

Debating PRC – American relations and the ‘lost chance’ thesis

Of all areas in international history, study of the origins of the Cold War in East Asia has probably benefited most from the increasing availability of archival material from the former USSR and the PRC. This in turn has helped to revise some of the arguments that were put forward when only American sources were available. This is particularly evident in the case of the ‘lost chance’ debate about the relationship between Washington and the CCP in 1949–50. In the 1970s and 1980s some historians, such as Nancy Tucker (1983), Warren Cohen (1980) and Michael Hunt (1980), speculated about the possibility that if the United States had proved more forthcoming, it could have established working relations with the PRC and avoided the next twenty years of animosity. This ‘lost chance’ thesis rested largely on the discovery from American documents released in this period that in the spring of 1949 the CCP had suggested that it was willing to explore diplomatic and economic ties with America, but that no positive response had been forthcoming from Washington.

In positing this argument, the ‘lost chance’ historians were, however, making a large assumption, which was that the original CCP overtures were sincere rather than mere tactical gestures designed to mislead the Americans. The partial opening of the PRC’s archives over the past decade has clarified the CCP’s intentions and appears to demonstrate that there was little prospect of better relations. It transpires that in the spring of 1949 the CCP leadership and the Soviets were concerned about the prospect of the United States intervening in China to prevent the fall of the former treaty ports, and that the overtures had been sanctioned to thwart such an occurrence. Moreover, as noted in the main text, it seems from Chinese documents that such was the hostility felt towards the United States that there was little or no chance of any kind of diplomatic relationship with America. However, in this area some caution is still necessary, for it needs to be understood that the PRC still has strong controls over the release of documents and one cannot discount the possibility that the availability of material is influenced by contemporary political considerations.