

American Perceptions of Chinese Communism

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Introduction

American perceptions of Chinese Communism, though largely negative at present, have oscillated widely since the earliest point of cognizance in American minds in the 1920s. When considered in large strokes, public perception has generally been consistent with Sino-American relations, each influencing the other.¹ The perceptions of Chinese Communism initially developed in the context of the First Red Scare with Americans seeking to disassociate it from the violence and extremism of Russian Communism. From then on, they have been closely associated with the American propensity to sympathize with ‘the underdog’ and an expectation that China would ultimately follow in America’s footsteps. Only recently, as a result of China’s growth and continued assertion of their own interests as independent from those harbored by the US on their behalf, does the US perceive them on more equal footing. The evolution of American perceptions of Chinese Communism over time can be traced through the depictions and arguments of Edgar Snow, John S. Service, Dean Acheson, Tang Tsou, Barbara Tuchman, John Pomfret, Julia Lovell, and David Cheng Chang. Their ideas both reflect and shape American perceptions of Chinese Communism.

The ‘So-Called Communists’

During the First Red Scare in 1919 Americans harbored sweeping fears of the potential of far-left movements like communism and anarchism coalescing to undermine social and political security. Communism was associated with the radicalism and bloody violence of the Bolshevik Revolution. It was seen as a dangerous ideology that posed a threat to domestic stability. However, when faced with the reality that the Nationalist army in China included Communists, some US media outlets downplayed this fact by equating the Nationalists, including their Communist element, with American revolutionary troops led by George Washington: “Americans equated China’s revolution with their own... The press as a whole refused to respond to the Red scare... American public opinion for the first time in history was moved to minimize rather than inflate the Red menace.”² At this point, many Americans viewed Chinese Communism as communism in name only. Far from the violent extremism they equated with communist ideology, Chinese Communism was seen as a positive and natural reaction to the difficult conditions the Chinese people found themselves in and for this reason was disassociated with ‘real communism.’³

This disassociation was reflected in official US government communications where it was repeatedly referred to as ‘so-called communism.’⁴ This viewpoint is also well demonstrated by journalist Edgar Snow and diplomat John S. Service, both Americans who spent time in China prior to and during World War II. They adopted the language of democracy to describe their personal experiences with Chinese Communism. In 1938, Snow referenced the efforts of the Communist leaders “to arouse the millions of rural China to their responsibilities in society; to awaken them to a belief in human rights...to fight for a life of justice, equality, freedom, and human dignity, as the Communists saw it.”⁵ Reflecting on his 1944 trip to the Communist base, Service wrote “there is everywhere an emphasis on

¹ Matthew S. Hirshberg, “Consistency and Change in American Perceptions of China,” *Political Behavior* 15, no.3 (September 1993): 248.

² Barbara Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China 1911-1945* (New York: Random House, 1970), 122.

³ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴ Henry L. Stimson, “The Secretary of State to the Minister in China (Johnson),” *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1932, The Far East, Volume IV*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1932v04/d171>.

⁵ Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 124.

democracy,” and “we have come...to find the most modern place in China.”⁶ These statements reinforced and amplified views already held by many in the US.

The Russians at that time, at least outwardly, reiterated this perspective. In a 1944 conversation with the American ambassador to China, Patrick Hurley, Vyacheslav Molotov asserted that some of the people in China “called themselves Communists” merely as “a way of expressing dissatisfaction with their wretched economic condition.” They were “related to Communism in no way at all.” The Soviet government, he continued “should not be associated with these Communist elements.”⁷ While suspicion regarding the sincerity of this statement is warranted, it was considered credible by the Americans at the time.⁸

‘Lost’

In 1949 Mao Zedong announced, “that his new China ‘must lean to one side’—the Soviet Union.”⁹ American influence on the development of Chinese Communism was seen as lost to Russian control. The idea that it was the Americans who lost China, rather than the Chinese who determined their own path, became a persistent misconception. With this loss, American pride was damaged. China Hand John Paton Davies stated, “Never in the history of U.S. relations with China has the predominant regime of that country viewed us with such uncompromising enmity. Never has the prestige of the United States in China been so low. And never have we been so apparently at a loss to make our influence felt in China.”¹⁰

Rather than affirm this enmity by admitting error in judgement, Acheson declared that “the unfortunate but inescapable fact is that the ominous result of the civil war in China was beyond the control of the government of the United States.”¹¹ This effort to avoid blame was nevertheless accompanied by language that continued to undercut the agency of China. He depicted the Chinese Communists as “fanatic,” hoodwinked by the Russians, and still democratic and individualist by nature.¹² As David Chang argues in his book, *The Hijacked War*, it was the hope that communism in China was a mere distraction from an inherently democratic character that guided Washington’s policy during the Korean War “to reindoctrinate Korean War prisoners so that they could become ‘ambassadors of independent thinking’ after repatriation.”¹³ If China had been lost, it could be found again.

The Threat

The United States first tasted the strength of the Chinese Communists during the Korean War. Their unanticipated successes on the battle front ignited fear and hostility which ultimately “replaced the traditional friendship as the dominant mood in the American attitude toward China.”¹⁴ It was within this context that Senator Joseph McCarthy was able to build on previous theories of conspiracy to explain America’s failure in China, again avoiding admission of error. Through his attack on America’s China policy, McCarthyism garnered the support of more respectable politicians, adding fuel to the Second Red Scare.¹⁵

⁶ John S. Service quoted in Joseph W. Esherick, *Lost Chance in China: The World War II Despatches of John S. Service* (New York: Random House, 1974) 180-182.

⁷ Tang Tsou, *America’s Failure in China: 1941-50* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 182.

⁸ David Cheng Chang, *The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020), 377; US Department of State, *The China White Paper: August 1949* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1970), IX.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 378.

¹⁰ John Paton Davies quoted in Chang, 379.

¹¹ US Department of State, XVI.

¹² *Ibid.*, VI.

¹³ Chang, 380.

¹⁴ Tsou, 590.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 539.

The perception of Chinese Communists as fanatics, combined with America's new understanding of their strength and fear of their potential as a nuclear-armed state, justified President Kennedy's escalation of US operations in Vietnam. In 1963 Kennedy told a *New York Times* reporter, "Once China became a nuclear-armed state, the 'domino theory' would no longer hold, as all of Southeast Asia would naturally go Communist under the threat of a Maoist holocaust. These Chinese are tough... [they] seem prepared to sacrifice 300 million people, if necessary, to dominate Asia."¹⁶ This is the same year that Tang Tsou's book, *America's Failure in China*, was published. He frames his arguments in direct response to the above-mentioned idea that it was America who lost China and offers the first direct look at US interaction with China during the 1940's that prioritizes balanced explanation over justification.

In 1965 Johnson again intensified US operations in Vietnam similarly calling on atomic weapons and containment of Communism for justification. However, only one year later he became the first president to speak of reconciliation with China. What prompted this sudden change? In *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom*, John Pomfret describes protests against the US presence in Vietnam as "the glue that bound together disparate campaigns for racial and gender equality, for civil rights, and against American overreach abroad. And always in the background was Red China."¹⁷ Resistance against domestic injustices led to a re-evaluation of American aggression in southeast Asia, but this time the United States government was cast in the role of 'the threat'.

The Solution

This time period marked a significant turnaround in American perception of Chinese Communism. China, and communism in general, began to be positively depicted in pop culture. People began to prioritize friendship with China over ideological differences between communism and democracy. In 1970 Barbara Tuchman, who had been a public supporter of Beijing, published *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*. In her book she negatively depicted Chiang Kai-shek and created space to adjust earlier assumptions about Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party. Pomfret explains the American infatuation with China:

From die-hard leftists to well-meaning liberals to those securely on the right, Americans fell for China again. With their own country trapped in Vietnam and riven by drugs, the generation gap, and racial conflict, Americans found China inspirational. The US was rich but spoiled. China was poor but noble. The US was free and fractious. China was communal and harmonious. Americans dug free love. The Chinese were beyond sex. Americans worshipped individualism. China valued the collective. Americans had laws. The Chinese had morals.¹⁸

China offered a solution to more than just the moral depravity that raged in America at that time. Improving relations with China would prove to be a much-needed political win for Nixon.

Well before his 1972 visit to China, in 1967 Nixon was already strongly advocating to reincorporate China into "the family of nations," admonishing the United States to "come urgently to grips with the reality of China."¹⁹ Bringing normalization with China to its pinnacle, the Carter administration developed programs across many government agencies with the aim of supporting the growth and development of China, undoubtedly with the assumption that China would follow in American footsteps. The belief in the democratic

¹⁶ John Pomfret, *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom: America and China, 1776 to the Present* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2016), 429.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 434-8.

¹⁸ Pomfret, 468.

¹⁹ Richard Nixon quoted in Pomfret, 439.

nature of China resurfaced as Carter picked up the work of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had hoped to develop China into a world power.²⁰

The Bully

The 1970's and 80's were golden years in the history of US perception of China and Chinese Communism. A poll conducted in March 1989 found that 80% of Americans had favorable views of China. However, another in June of the same year reflected a much smaller number, only 16%.²¹ The cause of this almost overnight extreme change in American perceptions on China was the April 15 Tiananmen Square Massacre, which still looms large in the minds of Americans who were alive at the time. US perceptions were again driven by the propensity to support the underdog, but this time the underdog represented those being suppressed by the Communist Regime. From this point up to the present, human rights abuses and lack of freedom became closely linked to Chinese Communism in American minds.²² Pomfret's *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom* and Julie Lovell's *Maoism: A Global History* were both published in this context, in 2016 and 2019 respectively. Both call for and contribute to a realist perspective of Chinese Communism rather than one driven by an aim to excavate and guide some deep-seated democratic soul. In recent years, in addition to human rights abuses, Americans associate global influence and economic competition with China.

Lovell describes the ideas of Maoism as “major forces of the recent past, present and future that have shaped – and are shaping – the world, as well as China.”²³ In their 2018 *Foreign Affairs* article “The China Reckoning,” Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner state that “Trump’s policies...have put Washington at risk of adopting an approach that is confrontational without being competitive; Beijing, meanwhile, has managed to be increasingly competitive without being confrontational.”²⁴ In President Biden’s 2023 State of the Union Address, he references a “story... about how the People’s Republic of China was increasing its power and America was falling in the world,” and that he “made clear with President Xi that we seek competition, not conflict,” and also that “winning the competition with China” should be a unifying force for Americans.²⁵ This may be the first time that the US has regarded China on equal footing, not morally, but in terms of power and influence. Pomfret candidly suggests that the problem lies in the reality “that the interests of the Chinese Communist Party [are] diverging from the interests of the United States – and somehow, many Americans had expected that they never would.”²⁶

Outlook & Conclusions

Snow’s and Service’s depictions of Chinese Communism, Dean Acheson’s reflections on US policy in China, and the arguments made by Tsou, Tuchman, Pomfret, and Chang regarding American misperceptions of China and Chinese Communism represent, react to, and shape American perceptions of Chinese Communism. In 1963 Tsou’s conclusions were

²⁰ Pomfret., 488.

²¹ Hirshberg, 249.

²² Shannon Schumacher and Laura Silver, “In their own words: what Americans think about China,” *Pew Research Center* (March 4, 2021): <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/03/04/in-their-own-words-what-americans-think-about-china/>.

²³ Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 460.

²⁴ Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2018), 70.

²⁵ Joe Biden, “Remarks of President Joe Biden – State of the Union Address as Prepared for Delivery,” *The White House* (February 7, 2023): <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/02/07/remarks-of-president-joe-biden-state-of-the-union-address-as-prepared-for-delivery/>.

²⁶ Pomfret, 632.

dreary: “On the horizon looms an ever-present chance of war,” with an emphasis on “the tragic results produced by a policy of good intentions and high ideals which lacked the foundation of a correlative estimate of self-interest.”²⁷ His sober tone was valid then and remains so now. It makes the shift towards friendship and reconciliation that followed even more surprising.

In 2016, Pomfret, though in no way naïve to the likelihood of achieving a great and lasting harmony with China, strongly advocates for efforts in that direction. Unexpectedly, in his recommendations for action he adopts the paternal language of Nixon from 1968 and the classic outsized belief in US influence over China’s destiny: “the United States has no choice but to redouble its efforts to complete its historic mission to pull China into the world,” as “the United States is the only nation capable of convincing China.”²⁸ This supports Chang’s conclusion that despite the US experience in Korea and beyond, America has yet to fully shake its “wishful thinking,” “arrogance,” and “ignorance” towards the Chinese Communists.²⁹ Considering this, Campbell and Ratner’s advice for a starting point is sound:

The starting point for a better approach is a new degree of humility about the United States' ability to change China. Neither seeking to isolate and weaken it nor trying to transform it for the better should be the lodestar of U.S. strategy in Asia. Washington should instead focus more on its own power and behavior, and the power and behavior of its allies and partners. Basing policy on a more realistic set of assumptions about China would better advance U.S. interests and put the bilateral relationship on a more sustainable footing.³⁰

Similarly, Jonathan Spence suggests a thread of hope that the cycle of Sino-American relations could be broken: “at least—if each partner in the equation has attained a new level of self-awareness—there is a chance that the old misconceptions will not be repeated.”³¹ The tone of these recent statements on the outlook of US-China relations is notably more positive than Tsou’s in 1963, perhaps less because the outlook is more bright, but rather because the US has finally taken steps toward recognizing China’s independent agency and ambition. While a great swing in the Sino-American relationship as seen with Nixon is unlikely, perhaps there is room for slow, incremental improvements that could prove to be more stable.

This essay is notably lopsided in scope, focusing solely on American perceptions of Chinese Communism with no reference to the concomitant Chinese perception of American Democracy. Given that the original US view of Chinese Communism was that it was communism only in name and had democratic undertones, better understanding how the Communists have perceived democracy overtime could help correct remaining misconceptions. Domestically speaking, American public opinion and government perceptions have been closely related, and further analysis regarding which was the instigator in key turning points could be informative not only in terms of better understanding the mechanisms behind shifting perceptions overtime, but also the nature of the connectedness between the US government and its citizens. Finally, with the continued escalation of globalization, further investigating the influence of key third parties on American perspectives of Chinese Communism such as the Soviet Union and Taiwan would be a logical next step.

²⁷ Tsou, 591.

²⁸ Pomfret, 633-4.

²⁹ Chang, 385.

³⁰ Campbell and Ratner, 70.

³¹ Jonathan Spence quoted in John Delury, *Agents of Subversion: The Fate of John T. Downey and the CIA’s Covert War in China* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2022), 328.

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