Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to the KW episode 7. Last time we continued our in depth analysis of Sino-Soviet relations, through the year of 1949, which as we’ve come to appreciate, was a critically important year for the building blocks of diplomacy that would, in time, pave the way for the KW. In this episode we bring this trilogy of analysis to an end, by resuming where we left off last time, as Mao Zedong prepares to make his way to Moscow for high level talks at last with the Soviet Union. Mao’s plans had somewhat gone up in smoke over the previous months, that is in late October and early November 1949, when the efforts to seize some outlying islands from Taiwan miserably failed.

This failure meant that Mao would have far less leverage and his plans for inflicting the final defeat on Chiang Kai-Shek’s republican regime would be far less clear. Notwithstanding these setbacks, Mao also accepted that time was of the essence, and although he expected Josef Stalin to drive a hard bargain, and probably demand the ceding of Manchuria into the Soviet Union, Mao was determined to find a way to get Soviet aid for the final chapter of the Chinese Civil War. Let’s see how he got on then, as I take you to early November 1949…

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***Charlie Chaplin part 3.***

Mao Zedong had grown used to possessing the advantage over his opponents. It had been some time since the republican Chinese forces had seriously threatened his Chinese Communist Party, and he had greatly benefited from the superiority in position, in resources and in manpower once the tables had so drastically turned in the civil war. It was so apparent to Mao that victory was inevitable that he had felt comfortable with declaring the establishment of the PRC on 1st October 1949, before Chiang Kai-Shek’s forces had even been completely defeated. The outcome of the struggle, while Mao wished to arrive at it sooner, was thus not in doubt. The future looked bright for the once obscure son of a peasant family of moderate means. Mao seemed destined to lead the most populous communist state in the world, and to enjoy trappings of power on an unimaginable scale. As positive as the future seemed though, Mao could not ignore the immediate strategic realities which faced his new people’s republic. When it came to question of an American leaning or Soviet leaning China, Mao had plainly chosen the latter – he wasn’t, after all, heading to Washington in the near future. Yet, as a man used to possessing the advantage, Mao must have burned at the prospect of arriving on Stalin’s doorstep empty handed.

A notoriously hard bargainer, Mao would have known that Stalin would ask for something in return for his requests. What Mao wanted was to acquire material aid from the Soviets, to facilitate the invasion of Taiwan and finish off the republicans, thereby securing his regime from either Chiang’s resurgence or American interference. Yet, what he also wanted to achieve in his trip to Moscow was to make genuine headway in the negotiations once arranged between a disadvantaged republican China and an empowered Soviet Union. To do so, Mao planned to do away with the treaty of friendship agreed to in August 1945. This arrangement had handed Stalin a brilliant set of carrots in Mongolia and Manchuria, and it had represented in Mao’s mind a repeat of the unequal treaties between China and the West which had so characterised the 19th and early 20th centuries.

If Mao wished to pave a new future for China, he understood that he would have to overcome the prejudices and expectations of its past. To do so, any semblance of the unequal treaties of yore would have to be abolished. Yet, Mao was acutely aware that while he weighed both of these aims against the other, Stalin was unlikely to give either of them without a significant price – the Soviet Chairman may well insist on paying for one by giving up on the other, a prospect which Mao was immensely uncomfortable with.

The question for Mao and his allies before he left for Moscow then was how to achieve the maximum results in the constrained situation they found themselves in. First and foremost, Mao believed, damage control would have to be implemented. After the Chinese Politburo met in the days immediately following the failure to seize the Taiwanese islands, an effort was made to alleviate any pressure on Mao or his peers to acquire any lofty promises from Stalin. In anticipation of Stalin’s efforts to drive a hard bargain, Mao wished to reduce any pressures which the public mood in China or elsewhere might place upon him. To do so, he determined to recast his visit to Moscow not as one which would bring the PRC any advantages, but as a Sino-Soviet goodwill tour, brought on by the occasion of Stalin’s birthday.

Mao also had a further strategy to prevent any loss of face during his trip. His foreign minister Zhou Enlai would stay at home while Mao travelled to Moscow, and would only travel to Moscow himself if it seemed as though Stalin was about to give way on certain notable issues. On the other hand, if Stalin looked set to demand to high a price, or if Mao found Stalin’s terms unacceptable, then Zhou Enlai would remain at home. Through such a process, there would be no prospect of Mao and company returning to China having publicly failed in their mission to the Soviet Union. Mao would be there as the public face of the mission for sure, but he would avoid from engaging in actual negotiations over the minutiae of Sino-Soviet cooperation, since that was what foreign ministers were for. By testing the waters first, Mao hoped to avoid any disappointment, and demonstrate to Stalin that he would only engage in serious talks. Otherwise, Mao could simply explain, there was no point in his minister coming all the way from China to engage in fruitless talks. This at least was the plan, but time would tell if it would work or not.

On 6th December 1949, as well prepared as he would ever be, Mao departed for Moscow by train, stopping off in an unplanned visit in Manchuria along the way. Manchuria remained a sensitive issue in Mao’s mind. It was strategically located in a critically important position in China’s sphere of territory, but the definition of Manchuria itself and the lands which that region could be said to include were necessarily vague. If it came down to it, Mao did not doubt that Stalin would seek to claim as much land under the ‘Manchurian’ jurisdiction as possible, since this would give Moscow the greatest strategic advantages. This was another region why Mao didn’t wish to see the Manchurian weapon in Stalin’s hands to begin with; aside from the insult this laid at the feet of the communist nationalist in Mao Zedong, the procedure for occupying and enforcing the Soviet writ in the region could have grave consequences depending how far Stalin intended to force the issue. Mao didn’t want to take the chance that Stalin would be reasonable, and believed instead that the Soviet Chairman would take as much as the circumstances – in other words, Chinese weakness – allowed. Considering the lessons learned by the west in Europe by this point, Mao’s deductions were far from unfounded.


The location of Manchuria, the dark red being the ‘truest’ Manchurian territory, in north-western China. Note Manchuria’s critically important position along the Korean border, and the Soviet Union’s close proximity to it as well.

In his stop off in the Manchurian city of Shenyang, Mao wasn’t merely reminiscing about what might have been, he was also keeping a close eye on his so-called allies. Gao Gang, that Manchurian native we were introduced to in the last episode, had already fallen from favour in Mao’s mind for his demonstrated desire to bring Manchuria into the Soviet fold. In light of these ambitions, Mao had set Gao Gang a test to see if he would in fact redeem himself in the People’s Republic, or whether he was in fact doomed. What was Gao Gang’s test? Mao had instructed the Manchurian native to remove all pictures and images of Stalin from the city, and to ensure that only portraits of Mao remained in place. In the portrait war of the age, the appearance of the Chairman’s face could suggest reverence, allegiance and loyalty, and there was plainly no room for such a contested region as Manchuria to be in any doubts. Its people had to be shown that China owned this land, not the Soviet Union, and so all images of Stalin needed to be gone. Unfortunately, while Gao Gang certainly received this memo, Mao was outraged to discover that he had manifestly failed in his task.

Perhaps not expecting Mao to get out of the train and explore the city, in anticipation of its expected absorption into the Soviet fold, Gao had neglected to remove Stalin’s portrait from the city. When Mao travelled through the Shenyang then, he was greeted with an infuriating sight – portraits of Mao Zedong being consistently dwarfed by the far larger and more resplendent images of Josef Stalin. Some portraits of Stalin had rings of flowers, while Mao’s lingered unloved on the walls and side boards of the city, as though they had only been put up for the sake of it, not out of any sense of genuine affection. This did not bode well for the trip to come, and Mao rightly suspected that many in his own party like Gao Gang were more sympathetic to Stalin than to their true Chinese leader. It would evidently be quite difficult to expel Soviet influence from Manchuria, but Mao was determined to see that progress was made. He arrived in Moscow on 16th December 1949.

By this point, in terms of the grand strategic makeup of the Chinese Civil War, Chiang Kai-Shek and his republican allies had retreated to the island of Taiwan. With them they brought their remaining soldiers, the bureaucratic functionaries and institutions, and of course their war chest, still bolstered by American monies. Chiang’s exit to Taiwan and the abandonment of the Chinese mainland on 10th December was not the triumph in Mao’s mind that it seemed. All it did was make it all the more imperative that Taiwan be seized.

Where before that island had been a bastion of republican sentiment and a strategically critical landing pad, now it was the base of operations for Mao’s political enemies, and so long as the ocean separated Chiang and Mao, the latter could never feel completely safe in his position, nor could he be sure, as his later, arguably paranoid behaviour was to demonstrate, that the Americans did not intend to intervene at this critical juncture in Chiang Kai-Shek’s name. The best way to prevent any extension of the civil war and to conclude it absolutely was to finish Chiang off, and to do that, Mao knew he would need the Soviet Union’s help. If the republican retreat made Mao’s urgency more acute, he could not afford to show it. Stalin would already know of his counterpart’s weak position, there was no need to advertise even further the chasm between them.

Initially, the cold weather meant that Mao did not meet with Stalin immediately after arriving on 16th December, but later on in the evening the two men met in person at last, accompanied by the necessary interpreters, and the sheer weight of expectation which no doubt filled the room. Attempting to put Stalin on the defensive from the get go, Mao began with a brief summary of the difficulties which Soviet policy had caused him up to that point, paying particular attention to the earlier Soviet efforts to bring about some sort of mediated peace which would perpetuate a divided China. If he was taken aback, the experienced Stalin did not show it, instead accepting, at least in a cryptic way, a measure of responsibility. ‘We have probably caused you a lot of trouble. Beg your pardon.’ In response to this weakly worded apology, Mao noted that ‘I have been squeezed and attacked within the party in China’, a veiled reference to the activity of Stalinist operatives within the Chinese Communist Party, such as the aforementioned native Manchurian Gao Gang.

‘Let bygones be bygones’, Stalin returned, ‘who can condemn victors?’ Noting a measure of awkwardness in the mood, Stalin then attempted to change the subject, asking Mao about the nature of his trip, although he knew the nature of it quite well. ‘For this trip’, Mao replied, ‘we hope to bring home something that not only looks nice but also tastes delicious.’ Mao wasn’t talking about a slice of Stalin’s birthday cake, but of a slice – as big as he could get – of the Manchurian pie. Yet, even after this was again repeated to Stalin, he refused to take the bait, so Mao tried a different approach, and asked Stalin point blank if he wished to call Zhou Enlai to Moscow to join them. This question was essentially a question deep down over whether Stalin intended to actually conduct meaningful talks over the future of Manchuria, though it could be of course be presented to the onlooker as one of mere diplomatic courtesy. Mao continued to test the waters, and seemed capable of at least sharing the same room as a man who had once leveraged his position against the Anglo-American post-war vision, to build what became the Soviet bloc.

Mao was well aware of Stalin’s record, and of his ability to say no or say yes while mouthing the opposite, making you feel as though you’d gotten what you wanted, until you subsequently realised that it was too late. ‘If we cannot make certain what we really want to work out, what is the use to call Zhou to come here?’ Stalin asked. Understanding that the Soviet leader was now calling his bluff, Mao realised that he wasn’t going to get an offer from Stalin at this moment to renegotiate the 1945 treaty, so he tried another approach. Noting the need for peace in his country’s case, Mao insisted that the PR desperately needed international peace so that it could properly recover its old energies, and asked Stalin ‘how long will international peace be preserved?’ To which Stalin replied ‘we have already had peace for the last four years.’

Stalin, it emerged, didn’t equate Mao’s struggle or his eventual triumph as anything other than inevitable, and attempted to further understate the cost of the struggle by emphasising the lack of threats to Mao’s current position. ‘There is no one to fight with China’, Stalin noted, ‘not unless Kim Il-Sung decides to invade China.’ However he expected Mao to respond to the mention of the North Korean leader, Stalin continued with his theme of relative Chinese prosperity by insisting on the basis for which such peaceful times could continue. Peace, as Stalin insisted, ‘will depend on our efforts. If we continue to be friendly, peace can last not only 5-10 years, but 20-25 years and perhaps even longer.’ Stalin’s optimistic note contained two major nuggets.

While not going so far as to make a collective noun out of their relationship, and refer to Mao and himself as belonging to the same ‘communist family’, Stalin’s use of ‘our’ and ‘we’ was deliberate. It inferred a certain onus to preserve peace at Mao’s door, and served also to indicate that Stalin did not anticipate Mao to engage in any reckless foreign ventures. The second nugget we can take from Stalin’s line though was the equality that the Soviet Chairman implied. Again, by the usage of ‘our’ and ‘we’, Stalin indicated that they were equally responsible, equally joint in foreign policy and united in their ambitions to preserve peace in their respective spheres. Stalin was disinterested in war in Europe, so Mao should be disinterested in war in Asia. Yet, as a final point, implying such equality would also enable Mao to return to the question of the distinctly *un*equal treaties, as Stalin well knew, and so the tricky language of diplomacy, which Stalin was evidently fluent, was revealed to contain more layers than was initially obvious. Mao, to his credit, was equally fluent, as he knew he would have to be when meeting such a formidable man in Stalin.

It was important in Stalin’s mind that Mao be seen to ask for things, as being in the position to hand out concessions indicated that you were in the dominant position. The psychological impact which requesting such concessions could have on a foreign dignitary would vary depending on how much they had to ask for and how long they to ask for it for. Stalin didn’t intend to merely exhaust Mao’s patience though, and he remarked that they could discuss the question of the 1945 treaty when Mao brought it up. The way in which Mao brought up the treaty demonstrated his own adherence to the diplomatic code – rather than ask that the treaty be renegotiated, Mao simply referred to the previous Liu mission earlier in the year, stating that ‘since Liu Shaoqi’s return to China, the CCP has been discussing the treaty of friendship, alliance and mutual assistance with the USSR.’ This careful diplomatic tiptoeing around making any distinct commitments or requests strikes me as language more familiar to lawyers than national leaders, but in the minds of both men it was imperative that such a policy be adopted if their reputation and self-image was to be preserved. Both men, of course, held onto their leadership positions thanks to an unrivalled cult of power which surrounded them, and any supplication to a foreign counterpart could throw this cult into immediate jeopardy.

Incredibly, what followed by Stalin was a display of diplomatic athletics which nearly left Mao speechless. Arguing that since the terms of the current arrangement between China and the USSR were also guaranteed by the US and British, Stalin reasoned that if the treaty was simply dropped, the British and Americans would rush to take advantage and claim portions of territory which were in a position to occupy. Since any public rejection of the treaty’s terms would thus violate the treaty, Stalin instead argued that Mao could take advantage of a kind of gentleman’s agreement, which he presented in the following terms, using Port Arthur as an example, saying that we could ‘formally maintain the Soviet Union’s right to station its troops at Port Arthur while, at the request of the Chinese government…actually withdraw the forces currently stationed there…if one the other hand, the Chinese comrades are not satisfied with this strategy, they can present their own proposals.’

Stalin’s efforts to deceive Mao verged on breath-taking – not only did he wish to hold onto the unequal 1945 in all but name, but he wished to blame its retention on the Anglo-Americans, and he reasoned that unwritten handshake agreements would be sufficient to ease Mao’s concerns, and convince him that the 1945 treaty didn’t have to be as limiting in actuality as it remained on paper. Either way, such a dilemma was not his fault, Stalin explained, but merely the result of the Yalta conference, which the USSR was contractually obliged to adhere to, upon pain of Anglo-American interference. Stalin wanted to have his cake and eat it, and for a moment it seemed as though he would get away with this scam.

Mao had not given any thought to the use of Yalta as an excuse, and as Stalin was well aware, Mao was also suspicious of the American government’s intentions with respect to Chiang Kai-Shek’s republican regime. Now that they were holed up in Taiwan, in the desperate hour when their strategic interests were at stake the Americans would surely be looking for any excuse to interrupt the progress of the PLA and to save the republican regime. By violating the 1945 treaty, thus violating Yalta, the Americans, supported by their British lackeys, would be given such an excuse. ‘In discussing the treaty in China we had not taken into account the American and English positions regarding the Yalta agreement’, Mao began, before adding:

We must act in a way that is best for the common cause. This question merits further consideration. However, it is already becoming clear that the treaty should not be modified at the present time, nor should one rush to withdraw troops from Port Arthur.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Mao appeared to be buying into the warped presentation of events, and into Stalin’s habitual tendency to blame the west for his own intransigence. Whether he thought he could get away with pulling the wool over Mao’s eyes or not, Stalin was resolute when it came to a possible foil in his plan. Mao asked whether it would be wise to invite Zhou Enlai, the foreign minister, over the Moscow to join them. Mao wanted his foreign minister to come not to renegotiate the treaty with Stalin, but to determine how to respond. Zhou’s experience in foreign affairs would be invaluable to Mao, who was plainly caught between his suspicion of the west and his distrust of the Soviets. As Stalin well knew, his offer was a flimsy, weakly argued one, and to another Chinese official less suspicious of western intentions, it would likely fall to pieces. For this reason Stalin sought to keep Zhou Enlai away.

Was there any truth to Stalin’s presentation of events at all? To recap, Stalin argued that he wouldn’t be able to cancel the 1945 treaty, since this was locked into the Yalta conference, and violating the 1945 would thus violate Yalta and provide the grounds for the Anglo-Americans to consider the whole arrangement void. If this happened, Stalin claimed, Washington and London would lay claim to some sensitive territories in the Chinese sphere of influence: in particular the Kuril Islands and South Sakhalin, which were located to the north of Japan and maintain a Russian presence to this day. Through Stalin’s presentation of events, the Anglo-Americans would come and occupy these sensitive territories if Yalta was dissolved, placing them in an ideal position to strike at the PRC.


The location of the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin, currently under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation, though not without international tensions.

With regards to the question ‘was Stalin telling Mao the truth’, the answer was a resounding no. Richard C Thornton’s aforementioned book called *Odd Man Out: Stalin, Truman, Mao and the Origins of the Korean War* has helped us immensely for the sake of events like these. Thornton’s accessible and straightforward writing style, not to mention his mounds of research, has made examining and presenting to you this preceding part of the KW far easier than it would have been otherwise, and for those loving this stuff as much as I am, I would absolutely recommend you check Thornton’s book out. In any case, Thornton effectively captures all the hypocrisy and deceit present in Stalin’s portrayal of events to Mao, when he noted that:

The falsity of this argument was clear enough. The 1945 treaty derived from Yalta, but the treaty had nothing to do legally or otherwise with the Soviet position in the Kurile Islands or South Sakhalin. Neither one is mentioned in 1945 treaty, although both are mentioned in the Yalta agreement. The 1945 treaty, in fact, stood on its own merits…Stalin had muddled together two separate entities, which he no doubt knew that Zhou would recognise. Therefore, the Soviet leader strove to keep him in China. Did Stalin think he could bulldoze Mao into accepting the Soviet position on the 1945 treaty on the grounds that he might not have seen the Yalta agreement?[[2]](#footnote-2)

Indeed, confusing Mao seemed to have struck Stalin as his best chance to get what he wanted at the lowest price, but Mao determined to change the subject for the moment, and proceeded with the meeting by raising the issue of Soviet aid to China, to which Stalin approved a $5 billion line of credit. Stalin agreed to render assistance in helping the Chinese establish air transportation routes, to train naval personnel and to provide the Chinese with a naval force. Back to the second matter at hand, which Mao hoped would meet with more success, the issue of Taiwan was tentatively raised. ‘Our lack of naval forces and aviation makes the occupation of the island by the PLA more difficult’, Mao said, and continued to indirectly make a request for aid: ‘with regard to this, some of our generals have been voicing opinions that we should request some assistance from the Soviet Union, which could send volunteer pilots or secret military detachments to speed up the conquest of Taiwan.’ Yet, Stalin didn’t believe it was in his interests to relieve the pressure of the republican regime on Mao, and presented his own intransigence as ever as a necessary precaution in the face of western opposition. ‘What is most important here’, Stalin said, ‘is not to give the Americans a pretext to intervene.’

Grand strategy was all well and good, but Mao let slip that the PLA possessed only one landing assault unit, confirming what the Soviet leader had already been told. Stalin appreciated that there was now no chance of Mao being able to finish off Chiang Kai-Shek’s regime, since Mao possessed no landing craft, planes or suitably trained soldiers to carry such an operation out. Mao was dependent upon Stalin for the conclusion of the communist revolution and Stalin knew it; for as long as he could, he was determined to make this dependence a source of Chinese weakness, and ensure that it remained supplicant to Moscow and deferred to his own direction in world communist affairs. What was perhaps worse for Mao in these negotiations was the fact that once Stalin discerned the extent of the Chinese reliance upon his decision, he felt content to toy with Mao for the remainder of their meeting on 16th.

Stalin began by proposing a deliberately ludicrous plan, suggesting that ‘one could select a company of fighting forces, train them in propaganda, send them to Taiwan, and through them organise an uprising on the isle.’ Rejecting such a proposal as absurd, Mao changed the subject by noting that: ‘Our troops have approached the borders of Burma and Indo-China. As a result, the Americans and British are alarmed, not knowing whether we will cross the border or whether our troops will halt their movement.’ But Stalin fired back by prodding at Mao’s sensibilities, saying ‘one could create a rumour that you are preparing to cross the border, and in this way frighten the imperialists a bit.’ In response to this, Mao changed his tune by introducing a subject which he was confident would harden Stalin’s mood. ‘Several countries’, Mao began, ‘especially Britain, are actively campaigning to recognise the PRC. However, we believe that we should not rush to be recognised. We must first bring about order to the country, strengthen our position, and then we can talk to foreign imperialists.’ But Stalin refused to be fazed, perhaps safe in the knowledge that he had Mao where he wanted him, and was enjoying watching the Chinese leader squirm. He noted an equally bluff-filled response ‘that is a good policy, but if you need to put pressure on the British, this can be done by resorting to a conflict between the Guangdong province and Hong Kong. And to resolve this conflict, Mao Zedong could come forward as mediator.’

Mao Zedong was not amused – Stalin was neither taking him seriously nor seemed to care much for China’s best interests. But Stalin was not finished. He proceeded to pepper Mao with questions. Did China have any foreign banks; did these include Japanese banks; who was in control of customs; do you have any inspectors overseeing foreign industries; who owns the mining and petroleum industries; was it possible to grow rubber trees in China; do you want us to translate your revolutionary works into Russian? In such a way did Stalin declare the meeting at an end, having received the terse one word responses from a Chinese leader now exhausted with the prospect of further negotiations. Mao needed his foreign minister at his side the next time such negotiations took place, if indeed there was to be a second time.

Two days later, Mao would send the details of the meeting home to his peers, but the immediate aftermath of his talks with Stalin must have felt more like an overwhelming showdown than a meeting between equals. Stalin had evidently come far more prepared to push and take advantage of Mao than the Chinese leader had expected, and he felt keenly his own lack of knowledge in relation to the Yalta Agreement in particular, as much as he likely felt frustrated at his letting slip of the PLA’s general unpreparedness to finish off the republicans. Mao had made several errors when faced with Stalin’s formidable image of well-informed self-assurance, but he would, over the following days, hatch a plan to rally his allies around him and fight back. The diplomatic struggle between the two ideological allies was far from over, and next time we’ll resume this fascinating story. Until then history friends, my name is Zack and you have been listening to the 7th episode of the KW. Thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Cited in Richard C. Thornton, *Odd Man Out*, p. 42. All previous citations from same, pp. 40-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*, pp. 42-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)