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After empire?: Cold War scholarship on Mao's China

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Anglophone scholars approached the question of Maoist China's relationship with empire between 1949 and 1976. My analysis sheds light on three discursive frameworks. First, I discuss scholars that portrayed China as part of a Sino-Soviet empire. Second, I investigate academic studies that argued that the CCP sought to revive China's old empire with new characteristics. Third, I look at scholarship that depicted the CCP as seeking to create a post-colonial order both at home and abroad. Finally, in the conclusion, I address how these three discursive frameworks continue to circulate in contemporary discourse about Sino-American relations.

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On 21 September 1949, Mao Zedong famously declared that China's modern history of humiliation had come to end. The Chinese people had 'stood up' and pushed back against the 'oppression and exploitation by foreign imperialism' that had caused China to fall behind in the past century and lose its perennial international position as 'a great, courageous, and industrious nation'.¹ Mao credited the Chinese people's 'unity', 'unyielding struggles', and 'revolutionary movement' for stemming the tide of China's century-long decline. Mao, however, made clear that the Chinese people had only brought about this new era of emancipation under the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) leadership, which was on the cusp of founding a new nation – the People's Republic of China (PRC). This new nation would not only overcome the weak, divided, and oppressive government of China's last imperial dynasty and the CCP's longtime rival – the Guomindang – but it would also 'work courageously . . . to promote world peace and freedom' and make sure that China and all other nations of the world were no 'longer . . . subject to insult and humiliation' by foreign imperialism.²

While Mao and his comrades were brimming with confidence that the PRC's establishment marked a new anti-imperial epoch in Chinese and world history, scholars abroad were much less sanguine about what the founding of a new state in Asia with a revolutionary socialist group at the helm meant for the fate of empire in modern world history. Cold War battle lines between the Soviet-led socialist bloc and American-led capitalist camp were hardening, and scholars held competing views on whether a CCP-

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¹Mao Zedong, 'The Chinese People Have Stood Up!' USC US-China Institute, 21 September 1949, <https://china.usc.edu/Mao-declares-founding-of-peoples-republic-of-china-chinese-people-have-stood-up>.

²Mao, 'Chinese People'.

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led China would advance the formation of a new global order in which empires and colonies would recede from the historical stage and become a geopolitical thing of the past, or whether the CCP would work to create a new form of socialist empire both at home and abroad.

Existing studies have looked at Maoist China's relationship to empire from a variety of different perspectives. Historians have inquired into how China worked to promote anti-imperialism abroad,³ and how China's struggles against imperialism shaped its relations with the Soviet Union and United States.⁴ Scholars have also illustrated how political actors in the Global South responded to China's anti-imperialist endeavors.⁵ Others have focused on how Maoist anti-imperialism served as an inspiration for radical scholars and political groups in Europe and the United States.⁶ This article builds on this last strand of research. However, it takes a broader approach and does not concentrate on scholars who looked favorably on Chinese anti-imperialism.

Instead, it takes a deep dive into the multiple ways that Anglophone scholars approached the question of China's relationship with empire during the time that Mao Zedong served as the PRC's paramount leader between 1949 and 1976. My analysis sheds light on three discursive frameworks prominent in Cold War studies of Chinese domestic and foreign policy. First, I discuss scholarly views that portrayed Mao's China as part of a Sino-Soviet empire. Second, I investigate academic studies that argued that the CCP sought to revive China's old empire and reinvigorate it with new characteristics. Third, I look at scholarship that depicted the CCP as seeking to create a post-colonial order both within China's borders and around the world. Finally, in the conclusion, I address how the three discursive frameworks presented in this article continue to circulate in contemporary discourse about Sino-American relations.

Before proceeding to the article's body, I want to make four points about its scope. First, I want to clarify why I have limited my discussion to Mao's time in power when many historians maintain that the Cold War lasted until the early 1990s.⁷ I have focused on this period for a specific reason. It is my view that the Cold War should not be understood as a single global conflict in which events in all world regions were all on the same clock, such that the Cold War waxed and waned in influence in a synchronous manner in each region of the world. Every world region was not on a uniform timeline in which the Cold War began and concluded at the same time.

Rather, as Lorenz Lüthi has argued, the Cold War had distinct 'regional incarnations', and each regional formation was on a different geopolitical clock, such that the Cold War

³Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); and Gregg Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry during the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁴Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War. The New Cold War History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Shen Zhihua and Xia Yafeng, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Partnership, 1945–1959* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015); and Li Danhui and Xia Yafeng, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959–1973* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018).

⁵Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2019); and Matthew Galway, *The Emergence of Global Maoism: China's Red Evangelism and the Cambodian Communist Movement, 1949–1979* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

⁶Fabio Lanza, *The End of Concern: Maoist China, Activism, and Asian Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Daniel Vukovich, *Illiberal China: The Ideological Challenge of the People's Republic of China* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); and Gao Yunxiang, *Arise Africa, Roar China: Black and Chinese Citizens of the World in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

⁷John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–1996* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997).

became a defining force in various regions at differing times, had varying points of intensity, and 'ended in different ways in various parts of the world'.⁸ In the case of Asia, the Cold War was centered on the conflict between US-allied non-communist countries and communist-leaning national liberation movements in China and Vietnam. This geopolitical conflict ceased to be the crux of regional politics in the late 1970s in the post-Mao era when the PRC went to war with Vietnam, and Chinese leaders repaired relations with the United States and Southeast Asian anti-communist states.⁹

Second, I want to spell out how this article uses the concept of empire. As the reader will see in the following pages, some Cold War scholars employed the term empire to refer to Chinese expansion into Central Asia. Others drew on the idea of empire to highlight the Chinese imperial tradition of a strong central government. Still others deployed the concept of empire to explain the PRC's efforts to export socialist revolution worldwide. I fully acknowledge that the authors covered in this study ascribed to empire a multitude of meanings. My goal is not to find a common definition of empire that can encompass every single semantic variation produced by the authors analyzed. To my mind, such an endeavor would not only be impossible because the scholars investigated were operating with very different understandings of empire, but also because such an effort would obscure the disparate meanings that scholars attributed to the term empire. My aim instead is to chart out the semantic diversity of the discursive field that developed around the concept of empire in Anglophone Cold War scholarship.¹⁰

Third, I group participants in this discursive field under the term 'Cold War scholars'. Readers might ask whether this designation means to suggest that the scholars discussed were Cold Warriors who believed in America's policy of containing communism in Asia. For historians, it is often difficult to discern what historical actors believed based on available sources. Doing so is particularly complicated with Cold War scholars who had reason to dissemble their politics after the American Red Scare of the 1950s.¹¹ What historians can delineate with more certainty is a given period's major discursive positions. When it comes to China's relationship to empire, the three discursive frameworks explored in this article were predominant in the Mao era. When a scholar voiced support for the idea that the PRC was one half of a Sino-Soviet empire, or that China sought to revamp its old expansionist empire, or that CCP anti-imperialism aimed to undermine American global leadership, whether they were a Cold Warrior or not, their scholarship reinforced the prevailing American discourse that Mao's China was a malign communist actor whose global influence Washington should strive to contain.

Lastly, I want to explain why this study only examines Anglophone scholarship. I have concentrated on the Anglophone world because it is the academic field where much scholarly discussion of China's relationship to empire occurred, because it forms the historical foundation of contemporary Anglophone studies of Mao's China, and finally because its ideas reverberated in American foreign policy towards China. When I began work on this project, I initially planned to include French studies. I eventually opted to save them for another day to keep the article's scope manageable. For the same reason,

⁸Lorenz Lüthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 5.

⁹Lüthi, *Cold Wars*, 520–538.

¹⁰On discursive fields, see Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 94–115.

¹¹Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1–52.

I have not compared American, British, Canadian, and Australian views – an important topic that merits in-depth discussion. This article’s investigation of Anglophone scholarship writ large will hopefully serve as a foundation for future research in this direction.

Making a Sino-Soviet empire

That imperialism was central to the CCP’s governing of China was of little doubt to Cold War scholars. What was at issue was how exactly imperialism factored into Chinese politics. China’s relationship with the Soviet Union loomed large in these discussions. A particularly prominent strand of scholarship during the heyday of the Sino-Soviet alliance in the fifties depicted China as part of Soviet efforts to build a global empire with socialist characteristics. Interpretations in this discursive framework tended to portray a common Marxist-Leninist ideology as the driving factor that made China and the Soviet Union act in concert on the global stage. Cut from the same ideological cloth, Beijing and Moscow had the same core foreign policy objective of upending the current American-led international order to establish a new global balance of power in which more socialist countries had more influence worldwide, an idea which underpinned American government support for containing and suppressing communist activities around the globe in the fifties.¹²

One proponent of this position was Hong Kong University political scientist – Stuart Kirby – who was also known to conduct intelligence work for Britain and the United States.¹³ In his research, Kirby highlighted how China leaning towards the Soviets in the Cold War made the Chinese state into a ‘satellite’ of the Soviet empire.¹⁴ Other scholars, such as KMT diplomat turned Boston College political scientist Peter S. H. Tang, found it incorrect to characterise China as a ‘mere Soviet satellite’ given the ‘size and strength of Communist China’ and emphasised how Moscow treated China as a ‘co-leader of . . . the Sino-Soviet bloc’ that shared responsibility ‘for the internal solidarity of the bloc as well as for the furtherance of its external aims’.¹⁵ No matter if China was classified as a Soviet satellite or a socialist camp co-leader, O. Edmund Clubb, who lost his U.S. Foreign Service position to McCarthyism, maintained that Beijing agreed with Moscow that Leninist social, political, and economic organizations were best suited to building socialism, and so Chinese leaders welcomed Soviet personnel into China to guide the construction of a Marxist-Leninist party-state.¹⁶ U.S. diplomat turned Columbia

¹²William Ballis, ‘The Pattern of Sino-Soviet Treaties, 1945–1950’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 277 (1951): 175–176; Max Beloff, ‘Soviet Policy in China International Affairs’, *International Affairs* 27, no. 3 (1951): 285–296; Stanley Hornbeck, ‘Communism at Work in China’, *World Affairs* 121, no. 1 (1958): 8–9; and John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 114–115.

¹³Tom Crawford, ‘Professor Stuart Kirby (1909–1998)’, *Marxists Internet Archive*, last modified 10 June 2011, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backiss/vol8/no1/crawford.html>.

¹⁴Stuart Kirby, ‘Russia’s Largest Satellite’, *China Quarterly* 1 (1960): 12–14; and F. F., ‘Soviet Cultural Collaboration: The Role of the Friendship Societies in the Satellite States’, *The World Today* 10 (May 1954): 197–209.

¹⁵Peter S. H. Tang, ‘Soviet Plans for Peking’, *Current History* 37(November 1959): 285. For another example of Beijing and Moscow as co-leaders of the socialist bloc, S. B. Thomas, ‘Recent Developments in Communist China: II. Economic’, *Far Eastern Survey* 24, no. 2 (1955): 27.

¹⁶O. Edmund Clubb, ‘Chinese Communist Strategy in Foreign Relations’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 277 (1951): 156–166; and ‘O. Edmund Clubb, 88, China Hand Dies’, *Washington Post*, 12 May 1989, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1989/05/12/o-edmund-clubb-88-china-hand-dies/709092ff-f230-4ad2-807b-32933dce3705/>.

University professor Howard Boorman similarly held that Soviet leaders provided extensive assistance to bolster China's defense capabilities, economic development, and cultural improvement in the interest of expanding the global clout of a Sino-Soviet sphere of influence.¹⁷

But some scholars, such as Oxford University Fellow G. F. Hudson, pointed out that the Kremlin's support for Zhongnanhai was not a gift with no strings attached.¹⁸ Soviet assistance instead functioned as a means for Moscow to gain leverage over Beijing.¹⁹ Analysts that saw China's interactions with the Soviet Union in this geopolitical light, such as eminent public historian William Henry Chamberlin, sometimes explicitly referred to the Soviet Union as an empire.²⁰ However, even when scholars, like G. F. Hudson, did not employ the language of empire, the political structures they asserted were undergirding Sino-Soviet relations often had key features of what Ghanaian political theorist and politician Kwame Nkrumah characterised as a 'neo-colonial' relationship.²¹

As Kwame Nkrumah explained in his classic book, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, neo-colonialism does not involve one country formally colonizing another and directly ruling its people and territory. Yet despite the subjugated state having 'all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside'.²² To my knowledge, no Sino-Soviet scholars directly engaged with Nkrumah's arguments about neo-colonialism. That none did so is not surprising given most studies in this discursive vein were written in the fifties, and Nkrumah's book was not published until 1965. Even if Nkrumah's book had been available, it is questionable whether scholars of this political persuasion would have drawn on Nkrumah's thinking given that the major object of his critique was American and British dominance in postcolonial countries, and that the United States was so strongly opposed to the socialist regime Nkrumah led in Ghana that the CIA assisted with its overthrow in 1966.²³

If a scholar had, nevertheless, still connected their thinking to Nkrumah, they would have not only opened themselves up to accusations of sympathizing with a communist thinker, but some in the public might have also concluded that they agreed with Nkrumah that the United States was the world's leading neo-colonial power.²⁴ As Tani Barlow has illustrated in her research on China studies in Cold War America, this political position was one that most scholars would not have endorsed as American research typically effaced the United States' past and present imperialist activities in Asia.²⁵ Despite this lack of a direct connection to Nkrumah's writings, some studies of Sino-Soviet relations still bore a striking resemblance to his portrayal of neo-colonialism when they depicted the PRC as a sovereign nation with its own government apparatus, but whose sovereignty was

¹⁷Howard Boorman, 'The Sino-Soviet Alliance: A New Dimension in World Politics', *Journal of International Affairs* 11(1957): 128–131.

¹⁸G. F. Hudson, 'Communist Ideology in China', *International Affairs* 33 (1957): 176–184.

¹⁹On gift giving as a kind of debt, Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 177–178.

²⁰William Henry Chamberlin, 'Ten Fallacies about Communism', *The Russian Review* 12 (1953): 150.

²¹Hudson, 'Communist Ideology in China'; and Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd., 1965).

²²Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism*, ix.

²³Susan Williams, *White Malice: The CIA and the Covert Recolonization of Africa* (Public Affairs, 2021), 476–493.

²⁴Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism*, 52–68, 239–241.

²⁵Tani Barlow, 'Colonialism's Career in Postwar China Studies', in *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, ed. Tani Barlow (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 373–401.

significantly compromised by Soviet ties. As recent historical research on Sino-Soviet relations has shown, Chinese leaders would not have accepted a neo-colonial relationship with the Soviet Union and were very concerned about maintaining national independence. However, during the Cold War, the idea that Beijing would defer to Moscow gained currency not only among scholars but in the central halls of American state power.²⁶

Cold War scholars highlighted multiple levers that Moscow possessed to shape Chinese policymaking and compel Beijing to act according to Soviet interests. The main vectors of Soviet influence that Cold War scholars identified were governmental assistance programs which granted Moscow dominance over Chinese political, economic, cultural, and military affairs.²⁷ In line with a neo-colonial relationship, CCP leaders saw it to be in their own interest to allow Soviet sway over Chinese activities since with Soviet backing, the CCP thought that it could achieve its own goal of making China into a socialist society.²⁸ As critics of the Sino-Soviet alliance were quick to point out, such as influential public intellectual A. Doak Barnett, the CCP's objective of transitioning China towards socialism was not universally shared by all segments of Chinese society, a condition which generated resistance to CCP rule and the state's formation of extensive mechanisms of social control.²⁹

Another key feature of a neo-colonial relationship is that elites in the subordinate country come to see the more powerful country's interests as their own and favor the interests of elites and their foreign patron over the interests of local non-elite social groups.³⁰ In line with this analytical framework, some Cold War students of Mao's China, like G. F. Hudson, stressed that there was a disjuncture between the CCP's policies and the popular will. What CCP leaders viewed as being in the national interest was what benefited their own interests and their minders in Moscow, not what social groups in China considered to be advantageous for the nation or their segment of society.³¹

Having conflated the national interest with party rule, the CCP, A. Doak Barnett claimed, undertook several measures to serve the state's interest in implementing the Soviet model of socialism in China. It suppressed competing political groups, and established, in Barnett's words, 'a complex web of political organizations which reaches out and directly enmeshes . . . the Chinese population' and whose many strands all 'are controlled by the handful of men who dominate the Chinese Communist party's top leadership'.³² With political power concentrated in its organizational hands, the party silenced expressions of political discontent, forcefully converted people to the communist cause, and magnified the voice of its supporters in the mass media. To further firm up its authority, CCP leaders, Barnett argued, confiscated business' assets and mandated

²⁶Chen, *Mao's China*; Lorenz Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Trenton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962–1967* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); and Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

²⁷F. F., 'Soviet Cultural Collaboration'; and Kirby, 'Russia's Largest Satellite'.

²⁸Nathan Leites and David Nelson Rowe, 'Choice in China', *World Politics* 1, no. 3 (1949): 280–307.

²⁹A. Doak Barnett, 'Social Controls in Communist China', *Far Eastern Survey* 22, no. 5 (1953): 45–48; and Karl A. Wittfogel, 'The Influence of Leninism-Stalinism on China', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 277 (1951): 22–34.

³⁰Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 173.

³¹G. F. Hudson, 'Mao, Marx and Moscow', *Foreign Affairs* 37, no. 4 (1959): 563.

³²A. Doak Barnett, 'Political Power in Communist China', *Journal of International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (1957): 107.

austerity to realise their dreams of a socialist industrial China. Lastly, according to Barnett, the CCP required popular involvement in state-directed campaigns that attacked regime opponents, pushed social and economic levelling, and coercively channeled people to perform manual labor on massive construction projects. In all these instances, Beijing, in accordance with its teachers in Moscow, prioritised CCP elite interests above all other social actors in China.³³

Reviving China's empire with new characteristics

The deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations in the sixties undermined the idea that China was willing to be either a co-leader or subordinate partner in a Sino-Soviet empire. As evidence of the Sino-Soviet Split accumulated during the sixties, an idea that had adherents in the fifties, but became much more widespread, was that CCP leaders sought to pursue their own path to building socialism that was distinct from the Soviet model.³⁴ Some academic studies that advanced this view looked to Chinese history to explain CCP efforts to chart out their own road to socialism.

A pronounced theme in this strand of scholarship was that the CCP endeavored to revive China's former empire and endow it with new characteristics. University of Washington historian Karl Wittfogel was a well-known proponent of this understanding of Mao's China. Wittfogel did not deny that the CCP endorsed Lenin's 'ideas on how to establish and perpetuate dictatorial and monopolistic power'.³⁵ He, nevertheless, still saw the CCP as carrying on some fundamental practices of China's long history of empire. For Wittfogel, the crucial conundrum that the Chinese empire had historically to address was China's rivers frequently causing catastrophic floods, a problem which led to the formation of what he called a hydraulic society. The central feature of this societal type was a large bureaucracy whose main task was managing state structures that enabled the mobilization of massive amounts of resources for 'large scale water conservancy, flood control, and irrigation projects'.³⁶

Wittfogel maintained that socialist China took the old imperial state's capacity to marshal resources to achieve state objectives to a whole other level. In the old empire, imperial officials sought to ensure the prosperity of an agricultural economy, to maintain communication channels countrywide, and defend the country from foreign threats, and so the state undertook huge waterworks projects, constructed highways, ran a postal system, and constructed defensive frontier walls. In the pursuit of these goals, the state asserted authority over a variety of resources, and yet in the spite of the extensive reach of China's imperial state, many resources remained outside its grasp.³⁷

With the CCP's expansion of the public sector in urban areas and the organization of rural collectives, the scope of Chinese state power, according to Wittfogel, attained a level that far exceeded its imperial predecessors. Like past imperial households, the CCP was

³³Barnett, 'Social Controls'; and Richard Plunkett, 'China Views Her Russian Tutor', *Far Eastern Survey* 22, no. 8 (1953): 95–101.

³⁴Some 1950s examples are the following. Benjamin Schwartz, 'Marx and Lenin in China', *Far Eastern Survey* 18, no. 15 (1949): 174–178; C. M. Chang, 'Communism and Nationalism in China', *Foreign Affairs* 28, no. 4 (1950): 548–564; and Allen Whiting, 'Communist China and "Big Brother"', *Far Eastern Survey* 24, no. 10 (1955): 145–151.

³⁵Karl Wittfogel, 'Oriental Society in Transition', *Far Eastern Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (August 1955): 476.

³⁶Wittfogel, 'Oriental Society', 477.

³⁷Wittfogel, 'Oriental Society', 477.

despotic, did not accept multiple political centers, and relied on a single ruling class with authority over one political center.³⁸ However, as Wittfogel noted, there were crucial differences between governance in socialist China and in the past. In old Chinese empires, the central government had ‘only partial economic, personal, and ideological control’.³⁹ As Wittfogel observed, small holders and small-scale production were the norm; China’s agricultural economy required less resources than its later industrial economy; multiple ideologies existed; the government did not perform widescale thought reform to enforce adherence to a single state-designated ideology, and the dynastic state had a limited ability to publicise its ideas given imperial China’s underdeveloped transportation and communication infrastructure. In contrast, the CCP’s ‘new monopoly bureaucracy’, according to Wittfogel, sought to ‘establish full control everywhere’.⁴⁰

With its centralise and expansive authority over Chinese society, the CCP instituted a political system which Wittfogel concluded was even more oppressive than China’s previous regimes. Prior to the PRC’s founding, some economic, ideological, and individual affairs still existed outside the state’s purview. After taking power, the CCP erected a more restrictive political system which Wittfogel described as a system of ‘general slavery’.⁴¹ No longer did the Chinese government only commandeered labor for a few economic sectors as in pre-communist times. In Mao’s China, government authority extended ‘throughout the entire economic order’ and dominated nearly all aspects of social and political life.⁴² In a regime with such capacious power, China’s population had no choice but to submit to the party’s forced-draft drive to build a socialist society and economy. Further strengthening the CCP’s neo-imperial state, in Wittfogel’s eyes, was the CCP’s much more robust transportation and communication networks which it employed to muster all available resources into creating an industry-centered national economy.⁴³

Doyen of Chinese history John Fairbank agreed with Wittfogel in his widely assigned textbook, *The United States and China*, that the CCP revitalised some old imperial Chinese practices of government. Like their political forebearers, CCP leaders followed the imperial tradition of ‘Chinese governments over the centuries . . . imposing central controls and large-scale bureaucratic administration’ to maintain ‘a unified state and a uniform culture over a vast and diverse subcontinent’.⁴⁴ The party also kept up the tendency of Chinese regimes to instill in the population a unifying philosophy whose ethics animated ‘one’s entire thought and conduct’, exchanging Confucianism for Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought.⁴⁵ Similar to China’s previous Confucian empire, communist China tried to fuse ‘morality and politics, such that a policy mistake is a moral crime’, assumed that ‘theory and practice should be one’, and identified ultimate ‘moral-ideological authority and political power’ with the central government and ultimately a single ‘great leader, Mao himself’.⁴⁶ However, whereas in imperial times

³⁸Wittfogel, ‘Oriental Society’, 477.

³⁹Wittfogel, ‘Oriental Society’, 477.

⁴⁰Wittfogel, ‘Oriental Society’, 477.

⁴¹Wittfogel, ‘Oriental Society’, 477.

⁴²Karl Wittfogel, ‘A Stronger Oriental Despotism’, *China Quarterly* no. 1 (1960): 33.

⁴³Wittfogel, ‘A Stronger Oriental Despotism’, 30–32.

⁴⁴John King Fairbank, *The United States and China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 359.

⁴⁵Fairbank, *United States*, 384.

⁴⁶Fairbank, *United States*, 392.

the government sought to inculcate morality in the people to realise social harmony, Fairbank drew attention to how the CCP figured social, political, and economic contradictions as history's motor and called for Chinese to constantly struggle against them in a permanent revolution.⁴⁷

Fairbank additionally concurred with Wittfogel's conclusion that socialist China had a state whose sinews penetrated more into the social fabric, strengthening the party's capabilities to mobilise resources countrywide, and that the party's ambition to utilise its new powers to build an industrial economy fundamentally diverged from previous governments' agricultural focus.⁴⁸ Fairbank also highlighted how the socialist state attacked imperial China's 'ancient stress on filial piety as the highest virtue', praised children 'for denouncing their parents', and tried 'to displace the Chinese patrilineal family system, leaving the nuclear family as the norm and ... the individual shorn of family support, at the mercy of the authorities'.⁴⁹

While both Fairbank and Wittfogel underscored how the PRC augmented longstanding autocratic practices of Chinese statecraft, Fairbank also paid attention to how the CCP repurposed methods of cultivating popular support employed by Chinese officialdom, unlike Wittfogel who almost exclusively focus on state coercion. Of particular note, for Fairbank, was that the party's guiding doctrine of Marxist-Leninism, like Confucianism, was highly paternalistic, and that the CCP remolded Confucianism's emphasis on political leaders' responsibility to look after the people's welfare and made it central to the party's political mission.⁵⁰

According to Fairbank, the Chinese people were supportive of the party's revival of the imperial tradition of a strong central government backed by a unitary ethical philosophy that prioritised the people's well-being. In the century before the CCP's ascension, China experienced the travails of Western imperialism, 'the long era of warlordism and the Nationalist revolution, followed by the ... Japanese invasion and ... civil war, [which] had produced a nationwide craving for central authority, firm leadership, peace and order'.⁵¹ The CCP also found popular support in political practices that in imperial China had often been arrayed against the political establishment. Most notably, Fairbank contended that party leaders' channeled into the 'cult of Mao and its fanaticism' popular social energies that had previously backed millenarian sects whose charismatic leaders had promised utopia and universal salvation.⁵²

One lens through which scholars analyzed the relationship between China's imperial past and its Cold War present was to consider continuities in domestic affairs. Another lens was to examine connections between China's historic and current foreign policies. When Cold War scholars gazed at Chinese foreign affairs through the looking glass of history, one common claim they made, that was enshrined in Fairbank and Immanuel Hsu's widely read textbooks, was that the CCP sought to restore China's leading position in Asia. Prior to the nineteenth century, China had been the top imperial power in Asia.

⁴⁷Fairbank, *United States*, 393.

⁴⁸Fairbank, *United States*, 361–384.

⁴⁹Fairbank, *United States*, 376.

⁵⁰Fairbank, *United States*, 360, 398.

⁵¹Fairbank, *United States*, 359.

⁵²Fairbank, *United States*, 136, 360. The quote is on page 360.

Then, Western imperialism came to the region, challenged China's regional supremacy, and placed military and economic pressure on the Qing dynasty that contributed to its imperial decline. According to this analytical framework, the CCP conceived one of its primary political objectives to be righting the geopolitical balance in Asia and reasserting China's regional ascendancy.⁵³

Reestablishing China's primacy in Asia, according to Fairbank, started at home with the CCP reaffirming dominance in borderland regions which had fallen out of central government control in after the Qing's collapse in 1911.⁵⁴ In regions that were Qing 'areas of conquest and domination' where Han Chinese were the ethnic minority, the party pursued what Karl Wittfogel labelled, 'a pattern of total colonialism incomparably more repressive' than China's old empire which, unlike the PRC, had not endeavored to engage in 'total managerialism' of all social and economic activities.⁵⁵ The CCP also thoroughly rejected the idea of a 'national revolutionist' being allowed to 'openly plead his cause in the colonial domains of Communist China', making the PRC even more repressive, for Wittfogel, than British India where Gandhi and Nehru led protests and wrote tracts against the Raj.⁵⁶

Scholars who analyzed CCP policies in borderland regions at a more granular level, such as political scientist and RAND analyst Allen Whiting, tended to share Wittfogel's view that CCP governance of minority areas was colonial in character as Beijing supported Han settlement, imposed Han norms, and extracted local resources.⁵⁷ However, Cold War scholars of China's minority regions, such as Tufts historian George Moseley, noted shifts in how the CCP managed the 'national minority question', from an initial focus on 'the reimposition of unchallengeable Han Chinese mastery of the frontier' until the mid-fifties when the party instituted a policy of 'regional autonomy' during which local officials were brought into the government, and the party did not attempt to undertake the socialist transformation of local society.⁵⁸ In the late fifties, Moseley remarked, CCP leaders altered minority policy, pushing local officials out of power and forcing a rapid transition to socialism, which spurred people to flee abroad and engage in resistance against the CCP's Han-led regime.⁵⁹ In the early sixties, government policy switched again, and as Harvard Fellow June Dreyer contended, merging Han Chinese and minority groups was put off indefinitely, only to have this policy resurrected in the Cultural Revolution.⁶⁰ All throughout these governmental twists and turns, the CCP maintained, Yale Professor Herold Wiens argued, a colonial stance towards administering non-Han populations.⁶¹

⁵³Fairbank, *United States*, 278, 405; and Immanuel Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 660–661.

⁵⁴Fairbank, *United States*, 388, 407–408.

⁵⁵Karl A. Wittfogel, 'A Stronger Oriental Despotism', 30.

⁵⁶Wittfogel, 'Stronger Oriental Despotism', 30.

⁵⁷Allen Whiting, 'Nationality Tensions in Sinkiang', *Far Eastern Survey* 25, no. 1 (1956): 8–13; Michael Freeberne, 'Demographic and Economic Changes in the Sinkiang Uighur Autonomous Region', *Population Studies* 20, no. 1 (1966): 103–124; and Henry Schwarz, 'The Treatment of Minorities', *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 31, no. 1 (1973): 199–207.

⁵⁸George Moseley, 'China's Fresh Approach to the National Minority Question', *China Quarterly* no. 24 (1965): 25.

⁵⁹Moseley, 'China's Fresh Approach', 18–19; Henry Schwarz, 'Chinese Migration to North-West China and Inner Mongolia, 1949–59', *China Quarterly* no. 16 (1963): 61–74.

⁶⁰June Dreyer, 'China's Minority Nationalities in the Cultural Revolution', *China Quarterly* 35 (1968): 96–109.

⁶¹Herold Wiens, 'Cultivation Development and Expansion in China's Colonial Realm in Central Asia', *Journal of Asian Studies* 26 (1966), 67–88.

The CCP's colonial practices, according to some academics, extended beyond its borders, as China's new leaders, like their predecessors, thought that their country was superior to others and recalled with longing China's past preeminence in Asia. The idea that the CCP was determined to carry out an imperial resurgence in Asia was one driver behind America's commitment to containing communism worldwide.⁶² For, if America did not check an imperially minded China, then Beijing would assist with communist takeovers abroad, and according to the governmentally-influential domino theory of international relations, the loss of one country to communism would precipitate surrounding countries turning communist, in part because they would lose confidence in America's credibility and dedication to their defense.⁶³

A geographic area that scholars and American officials alike thought was of particular interest to Beijing was Southeast Asia, where CCP leaders 'kept alive the idea of Chinese prominence', in the words of Frank Trager – NYU political scientist and U.S. State Department adviser on Southeast Asia.⁶⁴ To extend China's influence southward, the CCP undertook, according to Trager, 'an incessant political campaign against . . . governments of newly independent' Asian states in the fifties and sixties.⁶⁵ When rebel socialist movements existed, Trager noted how Beijing backed overthrowing the established government. When rebel movements were not present, the CCP worked to create them by teaching revolutionary tactics.⁶⁶ In either case, critics of the PRC, such as Australian National University's Stephen Fitzgerald, asserted that the CCP viewed overseas Chinese as a fifth column whose ethnic ties it could tap to subvert existing political arrangements in Southeast Asia and spread socialism's influence.⁶⁷

Confident in the socialist revolutionary cause, CCP leaders' ultimate geopolitical objective, in Trager's view, was socialism's triumph over all capitalist countries and founding a socialist empire that covered the entire world. To achieve this goal, the party sometimes did not engage in military hostilities against capitalist states and preached the peaceful coexistence of socialism and capitalism in the short term, while still believing in socialism's inevitable victory over capitalism and imperialism in the long run. Due to this double-faced character of Chinese communist foreign policy, Trager argued that the United States and its allies should not take at face value CCP calls for peace, friendly relations, and non-intervention in other nations' affairs.⁶⁸ This is why longtime U.S. diplomat Robert Hunter and University of Sydney Professor Owen Harries opined that America and its global supporters had to match the CCP's resolve and stand

⁶²Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 36–37.

⁶³Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 119; and Campbell Craig, *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 220.

⁶⁴The quote is from Frank Trager, 'Communist China: The New Imperialism', *Current History* 41, no. 241 (1961): 137; and Robert D. McFadden, 'Frank N. Trager, 78, an Expert on Asia Dies', *New York Times*, August 31, 1984, Section D, Page 14, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1984/08/31/164446.html?pageNumber=78>.

⁶⁵Trager, 'Communist China', 137.

⁶⁶Trager, 'Communist China', 136–140; Amry Vandenbosch, 'Chinese Thrust in Southeast Asia', *Current History* 37, no. 220 (1959): 333–338; and A. M. Halpern, 'The Chinese Communist Line on Neutralism', *China Quarterly* no. 5 (1961): 90–115.

⁶⁷Mary Somers Heidhues, 'Peking and the Overseas Chinese: The Malaysian Dispute', *Asian Survey* 6, no. 5 (1966): 276–287; and Stephen Fitzgerald, 'China and the Overseas Chinese: Perceptions and Policies', *China Quarterly* no. 44 (1970): 1–37.

⁶⁸Frank Trager, "'Never Negotiate Freedom': The Case of Laos and Vietnam', *Asian Survey* 1, no. 11 (1962): 3–11.

up militarily to socialist movements, especially in Southeast Asia. Otherwise, one national domino falling into the socialist camp would only embolden Beijing to increase efforts to bring more countries over to the socialist side in the Cold War.⁶⁹ Leaders in Washington demonstrated their endorsement of this scrutinised understanding of Asian politics through multiple efforts to contain communism, most notably in the Vietnam War.⁷⁰

Making a post-colonial China and world

As the last two sections have shown, when some Cold War scholars examined the CCP's affairs, they concluded that its foreign and domestic policies had *not* helped bring an end to empire worldwide but had rather contributed to empire's continued existence both in China and abroad. A different set of scholars arrived at a starkly different evaluation of how the CCP's political endeavors affected the history of empire in the modern world. They highlighted how Chinese Communist politics advanced the creation of both a postcolonial China and a postcolonial international order. As I will illustrate below, scholars came to this historiographic assessment through a variety of analytical routes.

For some scholars on the left, imperialism had, as Vladimir Lenin stated, set the stage for the final phase of capitalism's history.⁷¹ In the case of Chinese history, this viewpoint was argued in the most forceful and sustained manner by Harold Isaacs in his book, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*. Following Lenin, Isaacs maintained that imperial powers came to China to extract value for the metropole, which Chinese compradors and local elites worked with to exploit the country's people and resources to advance their own wealth and power. According to Isaacs, the social and economic inequalities that resulted from this exploitative process generated a wave of late nineteenth century rebellions and widespread social disorder in the early twentieth century. It was the CCP's historic mission to channel pervasive political discontent in Chinese society into building a new revolutionary Chinese state. For Isaacs, the industrial proletariat was the key social class for this historic shift away from China's present-day depredations by foreign imperialism and its domestic enablers, and the CCP was charged with forging political bonds with industrial workers and leading the struggle for a decolonised China. With China liberated from foreign and domestic oppression, Isaacs thought that the party could then rationally plan the allocation of national resources to build a more just and equitable domestic and international order.⁷²

Many other scholars shared Isaacs' view that China's emancipation from colonialism by a disciplined Leninist party was at the core of Chinese communist politics. The majority, however, did not agree that the industrial proletariat was the principal class that the CCP endeavored to represent during its rise to power. It was rather the CCP's alliance with the peasantry that most analyses took to be vital to the Chinese communist revolution's victory. This difference between Chinese and Soviet revolutionary strategies

⁶⁹Robert Hunter and Philip Windsor, 'Vietnam and United States Policy in Asia', *International Affairs* 44, no. 2 (1968): 208; and Owen Harries, 'Should the U.S. Withdraw from Asia?' *Foreign Affairs* 47, no. 1 (1968): 18–19.

⁷⁰Paul Chamberlin, *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 104–130, 183–209, 230–233.

⁷¹Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Petrograd, 1916), *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/>.

⁷²Harold Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010 [1951]), 1–39.

was a result of what Benjamin Schwartz referred to in 1949 as Mao Zedong's 'Sinification of Marxism'.⁷³ That is to say Mao reworked Marxist ideology, so that it accorded with the political constraints of 'Chinese conditions', the fundamental difference being that China lacked a sizable industrial working class but had a large peasantry that 'could furnish the mass basis' for a Chinese revolutionary movement against Western and Japanese imperialism in the thirties and forties.⁷⁴ With this historiographic position, Schwartz called discursive attention to the links between Chinese communist politics and China's struggle against empire in three different ways.

First, Schwartz underlined not only how leading an anti-imperialist movement to overcome Japan's assault on China was a major motivator of CCP activities, but that the CCP's longstanding fight against Western and Japanese empire was also a driving factor in the party's political ascent. Second, the idea that socialist China was a clone of the Soviet Union was clearly refuted. The CCP was rather an autonomous political entity that valued its independence and made use of its autonomy to make independent political decisions. Even for a crucial issue, like class politics, China's revolutionary leaders did not deem it necessary to follow Moscow's line, even though breaking with the Soviet Union implied, as Schwartz observed, 'a rejection of previous Leninist dogma and of the basic concept of Marxist philosophy'.⁷⁵ Rather, the exact opposite was the case when it came to the CCP. Because class politics was so pivotal to socialist revolutionary politics, Mao and his comrades determined that it must a national form that reflected China's concrete situation.

Lastly, Schwartz held that the CCP under Mao had not just developed its own national version of socialism, but 'in the event of a clash of interests between the Soviet Union and a Chinese Communist regime', the party would most likely act based on 'its own interests'.⁷⁶ In making this statement, Schwartz rejected the notion that China would accept being a Soviet subordinate. The scholarly argument discussed earlier in this article that the PRC was an extension of the Soviets was thus fundamentally flawed because, as Schwartz stated, 'the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party would not willingly submit to the dictation of the Kremlin'.⁷⁷ The CCP had struggled for decades to liberate China from imperialism, and it was determined to ensure that imperial subjugation stayed in China's past, and that the party pursued what it judged to be the national interest.⁷⁸

Cold War scholars identified various endeavors that the CCP undertook to make sure that China not only never again became subject to imperialism but was also able to lessen imperialism's influence worldwide. Of utmost importance, according to Columbia Professor Alexander Dallin, were economic and military development, which the party saw as essential to fortifying its ability to defend China in a hostile international environment.⁷⁹ In UCLA Professor H. Arthur Steiner's view, Beijing saw the United States as the paramount imperialist state leading the capitalist bloc's efforts to contain

⁷³Benjamin Schwartz, 'Marx and Lenin in China', *Far Eastern Survey* 18, no. 15 (1949): 176, 178.

⁷⁴Schwartz, 'Marx', 176, 178.

⁷⁵Schwartz, 'Marx', 176.

⁷⁶Schwartz, 'Marx', 178.

⁷⁷Schwartz, 'Marx', 178.

⁷⁸For other scholars on Cold War China prioritizing national interests, see C. M. Chang, 'Communism and Nationalism in China', *Foreign Affairs* 28, no. 4 (1950): 548–564; Walt Rostow 'Russia and China Under Communism', *World Politics* 7, no. 4 (1955), 514; and Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

⁷⁹Alexander Dallin, 'Russia and China View the United States', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 349 (1963): 156–159.

and eventually eliminate China's communist regime.⁸⁰ John Fairbank remarked that the party was attracted to Marxist-Leninism's developmental methods because the Soviet experience seemed to show how a recently colonised country could eradicate 'her modern humiliations by leaping over the capitalist phase of universal development to stand . . . in the forefront of the nations'.⁸¹

However, it became clear to many scholars in the late fifties and early sixties that CCP leaders no longer agreed with Moscow's methods of fighting imperialism. One indication was CCP complaints about the Soviets entertaining the idea of peaceful existence with the capitalist camp and its leader – American imperialism – instead of maintaining international socialism's unremitting fight against empire.⁸² The CCP's launching of the Great Leap Forward (1958–82) made it even more apparent to scholars, such as UCLA Professor Richard Baum, that Beijing no longer saw the Soviet's phased, centralised, urban-centered approach to development as the best way to help China overcome the economic backwardness caused by foreign imperialism and stand up against imperialist threats.⁸³ With the Great Leap, CCP leaders sought instead to pursue their own developmental path that, as eminent Mao scholar Stuart Schram averred, was based on China's revolutionary experience and laid more stress on decentralised decision-making, local initiative, rural development, mass mobilization, and human willpower.⁸⁴

The Great Leap proved in practice Benjamin Schwartz's early Cold War argument that Beijing was inclined to push back against the imposition of foreign models and favor the nation and methods of indigenous origin. When Schwartz made this argument, it did not hold much sway in American diplomatic circles. The Sino-Soviet relationship was growing stronger with the Korean War, and the possibility of it weakening seemed unlikely due to their shared ideological framework and overlapping military, political, and economic concerns.⁸⁵ A decade later in the sixties when Beijing and Moscow's relations showed signs of tension, the notion that China would act in its national interests no longer seemed like a distant improbability. It appeared to be a geopolitical reality. This viewpoint led some American scholars and officials to assert that Washington could exploit divergences between Beijing and Moscow to bring one of their nations over to America's side in the Cold War.⁸⁶

In the late fifties, renowned Marxist historian Maurice Meisner also noted emerging differences in the Chinese and Soviet approach to building socialism. Meisner's interest, however, was not in driving a diplomatic wedge between Moscow and Beijing but rather in analyzing the contents of their differing socialist strategies. In accordance with this intellectual agenda, Meisner remarked how from the Great Leap onwards, Mao inverted the typical understanding of China's largely rural economy as a condition that negatively impacted its development and international standing. Instead, Mao saw China's

⁸⁰H. Arthur Steiner, 'The United States and the Two Chinas', *Far Eastern Survey* 22, no. 6 (1953): 59; and Harold Vinacke, 'United States Policy towards China: An Appraisal', *Far Eastern Survey* 29, no. 5 (1960): 66.

⁸¹Fairbank, *The United States and China*, 278.

⁸²A. M. Halpern, 'Communist China and Peaceful Co-existence', *The China Quarterly* no. 3 (1960): 16–31, 319–320.

⁸³Richard Baum, "'Red and Expert': The Politico-Ideological Foundations of China's Great Leap Forward', *Asian Survey* 4, no. 9 (1964): 1048–1057.

⁸⁴Stuart Schram, *Mao Tse-tung* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966), 292–295.

⁸⁵Warren Cohen, *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 207.

⁸⁶Evelyn Goh, 'Competing Images and American Official Reconsiderations of China Policy, 1961–1968', *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 10, no. 1/2 (2001): 61, 64–82.

'backwardness' as providing the country with a people that understood the value of 'struggle, hard, work, and plain living' and possessed 'a reservoir of youthful energy and revolutionary creativity' that would help the 'backward lands of Asia, Africa, and Latin America ... encircle the economically advanced but reactionary "cities" of Europe and the United States'.⁸⁷

University of Michigan historian Rhoads Murphey also called attention to how the CCP's rural emphasis was connected to its animus towards Western imperialism. Murphey argued that this link was due to the fact that Western imperialism entered China principally through treaty-port cities that 'faced outwards toward world markets' and were established in China to accumulate 'foreign profit'.⁸⁸ Due to this exploitative background, Chinese revolutionaries tended to perceive "urbanization and its industrial concomitant ... [to be] 'alien' imports that were 'destroying the ... indigenous fabric'".⁸⁹ According to Murphey, Cold War China's rejection of Western imperialism's urban-centered development model informed two of its major policies.

First, the party regularly sent urban experts and bureaucrats to the countryside to engage in manual labor to prevent them from becoming 'incorrigibly corrupted by bourgeois attitudes' and urban elitism.⁹⁰ Second, the Chinese government condemned as 'totally unacceptable' the socioeconomic geography that imperialism had forged which was 'predominantly coastal', oriented towards foreign trade, neglected 'the great bulk of the country', and fostered the growth of an urban society which held 'selfish, elitist, bourgeois attitudes like those of the colonialists who had dominated' China before 1949.⁹¹ As a countermeasure, CCP leaders prioritised growth inland in regions 'previously devoid of manufacturing or ... major urban areas'.⁹²

Scholars, such as University of Victoria Professor Ralph Croizier, also contended that the CCP's emphasis on eliminating imperialist influences within China informed its scientific policies, from its attacks on foreign expertise to its promotion of traditional Chinese medicine.⁹³ The Chinese government under Mao additionally strived to decolonise the minds of China's citizens. Harvard Psychiatry Professor Robert Lifton analyzed this phenomenon in his widely cited book, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*. Lifton showed how the party used verbal and textual indoctrination in conjunction with group pressure to make Chinese individuals denounce their current practices as politically and morally incorrect and embrace loyalty to the party and its objectives as their new credo.

One political viewpoint that was subject to group criticism was supporting imperialism which Lifton held was castigated as 'the agent of military, political, economic, and cultural subversion, and the destroyer of all that was good and noble in Chinese civilization'.⁹⁴ Practitioners of Christianity came under particular scrutiny and were

⁸⁷Maurice Meisner, 'Leninism and Maoism: Some Populist Perspectives on Marxism-Leninism in China', *China Quarterly* no. 45 (1971): 21, 23.

⁸⁸Rhoads Murphey, 'City and Countryside as Ideological Issues: India and China', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 14, no. 3 (1972): 254.

⁸⁹Murphey, 'City and Countryside', 254.

⁹⁰Murphey, 'City and Countryside', 260.

⁹¹Murphey, 'City and Countryside', 264–265.

⁹²Murphey, 'City and Countryside', 264.

⁹³Ralph Croizier, 'Traditional Medicine in Communist China: Science, Communism and Cultural Nationalism', *China Quarterly* 23 (1965): 1–27.

⁹⁴Robert Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'Brainwashing' in China* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 230.

targeted for promoting a foreign-run religious organization rather than a party-led 'national church'.⁹⁵ People who stressed individualism were, likewise, reviled for being proponents of liberalism which, as Lifton said, 'bore the stigma of Western imperialism, no matter how strongly Chinese and Western liberals opposed to imperialism sought to dissociate themselves from this stigma'.⁹⁶ Criticisms of people's character, however, were not limited to these two social groups. Anyone against the party's policies could be condemned for harboring imperialist attitudes, betraying the nation, and endorsing foreigners engaging in 'territorial aggrandizement, infringements upon [Chinese] sovereignty, [and] special privileges demanded for Western nationals'.⁹⁷

While the CCP's moves to expunge imperialism's vestiges at home attracted scholarly attention, Chinese anti-imperialist activities abroad were of equal, if not more, concern to analysts of the Cold War's geopolitical dynamics.⁹⁸ Chinese foreign policy was of special concern because the party's political mission was seen, according to UCLA political scientist H. Arthur Steiner, to be a relentless 'anti-imperialist program' against the U.S.-led capitalist bloc's agenda of warmongering, exploiting workers worldwide, and establishing 'direct or indirect control over less developed peoples'.⁹⁹ As part of the CCP's commitment to making anti-imperialism its geopolitical vocation, Beijing instated a number of initiatives. It spoke out against imperialist and capitalist injustices in the Chinese press, and it assisted foreign political actors perceived to be struggling against western empire.¹⁰⁰ RAND analyst and Council on Foreign Relations Fellow A. M. Halpern observed that CCP leaders also made the superiority of Chinese revolutionary strategy a central feature of their criticism of the Soviets in the sixties, presenting Maoism's policy package of guerilla warfare and rural revolution as the best socialist model for colonial and semi-colonial countries to follow.¹⁰¹

The PRC's advocacy of Maoism as a revolutionary model for the world was not just an academic matter. It was an issue with policy implications for the United States and its allies which treated combatting communism as a core pillar of their foreign policy during the Cold War.¹⁰² Of particular importance was the causes of the CCP's rise to power. Berkeley political scientist Chalmers Johnson formulated an especially influential answer to this question in his book, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937–45*, which gained traction in Washington through Johnson's work for the CIA.¹⁰³ In this monograph, Johnson refuted past claims that the victory of China's communist revolution was based primarily on the party addressing the 'economic distress of the Chinese peasantry' or employing Leninist 'techniques of

⁹⁵Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 58.

⁹⁶Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 376.

⁹⁷Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 26.

⁹⁸Cohen, *America's Response to China*, 211–212.

⁹⁹H. Arthur Steiner, 'Mainsprings of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy', *American Journal of International Law* 44, no. 1 (1950): 79–80.

¹⁰⁰Kuang-sheng Liao and Allen Whiting, 'Chinese Press Perceptions of Threat: The U.S. and India, 1962', *China Quarterly* no. 53 (1973): 80–97; and Kuang-Sheng Liao, 'Linkage Politics in China: Internal Mobilization and Articulated External Hostility in the Cultural Revolution, 1967–1969', *World Politics* 28, no. 4 (1976): 590–610.

¹⁰¹A. M. Halpern, 'The Foreign Policy Uses of the Chinese Revolutionary Model', *China Quarterly* no. 7 (1961): 2, 9; and Schram, *Mao* 292–295.

¹⁰²Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*; and Westad, *Global Cold War*.

¹⁰³Interview with Chalmers Johnson', *In Motion Magazine*, September 19, 2004, https://inmotionmagazine.com/global/cj_int/cj_int2.html.

mass manipulation . . . to “seize” power’.¹⁰⁴ Johnson also found wanting the argument that the CCP’s authority was based on ‘military superiority alone . . . [and that] the masses simply followed the winner’ of the Chinese Civil War.¹⁰⁵ Johnson argued instead that based on his study of Chinese resistance against Japan during World War II that the ‘Communist rise to power in China should be understood as a species of nationalist movement’, and that the party only ‘became a mass movement in the context of resistance to a foreign invader during World War II’.¹⁰⁶

Johnson’s analysis of the drivers of China’s communist revolution had several consequences for countries such as the United States that strived to lessen, if not eliminate, global communist influence during the Cold War. First, communism was understood not as a political phenomenon that was externally imposed by a great power, such as the Soviet Union or socialist China. It was comprehended instead as a political movement that was rooted in a national base which gave it a local foundation of political legitimacy and popular support. Second, foreign countries, such as the United States, which fought foreign communist movements were contributing to their legitimacy since it was nationalist unity against a foreign invasion that was at the heart of their political authority. Third, Johnson’s research implied that the PRC’s formation was part of a global transition away from an old epoch of empires towards a new world order in which the nation had become the major source of political legitimacy, and nationalist movements would challenge any attempt to form an empire and undermine national sovereignty.

Published in 1961, Johnson’s peasant nationalism argument gained many adherents in Anglophone scholarly circles, as American involvement in the Vietnam War intensified, and anti-war protests erupted across campuses in the sixties. As anti-imperial struggles against American geopolitical power became the subject of nightly news broadcasts, tense university politics, and dinner table debates, all these everyday experiences provided lived evidence of Johnson’s conclusion that the Chinese communist revolution was part of a historic wave of anti-imperial nationalism in the mid-twentieth century that resulted in empires crumbling and being replaced with post-colonial nations.¹⁰⁷ Johnson’s scholarship also informed Washington’s handling of revolutionary insurgencies in Southeast Asia and beyond, as it challenged the policy assumption of a global communist movement and called for American officialdom to attend to how the nationalist drivers of revolution could be used to influence and divide China, the Soviet Union, and other communist countries.¹⁰⁸

While Johnson advised the American foreign policy establishment on how to fight communism worldwide, some scholars on the left vehemently disagreed with his view that anti-imperial nationalism was the principal driver of the CCP’s rise to power. The most prominent critique of Johnson’s nationalism thesis was the book by SUNY Binghamton historian Mark Selden, *The Yanan Way in Revolutionary China*. For Selden, China’s revolution certainly offered ‘inspiration . . . to those who would expel colonial oppressors . . . [as well as] to new nations striving to overcome . . . domination by

¹⁰⁴Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), viii–ix.

¹⁰⁵Johnson, *Peasant*, ix.

¹⁰⁶Johnson, *Peasant*, viii–ix.

¹⁰⁷David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 117–189.

¹⁰⁸Interview with Chalmers Johnson’.

the industrialized metropolitan powers'.¹⁰⁹ However, Maoist China's significance was not reducible to the CCP's nationalist resistance against empire and national independence's ascent as an international norm. The meaning of China's communist revolution, on the contrary, derived from its roots 'in a vision of man and society' centered on 'popular participation and egalitarian values'.¹¹⁰

For the many agrarian countries in the world, Maoism presented a route, Selden asserted, for 'the peasantry as a group . . . [to be] integrated into the political process' and for 'a society predicated on landlord domination' to be brought to an end.¹¹¹ But the Chinese revolution's significance was not just limited to countries with a large peasantry, its egalitarian politics were relevant to 'men and women everywhere who [sought] to create a society free from stifling oppression, arbitrary state power, and enslaving technology' and to political movements everywhere that were committed to eliminating 'distinctions between town and country, [and the] prosperous and poor'.¹¹²

With this argument, Selden made several important contributions to debates about the relationship between socialist China and empire, as Fabio Lanza has convincingly demonstrated. One, Maoist China had not just devised a way to advance world politics beyond empire and create a postcolonial nation. The CCP had come up with a revolutionary strategy to establish a postcolonial nation that recognised entrenched social, economic, and political inequalities and implemented policies to create a more egalitarian society. Two, Maoist China offered lessons not just to recently decolonised nations and peasant societies. Countries at any stage of development, including advanced industrial countries such as the United States, could learn from Maoism's methods of fighting against socioeconomic oppression and bureaucratic power over political decision-making and everyday life.¹¹³

As Julia Lovell has shown, worldwide interest in the lessons that Maoism could teach to the United States and other great powers rose to its utmost heights in the late sixties.¹¹⁴ A major cause of global interest was Mao Zedong's carrying out of the Cultural Revolution. As Fabio Lanza, Robeson Frazier, and Richard Wolin have illustrated in their respective studies, the Cultural Revolution's attacks on bureaucratic and technological authority, support for egalitarian politics, rejection of imperialism, and call for popular participation in political affairs appealed to some people in the developed world involved in protests against technocracy, socioeconomic inequities, racism, the Vietnam War, and empire more generally.¹¹⁵ The Anglophone academic group that became most interested in the insights that Maoist politics could provide was the organization Mark Selden helped found – the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS). Publishing a flurry of articles and books in the late sixties and early seventies, CCAS members wrote critiques of American imperialism in Asia, American scholars that promoted containing

¹⁰⁹Mark Selden, *The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), viii.

¹¹⁰Selden, *Yenan*, viii.

¹¹¹Selden, *Yenan*, 277–278.

¹¹²Selden, *Yenan*, 278.

¹¹³Lanza, *End*, 3–6.

¹¹⁴Lovell, *Maoism*.

¹¹⁵Lanza, *End*; Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Trenton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East Is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 108–192.

China, and scholarship that whitewashed Western imperialism in Asia as well as studies of how Mao's China was advancing egalitarianism and struggling against imperialism.¹¹⁶

Cold War scholarship about Mao's China, however, underwent a major shift after President Richard Nixon's visit to the PRC in 1972. As relations between Beijing and Washington became friendlier during the seventies, scholars could no longer assume that socialist ideology predisposed China to be hostile towards the United States and the rest of the capitalist bloc. The force of events had demonstrated otherwise. As China gradually firmed up bureaucratic authority after the Cultural Revolution, marketised its economy, and traded more with capitalist countries, scholars could no longer presume that China furnished an exemplary model of mass political participation, anti-imperialism, and egalitarianism for emancipatory movements worldwide.¹¹⁷ With these momentous changes in Beijing's domestic and foreign policies, scholars had to reevaluate their views of what Chinese politics meant for the formation of a China and world after empire.

Conclusion

Looking at Cold War studies of China's relationship to empire from the perspective of the present, it quickly becomes apparent that the discursive frameworks that animated discussions in the past persist in current conversations about U.S.-China relations both in and outside academia. Exploring all the connections between Cold War and contemporary analysis of China is a huge task that is best left for another day. Here, I will briefly comment on what some historians have recently said about Mao's China and empire. Next, I will discuss a few ways that the discursive frameworks examined in this article live on in contemporary discourse about U.S.-China relations.

Recent historical writing about Mao's China overwhelmingly rejects the early Cold War idea that the PRC was a subordinate member of a Sino-Soviet empire. Scholars have shown using newly available archival sources that Beijing took Moscow as a developmental model and reaped material benefits from Soviet military and economic support.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, Russian chauvinism and geopolitical power differentials were a major source of tension that significantly contributed to the Sino-Soviet Split.¹¹⁹ In this regard, contemporary historians carry on the Cold War scholarly trend of emphasizing Marxism's Sinification and China's own path to socialism.

Another area of historiographic continuity is the characterization of Mao-era governance of border regions as colonialism. However, while Cold War studies often treated the Chinese state as a unitary actor imposing its will uniformly on borderland regions, recent research on Tibet and Xinjiang has with archival sources charted out with more granularity not just the state's coercive mechanisms, but also attempts to assimilate different ethnic groups into the national polity, a process which some responded to with interest, others complied with, and still others resisted with varying intensity.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶For CCAS articles, <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcra20>.

¹¹⁷Lanza, *End*, 143–173.

¹¹⁸Thomas Bernstein and Hua-Yu Li, *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949-present* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010).

¹¹⁹Lüthi, *Sino-Soviet Split*; and Radchenko, *Two Suns*. Jersild, *Sino-Soviet*.

¹²⁰Justin Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016); and Benno Weiner, *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

Present-day scholarship has similarly shown that Mao's China did not implement its foreign policy of anti-imperialism in the same way in every situation. In some instances, such as Indonesia, the CCP distanced itself from overseas Chinese to win local government support for a global united front autonomous from the Soviet and American-led blocs.¹²¹ In other instances, Beijing backed national liberation movements through military and economic assistance to advance postcolonial development, counter American and Soviet influence, and combat KMT anti-communist efforts directed at overseas Chinese and foreign governments.¹²² Like in studies of Chinese borderlands, historians have stressed local actors' agency and examined how they shaped China's anti-imperialist policies from the elite level to the grassroots. All these studies of Chinese foreign policy under Mao noticeably differ from Cold War scholarship in one key respect. They do not put stock in the idea that China engaged in empire-building beyond its borders. Instead, they tend to analyze how the CCP operationalised its policy of ridding the world of empire in different geographic contexts.

Contemporary discourse on U.S.-China relations also reiterates some themes of Cold War scholarship. One area of continuity is the ongoing use of a neo-colonial lens to criticise Chinese politics, though with notable differences. Where Cold War scholarship focused on Beijing's subordination to Moscow, the emphasis in recent years is on the PRC as a neocolonial power in the developing world. This theme is especially evident in commentary about China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to connect Eurasia through expanding infrastructure. This commentary frequently depicts the BRI as a means for China to gain leverage over countries by saddling them with massive debts for development projects, so that China can seize their strategic assets when they cannot repay loans, a phenomenon that has been widely condemned as debt-trap diplomacy. While critics of this ilk rarely cite Lenin, their attention to how the BRI is motivated by China's desire to export excess industrial capacity, bolster its 'diplomatic influence', secure 'natural resources', increase 'the international use of its currency', and remake international norms to serve Chinese interests are all tendencies that Lenin would likely recognize as contemporary echoes of his early twentieth century critique of Western imperialism.¹²³

Anglophone analysts of contemporary Chinese foreign policy also reprimand Beijing for backing elites in developing countries who serve theirs and China's interests instead of the people they claim to represent, thereby reinforcing corruption, human rights abuses, environmental degradation, and socioeconomic divides.¹²⁴ Some commentators maintain that the CCP has even extended its neo-colonial designs to America and endeavored to cultivate American elites who publicly defend Chinese policy positions.¹²⁵ Like with Cold War critiques of the neo-colonial features of Sino-Soviet

¹²¹Taomo Zhou, *Migration in the Time of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

¹²²Friedman, *Shadow*; Brazinsky, *Winning the Third*; Xiaobing Li, *Building Ho's Army* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019); Chien-Wen Kung, *Diasporic Cold Warriors: Nationalist China, Anticommunism, and the Philippine Chinese, 1930s-1970s* (Cornell University Press, 2022); and Matthew Galway, *The Emergence of Global Maoism China's Red Evangelism and the Cambodian Communist Movement, 1949-1979* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

¹²³Quotes are from Brahma Chellaney, 'China's Creditor Imperialism', *Project Syndicate*, 20 December 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-sri-lanka-hambantota-port-debt-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-12>. A notable exception is Ho Fung-Hung, *Clash of Empires: From 'Chimerica' to the 'New Cold War'* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹²⁴'China in Africa: The New Colonialism?' *Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives*, 7 March 2018, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115hhrg28876/pdf/CHRG-115hhrg28876.pdf>.

¹²⁵Bradley Thayer and Lianchao Han, 'China's investment in Western elites really paid off', *The Hill*, 28 October 2020, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/522784-chinas-investment-in-western-elites-really-paid-off/>.

relations, these assessments of Chinese affairs have found their way into American foreign policy, which often derides Chinese economic coercion and authoritarianism.¹²⁶

One consequence of this line of criticism is that it positions the United States as an advocate of small and middle powers' interests. In so doing, it performs a geopolitical sleight of hand that obfuscates tensions between the United States and other countries, makes American and other nations' interests appear identical, and paints America as not an international Goliath but as a principled supporter of the national Davids of the world struggling against an imperious China. By presenting the United States as a benevolent superpower that is looking out for the international little guy, Washington can also draw attention away from America's problematic wars in the Middle East and instead bring into public focus how America's allies and partners should rally around deterring China's malign international influence.¹²⁷

The CCP's depictions of U.S.-China relations often mirror the United States'. Like America, China's backers are inclined to lay claim to the mantle of anti-imperialism in international representations of Chinese power. From Beijing's perspective though, it is the United States, not China, about which other countries should be wary. It is Washington with its 'Cold War mindset' that is imposing its will on independent nations and stoking global tensions by calling for countries to choose sides between China and America.¹²⁸ It is the United States with its appeals for countries to decouple from the Chinese economy and its criticisms of the BRI that it is putting American interests ahead of other nations' economic concerns and inciting racial hatred towards Asians in the United States.¹²⁹

Chinese state media presents the PRC, on the other hand, as free of colonial tendencies because of its century of humiliation. This historical experience, Chinese officialdom claims, has made the PRC unlike past great powers, which sought to accumulate wealth, power, and territory abroad to augment their national prosperity, authority, and grandeur at other countries' expense. The Chinese government contends to instead follow a postcolonial path that respects others' national sovereignty and interests. In accord with this geopolitical agenda, Chinese government sources regularly assert that the PRC favors international cooperation over competition, extensive consultation with other countries rather than forcing them to adhere to Chinese policies and interfering in their internal affairs, and the promotion of win-win endeavors that foster world peace and advance the developmental objectives of both China and its global partners.¹³⁰

As in much American discourse, Chinese talk about empire renders Beijing as an opponent of imperialism and a supporter of weaker states in the international system, whose national interests are represented as substantially overlapping with China's. This narrative framing, as with the United States, depends on

¹²⁶The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, 52, <https://trump.whitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. The White House, *National Security Strategic Guidance*, 20 March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

¹²⁷Tom Bowman, 'Pentagon Pushes for Bigger Effort to Deter China's Growing Military Might', *NPR*, 16 March 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/16/977987292/pentagon-pushes-for-bigger-effort-to-deter-chinas-growing-military-might>. Gordon G. Chang, 'Deterring China: Mission Possible', *Newsweek*, 18 February 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/deterring-china-mission-possible-opinion-1680278>.

¹²⁸US foreign policy in mess due to Cold War mindset', *Xinhua*, 21 April 2022, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202204/21/WS6260b3baa310fd2b29e58430.html>.

¹²⁹Covell Meyskens, 'China Is Pushing Disengagement With the United States Hard', *Foreign Policy*, 8 March 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/08/china-disengagement-america-cold-war>.

¹³⁰Nadège Rolland, *China's Vision for a New World Order* (Seattle: NBR Special Report No. 83, 2020), 17, 21–25.

a geopolitical legerdemain that hides the more conflictual aspects of Chinese domestic and foreign affairs. Obscured from sight are Beijing's acquiescence in Russia's imperial invasion of Ukraine, Chinese sanctions against Australia for suggesting an independent inquiry into COVID-19's origins, and Chinese economic pressure on South Korea for deploying an American missile system to defend against North Korea. Also hidden from view are Chinese suppression of Hong Kong's democracy movement, Beijing's oppression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the People's Liberation Army's rising pressure on Taiwan's democratically elected government, and the Chinese navy's building of militarised islands in the South China Sea in areas claimed by other countries.¹³¹

These assertive international activities by the PRC have led many commentators to assert that today's PRC seeks to revive China's empire of yesteryear. One phenomenon cited as evidence is Chinese academics and officials endorsing the idea that the PRC is working to carry on China's long Confucian tradition of altruistically using power in international relations. However, what a great power like China considers to be an act of altruism may be perceived by small and middle powers as a cover for self-interested Chinese paternalism and the acceptance of a global hierarchy in which China is higher up.¹³²

No matter how much China's boosters try to convince people around the world that the PRC is not interested in empire building, Washington and its supporters will likely continue to view Beijing as a challenger to American ascendancy in the international order and work to undermine Chinese claims that China is not a neo-imperial power. The validity of this geopolitical characterization will only come to acquire more heft over time if the Chinese government persists in its current trajectory of stirring the nationalist pot at home and lashing out at Chinese citizens and foreigners who challenge what Beijing perceives to be its rightful leading position in Asia.¹³³

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¹³¹Paul Mozur, Steven Lee Meyers, and John Liu, 'China's Echoes of Russia's Alternate Reality Intensify Around the World', *New York Times*, April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/11/technology/china-russia-propaganda.html>. Elizabeth Economy, 'Xi Jinping's New World Order: Can China Remake the International System?' *Foreign Affairs*, 9 December 2021.

¹³²June Teufel Dreyer, 'The "Tianxia Trope": will China change the international system?' *Journal of Contemporary China* (2015): 1–17; and Andrew J. Nathan & Boshu Zhang, 'A Shared Future for Mankind': Rhetoric and Reality in Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping', *Journal of Contemporary China* (2021): 7.

¹³³Suisheng Zhao, 'From Affirmative to Assertive Patriots: Nationalism in Xi Jinping's China', *Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2021): 141–161.