

## HIST 485 Paper Proposal

The victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 over the Chinese Nationalists marked the end of diplomatic relations between China and the U.S. In 1949 and in the following decades, the U.S. backed the remnants of Chinese Nationalists who fled to Taiwan and formed the Republic of China (ROC) as the true representatives of China, instead of the de facto rulers of the Chinese mainland, the People's Republic of China (PRC). Sino-U.S. relations seemed impossible due to opposing Cold War ideologies and proxy wars in Korea and Vietnam. Today, geopolitics and global economics revolve around these two countries; yet for over twenty years, the most powerful nation in the world and the populous nation in the world refused to communicate with each other. The seemingly sudden and momentous meeting between Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon on February 21, 1972, began the process of rapprochement between the China and the U.S. and highlighted, as Nixon put it, "the week that changed the world."

The most famous expression to come from this historic visit is "only Nixon could go to China," the implication being that only a politician with an ardent anti-communist history such as Nixon could have visited China without public allegations that he was a communist sympathizer, if not an actual communist. However, this formulation is not entirely accurate as Nixon kept much of the negotiations for U.S.-Chinese rapprochement top secret for years from both the American public and even his fellow Republicans. The second implication of the phrase is that only Nixon had the foresight and audacity to make such a trip possible. Nixon often referred to the China trip as the crowning achievement of his presidency. Alternatively, Henry Kissinger, Nixon's foreign affairs advisor, is often praised as the architect of the trip because he astutely understood the foreign policy goals of the Chinese leaders and played on their fears of encirclement by the Soviets. According to this narrative, the "China card" was then used against

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the Soviets in a game of triangle diplomacy which secured more détente agreements than possible before. The proposed project will attempt to uncover whether Nixon or Kissinger is more deserving of the credit for Chinese rapprochement, or perhaps whether neither deserve as much credit as they give themselves. On the Chinese side, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai played similar roles to their American counterparts as the ambitious leader and the shrewd diplomat. They too faced enormous internal pressure against rapprochement due to revolutionary rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution. Chinese scholars tend to argue that China gave up more to make rapprochement possible whereas American scholars tend to argue the opposite. Lastly, more recent scholarship has argued that U.S.-Chinese rapprochement was inevitable, as the international system was already trending toward PRC recognition in the UN, and that these four individuals' roles have been overstated. A goal of the proposed project is to bridge these arguments and provide a synthesis that demonstrates the importance of these four men, while acknowledging that their decisions were influenced by more than just their individual diplomatic acumen.

A wealth of primary sources de-classified in the past twenty years document the negotiation process between Communist China and Nixon's administration. Most of Nixon's secret tapes in the Oval Office and internal documents discussing China have been declassified and edited by the State Department into their "Foreign Relations of the United States" series, specifically "Volume XVII, China, 1969–1972," released in 2006. Raw copies of the audio and documents can also be found at [nixontapes.org](http://nixontapes.org) and at the National Security Archive. Older and more biased primary sources can be found in the memoirs of Kissinger and Nixon, *White House Years* (1979) and *RN* (1990), respectively. Kissinger re-visits the issue in his recent book *On China* (2011). The transcript of the actual meeting between Nixon and Mao and their jointly

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crafted statement, the Shanghai Communiqué, will also be useful in determining the concessions each side made in negotiations. Sources on the Chinese side are more sparse due to the lack of translations and secrecy of the Chinese government. Secondary source translations of the available documents as well as translated memoirs of Chinese officials will be critical in determining whether the U.S. understanding of Chinese foreign policy goals ~~were~~ **was** accurate, or whether diplomacy succeeded in spite of misunderstandings.

As the U.S. and China continue to oscillate between partnership and rivalry today, there is renewed scholarly interest in U.S.-Chinese rapprochement as an augury of future foreign relations between the two countries. While too much has changed in both countries' leadership and geopolitical standing to have immediate applicable advice, re-examining the Nixon and Mao negotiations and meeting may reveal the necessary conditions for dialogue between such opposing ideologies to exist. The success of U.S.-Chinese rapprochement was not primarily due to any of the four major individuals at the negotiating table, nor due to keen insight of each other's geopolitical desires. Oftentimes, intentions and gestures were grossly misread. Instead, it was four men's tenacity and unwillingness to leave the negotiating table, as well as a realist mindset which allowed diplomacy to succeed. As Nixon in his 1970 State of the Union address put it, "We have based our policies on an evaluation of the world as it is, not as it was 25 years ago." While history was already trending toward acceptance of the PRC, the 1972 visit represents the best ability of statesmen to steer into the reality of geopolitics and emerge on friendly terms, instead of futilely fighting against it.

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