The Crafting of Public Opinion
The Establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and Its International Implications for the Cold War

Angela Hou
On October 1st, 1949, Mao Zedong, the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), declared the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The PRC’s entry into the international system fundamentally altered the Cold War landscape. The establishment of the PRC is often interpreted by historians as a consequence of China’s divisive and entangled relations with the United States and the Soviet Union. However, a narrative that only considers the international backdrop of the Cold War is incomplete. In order to account for the Chinese Communist Party’s success in uniting China under its political control, it is crucial to examine Mao and his administration’s careful domestic framing of public opinion. Mao’s appeal to nationalism played a crucial role in the unification of China, in addition to his administration’s depiction of the Kuomintang Nationalist Party (KMT), the United States (US), and the Soviet Union (USSR). Mao’s emphasis on political optics in these three areas facilitated the CCP's successful transition from a political faction into formal statehood.

The PRC was established after the communist party’s victory in the Chinese civil war against the KMT from 1946-1949. Historians frequently account for the international implications of the conflict by citing the United States’ support for the KMT and the Soviet alliance with the CCP. China’s communist victory was a clear setback for the United States and a victory for the Soviet Union. The two hegemons respectively supported opposing blocs of the Chinese civil conflict since 1946, and both the US and the USSR were heavily invested politically in the outcome of the war.

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literature on the PRC’s inauguration focuses on the ideological antagonism of capitalism versus communism, the political rivalry between two Cold War hegemons, and the political context of 1949. For instance, a prevailing debate within the ranks of contemporary historians, such as Owen Lattimore and Jian Chen, surrounds the theory of a “lost chance in China”. Often, historians inquire as to whether the American government made the wrong decision not to engage China, thus fostering the success of the communist regime. Historians, however, have not focused sufficiently on studying how public opinion in mainland China strengthened the communist party's claim to internal sovereignty. This perspective is crucial to a nuanced understanding of the CCP’s success as both a political party and the government of China, as it granted rational agency to the population of the country in question.

First and foremost, in the “Proclamation of the Central People's Government of the PRC”, Mao asserted that the CCP was the sole legitimate government of China and condemned the treasonous behavior of Chiang Kai Shek, leader of the KMT, for allying with the US. On the domestic front, Mao was swift to denounce his political adversary from the civil war as he established the PRC. The CCP consolidated its own legitimacy by reiterating the inadequacies of the KMT. By 1949, the Chinese public, fueled by anti-western sentiments and nationalism, held a less than positive view of the Nationalist Party and its foreign ties. The KMT was perceived to be a puppet of American

intervention and foreign interests due to its substantial connections and reliance on the Truman administration. According to a public letter from Secretary of State Dean Acheson to President Harry S. Truman on July 30th, 1949, the US government’s extensive aid to the KMT totaled approximately $3 million in grants, credits, and procurement costs of military property.\(^5\) Despite American funding, the KMT’s troops deteriorated in capacity until they lost the civil war.\(^6\) This was partially due to the frequency with which KMT officials misused foreign aid to militarily suppress local residents or for personal gain.\(^7\) In retrospect, the US failed to realize the inherent contradiction between pressuring the KMT to reform internally and providing Chiang Kai Shek with massive financial assistance. As long as the KMT could depend on US aid, its leaders lacked the incentive for any genuine reform.\(^8\) American funds were essentially “feeding the appetite” of an increasingly corrupt regime, while perpetuating the image of the KMT’s incompetency in the Chinese public eye.\(^9\) As a result, the CCP took advantage of this fatal weakness, and gained public support through exposing the KMT’s failings.

Since 1945, KMT troops also consistently demonstrated inadequate treatment of local residents, forming a sharp contrast to the behavior of CCP troops.\(^10\) By depriving rural villagers of their property and treating them with abuse condescension, the KMT offended the demographic who later became the most vital base of support for the

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\(^6\) Ibid, 193.

\(^7\) Thomas D Lutze. China’s Inevitable Revolution: Rethinking America’s Loss to the Communists. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 188.

\(^8\) Ibid, 191.

\(^9\) Ibid, 192.

communist party. The KMT’s overall corruption and abuse of the Chinese people strengthened the CCP’s political advantage, especially in rural China, and led many to associate American influence with the Nationalist Party’s actions.\textsuperscript{11}

In contrast, the Communist Party’s treatment of agricultural, rural communities was much less coercive and exploitative. As a result, the CCP took advantage of the widespread disapproval among Chinese peasants to rally those critical of the KMT’s actions. In Mao’s famous speech, “The Chinese People Have Stood Up” on September 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1949, he stated that Chinese unity was possible due to “China’s victory against the US-aided KMT reactionary regime”, and that there should be “no room for compromise with the imperialist lackeys”.\textsuperscript{12} Mao was acutely aware that national solidarity appealed universally to all Chinese people, and the KMT’s western support was its biggest weakness when confronted with nationalism.\textsuperscript{13} Instead of pointing out the communist victory, Mao’s language emphasized China’s national success in eradicating western influence. Mao’s use of anti-KMT discourse effectively persuaded the masses that the CCP intended to represent the true voices of China as a united country before its own political interests. The emotional appeal to China’s desire for national liberation from imperialist influence thus fueled the momentum of positive public opinion.\textsuperscript{14}

Mao was also very conscious to appeal to sympathizers of the KMT’s ideology, both within the communist party and the public. Although his harsh rhetoric directly

\textsuperscript{13} Key clarification: Nationalist (with a capital N) refers to the KMT party, while nationalist (lower case n) refers to the adjective form of the word nationalism.
\textsuperscript{14} Chen, 47-8.
attacked the Nationalist Party, he carefully circumvented controversy in suppressing supporters of liberal democratic ideals in 1949. Within the ranks of the CCP, Mao enhanced solidarity through publicly adhering to collective leadership and democratic discussion, gathering input from different political parties. In addressing the public, Mao’s speech “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship” claims that the Chinese model is the most truly democratic due to its inclusivity of all Chinese people, as opposed to the western bourgeois definition. By building in national consciousness cloaked under a “different interpretation” of democracy, the more moderate audiences of China came to support the CCP as the unifying force of China. Individuals who did not directly or strongly in support of communism were also swayed by the lip service paid to the prospects of democracy.

Secondly, on the international front, the Chinese government took advantage of anti-American sentiments within China by displaying the dissent of the American public against their government’s actions. The critical American public opinion furthered the CCP’s cause in China, as discontented citizens, media outlets, and corporations accused President Truman’s administration of “losing China” to communism. The American public was heavily influenced by the domino theory, which hypothesizes the loss of China as the beginning of a “slippery slope” proliferation of communism. The American public's concern about Soviet and communist victories in China were then

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15 Teiwes, 14.
showcased by the Chinese government as an example of widespread dissatisfaction against American policies.

In addition, President Truman’s public messages in 1949 show that he repeatedly evaded media inquiries about the possibility of rescuing China from the communists, instead deferring them to “go read the China White Paper”. The lack of direct response from the president frustrated journalists, who interpreted this hesitation as a sign of diffidence. American interest groups in the private sector and corporations with investments in China, such as the American Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) and the Shanghai Power Company (SPC), believed that the government unreasonably excluded the possibility of an economic relationship with China due to the Sino-Soviet alliance. In reality, this outcry was simply because American political leaders saw little economic importance in China at the time, given the relatively small size of private investments and lucrative possibilities. Instead, the American government emphasized the political battle. The CCP observed the aforementioned criticisms from American civil society, and later propelled them domestically as selective evidence of the US government’s loss of public confidence. The tension between corporate interests and foreign policy was interpreted by China as a sign of America’s “democratic weakness”, which upon being publicized, provided impetus for further national unity in China.

The Truman administration also hoped that the Chinese people would overthrow its

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20 Wei, 53.
communist government. In a public letter from Acheson to Truman on July 30th, 1949, Acheson claimed that “ultimately [China’s] profound civilization and democratic individualism will reassert itself”. The China White Paper of 1949 also stated that the “Chinese people [must] come to realize that the communist regime serves not their interests but those of Soviet Russia”. The Chinese public viewed such statements as a threat and hindrance to China’s hard-earned unity and sovereignty, thereby choosing to side with the PRC government, whose rhetoric embodied these two values. From these two aforementioned historical documents, it is also clear the US government failed to realize the scarring psychological impact of its historical intervention in China.

American actions only served to persuade the “middle forces”, the population who were neither committed to the CCP nor the KMT, to side with their newly established communist government. The Chinese population was generally committed to the cause of nationalism, and American interference is the sensitive bottom-line for many Chinese nationals. Most importantly, the American post-war decision to revive the Japanese economy raised widespread anger among the Chinese public, who became increasingly united in their nationalist and anti-western cause. The vivid memories of Japanese and western imperialism allowed Mao to appeal emotionally to the historic wrongdoings. The CCP’s success in fighting Japanese invasion during the Sino-Japanese War of 1937 provided a consistent image for Mao to champion the CCP’s emphasis on

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22 Hunt, “Secretary of State Acheson to President Truman, public letter, 30 July 1949, summarizing the China White Paper’s defense against charges that the Truman administration had ‘lost China’”, 195.


24 Lutze, 191.

resistance against imperialism, which continued to bolster his authority in China.\footnote{Teiwes, 12.}

Third, the Chinese public’s gratitude towards the Sino-Soviet alliance was a source of support for the CCP, who further gained legitimacy through Soviet’s diplomatic recognition. On October 2\textsuperscript{nd}, the day after the PRC’s establishment, the People’s Daily newspaper published headlines regarding Soviet recognition of the Chinese communist government. The Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Gromyko stated that the CCP is the sole “representative of the people’s will”, and expressed willingness to establish friendly diplomatic relations with China.\footnote{Teiwes, 18.} As the first government to acknowledge the PRC’s legitimacy, the USSR was proactive in asserting its tightly knit relationship with China. For the Chinese people, the Soviet Union’s diplomatic recognition of the PRC represented affirmation from a global hegemon. The long-lost feeling of international acknowledgement exhilarated the sense of wrongdoing, which resulted from decades of imperial oppression and domestic strife previous to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China.

In 1949, one could characterize China’s relations to the USSR as a mentorship. Soviet leaders often instructed Mao on the basis of the USSR’s history of implementing communist revolution, in areas such as economic reform and ideological mobilization, hoping that China could benefit from these “lessons of the past”.\footnote{Teiwes, 12.} \textit{Soviet Government Officially Recognizes the PRC, Establishes Diplomatic Relations – People’s Daily}. in \textit{(Sixty Years of the PRC – Valuable Archives) Vol. 1}, ed. 中央档案馆编 (Central Archives Bureau). (Beijing: Central Archives Bureau, 2009), 63.
On the day of the PRC’s establishment, the China People’s Daily, a government-sanctioned newspaper, published a compliment to Soviet socialism for abolishing class differences. From the grassroots to the federal level, there was never any ambiguity in 1949 that China’s relations with the Soviet Union were of high importance. Mao’s revolutionary plan as the CCP’s leader has always included an alliance policy with the USSR.

From an ideational standpoint, both China and the USSR allied to resist American hegemony. Ideologically, the Soviet historical experience with communist revolution was perceived by China as proof of Soviet leadership on the implementation of Marxism-Leninism worldwide. From the perspective of tangible benefits, China quickly realized that the USSR was its only available source of military and economic aid. The Soviet Union agreed to assist China’s post-war military buildup and financial reconstruction. CCP officials paid numerous visits to the USSR to conduct extensive diplomatic dialogue in order to... with the goal of... seeking to maintain... etc. The abundance of assistance provided by the Soviet Union was generally duly noted by the Chinese public.

Mao’s clear favoritism for the USSR was also reflected in the famous “leaning to one side” policy. Instead of rushing to gain political recognition from western countries,
Mao's plan was to first “unite with those nations of the world which treats us as equals”, a notion expressed in Mao’s speech “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship”. Furthermore, at the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference on September 21st, 1949, Mao declared China’s friendship to the USSR and “other like-minded nations who advocated for true peace and freedom”, rather than western imperial stability. Mao’s comment alludes to the historical sense of being downtrodden by western superiors, and this was not observed in China’s interactions with the USSR. The concept of equal treatment and national respect is central to understanding why Chinese public opinion was particularly appreciative of the USSR.

On the other hand, the American government’s published “Draft Report by the National Security Council on US Policy Regarding Trade with China” states that the American policy priority was to “prevent China from becoming an adjunct of Soviet power”. In contrast, the Soviet Union’s support was the “only hand held out” to China in 1949, and thus especially cherished by the Chinese people as they witnessed the rest of the world adopt an isolating and disapproving posture. Paradoxically, the American imperialism that China was desperately trying to condemn was the same imperialism that the American people thought were Soviet intentions. Both sides of the Cold War perceived the other as the imperialist enemy. This belief is captured in Acheson’s comment, as he states that “[Soviet influence is] foreign domination masking behind the façade of a vast crusading movement”. The Truman administration perceived Soviet

38 Mao, On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship.
39 Mao, “The Chinese People Have Stood Up!”.
40 Souers.
motives to support the CCP as a subtle instrument of the USSR’s imperialist foreign policy rather than a communist comradeship. This perception had long-standing implications for American interpretations of Chinese actions during the Cold War, and viewed any advances made by the Soviet Union or China with suspicion and distrust.

However, the gratefulness of the Chinese public towards the USSR is not to imply that they desired to replicate the Soviet Union entirely. In fact, on a personal level, Mao was often uncomfortable that Stalin treated him and his country as an inferior younger brother. But more fundamentally, Mao’s goal was to establish a new proletarian regime that would combine traditional Chinese political ideology and Marxist-Leninist theory. The vital divergence rested on the fact that Mao wanted more than a change in China’s weak power status. He desired to restore China’s central position in the international system and shed the label of weakness, a goal that would fundamentally contest Soviet interests. Specifically, Mao saw China as a great civilization re-awakening through self-governance and recovery from western exploitation. This idea corresponded with the desires of the Chinese public, who were increasingly united along the lines of nationalism rather that political or party affiliation.

In conclusion, the establishment of PRC held symbolic and strategic significance internationally as an assertion of victory through domestic revolution, a challenge to American influence, and reinforcement of Soviet power and ideology. The CCP’s

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43 Chen, 53.
45 Chen, 47.
46 “Long Live the People’s Republic of China”.
47 Lutze, 16.
successful endeavors to strengthen public coherence by appealing to national consciousness was a crucial factor in establishing an assertive and centralized government that lasts to this day. When examining the history of the PRC, it is crucial not to ignore the importance of domestic public opinion in determining the victory of its government. The emphasis of Mao’s administration on directing the popular belief in China served to enhance its political infrastructure in a time where the CCP needed it most. In addition to great power politics during the Cold War era, a holistic historical account of the establishment of the PRC in 1949 must consider the rationale and agency of the Chinese people.
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