

**Daniel Kurtz-Phelan.** *The China Mission: George Marshall's Unfinished War, 1945-1947.* New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2018. 496 pp. \$28.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-393-24095-5.

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George C. Marshall has been lauded as an accomplished soldier-statesman and one of the most prominent figures of the mid-twentieth century. Marshall's mission to China from December 1945 to January 1947, however, turned out to be an unfortunate episode in his otherwise exceptional role as the architect of the postwar world order. If Marshall failed to help create a "strong, peaceful, united and democratic China" as Washington expected, is his mission to China still important to historians and relevant to our understanding of US foreign relations today (p. 43)? Daniel Kurtz-Phelan's *The China Mission* is a valuable recent addition to historians' efforts to "rediscover" this neglected turning point of the early Cold War. The author argues that the collapse of Marshall's endeavor to mediate the looming civil war between Chinese Nationalists and Communists would not only "define the rest of his career," as noted on the cover page, but also shape the Cold War and US-China relations in the decades to come.

*The China Mission* joins an ongoing conversation that places US-China relations in the critical juncture of the mid-1940s against the broader historical context. The first debate centers on whether the unfolding US-Soviet global competition affected Marshall's objectives and strategy in China. Steven I. Levine's article "A New Look at American Mediation in the Chinese Civil War: The

Marshall Mission and Manchuria," on the Marshall mission and Manchuria, where head-on clashes between Nationalist and Communist forces after the end of World War II first began, published in 1979, marked the earliest effort by historians to challenge the old image of the mission as a futile diplomatic attempt. Levine believes that even before the mission, Marshall shared with American observers in Washington concerns that Soviet delay of its withdrawal from Manchuria fit in "an already familiar pattern of aggression." "Although the Marshall mission failed to unify China," Levine argues, "it succeeded in its basic purpose of thwarting Soviet expansionism." [1] Illoyna Homeyard, by contrast, believes that internal contradictions in US policy and the danger of further deployment of American troops to China concerned Marshall more than Soviet expansion. [2] Such debate sheds important light on the relationship between the long-existing power struggles in China and the crystallization of the Cold War in Asia.

A second focus of existing literature on the Marshall mission is the obstacles that prevented Marshall from accomplishing his mandate. In the mid-1980s, Niu Jun, then among the first history PhD students trained by the restored Chinese higher-education system after the Cultural Revolution and later a leading historian of China's for-

eign relations, in his dissertation chose to focus on the two missions led by Patrick J. Hurley and Marshall. In his 2009 book, which is based on his dissertation, Niu describes the United States' frustrated attempts to mediate the Chinese Civil War as the product of a fundamental problem in American policy toward China—"the gap between capabilities and goals." [3] Marshall was not able to "solve" the China problem, according to Odd Arne Westad, because US presence in China itself was part of the problem. Chiang Kai-shek never expected Marshall to be a true mediator who took a neutral stance between the Nationalists and the Communists. Communist leaders also distrusted US motives as the Americans continued buttressing Chiang's position financially and militarily. [4] Scholarship on the contrast between ambitious US goals in China and Marshall's limited leverage indicated that his China mission had very little chance to succeed from the very beginning.

Kurtz-Phelan's book significantly contributes to these historiographical issues. With regard to US objectives of mediating the Chinese Civil War, Kurtz-Phelan argues that Washington wanted to build a strong and unified China to "take China off the table as both a source of US-Soviet tension and an easy target for Soviet subterfuge" (p. 37). Therefore, for American leaders, by late 1945, preventing conflicts with the Soviet Union in the Far East was as important as stopping Soviet expansion there. In analyzing US goals in China, Kurtz-Phelan reveals the divisions among top decision makers. For instance, before Marshall's departure for China, whereas the State Department sought to build a "strong, peaceful, united and democratic" China, the War Department prioritized formulating a "strong, peaceful, united and effective" China, citing that the country was not ready for democratic procedures (p. 43). *The China Mission* does a particularly excellent job highlighting the gap between American capabilities and goals in China. Kurtz-Phelan tells a convincing story of how such a gap was widened after the end of World War II. The United States had assigned low

priority to China in its war effort, yet its stakes in China became much higher after the war ended as US-Soviet strategic competition unfolded. However, it never attained enough leverage to achieve the ambitious goals of guaranteeing China's unity and Chiang's leadership while encouraging necessary reform to prevent a civil war. *The China Mission* demonstrates that Washington failed to make any concrete efforts to narrow the gap. Instead, the top decision makers resorted to "wishful thinking" and "optimistic evasions" (p. 44). None of President Harry Truman's top aides answered Marshall's fundamental question about what he should do if the Communists agreed to compromise but Chiang did not. Pressed by Marshall, Truman had to admit that eventually the United States had to support Chiang's position. What further foreshadowed Marshall's mediation efforts was the fact that this confidential deliberation was leaked to the Chinese ambassador to Washington, which partly explained Chiang's uncompromising stance during the negotiations.

Besides addressing existing scholarly interests, *The China Mission* makes two additional contributions to studies of Cold War history. First, Kurtz-Phelan makes a convincing argument about the impact of the failed China mission on the rest of Marshall's career, especially his role as the secretary of state, as well as US foreign relations during the early Cold War. After experiencing the chaos and political impasse in China, Marshall developed a more acute understanding that "America could achieve little on its own" and that helping European societies overcome the postwar desperation was a precondition to containing Communism (p. 335). Learning from the lesson in China, Marshall emphasized a "shared-commitment" between the United States and European recipients when he designed the Marshall Plan. With this healthy skepticism about American might, Marshall believed that "preliminary to the question of should was the question of would. If the answer to the latter was no, the former was academic" (p. 340). Second and methodologically,

benefiting from Chiang's diaries, T. V. Soong Papers, and secondary sources about the Chinese Communists' foreign relations, *The China Mission* presents four interconnected storylines: Marshall's thirteen months in China, strategic considerations in Washington, Chiang's deliberations, and negotiation strategies of the Communists. The book gives agency to all key historical figures involved in this episode of history while at the same time analyzing the restraints on their actions.

To conclude, *The China Mission* sheds important light on the significance of the Marshall mission despite its failure, the interconnectedness of the Cold War in different parts of the world, and the limits to American power despite its ascendancy in the post-World War II world. The book will appeal to scholars and a non-academic audience who are interested in the Cold War in Asia, US-China relations, and twentieth-century China.

#### Notes

[1]. Steven I. Levine, "A New Look at American Mediation in the Chinese Civil War: The Marshall Mission and Manchuria," *Diplomatic History* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1979): 349-50.

[2]. Illoyna Homeyard, "Another Look at the Marshall Mission to China," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 191-217.

[3]. Niu Jun, *Cong He'erli dao Maxie'er: Meiguo tiaochu guogong maodun shimo* [From Hurley to Marshall: US mediation of the conflicts between the Nationalists and the Communists] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2009), 2.

[4]. Odd Arne Westad, *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946-1950* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 44.

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