

2017

H-Diplo

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Article Review
No. 698
16 May 2017

Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse
Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Kazushi Minami. "Re-examining the end of Mao's revolution: China's changing statecraft and Sino-American relations, 1973–1978." *Cold War History* 16:4 (2016): 359-375. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2016.1218473>.

URL: <http://tiny.cc/AR698>

Review by **Sheng Peng**, University of Oxford

Contribution to Existing Scholarship

The Chinese domestic factors in the U.S.-China rapprochement in the 1970s, from President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's initial opening to China to the establishment of full diplomatic relations in the Carter years, is a fascinating yet under-explored topic in Cold War history. It has been very pleasant and refreshing to read Kazushi Minami's article, "Re-examining the end of Mao's revolution: China's changing statecraft and Sino-American relations, 1973–1978," in which the author argues that the political leadership transition in China from a revolution-minded Mao Zedong, to a relatively more moderate Hua Guofeng, and eventually, to the reform-minded Deng Xiaoping, was essential for China and the United States to establish normal diplomatic relations and initiated a series of military and economic cooperation.

The lack of scholarship on this topic is largely due to the difficulty in accessing Chinese primary sources. Foreign-policy related Chinese sources were already scarce, and the situation has become more difficult, since with the closure of Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive, historians now have no hope of accessing key documents from the 1970s, which could have been extremely helpful in understanding this crucial and transformational period of Chinese foreign relations.¹ Minami made the wise choice of avoiding this issue by using existing Chinese documents to look at the ideologies behind the foreign policy. Minami's article

¹ For news regarding the closure of MFA archive, and a most recent discussion regarding access to other Chinese archives, see, Charles Kraus, "Researching the History of the People's Republic of China," *Cold War International History Project*, Working Paper 79 (April 2016), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/researching-the-history-the-peoples-republic-china>.

certainly contributes to a set of emerging literatures exploring the interaction among ideology, personality, and foreign policy under the context of the global Cold War.²

Minami's greatest contribution, based on his careful examination of Chinese sources, is his revaluation of the role of Premier Hua Guofeng in the post-Mao political transition: the transition from Mao to Deng was not a radical one, but a gradual one, with Hua playing a modifying – or moderate role - in between. Hua's emphasis on economic development, and his openness about borrowing foreign technologies, were two policies that departed from those of Mao, and continued to the Deng Xiaoping years. The subtle difference between Hua and Deng, Minami points out, is that economic development for Hua was a path to revolutionary struggle, where Deng saw it as an end in itself. Minami's finding is supported by other literature. Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun also point out that Hua's greatest legacy was his "deep commitment to modernization" which paved the way for Deng's future reforms.³ Others, such as Alexander Pantsov and Steven Levine, point to Hua's travels abroad, especially to Yugoslavia, where "foreign currency was freely convertible, Western techniques and technology had been successfully assimilated" and this made him recognize China's backwardness, and strengthened his determination to reform.⁴ Regardless of Hua's motivation, he was indeed the right leader at the right time: loyal enough to be marked as heir by Chairman Mao, yet still independent enough to prepare for further reforms, and most importantly, honourable enough to give up power peacefully after he lost the ensuing struggle with Deng.

Unanswered Questions

Minami rightfully points out that Mao's revolutionary view of world affairs and his assessment of U.S.-Soviet relations through the lens of the 'inevitability of war' ran into direct conflict with the Nixon and Ford administrations' interests in reducing great-power tension through détente. Meanwhile, at home, Mao's vacillation between Sino-American cooperation and world revolution – two contradictory ideologies - confused, and alienated key officials who were supportive of Sino-U.S. cooperation, such as the eminent diplomat and premier Zhou Enlai. The historiography on the topic provides a good record and reasonable explanations of Mao's fear of détente. For example, Lorenz Lüthi observes that China's negative attitude on détente was immediately tied to the Soviet-British-American agreement on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which Mao saw as a Soviet surrender to the imperialists.⁵

Minami discusses Deng's decision to redefine "China's foreign menace from hegemonic competition between the US and Soviet superpowers to Soviet unilateral belligerence" as well as Deng's decision to "achieve four modernizations." However, the author did not explaining how those two abstract new *ideas* exactly translated

² Steven Casey, Jonathan Wright (eds), *Mental maps in the era of détente and the end of the Cold War 1968-91* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2015).

³ Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, "China's New Economic Policy under Hua Guofeng: Party Consensus and Party Myths," *The China Journal* 66 (July 2011).

⁴ Alexander V. Pantsov, Steven I. Levine, *Deng Xiaoping, A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 336-337.

⁵ Lorenz M. Lüthi, "The American Factor, 1962-1963" in *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

into *policy change* in foreign affairs. Nor did Minami explain how Deng's willingness to "de-revolutionise China" affected his policy towards U.S.-Soviet detente, which, in the early section of his paper, was central to U.S.-China relations in the Mao-Nixon years. Minami does not mention that China's anti-detente policy, curiously persisted till the late 1970s despite Deng's domestic re-revolutionary transformation. Many foreign sources point out this continuity, for example, the Director of Central Intelligence reported to President Jimmy Carter in 1977 that "China anathematizes defense-related multilateral agreements because it fears those agreements are designed to freeze China and other developing countries into defense positions permanently inferior to the US and USSR. Peking justifies its own testing of nuclear weapons by asserting that China is trying to break that monopoly and pave the way for eventual real, not 'sham,' disarmament."⁶

This continuity has raised an interesting question that Minami fails to mention – despite Deng's more moderated world view, China's hostile attitude towards Détente did not subside even as China's domestic revolutionary ideology disappeared. There seemed to be a firewall separating China's domestic politics, and China's persistent anti-detente policy abroad. On May 21, 1978, the Chinese Foreign Minister told American National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski that:

"Your Excellency has informed us about SALT talks between the U.S. and the Soviet Union as well as the considerations of the American side. To be candid with you, we think any agreement that is reached in the negotiations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union cannot deter the speed of the arms race. The U.S. intends to continue to develop and commission new types of weapons systems, while the Soviet Union will never tie its own hands and feet. The experience in the past years has shown that the Soviet Union will not come to agreement unless it has something to gain. Even if there are agreements, when it is necessary, the Soviet Union will tear them up."⁷

Deng was no different; when asked if China's view on SALT has changed, he said in the same year during a crucial meeting that determined American decision to normalize relations with China:

"No. There has been no change. Our policy is always the same. Just as always. The Russians will not be restricted by any agreement. We do not blow our own trumpet but perhaps the establishment of Sino-American relations is a good way to contain the Soviet Union. A closer partnership between Europe and the United States is always a good way to contain the Soviet Union as is a strengthened relationship China, January–September 1979 711 with Japan. As was said when Dr. Kissinger and President Ford met with Chairman Mao, "let's all get together to fight the bastards."⁸

Minami's article, however, is not exactly clear about how China's continuity in its hostility towards any possibility of U.S.-Soviet cooperation, which was carefully separate from China's changing domestic ideological orientation and political atmosphere, had affected Sino-American relations. This flaw might have resulted exactly from Minami's research strength – his very focused reading of Chinese documents. However,

⁶ Memorandum, "China's Attitude toward Multilateral Agreements," 26 November 1976, Released, 11 January 2005, General CIA Record, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

⁷ *FRUS, 1977–1980* XIII, 412.

⁸ *FRUS, 1977–1980* XIII, 710-711.

Minami's lack of consultation with international materials regarding Chinese behaviours abroad might have caused him to miss the subtle differences between Chinese *domestic ideology* and Chinese *ideologies of foreign policy*, and too quickly jumped to the conclusion that Chinese domestic reform had contributed to U.S.-China normalization of relations. Those foreign sources, including the highly valuable U.S. State Department cables, could have provided a different view on Chinese behaviours abroad, from the speeches and working papers cited in Minami's article, which were prepared more for a domestic audience.⁹

Contributions and more expectations

Finally, Minami's conclusion is that China's domestic ideological change under Deng is a key to U.S.-China normalization. There was certainly a connection, and there might be more to the story. Perhaps, it was also about the timing and a bit of luck – by the time Deng started economic reform in China and Jimmy Carter became the U.S. President, the world had already changed and détente itself was dying. As Cuban forces rolled into Angola, Soviet arms poured into Ethiopia, and SALT II negotiations faced increasing difficulties, the more hawkish American policy makers, led by Brzezinski, and Secretary of Defense Howard Brown, lost enthusiasm for détente and were looking for other solutions to counter the Soviet Union. China, for them, was the solution. In Brzezinski's words, America no longer cared about China's anti-détente attitudes, because US-Soviet relations were already bad enough. Commenting on his rationale regarding finally normalizing relations with China in late 1978, he said: "Soviet disregard for our concerns, especially through the use of the Cuban proxy in Yemen and Ethiopia around Saudi Arabia, made me feel that we should not be excessively deferential to Soviet sensitivities about U.S.-China collaborations."¹⁰ In Nancy Mitchell's carefully documented book on Carter, she also points out that Soviet third-world interventions, especially in Africa, were the key driver of the U.S. opening to China.¹¹

Overall, Minami's article makes significant contribution to the literature of the Cold War by raising an important question about how China's domestic political ideological transition might have contributed to China's foreign policy towards the United States. The gap in Minami's argument, as mentioned above, is not entirely his fault. Minami explored existing Chinese materials as carefully as he could and his argument certainly deserves respect. Unfortunately, due to the lack of key documents from China, all historians working on Chinese foreign policy in the 1970s will have to face the same difficulties. Maybe we will never know how exactly China's changing statecraft from Mao to Deng helped—or postponed—the U.S.-China normalization of diplomatic relations until we finally have access to the still-classified Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs files.

⁹ Those declassified U.S. Department of State telegrams provide a global scale observation of key events – including Chinese foreign policy—from the 1970s. They can be accessed at: <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-list.jsp?cat=WR42>.

¹⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1987), 196.

¹¹ Nancy Mitchell, *Jimmy Carter in Africa, Race and the Cold War* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2016), 416-418.

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