

Michael M. Sheng, *Battling Western Imperialism: Mao, Stalin, and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

Michael Sheng's *Battling Western Imperialism* is a revisionist work in several respects. Sheng claims that it was Joseph Stalin, not Mao Zedong, who made the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) foreign policy toward the United States from 1935 to 1949. He argues that past historical scholarship on CCP-Moscow relations overstated the case by suggesting that the relationship between Mao and Stalin was an antagonistic one because of Mao's nationalism which bridled at attempts by Stalin to impose his will on Mao and the CCP. Sheng writes that in fact Mao "followed Moscow's instruction step by step almost religiously throughout the pre-1949 period," (7) even, according to Sheng, "when it went against Chinese national interests or the immediate interests of the CCP." (56) Mao was no nationalist, but an "International Communist" who was "loyal and obedient" to Stalin. Not merely because Mao needed military and economic aid from Moscow, but because of Mao's ideology. Mao and everyone else in the CCP believed in the notion of class struggle which identified the CCP with Moscow and the CCP "viewed its relations with the USSR as matters of "internal affairs" within the world socialist movement." (193) It was this ideology that "helped select the CCP's friends and enemies." Stalin was a friend; the United States, because it backed Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government, was the enemy.

It is in this framework that Sheng examines Mao as proxy for Stalin's policy toward the United States. In the years before Pearl Harbor, Mao feared American imperialism more than Japanese imperialism because the Japanese were the aggressors whereas the Americans, if they defeated Japan, would be seen as the liberators of China and China's bourgeoisie would support America's running dog, Chiang Kai-shek. Although the United States was "the master" backing Chiang, the CCP's main enemy, Mao sought to make friends with America in line with the Comintern's policy of creating "an antifacist world united front." However, Mao remained leery of American aid to Chiang. During World War II, the CCP became pro-Americans overnight after Germany invaded the Soviet Union, but remained "suspicious of the U.S. imperialist nature." Sheng argues that Mao deftly used the United States to block Chiang's anti-CCP activities by convincing American foreign service officers that his policies were liberal. His goal was to use the Americans to pressure Chiang to make reforms, secure American military aid and expand the CCP's influence southward.

After the war, Mao shifted his policy to a two-camp approach in which the CCP would align with Moscow against the Chiang-US alliance. Mao wanted to continue fighting the civil war, but Moscow said "no" fearing American intervention. When, to Mao's displeasure, Stalin suggested that Mao negotiate with Chiang Kai-shek, Mao did so albeit reluctantly. Thus, Mao adjusted his

policy to Moscow's tune because Stalin wanted him to do it: "when Stalin speaks, Mao listens and complies." (124) When the Cold War came to Asia in 1947, Mao identified the United States as the CCP's enemy and formed an "anti-American international united front ... in close coordination with Stalin's policy." (152) With secret Soviet backing, Mao restarted the civil war. When Mao won that war, Sheng argues that there was never any "lost chance" between the United States and Mao to reach a rapprochement "Mao's Beijing regime was born anti-American and pro-Soviet" and the alliance between Mao and Stalin "was only a logical extension of the history of CCP-Moscow relations in the decades prior to the proclamation of the PRC in 1949." (186)

In writing this revisionist account, Sheng engages in a great deal of Mao debunking. He asserts that Mao's later claim that Stalin attempted to have Mao replaced as leader of CCP as ludicrous. "Mao was Moscow's chosen man" and it was the "unprecedented support and endorsement from Moscow that paved the way for Mao's rise to power." (20) True, Mao was successful in creating a "Mao cult" in the CCP, but "not at the expense of Stalin's godlike status in the hearts and minds of the CCP members." (54) Moreover, Sheng asserts that Stalin saved Mao from many policy disasters. Mao is described by Sheng as a "megalomaniac," "egotistic," "emotionally impulsive and politically radical." Time and again, it "was Stalin who pulled Mao back from his radical and potentially ruinous grandioseness." (31) If it was not for Stalin, who "provided a balancing mechanism to Mao's often too radical orientation ... the CCP would have been doomed during the anti-Japanese war." (45) Indeed, Sheng claims "that after Stalin's death Mao's grandiosity and megalomania were set loose, and his personality cult ruined the CCP in the process of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." (32) In his estimation, Mao was not "'always correct' ... [but] a rather muddle-headed strategic thinker, poorly informed, with little real understanding of world politics." (72) Sheng describes Mao as "more of a radical revolutionary inclined to simple solutions, while Stalin was more of a tactful statesman." (167)

Despite claims of presenting new evidence, Sheng's account only puts a new spin on evidence that has existed for some time. To describe Mao as an "Internationalist," a concept that Sheng does not flesh out, in which Mao willingly obeyed Stalin's every command and whose basis for leadership was Moscow's support is oversimplified. The internal politics of the CCP and Mao as an intellectual were much more complicated. Mao's ideology included a deep grasp of China's historical and literary past, and he had to struggle for power in the organization as much as anyone else. Interestingly, Sheng avoids any discussion of the Long March of 1935, a pivotal event in which most historians agree that Mao ascended to the leadership of the party against that of the twenty-eight Bolsheviks sent by Moscow to take control of the CCP. Yes, Mao went along with Stalin because Moscow was the only country around that

shared the same ideology and could give Mao aid for his revolution, but going along with Stalin does not mean that Mao planned to be controlled by Stalin like a puppet. Mao was his own man with his own ideas who had to suffer Stalin until he was in a position to run his own country his way, for better or worse for the Chinese people.

Nor does Mao the “internationalist” during the 1930s and 1940s jibe with the Mao of post-1949. In the 1920s, Mao spoke of an internationalism in which the provinces of China and areas on its borders, such as Tibet, were to declare independence and become autonomous. Once Mao was in power, he consolidated the CCP’s hold on China including Tibet, entered the Korean War in order to protect China from American aggression, sought to assert control over Taiwan, got into a war with India over a border dispute, and nearly got into a war with Russia over a tiny patch a territory. Clearly, as leader, Mao cared about China’s national interests. Probably because Mao was a “Chinese” Communist, not a “Russian” one.

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