

The China Hands' Legacy

Ethics and Diplomacy

Edited by

Paul Gordon Lauren



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About the Book and Editor

A group of American Foreign Service officers and journalists in China during and after World War II—collectively known as “the China Hands”—were accused of disloyalty, and in some cases treason, for reporting on events as they saw them. Faced with the ethical dilemma of what a public official’s responsibility is when one believes one’s government’s policy is wrong, these men and women wrote what they considered to be the truth. Forty years later, their celebrated experiences provide a case study for the exploration of larger questions about U.S. foreign policy, relations between the United States and East and Southeast Asia, and ethics and diplomacy. This volume combines the perspectives of former China Hands themselves looking back upon their personal experiences with those of noted scholars; together the two groups explore the China Hands’ legacy and its meaning for the future.

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PAUL GORDON LAUREN

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**The China Hands:
An Introduction**

As 1950 began, Alger Hiss, an important and well-placed career diplomat of the United States, found himself the principal target of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, embroiled in a sensational trial. On January 21 he was convicted of perjury. Within a few days a major espionage case exploded before the public eye. In the United States Senate, hitherto unknown and freeswinging Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy sensed that the time might be politically ripe to accelerate his accusations against those Americans whom he regarded as being “soft” on Communists, loyal to the ideals and designs of communism, and responsible for “losing” China to Mao Tse-tung’s Communist forces. On February 9, at a colorful Lincoln’s Day dinner in Wheeling, West Virginia, McCarthy launched his attack and fired his now famous salvo by unashamedly proclaiming in public:

Ladies and gentlemen, while I cannot take the time to name all the men in the State Department who have been named as active members of the Communist Party and members of a spy ring, I have here in my hand a list of 205—a list of names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department.¹

In the upheaval that followed, much of the attention of McCarthy and his many supporters focused upon the “China Hands,” those

individuals in the Foreign Service who had served in China and become experts on Chinese affairs during the preceding years. In the anti-Communist purge that followed, these diplomats and a number of journalists also with experience in China found themselves accused of “losing” China to the Communists, of being “card-carrying” members or “fellow travelers” of the Communist Party, and of practicing disloyalty and even treason against the United States for the reports they wrote and the conclusions they reached from China. During World War II they had reported the truth as they saw it: that regardless of what their own government wanted to hear, America’s ally, Chiang Kai-shek, headed a corrupt regime lacking support among the Chinese people and likely to collapse in the face of growing Communist strength. They argued that this was not necessarily desirable for the United States, but that it was going to happen. When they were proven right, they were accused of having willed the event and of having contributed to the outcome.² Their case raised—and their legacy continues to raise—critical questions about modern Chinese-American relations, memory and historical consciousness, shifting political realities in war and peace, utopianism and the modern state, intercultural communication and understanding, the function of the press in free societies, and the ethical problems that arise in the conduct of diplomacy.

China and America

China has always seemed to have a special allure and attraction for Americans. Its land, long history, and fascinating multitudes of people have aroused interest, curiosity, sympathy, and greed, among many other reactions. China’s mysteries and philosophies attracted scholars thirsty for knowledge. Its markets, resources, and financial opportunities, as Raymond Wylie and Immanuel Hsu suggest in Chapter 3 attracted merchants and investors hungry for profits. China’s people attracted missionaries ardent to help and to win souls. Its location attracted soldiers anxious for strategic footholds in Asia. And, after the successful revolution led by Sun Yat-sen against the old Ch’ing Dynasty and then the creation of the Republic of China in 1912, as Akira Iriye observes in Chapter 4, the country attracted the attention of political and social reformers eager to

bring the benefits of democracy and modern technology to an ancient land.

This attraction certainly did not diminish with the subsequent rise of political parties in China. Indeed, the creation in 1912 of the Kuomintang, or Nationalist People's Party, and the formation in 1921 of the Kungch'antang, or Communist Party, attracted even greater attention. Both parties wanted to modernize China, to mobilize the Chinese people in political life, and to create new forms of government for the future; for a time, they actually worked with each other to achieve common objectives. This uneasy alliance was broken in 1927 when the leader of the Kuomintang, Chiang Kai-shek, bolted and established the Nationalist government of China. Although initially deeply committed to the principles of democracy and the people's livelihood, like many other revolutionaries in history the Nationalists and Chiang increasingly became concerned with preservation of their own wealth and power. With the growth of secret police surveillance, censorship, the suppression of opposition, starvation in the countryside, and corruption, Chiang's government found itself steadily abandoned by the intellectuals, losing the support of the peasants and their perception of his "Mandate from Heaven" to govern, and seriously challenged by the Chinese Communists under the leadership of Mao Tse-tung. In response to Mao's challenge, Chiang launched a series of extermination campaigns against the Communists, forcing them by 1934 to undertake the now legendary Long March of more than 6,000 miles through numerous perils and to transfer their headquarters far away to the arid, sunbaked hills of Yenan in North China.

In the midst of this dramatic contest for the control of China's destiny, the Japanese decided to take advantage of the internal disunity and expand their control over Chinese territory. The expansion started during 1931 when military forces from Japan overran most of the key Chinese positions in South Manchuria. Shortly thereafter, the Japanese staged an assault upon Shanghai. Incidents continued during the following years, then exploded in 1937 when serious fighting broke out between Chinese and Japanese troops at the Marco Polo Bridge near Peking. The resulting Sino-Japanese War struck at the very foundations of the Nationalist regime, significantly draining away resources and energies. At the same time, it also provided unprecedented opportunities for the Chinese Com-

munists to increase their revolutionary strength and influence in the countryside. Both the Nationalists and the Communists, however, understood that this external threat to China endangered them more than their internal struggle for power and hence agreed to a program of National Unity whereby the Communists would place their troops under Nationalist command to fight the common enemy. As a result of this agreement the supreme commander, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, possessed at least nominal control over all Chinese forces, but he knew that in order to survive he needed vast amounts of American assistance.

In the past, Americans always had given considerable aid to the Chinese, but this had appeared largely in the form of missionary assistance, private philanthropy, and person-to-person or group-to-group contributions. With the attacks upon China by the Japanese, however, assistance quickly came to be official as the U.S. government sought to support the government of China in order to provide a check upon Japan in Asia. Chiang made it clear that his was the only officially recognized government of China and that he thus intended to remain the sole channel through which American support would go to the Chinese. The United States complied and began providing funds, making loans, and even clandestinely establishing an air force known as the Flying Tigers in Burma and Yunnan under Claire Chennault to bring military supplies to China. When the Japanese launched their surprise attack upon Pearl Harbor, and the United States entered World War II, what had been a trickle of assistance became a veritable flood of financial, material, and technical aid. With this, the two countries joined as allies, and their futures became very closely intertwined. But as scholar John King Fairbank writes of this development: "Unfortunately our ally the Nationalist Government was by 1942 already well advanced in that process of decline. . . . From the very beginning of our wartime alliance, American officials found themselves dealing with an ineffective administration, too debilitated by its domestic problems to respond to foreign stimuli. Trying to aid it, we became entangled in its decline and fall."³

This entanglement began almost immediately. In order to coordinate the use of such aid and military policy, President Franklin Roosevelt sent General Joseph ("Vinegar Joe") Stilwell to China as the commanding general of U.S. Forces in the China-Burma-India Theater

and as Chiang's chief of staff. Stilwell was the army's China specialist. He could both read and speak Chinese, had traveled widely throughout the country, and had been the American military attaché in Peking during the first years of China's war with Japan. Stilwell's assignment was to coordinate the distribution of military aid, to break the blockade of China by cutting his way through the Japanese occupying army in Burma, to modernize and retrain China's armies to become a genuine fighting force, and, in the process, to defend Chiang and his government. All of this made Stilwell, in the words of one contemporary observer on the scene in China, a "jockey to a dying horse."⁴

It did not take Stilwell long to understand the impossible nature of his mission. When the war came, Roosevelt and the American people viewed Chiang as a precious ally, the master of a great Asian reservoir of manpower, the owner of a vast landmass from which a counterattack could be launched against Japan, and a democratic leader beloved by his countrymen. Yet, once in China again, it quickly became apparent to Stilwell that China had a government racked with corruption and incompetence and a dictatorial political leader despised by many of his own people. Stilwell watched Chiang deploy 200,000 of his best fighting troops, not against the Japanese as he had promised, but in a blockade against the Chinese Communists. He saw Chiang beg Americans for more and more aid and then hoard what was forthcoming for his own purposes rather than use it in war. He listened to Chiang make promises about victories when he knew perfectly well that Nationalist forces suffered defeats. Declared Stilwell in extreme frustration and bluntness, "The trouble in China is simple: We are allied to an ignorant, illiterate, superstitious peasant son of a bitch."⁵

For Stilwell, this terrible situation became even worse. Chiang insisted upon issuing his military orders without any effort at consultation. At times he simply refused to talk with Stilwell. On other occasions he deliberately tried to obstruct cooperation. Chiang strongly opposed any suggestion, for example, that Stilwell be allowed to at least establish some contact with the Chinese Communist armies in order to utilize their troops in the fight against Japan. Chiang also began to suggest to the United States that Stilwell should be recalled. "What Stilwell was beginning to learn," writes Theodore White, who personally witnessed these events, ". . . was

that all war at its supreme level is dominated by politics and that no fighting army could be created in China without changing the politics of China.”⁶

The political dimensions of the war were evident in other ways as well. Chiang and his government, for example, knew that massive American aid was essential for their survival and thus exerted great effort and expended enormous funds to influence the American political process. They used paid lobbyists, their own officials, and a variety of other allies who had the leverage of wealth and influence to recruit friends, engender sympathy, and encourage the United States to increase its assistance to the Nationalists. Many of these supporters worked together in a loosely organized confederation known as the China Lobby. The power of this group probably never was as great as either its defenders or opponents claimed, but its members included several extremely wealthy and influential Americans ranging from textile importer Alfred Kohlberg to Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time-Life*, to Pittsburgh industrialist Frederick McKee. The lobby took particular pride in the access it possessed to Republican senators and congressmen like Joseph McCarthy, Patrick McCarran, and Walter Judd. These men, in turn, were strategically placed to provide assistance for Chiang—and to provide formidable opposition to those who might not agree that the Nationalists deserved full American support.⁷

In order to maintain this political support within the United States, Chiang also tried to control American journalists in China by means of travel restrictions and censorship. As Charles Hood observes in Chapter 8, Chiang’s officials carefully attempted to watch where members of the press went, what they heard, and what they reported. Theodore White, interestingly enough, found himself a part of this process while he temporarily served as an adviser to the Chinese Ministry of Information. In a revealing passage in his own colorful autobiography, he writes:

I was employed . . . to manipulate American public opinion. The support of America against the Japanese was the government's one hope for survival; to sway the American press was critical. It was considered necessary to lie to it, to deceive it, to do anything to persuade America that the future of China and the United States ran together against Japan. That was the only war strategy of the

Chinese government . . . and my job was to practice whatever deception was needed to implement the strategy.⁸

This propaganda effort may have worked within the United States among those removed from Chinese affairs, but it proved to be singularly ineffective among many of those Americans who in their official or professional capacity resided in China and saw Chiang and the Nationalists for themselves. These included military commanders like General Stilwell, the American ambassador Clarence Gauss and his China Hand political advisers from the Foreign Service, and a large number of journalists, among others. As one newspaperman on the scene rather imaginatively described it, Chiang and his government were like the panel of a modern switchboard. When one pushed the buttons, the lights winked, but the wires in the back led nowhere and the panel “did not connect to the operations system. And the parade of American advisers, aid masters, and generals who . . . [came] to help all exploded in impotent fury when they finally realized the switchboard did not work.”⁹

In the midst of this fury and confusion, the China Hands faced a number of serious ethical dilemmas. Individually and collectively they had to deal with the difficult problem of what public officials should do when they believe their government is wrong. On the one hand, they had a clear responsibility to tell the truth the way they saw it. Regardless of how unpleasant the facts might be, their government needed accurate information and assessments. As Melby describes it in his chapter, ideally any Foreign Service officer “should always report what he sees, hears, smells, and feels, preferably rounded off with his interpretations and recommendations.” To do so, however, runs serious risks of contradicting official policy and thus appearing disloyal, of harming relations with an ally during time of war and thus seeming treasonous, or of placing one’s own career in serious jeopardy. As Davies observes in his chapter, a Foreign Service officer in this situation faces a choice either to “remain silent” or to “speak out about his misgivings and suggest alternative policies, knowing that he runs serious personal risks in so doing.” Davies, Melby, and the other China Hands chose to speak out and to tell the truth the way they saw it.

“Truth,” however, is not always as easy to determine as one might want to believe. As all of the following chapters indicate,

what active participants in the world of diplomacy determine to be the empirical truth is frequently conditioned by a number of factors. Wylie and Hsu, for example, stress the importance of geographical perspective and the limitations of vision imposed by local conditions. Melby emphasizes the role played by ideology and subjective judgments. May discusses the importance of domestic factors and ethical notions of political loyalty. And Davies is quick to remind us that diplomats must always face the difficulty of making reports and hazarding estimates based upon insufficient evidence, because the facts are never all available at the time of need.

Yet another ethical problem for diplomats arises over the question of establishing contacts. The fulfillment of their classical responsibility to gather accurate information and report it to their home government requires that they gather intelligence from foreign sources. But are some sources clearly acceptable while others are not? In times of war, for example, is it ethically better to maintain contact only with allies, even if it is known that they are corrupt and engage in censorship, or is it more ethically sound to seek accurate information wherever it can be found, regardless of the source? Again, as Davies suggests in Chapter 2, "if a Foreign Service officer must sever connections with everyone, American and foreign, about whom there has been or may be a derogatory report, then he will, of necessity, live in a useless vacuum." Consequently, the China Hands established whatever contacts they could with the Chinese Communists.

These two problems of reporting accurate information and gathering it where they could placed the American China Hands at serious odds with their Chinese Nationalist allies and Chiang's supporters (including those in the China Lobby within the United States). Indeed, after two years, Stilwell found himself spending seemingly more time in political battles with the Nationalists than in military combat against the Japanese. Time and time again he had been checked by Chiang in his efforts to establish contacts with the Communists and to assist them in fighting Japan. Stilwell's efforts remained unsuccessful until the summer of 1944 when Vice President Henry Wallace placed enough political pressure on Chiang for authority to establish the so-called Dixie Mission of American observers to Mao's headquarters in Yen-an.¹⁰ The price that Stilwell paid for this victory, however, was his job. After this, Chiang announced that he could no longer work with the man, claimed that he "was