

Bringing the Cold War into Teaching on Mao's China

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When historians teach the Mao era, they typically take one of two paths. The first path focuses on what Gail Hershatter has called “campaign time” and narrates the Mao period in terms of major political campaigns, such as the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.¹ The second method of narration concentrates on grassroots social history, often by presenting history through different categories of experience, such as labor, gender, or religion, which are not reducible to any given political campaign.² While both these approaches to teaching the Mao era are illuminating, they largely focus on domestic affairs and push international relations into the background. This situation is reflective of a bigger divide in the historiography of the Mao era where the study of the relationship between China and the Cold War has largely been the domain of diplomatic historians. This state of the field would not be problematic if China's experience of the Cold War could be entirely explained in terms of the activities of diplomatic elites. As this essay will show, this was far from the case. Cold War militarism influenced economic policies, the fabric of everyday life, and dominant frameworks of meaning. In the pages that follow, I will highlight a few ways that educators can bring the Cold War into their teaching of Mao's China.

First off, it is important for students to understand that the Cold War did not generate the mainstreaming of militarism in modern China. The ascent of military priorities and attitudes predated the Cold War's onset. Military concerns had been at the forefront of Chinese statecraft since the nineteenth century when the British and French sought to make China modern at the barrel of a gun. CCP leaders had also experienced war and state terror at the hands of the Guomindang and Japanese from the late 1920s to 1940s. The hard-edged political divides of the Cold War thus reinforced an existing tendency among CCP elites to view using militaristic methods to institute internal control and fight foreign enemies as not just a normal element of politics but as necessary to advance China's socialist project.

Right after the PRC's founding, its military weakness was driven home for Beijing in the Korean War. In the preceding two decades, the CCP had fought many battles against the GMD and the Japanese, but both their militaries were low-tech compared to the United States. When the PLA faced the American-led coalition in Korea, it was baptized by fire into the brutality of modern industrial warfare. A military romantic, Mao thought that an ideologically committed revolutionary army could defeat U.S.-led forces, even though they were equipped with the latest military technology, while China had only a small air force, very limited artillery, and almost no navy. In the end, Chinese and North Korean forces were able to bleed the United States into a stalemate at the 38th parallel in 1953, though in the later stages of the war Chinese troops frequently tunneled underground to avoid directly facing American firepower.

During the Korean War, some people in Shanghai displayed lukewarm interest in the conflict and questioned why China was supporting Pyongyang rather than focusing on national development. Many rural residents, on the other hand, were enthusiastic about the war effort and enrolled in large numbers. The Communist Party built on wartime nationalist sentiments to strengthen its power over Chinese society. Nationwide, a propaganda campaign was launched falsely accusing the United States of engaging in germ warfare. Chinese war fever was further fueled by American threats to undertake a nuclear strike on urban areas.

In the Southwest, where the Chinese Communist Party had yet to extinguish the last embers of the Chinese Civil War, the “new regime used the Korean War,” in Jeremy Brown's words, “to consolidate control,” and “Anti-American diatribes conflated domestic resisters with international threats.”³ In other parts of China, the Party employed similar rhetoric to discredit intellectuals and factory owners resistant to communist rule in order to firm up government authority over the economy, media, and educational institutions. In subsequent political campaigns, the CCP routinely quelled opposition to its policies by figuring resistance as a sign that someone was collaborating with China's Cold War competitors.

Cold War antagonisms continued to structure Chinese views of the United States after the Korean War. The media habitually referred to the United States not as “America” (*meiguo*) but as “American imperialism” (*meidi*) and denounced American efforts to bend China to its will. Given that the Party proscribed the employment of certain terms in the media and proscribed others, it is possible that there was an official order to limit the use of the term “beautiful country” (*meiguo*) because of the positive connotations. Whether such a decree exists or not, the CCP's characterization of the United States as an expansionist empire was rooted in a similar understanding of world history as prevailed in the Soviet Union under Stalin.

Like Stalin's Kremlin, the denizens of Zhongnanhai did not regard capitalism and socialism as capable of peacefully coexisting. They thought that according to the dialectic of history capitalist and socialist states would never be able to completely resolve their differences, except by force of arms. So that China was ready when war came, CCP leaders annually allocated on average over twenty percent of state investment in building up the defense sector between 1949 and 1976. China's antagonistic conception of socialist-capitalist relations found material confirmation in the actions of the United States.

The Pentagon spent ten times more on national defense than China, and it had tens of thousands of heavily armed troops stationed in South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines for the express purpose of containing communist influence in

Asia. Washington also had military forces in Taiwan, which Beijing considered to be part of its territory and intermittently threatened liberating through military force. The United States additionally imposed an international embargo on China that prevented it from trading with the capitalist world. The only major trading partners that were available to China in the 1950s were the Soviet Union and East European states. From the socialist bloc, China acquired industrial machinery and military equipment, and the People's Liberation Army received training from Soviet advisors.

In the 1950s, Beijing also imported Moscow's policy of employing central planning agencies to administer top-down staged economic growth and embraced the Soviet view that increased heavy industrial power was tightly linked to heightened national security. On average, the State Planning Commission dedicated eighty-nine percent of industrial investment in capital construction to heavy industry between 1953 and 1975. The Party's prioritization of heavy industry is also why the State Planning Commission allotted three-quarters of China's capital construction budget to productive ventures, leaving only twenty-five percent for endeavors deemed non-productive, such as housing and social services. From this policy followed a condition of permanent consumer austerity, which Party propaganda depicted as an essential element of building a socialist industrial nation in China.

The Chinese economy's pronounced slant towards heavy industry was also a major factor behind the CCP's decision to erect a strong division between urban and rural areas. By keeping the rural population out of cities, central planners aimed to direct resources away from the countryside towards building up urban industry as well as to lessen the number of people drawing on city services. While the defense implications of heavy industry were certainly not the sole cause of the urban-rural divide in Mao's China, the CCP's drive to compete economically with America and the Soviet Union after the Sino-Soviet Split was an important contributing factor.

China's most well known attempt to economically outcompete its Cold War rivals was the Great Leap Forward. Mao famously foretold at its start that China would catch up with Great Britain and bypass it in only fifteen years. During the Great Leap, China also challenged the Soviet Union's status as the most advanced socialist state. Turning away from depending on Soviet economic and military aid, the Party center advocated a policy of national self-reliance. Localities were ordered to "mobilize everyone as a soldier (*quanmin jiebing*)" and utilize local resources to rapidly expand economic production and welfare services in order to create an egalitarian communist society. To help rally the country around the Great Leap's developmental goals, Beijing manufactured the Second Taiwan Straits Crisis, so that hostility towards American-backed forces in Taiwan could be channeled into domestic economic construction. The Great Leap did not achieve its lofty objectives and serve as the global emblem of Chinese socialist progress that the Party center had hoped it would be. The actual result was economic depression and a huge famine, which has become in the contemporary era one of the dominant popular symbols of socialist modernity as a producer of mass death.

Another casualty of the Great Leap was Soviet support for China, marked by the pulling out of Soviet advisors in 1960. Sino-Soviet tensions had been simmering for years. Ever since Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 Secret Speech in which he denounced Stalin's personality cult, Mao had thought of him as implementing a "revisionist" line that was leading international socialism in the wrong direction. Mao's discontent with Khrushchev grew in the late fifties when Moscow responded favorably to Washington's suggestion that socialist and capitalist states pursue a policy of peaceful coexistence. Mao, in contrast, advocated maintaining a militant stance against American imperialism. Mao and his colleagues piqued Khrushchev's anger even more by behaving haughtily towards him and criticizing his approach to socialism. In an especially notorious incident, Mao literally swam around Khrushchev in a pool and lectured him about correct socialist conduct, while Khrushchev, who was not adept in the water, struggled to keep afloat. Khrushchev's disapproval of Chinese behavior only intensified when Beijing launched the Great Leap, which Moscow found to be unrealistic and reckless.

With the breakup of the Sino-Soviet alliance, the Soviet Union was added to China's list of Cold War rivals. On the international front, Chinese diplomats endeavored to convince Third World countries to side with Beijing in its dispute with Moscow. Countries generally either preferred the Soviet Union's more extensive menu of military and economic assistance, or they tried to obtain benefits from both Zhongnanhai and the Kremlin.⁴ One exception was Tanzania, where China assisted the local socialist government by building a railway from the coast into the country's copper belt. The PRC was also an important sponsor of communist forces in North Vietnam. Beijing's backing of Hanoi was the catalyst behind the CCP's initiation of a militarized developmental campaign that absorbed roughly fifty percent of Chinese funding for capital construction between 1964 and 1970. That massive economic project was called the Third Front.

The Party center inaugurated the Third Front campaign in August 1964 after the United States carried out its first bombing raids on North Vietnam in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. Concerned that a Sino-American war might be in the offing, the Party center divided China into three war zones. A First Front situated in the Northeast and coastal areas. A second Front located behind coastal provinces and in the far West, and a Third Front designated as Central China. In the last region, the Party constructed a huge industrial defense apparatus for the country to fall back on in the event that China's industrial heartlands along the coast and in the Northeast were lost to enemy forces in an invasion, air raids, or a nuclear assault.

One motivation for this military strategy was Chiang Kai-Shek and Joseph Stalin's poor military performance at the start of World War II, who Mao thought had both not built up a sufficient industrial rear prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Another source of inspiration was the CCP's revolutionary base areas in China's mountainous hinterlands. The past military advantages of their remote and concealed locations are one reason why central planners required that all Third

Front projects be placed in "mountainous, dispersed, hidden (*kaoshan fensan yinbi*)" locations, and sometimes even be "put in caves (*jindong*)." The other reason was that, like the heads of other Cold War states, Chinese leaders considered any facility aboveground to be susceptible to aerial bombardment. Chinese industry was even more vulnerable since the PRC's air force was puny, and Beijing possessed no nuclear deterrent, despite spending 10.8 billion RMB in order to join the nuclear club and detonate its first atomic bomb in 1964.

According to Party policy, only Third Front participants were allowed to know about its existence. Word eventually got out to some people who did not partake in the Third Front campaign since it involved millions of people, and rural residents could not help but notice new industrial enterprises being suddenly built nearby. Rural folks, however, often had vague notions about what these new work-units actually did since Third Front laborers were paid a special subsidy to keep their work secret, and no one was authorized to access a Third Front work-unit without proper identification indicating that they had been cleared for entry.⁵ The classified character of the Third Front also meant that the Party could not mobilize a big portion of national industrial development at the time in propaganda campaigns in order to demonstrate to foreign audiences domestic economic accomplishments.

With this clandestine arrangement, the CCP also kept most of the Chinese public in the dark about the main thrust of national industrialization during the last decade of Mao's life. Even without knowledge of the Third Front, the majority of Chinese people could have still sensed that rising animosity between China, the United States, and Soviet Union were militarizing domestic affairs. Nationwide, militias engaged in military drills and simulated battles with China's Cold War adversaries. Huge protests and parades were repeatedly held throughout the country to decry American imperial ventures in recently decolonized countries as well as to condemn American racism and capitalist exploitation. Mass events were also convened on a regular basis to criticize Soviet meddling and aggression abroad.

Chinese worries about Soviet interference in other country's internal affairs took on a very particular meaning during the Cultural Revolution. Party leaders, such as Vice Premiers Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, were accused of seeking to pull China away from the socialist path championed by Chairman Mao in favor of revisionist policies, which Khrushchev had supposedly instituted in the Soviet Union that had led to the revival of capitalism and the emergence of a privileged stratum of bureaucratic and technical personnel. During the Cultural Revolution, accusations of disloyalty to China's socialist cause were not restricted to Party elites. Anyone in a position of authority could be charged with being a "capitalist-roader" who was undercutting China's drive to lead the socialist world forward in the global Cold War.

The factional battles of the Cultural Revolution threw the Third Front campaign into a tailspin in 1967 and 1968. Cold War militarism brought the Third Front initiative back to life in 1969 when Beijing feared that border clashes with the Soviet Union might cause Moscow to militarily intervene in China, like it had in Czechoslovakia in 1968, in order to reassert what the Kremlin considered to be the right road

ahead for international socialism. Chinese preparations for war with the Soviet Union dominated domestic economic development until 1972 when Mao allowed U.S. President Richard Nixon to come to China in order to offset Soviet military pressure with more amiable relations with the United States.

Mao's diplomatic maneuver heralded a major shift in China's relationship to the international order. No longer was war between the United States and China taken by the CCP to be historically inevitable. Rather, as the joint U.S.-China Shanghai Communique stated at the end of Nixon's visit, Washington and Beijing "should conduct their relations on the principles of...nonaggression against other states...mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence."⁶ In line with China's more pacific approach to international affairs, the CCP discontinued military support for revolutionary groups abroad in the early 1970s. Although China did not come to such an agreement with the Soviet Union, the warming of Sino-American relations lessened the likelihood of Soviet military action.

As Cold War security threats receded as a pressing concern, the Party center reworked fundamental features of Chinese political economy. They slashed the defense budget, stopped construction of new Third Front projects, and demoted heavy industry from its top spot in national economic priorities. In its place, central planners put light industry and agriculture in order to improve domestic living standards. Beijing also decided to take advantage of the lifting of the American embargo in 1971 and purchased industrial machinery from capitalist countries, especially to produce textiles and fertilizer. China's turn towards increasing foreign trade would not come to full fruition until after the normalization of Sino-American relations in 1979. The Party's new interest in ramping up production of consumer goods, however, signaled the arrival of a new era in which Chinese citizens were no longer required to defer material gratification so that central planners could devote more resources to defending the People's Republic from the military dangers of the global Cold War.

¹ Gail Hershatter. *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011): 237-246.

² Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, eds. *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

³ Jeremy Brown. "From Resisting Communists to Resisting America," in *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*, eds. Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz (Harvard University Press, 2007): 125.

⁴ Jeremy Friedman. *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015). Gregg Brazinsky. *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry during the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁵ Interview with Third Front workers, Pengzhou, June 2016.

⁶ "Joint Statement Following Discussions With Leaders of the People's Republic of China," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969-1972*, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d203>