of a “united front from above” as opposed to a “united front from below.” Much of this debate was about how best to discredit class enemies (social democrats, progressive bourgeois politicians and so on) with whom the proletariat might find it expedient to unite. To imagine that, from a Leninist perspective, a desire to “unite” with someone precluded efforts to “discredit” that person is simply wrong.

Sheng and I reach diametrically opposed conclusions regarding the Comintern message that Lin Yuying carried to Baoan in November.

1935. Relying primarily on Zhang Guotao and Otto Braun I argued that Lin told the CCP to unite with Chiang Kai-shek. Relying on the minutes of a CCP Politburo meeting of 23 December 1935, Sheng argues that Lin brought an endorsement of continuing civil war against Chiang and specifically of the CCP drive into open lines of communication with Mongolia. Sheng interprets this as Stalin’s endorsement of the CCP’s drive into Shanxi the next February.

Here I think that Sheng is correct and I was wrong, at least as far as the content of Lin’s message about Chiang. Unfortunately this does not settle the issue. Lin Yuying’s mission remains shrouded in mystery. When did he leave Moscow? Under the best of circumstances movement between Moscow and Baoan took weeks in 1935. Moreover, Lin apparently made at least one failed attempt to reach northern Shaanxi before he eventually succeeded. Consequently he may have been in transit for several months. If he left Moscow shortly after the Seventh Congress he may have conveyed the line of that Congress before it was revised and updated by Wang Ming in mid-August. (The CCP’s Wayaobao Resolution of December 1935 called for a broad anti-Japanese united front from above, but excluded Chiang Kai-shek and provided that the Chinese soviet regime was to be the nucleus of the united front.) If Lin left Moscow with Wang Ming’s mid-August line in mind (in case of capture Lin carried no written message), the ambiguities of Wang’s thinking about Chiang at that point may have been too subtle to have been conveyed fully to Baoan. Nor can we rule out the possibility that the wishes and perspectives of Lin’s boss, Mao, shaped the message he delivered. Given these uncertainties, the overriding consideration to me remains the dramatic discrepancy between articles in Jiuguo shibao and the CCP’s Wayaobao Resolution in December 1935 regarding the desired role of Chiang Kai-shek. If Lin Yuying accurately conveyed the Comintern’s message, it must have been an old message.

Stalin’s stated willingness to arm the CCP and Comintern endorsement of CCP efforts to win over Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng in 1935 and 1936 figure prominently in Sheng’s argument. His argument is this: since Stalin was ready to arm the CCP, and since he supported the CCP’s efforts to bring Zhang and Yang and their forces into an anti-Japanese, anti-Chiang base in China’s north-west, it follows that Stalin still supported a policy of civil war against Chiang. The fact that Mao was still pursuing a policy of civil war against Chiang is not, therefore, evidence that Mao was out of step with Stalin. This is a non sequitur.

To Stalin, Chiang Kai-shek and the Republic of China were the big fish. Mao Zedong and the CCP were the little fish. But there was no guarantee that the big fish would bite and, in that case, the little fish was better than nothing. Soviet–Japanese relations deteriorated rapidly after September 1931. Stalin responded by courting the ROC. As I noted in my article in The China Quarterly, Japanese–German negotiations over a possible anti-Soviet alliance began in late spring
The China Quarterly

1935. The success of those negotiations presented an extremely dire two-front threat to the USSR. The ROC could play an important role in countering this threat—should Chiang decide to adopt a policy of resistance to Japan. But would Chiang do this, or would he reach some sort of compromise settlement with Japan? Stalin had no way of knowing.

In the event that Chiang settled with Japan, a well-armed CCP could be rather useful. A CCP-controlled state in China’s north-west would be even better. But in terms of contribution to enhancing Soviet security, Red guerrilla armies to harass Japanese forces or a Red buffer state south-east of Mongolia could not begin to compare with resistance to Japan by the ROC under Chiang Kai-shek. The Soviet government and the Comintern worked to induce Chiang to swing the ROC into resistance to Japan. One aspect of this was the Comintern’s effort to push the CCP to moderate its policy towards Chiang. A major factor inclining Chiang towards settlement with Japan was fear that the CCP would use the opportunity of an ROC–Japan war to undermine GMD rule. Stalin wanted Mao to moderate CCP policy to ease these fears. But Stalin still needed to keep alive the option of a CCP buffer state should Chiang decide to appease Japan. Stalin wanted to keep his options open until Chiang and the ROC were committed against Japan, hence his expressions of willingness to arm the CCP and his support for the CCP’s efforts to win over Zhang and Yang.

Forty years ago Allen Whiting found multiple and sometimes contradictory Soviet policies toward China during 1917–24. The contradictions between the requirements of these multiple policies sometimes created problems for Moscow, Whiting concluded, but Soviet leaders felt no need to forgo any possibly advantageous area of activity for the sake of logical consistency. Soviet policies in 1936 regarding the desirability of a CCP–GMD anti-Japanese united front and the creation of a CCP-led anti-Japanese state bordering on Mongolia seem to have been similar. The driving force of Soviet policy was not logical consistency but a desire to exploit all opportunities which uncertain future developments might prove to be profitable. It seems that Mao enthusiastically embraced some Soviet policies (the north-west strategy), but was not so enthusiastic about others (a united front with Chiang). Repeated Comintern directives were necessary to prompt him to adopt the latter policies.

The concept of “trust” plays, I believe, an inordinately large role in Sheng’s analysis; he argues that since Stalin did not trust Japan and Chiang Kai-shek, it would not have made sense for him to push the CCP towards a united front with Chiang. There are two problems with this analysis. First, “trust” is an unmeasurable concept, at least unless one uses psychometric techniques. Debate about “trust” is a

little like debate about theological propositions which are inherently unverifiable. Secondly, whether or not Stalin pushed the CCP towards a united front with Chiang was not a function of his "trust" in Japan, Chiang Kai-shek, or anyone else. I frankly doubt if Stalin trusted anyone, including his closest comrades. Even after the Sino-Japanese war began, Stalin continued to fear that Chiang would make peace with Japan and abandon the ROC's alignment with the USSR. As I read it, fear of abandonment and betrayal was a constant of the politics of that time and place.

Given his fear of a GMD or Japanese double cross, why would Stalin push the CCP toward a united front with Chiang? Precisely because of his awareness of the contingent nature of Chiang's and the ROC's alignments. Chiang's reluctance to "resist Japan" was based largely on his fear that the CCP would use the opportunity of Sino-Japanese war to expand Red power. If Chiang could be persuaded that the CCP was willing to accept certain restrictions demanded by him, then he would be more willing to lead the ROC to "resist Japan" and Soviet security would be correspondingly enhanced.

There are several curious lacunas in Sheng's analysis. He ignores the evidence, cited in notes 22 and 42 of my *China Quarterly* article, that in the weeks after the Seventh Comintern Congress Wang Ming modified the anti-Chiang line he and others had presented at the congress, and moved to include Chiang in the united front. Chen Yun's delegation brought word of the devastation of China's Red forces during the Long March and this led Wang to conclude that a viable anti-Japanese united front would have to include Chiang and the GMD. Sheng instead cites *public* boasts by Wang about CCP strength. He then concludes that any moderation in Wang's anti-Chiang stance in late 1935 was "more a matter of propaganda than sincere belief in Chiang's willingness to form a national united front with the CCP." I am not prepared to discuss either the sincerity of Wang's motives or his belief in the probability that Chiang would respond favourably to a call for unity. It does seem to me, however, that the 7 November 1935 *Jiuguo bao* article did represent a call for unity with Chiang; it certainly said that such unity would be desirable.

There is a substantial amount of evidence suggesting that, contrary to what Sheng asserts, Stalin did *not* endorse the CCP's drive into Shanxi in February 1936. There is convincing evidence that Stalin authorized CCP military efforts to reach Mongolia's borders. It was Mao, however, who drew up the plan to do that via central and northern Shanxi and Suiyuan. The CCP could have reached Soviet lines via Ningxia or Gansu, as it tried to do later in 1936 after further consultation with Moscow. For reasons I outlined in my 1988 *China Quarterly* article, CCP expansion into north China at that juncture threatened to undermine Soviet diplomacy toward the ROC and Japan.

Sheng ignores Stalin's statements in March 1936, several weeks after the Eastern Expedition was launched, expressing concern about
the danger of Japan launching a war of aggression. He recognizes only
back-handedly the implications of the Eastern Expedition on Soviet
“peace diplomacy” toward Japan, and ignores Otto Braun’s strong
objections to the Eastern Expedition on these grounds. He ignores the
questions raised by *Jiugo shibao* regarding the possible adverse
international political consequences of the expedition, as well as the
fact that it was *Jiugo shibao*, not Baoan, that announced its end in
March. He also ignores subsequent Soviet reports, cited in note 82 of
my *China Quarterly* article, that the Comintern directly censured the
initiation of the Eastern campaign. Sheng's basis for overturning this
considerable body of evidence suggesting Comintern displeasure with
the Eastern Expedition is the fact that Lin Yuying brought to Baoan
Stalin's approval of a drive to Mongolia's borders and that the plan for
the Eastern Expedition was drawn up subsequently. *Post hoc ergo
propter hoc*. One of Mao's stratagems for dealing with Stalin and the
Comintern was to take Moscow's formulations and creatively interpret
them in a manner he felt conducive to the expansion of revolutionary
power in China. This may have been the relationship between Stalin's
approval of a CCP effort to "open lines of international communi-
cation" and Mao's decision for a drive into central Shanxi.

Sheng notes that in June 1936, shortly after the end of the Eastern
Expedition and after regular radio contact was re-established, Mao
was suddenly aware of "Chiang [Kai-shek]'s hope" that an advance
by the Chinese Red Army to the Suiyuan-Chahar-Outer Mongolia
border (i.e. the objective of the second and third stages of the Eastern
Expedition) would "incite a Japanese-Soviet war." These were
exactly the sort of objections enumerated by Otto Braun in his early
1936 letter to the CCP Politburo criticizing the Eastern Expedition.
How did Mao come to accept the objections of this German
interloper? How did Mao gain his sudden awareness into the
requirements of USSR peace diplomacy? Was Mao's new understand-
ing a result of Comintern instruction? Soviet sources assert it was.

Soon after the Eastern Expedition Wang Ming discussed in *Jiugo
shibao* the factors pushing Chiang towards an anti-Japanese united
front. Sheng dismisses this because Wang talked "only" of two sets of
circumstances. Then when the CCP continued its efforts, in Sheng's
words, to "split the GMD from within" and undermine "Chiang Kai-
shek, the chieftain of Chinese traitors," Sheng concluded that this was
"fully in agreement with Wang Ming’s stance at the time." The basis
for this conclusion is, apparently, the fact that Wang had previously
cited "only" two factors pushing Chiang toward anti-Japanese
national unity. In reaching this conclusion Sheng ignores the mid-
1936 warnings of *The Communist International* that "all internecine
warfare in China facilitates the dark and dirty actions of the Japanese
plunderers," and of Wang Ming himself that one "should not place...Chiang Kai-shek in the same category as the Japanese
plunderers." These were cited in notes 97 and 100 of my *China
Quarterly* article.
Sheng says that an ECCI directive of 15 August 1936 said “that the ECCI was in agreement with the CCP’s united front policy conveyed in the Wayaobao Resolution.” I have not seen the 15 August 1936 ECCI directive, but I doubt that at that late date Moscow endorsed a policy of revolutionary war against Nanjing. It would be helpful if Sheng provided us with a more extensive quotation from this document. Sheng also asserts that the ECCI’s 15 August 1936 directive endorsed CCP leadership of the united front. The quotation he cites to document this, however, concerns the CCP’s political and organizational independence within the united front. Leadership of the united front and independence within the united front are two rather different things.

Sheng’s contention regarding ECCI support for civil war against the Nanjing government in August 1936 does not square with the ECCI’s July 1936 critique of CCP policy. Following a CCP radio report on its work in early July, the ECCI discussed China. It concluded that because the CCP was relatively weak while the danger posed by Japanese aggression was great, the CCP should unconditionally abandon the struggle for soviet power and seek instead a united, democratic republic. Specifically, the CCP should work to draw Chiang into the united front. This was a direct critique of CCP policy. Strangely, Sheng cites the article in the Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs in which I present this evidence, but does not consider its significance. Instead he cites Dimitrov defending the CCP against Wang Ming’s criticism and concludes that this demonstrates harmony between Dimitrov and Mao. Again a non sequitur.

Sheng may misunderstand my argument regarding “Mao versus the Comintern.” I have not argued that Mao openly rejected Comintern directives, or that he was, in Sheng’s words, “antagonistic and confrontational” towards the Comintern. Mao recognized the advantages he derived from Moscow: intelligence about world affairs; a degree of leverage with foreign governments, including Nanjing; support and publicity by communist-led front groups around the world; medical treatment in Soviet hospitals for his cadres; and some training, equipment and money. Mao also hoped that Moscow would arm the CCP. Even more, he hoped that at some point the Soviet Union would go to war against Japan, welcome the CCP’s armies as an ally, and that the CCP would “liberate” substantial areas of China in co-operation with the Soviet army. He retained these latter hopes right up to the Sino-Soviet friendship treaty of August 1945. In short, Mao understood very well that it was not in his interest to alienate Stalin.

But he also felt that Moscow’s frequent directives were often somewhat out of touch with Chinese realities. When this was the case, Mao would make some partial move to satisfy Moscow demands or interpret Moscow’s orders in a way that he thought conducive to the expansion of revolutionary power in China. In the instant case this meant launching the Eastern Expedition, supporting the liang guan
revolt, and continuing revolutionary civil war against Chiang Kai-shek and the Nanjing government. When Mao creatively interpreted Comintern directions in this manner, however, he made profuse declarations of loyalty to Moscow. Even as late as the zhengfeng campaign of 1942–44 when Mao decisively eliminated Soviet influence within the CCP, he presented it as a virtual emulation campaign of Stalin. Because of this, I cannot accept Sheng's use of Mao's professions of loyalty to the Comintern to prove he was not deviating from Comintern policy.

Finally, there is the question of the Zunyi Conference. Sheng says Mao had Comintern support for the changes in leadership made at that conference. I say he did not. First, Sheng ignores the extensive and first-hand evidence regarding Stalin's August 1938 endorsement of Mao's leadership of the CCP—evidence discussed in length on pages 75–80 of my 1988 book cited by Sheng in his second note. Secondly, there is substantial evidence that from 1935 to 1938 Wang Ming and his supporters were unhappy with and sought to undo the results of the Zunyi Conference. Some of this evidence is referenced by note 35 of my China Quarterly article. More is presented in my 1988 book. Thirdly, there is the fact that Chen Yun's delegation which was dispatched to Moscow by the CCP Centre with the explicit purpose of gaining Comintern endorsement of the Zunyi decisions came into conflict with Wang Ming. Lastly, Bo Gu and Otto Braun, indisputably Moscow loyalists, were the major losers at Zunyi.

Sheng presents two sorts of evidence to substantiate his thesis that the Comintern endorsed Mao's moves at Zunyi. The first are statements in Comintern and Soviet publications lauding Mao just before and after Zunyi. These statements are, it seems to me, rather different from an explicit statement by Stalin to the effect that "Mao is the leader of the CCP." Such a statement is what I call an "endorsement of Mao's leadership" and came only in August 1938. Short of such an endorsement, the Comintern had good reason to praise Mao. He did have very considerable influence in the Chinese Party and its army, and unless the Comintern wanted to alienate him and thereby undermine its own influence inside China, at least until the Comintern was in a position to remove him or hem him in, it needed to praise him. Mao needed certain things from Moscow, but Moscow also needed certain things from Mao.

Sheng's second category of evidence is the fact that Comintern instructions after Zunyi "often worked in Mao's favour" especially regarding Mao's struggle with Zhang Guotao. It is clear that Moscow favoured Mao over Zhang, but while important, this is not the same as an explicit endorsement of Mao's leadership by Stalin.

We should beware of reading back into history the understanding of later generations. Stalin and his Comintern apparatchiki in Moscow had little reason to oppose Mao in 1935. They had no way of knowing that over the next decade he would repeatedly deviate from Comintern line and ultimately emancipate the CCP from Moscow's
control. From Moscow’s perspective, Mao must have seemed to be a parochial but resourceful and effective revolutionary leader. Moreover, Mao understood that he needed Soviet support. Why shouldn’t Moscow have expected that he could be educated to become a loyal internationalist? In other words, I doubt if Mao’s assumption of paramount leadership at Zunyi met Comintern opposition. Nor is there any evidence, that I know of, suggesting this. But neither did it have Comintern endorsement. That endorsement came only in the autumn of 1938 in a power-for-policy trade-off between Mao and Stalin.