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Kuisong Yang and Yafeng Xia. "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente: Mao's Changing Psyche and Policy toward the United States, 1969-1976." *Diplomatic History* 34:2 (April 2010): 395-423.

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Review by **Michael Sheng**, The University of Akron

The famous Nixon-Mao handshake in 1972 has become a legend in twentieth century diplomacy, partially due to the proliferation of writings by participants and observers on both sides of the Pacific. On the American side, Henry Kissinger's writings seem to be the most influential. In Kissinger's view, "Mao emanated vibrations of strength and power and will," and was "beyond ideology" in dealing with the United States.¹ It is understandable that to drum up the drama of the "opening to China" as a geopolitical diplomatic feat Nixon and Kissinger needed their Chinese counterpart to appear to be as great a dynamic geopolitical strategist as they were. "Was Mao really a realistic leader as many have suggested?" This is the central question the two Chinese historians try to answer in their article.

Based on newly available Chinese historical materials, the authors' portrait of Mao is quite different from that in existing western literature. Far from the western image of a colossal strategic thinker of the 20th century, Mao turned out to be an indecisive ideologue vacillating between continuing China's existing policy of exporting revolution against American imperialism and pursuing détente with the United States. According to Kissinger, Mao said to Nixon that China was slow in responding to American initiatives over two years, and it was due to Beijing's "bureaucratic approach."² This article tells a radically different story. After the Sino-Soviet border clash in 1969, Mao was concerned with the Soviet threat, and thus he responded to the American initiatives positively, albeit slowly. Beijing's slowness was not due to the "bureaucratic approach" of Mao's subordinates, but due to Mao's own psychological/ideological hesitation. Mao could feel comfortable in

¹ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, Boston: Little (Brown and Company, 1979), pp. 1058-1063.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1061.

forming a united front with a “lesser evil,” the U.S. in order to deal with the perceived major threat, the Soviet Union. After all, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) formed two united front with its archenemy, the Guomindang (GMD, the Nationalists). Yang and Xia convincingly demonstrate that Mao was willing to explore the possibility of rapprochement with the U.S. only when he saw that the worldwide revolution had reached a disappointing low ebb. In March 1970, after Mao had approved high-level official contacts with the U.S., he reversed himself due to the situation in Cambodia and the anti-war movement in the United States. Mao now saw the “rising tide of world revolution” again, which excited him as he was fundamentally a Leninist. After the situation in Southeast Asia returned to a status quo late in 1970, Beijing attempted to send a signal to Washington by inviting Edgar Snow to the Chinese capital for the National Day celebration on October 1. Zhou Enlai tried to arrange a Mao-Snow interview in the following days, but Mao could not make up his mind, and Snow had to wait in Beijing until mid-December. Citing Chinese sources, the authors conclude insightfully that Mao “was not psychologically ready for such a tactical adjustment to improve relations with the United States.” The most notable strength of this article is its ability to use Chinese materials to demonstrate vividly Mao’s state of mind that was full of agony and hesitation when he was extending his hand to the Americans. It was extremely difficult for Mao to reverse his course of action from promoting anti-American world revolution to Sino-American rapprochement.

If Mao’s chief goal of shaking hands with Nixon was to intensify the Soviet-American conflict so that the worldwide revolution could be advanced, Mao was to be disappointed again. In February 1973, Mao proposed to Kissinger that a “horizontal line,” including the U.S., Japan, China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Europe, be formed to contain the Soviet threat. He later added the countries around this line into his proposed anti-Soviet alliance, which he called a “big terrain.” We will never know what was really in this dying man’s mind; whatever it might be, the Americans did not buy it. Instead, Nixon went to Moscow shortly after his China visit, and Brezhnev repaid this with a visit to the U.S. in 1973. Mao’s “wedge policy” clearly failed; but the Chairman was supposed to be infallible. Since he could not do anything to the Americans and the Soviets, he started to attack his own Foreign Ministry, and Zhou Enlai in particular. He accused Zhou of being too “rightist” in dealing with the United States. An angry and frustrated Mao prohibited any meaningful cooperation with the U.S., which explains why a fully normalized diplomatic relationship between China and the U.S. was not established until long after Mao’s death in 1976, in spite of the fanfare of the Mao-Nixon meeting in 1972.

For Mao, laying the blame for his own failure at Zhou’s doorstep was not enough. To prove that he was “always correct,” Mao soon came up with another grandiose theory on world politics, which was known as the “three-worlds” theory. Mao now declared that there were three worlds: The U.S. and the Soviet Union belonged to the “first world,” Western European nations and Japan the “second world,” while China and the rest formed the “third world.” Mao’s basic strategy was to unite with the “third world,” to win over the “second world” as much as possible, and to isolate and oppose the “first world” of the two superpowers. To implement the new policy, however, the real problem for Mao was not how to oppose the superpowers, but how to make his own government relevant to those governments in the third world, which his previous “exporting revolution” policy

attempted to overthrow. The authors successfully depict Mao's awkwardness and dilemma while receiving the Prime Minister of Malaysia, who asked Mao to help stop the violence by the Communist Party of Malaysia, whose leader took refuge in Beijing. When Mao took power in China in 1949, Stalin had already transformed the Soviet Union into a status quo power, calculating and manipulating world politics to advance the Russian national interest. Mao never reached that level of maturity as a statesman in international arena; he died a rebel.

Together with recent scholarship in the field, this article raises a more fundamental question: Did Mao really know what China's national interest was? If he did, why did his foreign policy keep changing, just like his domestic policy, as both brought China to the point of a break? Recent studies on the Sino-Soviet relations in the 1950s and 1960s indicate that the "Soviet threat" to China did not exist until Mao made it so.³ A probable explanation for Mao's ever-changing policy can be obtained along the line of Max Weber's theory of charisma. The Mao leadership in China was a charismatic authority, "to which the governed submit because of their belief in the extraordinary quality of the specific person."⁴ If the underpinning legitimacy of Mao's authority rested on the belief in his personal extraordinary quality, the preservation and strengthening of this belief became fundamental to all other considerations. This article reveals a pattern of Mao's behavior: when an existing policy failed, he blamed the failure on others within the leadership, and then came up with a new policy to correct the old one, so the narrative of an "always correct Chairman" was perpetuated. Some of the remnants of the Mao personality cult have yet to be thoroughly understood.

Michael Sheng is the author of *Battling Western Imperialism: Mao, Stalin, and the United States* (Princeton, 1997), and many articles published in *China Quarterly*, *China Journal*, *Modern China*, *Diplomatic History*, etc. The most recent ones include "Mao and China's Relations with the Superpowers in the 1950s: The Taiwan Strait Crises Revisited," *Modern China*, October 2008, pp. 477-507; "Mao Zedong and the Three-Anti Campaign: November 1951-April 1952," *Twentieth Century China*, Fall 2006, pp. 21-45; and "Mao, Tibet, and the Korean War," *The Journal of Cold War Studies*, Summer 2006, pp. 15-33. He is currently the Chair of the History Department at the University of Akron.

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³ See Lorenz Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton University Press, 2008); Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Stanford University Press, 2009); Michael Sheng, "Mao and China's Relations with the Superpowers in the 1950s: A New Look at the Taiwan Straits Crises and the Sino-Soviet Split," *Modern China*, (October 2008): 477-507.

⁴ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946): 77-79.

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