China: Blue Ants and Dangerous Reds
by Gwydion M Williams

Why a very civilised Frenchmen called the Chinese 'Blue Ants'.

How 'Old China Hands' in 1950 thought that the new Communist government would be as ineffective as the Kuomintang had been.

The amazing ignorance about 'Red China' found in 1950s USA.

Blood, Opium and Gunboats: how the West had messed up China before 1949.

The Amethyst Incident: when Gunboat Diplomacy ended
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Blue Ants and Inevitable Frenchmen ................................................................. 2
Shanghai In Transition ..................................................................................... 8
A View From 1950 .......................................................................................... 13
Ignorance in the USA ..................................................................................... 15
Nothing But Blood, Opium and Gunboats ....................................................... 17
The Amethyst's Pointless Voyage ................................................................... 26
The Declining British Empire .......................................................................... 30
A Need For Reminders ................................................................................... 32

Blue Ants and Inevitable Frenchmen

In Problems 24, I mentioned how the Chinese during Mao’s rule were often called ‘Blue Ants’ by mainstream writers in the West. I traced the term back to a book entitled The Blue Ants: 600 Million Chinese under the Red Flag. Despite the title, it is a lot more respectful of China and the Chinese Communists than most current Western books. For all its faults, it is worth studying.

In the 1950s, even left-wing Europeans might openly express racist sentiments. But they also saw the need for state power. What you now have is a general ‘Coolheart’ attitude, in which the usefulness of political authority is dogmatically denied and the role of the state sneered at.

Robert Guillain, born in 1908, showed some sympathy for and understanding of East Asians. His reports from Vietnam were collected and translated as Vietnam: The dirty war. They were useful to the Left because he accurately described the hopelessly corruption of the Saigon regime. But he also described the people of New China as ‘Blue Ants’ (Les Formise Bleu) in a book that bore the title 600 millions de Chinois sous le drapeau rouge. The English version moved ‘Blue Ants’ to the main title, but is otherwise a fair translation.

Guillain in 1949 / 1950 had been expecting the victorious Communists to be as ineffective after their 1949 victory as the Kuomintang had been after their 1927 victory. Going back in 1955, he found something else:

*First impressions at the frontier station: a remarkable change. Places and people as clean as in a station in the Tyrol [in Austria]. Bare feet but no rags, no beggars, no dirt, meticulous cleanliness of everybody and everything. Prosperous appearance of the Chinese workers… And the old Chinese laughers was still in evidence.*

"But there is no doubt about it: even the peasants I saw in the fields were usually better dressed than in the China of old." (Ibid., pages 4-5.)

Does he say ‘how nice to see them clean, orderly, healthy, and happy!’? Of course not. He’s a French intellectual, and so inclined to disapprove of life in general. But the more a foreign society differs from a social universe that really ought to be centred on Paris, the stronger the disapproval. Such people blame reality for failing to match their cherished notions of what it ought to be. Sneer at those who are doing something to bring such a vision into being.

Guillain chooses not to think about the awkward matter of how his own modern ideas were stamped into French collective consciousness. Similar evasions are almost universal in Britain and the USA.

He does however mention that he had originally expected the new Communist regime to become another failed revolution:

“At the end of 1949, I had left a China where the new man who bore the Communist stamp or was in the process of acquiring it – dress, language, general style and behaviour – was a creature apart, literally lost in an ocean, the indifferent and immutable ocean of the eternal Chinese. Would it ever be possible, I asked myself, for this lonely man to change the sea of humanity which surrounded him and escape the inevitable drowning? Today it is obvious to the most casual observer that an incredible change has taken place. It is not the Communist who has been absorbed, annihilated by the masses, but the masses who have been contaminated and transmogrified by the Communists hidden in their ranks. And the man

who is the exception today, that very rare man, who must be sought for in the crowd if you wish to find him, is the man who was one of the crowd of yesterday, the eternal Chinese to today is only a Chinese of the past.

"In 1949, when I saw the Communists drowning in the Chinese masses I said to myself: 'that man will perish,' but I was wrong – it was he who drowned all others." (Ibid., pages 11-12.)

To say 'drowned' is an odd metaphor. 'Cleaned up' would make more sense, but he turns it negative by saying 'drowned'

Most Chinese in 1949 were indeed a passive mass. An active progressive minority transformed it. But that's how all civilisation are created. And if there is normally intolerance during the transition, civilisations of all sorts are more tolerant of difference than tribalists are, at least when it comes to members of the tribe.

What did Guillain want to happen? Did he have a realistic alternative? How would he have compared it to the French Revolution? The revolutionary zealots had to use a lot of work and violence to convert peasants into Frenchmen. (Women were mostly ignored and had no vote till 1944.)

Does Guillain not credit that Robespierre's Terror and Napoleon's authoritarian war-machine with the creation the France which he now comfortably inhabits? To make a self-sustaining competitive democracy requires a lot of initial authoritarian processing of the human raw material.

The man should also have been aware that the Chinese people in 1949 were very different from what they'd been in 1899 or 1799. They were unhappy with what they had become, which was neither the old familiar world nor something functionally modern. Many thinking Chinese were depressed that their Revolution of 1911-12 had failed to create a Westernised China. (Failed much as the 'Arab Spring' revolutions have failed everywhere except Tunisia, with similar surprise expressed by Western observers.)

The Chinese Communists succeeded in imposing as many of the West's values as they thought suitable for China. It later turned out that there was plenty of individuality ready to re-emerge once China had been transformed by Marxism. From Marxism, you can get to almost anything. Without Marxism, there have been few fast transformations. Japan was the grand exception, but perhaps they're now showing the limits of what they learned and are in need of another grand transformation.

I'd have thought all this was obvious. But clearly it is not obvious or even acceptable to most observers, including Guillain:

"Nevertheless, I asked myself constantly if this regimentation of a whole people's dress does not betray a terrifying regimentation of the spirit, a desire to force the thoughts of millions of individuals into a uniform mould". (Ibid., p.16.)

He recalls how it was in the late 1930s, when he saw a Chinese dead soldier

"One of Chiang Kai-shek's poor soldiers, like so many other who perished or would perish in the Japanese and the Civil War, the victim with his remains formed part of a kind of macabre bas-relief, an appalling battle hymn of Chinese despair.

"These sombre pictures, I must admit, do not give a complete picture of China at that time. In those years, 1937-38, there was still a stable government and political system. It would be extremely unjust, I repeat, to attribute to them alone the calamities which befell the people. Both subjects and rulers still had the capacity and the will to defend themselves which were to be affirmed heroically in thirteen years of resistance to the Japanese invasion." (Ibid., p24)

'Extremely unjust'? I'd call it unpleasantly accurate: the sort of harsh insight that is needed to understand history and maybe make a better world. Chinese governments had repeatedly taken a weak and cowardly attitude to Japan ever since the 'Twenty-One Demands' that Japan dropped on China in 1915. General Yuan Shikai responded feebly, as I detailed in Problems 22, Yuan's whole career had been based on never fighting foreign forces and being no more than a bully-boy against other Chinese. Based on serving foreign interests. This remained true of most of the warlords, with just a few honourable exceptions like Feng Yuxiang. It was the Japanese who started the fighting in 1937, taking over most of North China.

(Of course the dominant right-wing element in Japan were bad-tempered fools who brought all of their later troubles on themselves. Nothing obliged them to start grabbing more of China. Nothing obliged them to carry on when they might have stopped with limited gains. But this article is about China's errors and successes, not those of Japan.)

The failure of the mainland Kuomintang government was that it was brutal but lax, showing little concern about people who were not giving them immediate trouble. You could mostly do as you please and also suffer and die without them caring. They were very much like gangsters in the West, in fact. In China it had become the norm in big cities, and was
widespread elsewhere. In Shanghai there was almost a merger between the Kuomintang and the Green Gang, Chiang Kai-shek's old friends. More widely, many of the warlords who'd been in power before the Kuomintang's 1927 Northern Expedition remained in power. They were only nominally obedient to the central government in Nanjing. This was utterly different from the Kuomintang's role on Taiwan, where they were equally brutal but also solidly in control and able to be effective modernisers with enormous help from the USA. They recovered some of the Leninist efficiency they had had before 1927.

Taiwan under Chiang and his son was widely labelled fascist, which was fair enough. Fascism was effective because it takes elements of socialism and progressive thinking and uses them for right-wing ends. If it avoids war – as Franco in Spain avoided it – it can work as a modernising force.

Hitler began as a minor imitator of the Fascism of ex-Marxist and anti-Leninist Benito Mussolini. But he was vastly more dangerous, because his mind was a strange blend of cleverness and foolishness. He had a very good insight into what made Marxism so successful, saying:

"What has won the millions of workers for Marxism is less the literary style of the Marxist church fathers than the indefatigable and truly enormous propaganda work of tens of thousands of untiring agitators...

"And it consisted, furthermore, in the gigantic mass demonstrations, these parades of hundreds of thousands of men, which burned into the small, wretched individual the proud conviction that, paltry worm as he was, he was nevertheless a part of a great dragon, beneath whose burning breath the hated bourgeois world would some day go up in fire and flame and the proletarian dictatorship would celebrate its ultimate final victory."²

He adapted that to shift the resentment of ordinary people to a wholly imaginary Jewish World Conspiracy. And was happy to use primitive symbols like torches and sacred banners in creating his own 'great dragon'. But that's another story. To return to Mr 'Blue Ants' Guillain:

"But in the Shanghai to which I returned in the spring of 1949, besieged by the Communists and on the point of surrendering, the collapse of the regime was complete. No political structure capable of resistance, with the will to resist, now existed. It was an immense shipwreck in which everything was submerged pell-mell: thirty years of effort to remould China on the model of liberal democracy; the foreign investments of half a century; the party and the politicians who had been in power for twenty years; millions of dollar-worth of currency, and so on. In the Shanghai of the old days, the filth and poverty were partly masked by the imposing façade of the International Quarter. But this façade had now collapsed. Even before the Communists appeared, everything was at its lowest ebb. The most modern city in China was in a state of indescribable filth and dilapidation, but this was nothing compared with the mental degeneration. The people of Shanghai, and in fact the Chinese throughout China, believed in nothing, hoped for nothing." (Ibid., p24-25.)

It had actually been 37 years, taking the success of the Republican Revolution as confirmed in 1912, though it is often dated to its beginning in October 1911. Also the Kuomintang had been dominant from 1927, 22 years. But almost everyone had noticed the failures. Chinese in 1949 were mostly sick of being part of a weak and disorderly nation. The Chinese Communists were recognisably something new and unexpected:

"In the brief lulls, I saw these peasant soldiers straining their necks and gaping at the fifteen and twenty story buildings, obviously unable to believe their eyes...

"Martians in Shanghai!" This cry, wrested from a spectator, admirably summed up the impressions of the stupefied inhabitants. Chinese soldiers who knew how to fight, who after victory did not pillage the conquered town, who slept on the pavement instead of invading the houses and raping the girls, who refused the bowl of rice or tea offered by kindly people and who paid for their tickets in the trams, must really be soldiers from another planet. And another surprise: the Martians were not only in the army, they also appeared in the new administration which suddenly displayed the unusual virtues of incorruptibility and austerity." (Ibid., p30.)

"And since I am comparing it with Japan, there is no doubt that during the past six years... the Japanese reconstruction effort has transformed the face of that country at least as much or even more than the Chinese effort has transformed China...

"No, the results in China are not extraordinary. They are up to average in a world where everything is changing at amazing speed. But it is precisely this feature which is extraordinary: China is doing the same as the rest of the world...

"China was outstanding yesterday in its backwardness, its desperate inefficiency and its corruption; the great surprise is that today it has become a normal country." (Ibid., page 55.)

But your norm and my norm are not 'the normal, Mr Guillain'. Modernism took centuries to impose itself on Western Europe (and has ended up doing so in an Anglo version rather than the French alternative). Conquest or the threat of conquest forced the rest of the world to change and adopt many of the same values.

In China, successful Modernism was a home-grown, but fed into the wider Cold War:

"Just as it was erroneous to believe, as they believe in the United States, that it was Soviet Russia that brought Mao Tse-tung to power – whereas the Chinese brought about their own revolution – so it is, I think, true today to say that Peking's appeal to Moscow for aid has given the Russians a powerful influence in the affairs of China." (Ibid., p62.)

"What actually was America's dream for China? To make of China the America of Asia, the Asiatic equivalent of the United States. And what happened to this dream? Russia is making of China a second Russia in Asia." (Ibid., page 63.)

A more efficient Kuomintang might have made China the America of Asia, as they have done on a relatively small scale in Taiwan. In the 1950s, the USA losing China was a major factor that encouraged the Cold War. It upset the carve-up of the world that the USA believed it had ensnirmed in the various wartime conferences.

But China was not a second Russia. The ideology of Leninism rather than the Soviet Army had caused the change. Guillian fails to understand that the new uniformity was homegrown, not a copy of Moscow. He says "So far from everything, so far from Peking, the same Chinese in blue mechanic's overall, the same Chinese girls in trousers, at a distance indistinguishable from the men. They were the same as in Canton, as in Harbin: another proof of China's complete unification and regimentation." (Ibid., p72.)

The new government imposed a unity that had been a dream for nearly four decades. Chiang Kai-shek's government had been nominally recognised in most parts of the former Chinese Empire. But when the People's Republic was proclaimed in October 1949, they had solid control in places where Chiang had never had much authority. By 1956 it was complete apart from Taiwan: "The West can no longer reasonably speculate on the collapse of the Communist party in China. The most it can hope is that its future evolution will make it less hostile towards the capitalist world... I knew the days when it had to fight in Southern and Western China against guerrillas helped by Chiang Kai-shek and the Americans; these disorders are today a thing of the past." (Ibid., p81.)

It was also a much more efficient regime than had ever existed before in China:

"In 1953 and 1954 China suffered floods and drought which affected nearly 100,000,000 of her inhabitants; but thanks to the measures taken to deal with them, they caused, comparatively, less damage than at any other period in the history of China. And finally the regime emerged stronger – and from its standpoint even victorious – from the great military ordeal of the Korean War. This episode gave the Chinese new confidence in themselves and was a powerful aid to the government in tightening its hold over the masses." (Ibid., pages 81-82.)

As I've detailed elsewhere, the new regime achieved a dramatic fall in the death-rate in the years up to 1958. In 1959-1961, this previously-successful system suffered from the classic error of a bubble. There were exaggerated expectations and false reporting based on a belief that everyone else was doing brilliantly. This caused a brief return in 1960 to a death-rate of 25 per thousand, less than the norm for many poor countries at the time. 'Recent research' in the West manages not to mention the vast improvements produced up to 1958 by standard Leninist discipline and radicalism. Gets most Westerners supposing that an error caused by gross dishonesty at a regional level was equivalent to Hitler's slaughter of millions in death-camps designed for just that end.

(In debating this matter in the question-and-answer forum Quora, I've had people reply on this 'yes, but millions died when Mao ruled'. It would be equally true – and equally misleading – to say that millions of Britons died when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. In the 20th century, some 600,000 Britons died during a typical year. Thatcher's rule made very little difference: yet it remains technically true to say that millions of Britons died under the Thatcher regime. More than six million in her 11 years in power.

(In Problems 17-18,4 I explain how the Chinese death rate was very high in 1949, but declined rather faster overall than in other poor and developing country. The Three Bad Years of 1959-61 were a stumble after a series of bold and radical policies that had succeeded. Even if a more moderate Chinese government could have avoided the Three Bad Years – which is moot, considering the number of famines at the time in the Republic of India and other moderate places – Mao's rule gave longer lives to more Chinese than would otherwise have happened.)

Mao changed China by radical methods. It's hard to see how else it could have happened – success by milder methods elsewhere in Asia was strongly dependent on massive US aid and trade privileges. Policies that successfully stopped a further spread of Communism in most of Asia, and were designed to stop the spread of Communism. They would have been unlikely had there not been successful Communist rule in China and North Vietnam that offered a serious alternative.

The appalling behaviour of the West after the Soviet collapse proves beyond doubt that the main motivating force was fear rather than a sudden outbreak of benevolence. There had always been plenty of Westerners whose aims were genuinely benevolent, of course. But they were never the people in charge. Were never the people whom the bulk of the electorate would listen to or trust.

Guillian doesn’t attempt to explain how else China might plausibly have been uplifted. Instead in Chapter VIII he introduces the metaphor of Chinese as 'Blue Ants', Les Fourmis Bleues:

"What have they done to them? What in God's name have they done to the Chinese to reduce them to this state... one of the most noteworthy things to disappear is the intelligent Chinese; and today it is almost impossible to find in China a Chinese with any ideas of his own.

"I do not go so far as to say that the new Chinese are unhappy, People could easily confound me by citing the glow of collective life and the organised enthusiasm of group manifestations, which visitors who have never known China find so impressive. To me they appear paralysed and this is what surprised me so much... They had become boring whereas in the old days they were


4 http://gwydionwilliams.com/42-china/mao-and-china/
amusing and gay.\textsuperscript{5} Away from the official parades and gatherings, the Chinese today are drab and seem to have retired into their shells." (Ibid., p.97.)

The book was published in French in 1955: the English translation appeared in 1957. Between these two years was the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956, in which Mao briefly encouraged open criticism, easing the strong social discipline which had been part of the general clean-up of China. When the criticism went beyond what Mao considered allowable – became mostly foolish and irresponsible – then there was a crack-down. This was the Anti-Rightist Movement, in which Deng Xiaoping played a prominent role. It involved punishments of maybe half a million over-bold individuals, mostly intellectuals. Anyone who'd been cautious had been wise. But it was probably also true that most of them had noted the vast improvements. That at least some of them realised that this was part of a single package. As Guillain himself says earlier in his book, crudely copying Western ways had been a complete failure.

It is also understandable that educated Chinese would be wary of talking to a foreigner who might be a spy or an enemy. Someone whom the authorities would be keeping an eye on. Someone who came from an Imperialist nations that had oppressed China in the past, with the French Concession in Shanghai knowingly employing opium-trading gangsters in its ethnic-Chinese police. And France had recently tried and failed to suppress the Vietnamese, giving up only in 1954. This was followed by the Algerian War of Independence, which lasted till 1962 and which the Chinese Communists must have been publicising. For the average Chinese, France was an actual enemy of China's overseas friends.

Even if they cared little about foreign countries, this was a regime that had restored the admirable Chinese tradition of a government competently looking after the entire population. It also enforcing the modern values of public honesty, social equality, and rights for women. Maybe upholding them far more efficiently than some people would have liked – there was a big return of inequality, corruption and unfair treatment of women in the post-Mao era. But the post-Mao era also showed that independent thinking had never gone away: it had just been suspended for a period when authoritarian methods were visibly successful.

It is true that China was made uniform for the whole of Mao's rule. But the sexless and classless blue suit had historic precedent, as Guillain himself notes:

*Blue cotton in China is as old as the hills: blue has always been a favourite colour for the people and for many years they have worn cotton. But even if this blue material was very common, it was far from being a uniform...  

*Why did they take Stalin's tunic as a model?  

\footnote{Note that up until the 1970s, 'gay' normally meant 'merry'. The French original says 'les plus amusants des hommes'.}  

*One quickly discovers that in actual fact the universal adoption of uniform – and of that particular uniform – was inspired by psychological and political motives at least as powerful as economic ones. To be dressed in this manner is to show that you are anxious to do the right thing and area good patriot; it is an act of austerity and proletarian discipline...  

*Furthermore, who would dare to make themselves conspicuous by dressing differently from the rest? Who would dare to appear in a Western-style bourgeois suit?* (Ibid., pages 105-6.)

The reference to Stalin is factually mistaken: the style was defined by Sun Yatsen, as a sensible compromise that was modern but avoided the fussy wastefulness of the Western business suit – now increasingly rejected in the West. Speaking personally, it was a grand liberation for me in the early twenty-hundreds when my own workplace allowed smart-casual garments like un-patterned tee-shirts and casual trousers.

A real attempt to abolish class distinctions also happened under Mao. There has been some reversion after Mao, but the society had also been thoroughly modernised in its thinking.

China is also the only place I know of where 'trickle-down' may actually have been true. 90% of Britons would have been better off if the crisis of the 1970s had been overcome in the authentically conservative manner offered by Edward Heath, without the great and growing inequalities created by Thatcher's radical-right ideology. In the USA, the 'rugged individualists' go on voting for anti-tax and anti-state policies that have kept 90% of them at the same level of income they had in the 1970s, with gigantic benefits going to the richest 1%. But in China, the 90% have made massive gains, even though a privileged 1% have re-emerged and done even better. It helped that China copied the successful mixed-economy methods of Japan, South Korea and Singapore, rather than becoming believers in Thatcher's radical-right notions.

Looking back to the 1950s 'blue ants': yes of course the new dress-style was a mark of accepting the new regime. Just as men wearing the pigtail was a requirement after the Manchu conquest, and cutting it off a mark of Republican liberation. That's an efficient and effective way to actually change vast numbers of people, most of them uneducated. Guillain offers no alternative. He is in fact showing his own 'blue-ant' behaviour by conforming to the normal standards for mildly progressive French intellectuals: *dislike the world as it is and pay no attention to realistic ways in which it might be changed.*

Guillain also shows obedience to a wider version of West European 'blue-ant' behaviour by thinking the only proper smart male garb is the business suit, which is among other things a mark not doing manual labour. In his eyes, freedom as it should be observed by foreigners is freedom to be a copy of the values that he grew up with.

*The blue ants, the ant-hill of Chinese in blue, that is it. I
have been haunted for a long time in Asia by the theme of the ant-hill. More than once already I thought I had discovered signs of a possible deviation on the part of humanity towards an ant-hill system. As I have already said, military Japan had already afforded me certain striking images. The China of today has merely intensified them. Millions of men here are busy creating a civilisation which will in no respect be an extension of our own, and not even of theirs." (Ibid., p.108.)

Typical of a progressive regime imposing vast changes. The French Revolution had its own distinctive 'look', (not to mention giving a 'short sharp shock' to those aristocrats who had not already fled). In Britain and in the North American colonies that became the USA, a major role was played by Puritans, whose communities imposed a great uniformity of extremely dull clothing; a process that also generated vast social discipline and creativity. And in early 18th century Russia, Peter the Great stopped the ruling class from wearing beards and made them wear a version of fancy French garments. (Ordinary people, powerless and mostly serfs at the time, got more tolerance and merely had to pay a beard-tax.)

As for cultural continuity, Mao emphasised using Chinese forms when these were compatible with modern and progressive values. He took from the West only what was actually useful, rather than a mindless imitation of everything Western. And it was not a simple copy of the Soviet Union either. In some ways it resembled the earlier Taiping. But mostly the new look also imitated the self-disciplined army that had won the Civil War. But it appals Guillian:

"The blue ants are already tending to be sexless and this is one of the most astonishing preliminary signs. It this merely a reaction against the erotic obsession of the capitalist world, constantly brought back to sex by its Press, publicity, films and literature? If this is so it is a healthy laudable reaction. But there is far more to it than that. The new society leads to an obliteration of individuality which goes so far as obliterate the differences between the sexes." (Ibid.)

Regarding sex, China under Mao was very successful in producing large numbers of regular and happy marriages. In Traditional China, as in Traditional Japan, sex in the proper social context was fine and admirable, but women mostly showed far less bare skin that has become normal in Britain or France. Western commerce sets the tone for this: you can use sex to sell anything, or rather anything except actual physical sex.

Controls in 1950s China were indeed tight and intrusive:

"The Street Committee is the State at the street corner; it is the Government installed as near as possible to the simple citizen. Everyone in the street keeps it informed and collaborates with it. In reverse it looks after everyone and mingles in everything. The lady of the street or her deputies have the right of entry everywhere at any hour. They carry out openly and incessantly their double work of benevolence and surveillance." (Ibid., pages 122-3.)

"I first heard the expression 'brain washing' during the early days of the liberation of Shanghai in the summer of 1949. It was forged by the Communists themselves and it is in current use. To a Western observer's mind it conjures up a fairly simple operation. The brain of a non-Communist is dirty. Capitalism has left dust and stains on it; a good washing and the brain returns to its normal clean state. The Communist society is then satisfied and leaves in peace the citizen who has thus been washed.

"Personally, I think that the expression 'brain-washing' is too kind. It does not sufficiently take into account the nature of the mental reform and procedure used... first of all a puncture to empty the head... then a second operation which grafts and implants the group thoughts in the emptied brain." (Ibid., pages 123-4.)

Most of what he describes is local supervision, which was milder than 'Thought Reform', which was imposed on intellectual and on former beggars and prostitutes. 'Brain washing' was harsher, applying to those suspected of serious crimes. It did involve first making the subject feel very negative about themselves, and then giving them a new set of ideas that would allow them to feel human again. That was for those judged criminal or disloyal: ordinary people were judged to be broadly OK already and just to need educating.

Shocking? It was a broken society that was also horribly poor and unable to generate any effective healing forces other than the Chinese Communists. What they were doing was the normal process of how a culture works, only done very fast and for radical ends. An extended 'Neighbourhood Watch'. The sort of supervision that applies in small villages and in tribal societies.

How does Mr Guilian think that Parisian values were imposed on the whole of what's now France, with a definite intent to impose them on the entire world? France would probably have succeeded without the rival globalisation offered by English culture, mildly modified with minor Welsh influences under the Tudors and then by an historic compromise with Scotland. Britness is more diverse than the Paris-centred culture of France, but was not imposed without violence and coercion. In the British Empire, it began with troops and was followed up by traders, officials, missionaries and schools. It lost most of its North American offshoots by being intolerant of their wish for more autonomy: but the 20th century saw a re-unification with the USA dominant in a partnership aimed at imposing Anglo values on everyone.

There was also the matter of changing the countryside – speeding up collectivisation:

"The stakes are high, concludes Mao, the whole future of the peasant-workers' alliance is at stake. This alliance will indubitably be broken unless the peasants become socialist at the same time as the workers in the towns and

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6 'Short sharp shock' was a phrase from one of Thatcherism's numerous failed attempts at reducing crime. 'I'm being ironical applying it to the mass executions by guillotine. (To be strictly accurate, only some were guillotined: others were drowned, sometimes tied two together to stop them swimming.)
"His standpoint appears rash to the point of folly. It is, however, that of a man who has always so far been proved right by the facts." (Ibid., p166.)

In the event, collectivisation at a village level was a considerable success. At the time, the Chinese Communists congratulated themselves on having managed it without the mass repression and waste that collectivisation had involved in the Soviet Union. Sadly, they (and not just Mao) got overconfident and things went badly wrong with the People's Communes. These were an attempt to create gigantic collectives roughly equal to county-level divisions (xians). These were popular but mismanaged with a burst of over-optimism after some very real successes. The harvest of 1958 was indeed a record, but then there was a failure to react in time to the Three Bad Years of 1959, 1960 and 1961. As I've detailed elsewhere,7 there was drought in the north and floods in the south. This was later recognised as a typical part of an El Nino event, a global disturbance that was not properly recognised until several years later.

**Shanghai In Transition**

China in the mid-1950s had changed, but incompletely. Guillain found remnants of Westernisation in Shanghai:

"I was beginning to think that the Western world had disappeared in China behind the dense curtains of distance and censorship. And there was Shanghai outlined against the Chinese sky..."

"The faces, the window displays which still strive for elegance, the street, the crowd, everything shows that the regime has not acquired such a great hold here as elsewhere... The waiter actually dared to understand when I addressed him in English. I was tempted to call him 'boy' as was the custom in the capitalistic days."

The good old days when you could call a grown man 'boy' if he belonged to an 'inferior' race? Interestingly, it is also 'boy' in the French original. He finds a fragment of the Shanghai that had once been a world centre for opium, and where 'Shanghaied' became a nickname for kidnapping and abduction. (And that's when applied to Europeans, please note. The various indignities suffered by Chinese were not seen as important enough to merit specific names.) Police in the mostly-British 'International Concession' worked with Chinese gangsters to control other Chinese.

Guillain is good enough to say he's glad the brothels and opium dens are gone, but once again fails to make the connection. Chinese gangsters were and are world-class players in gangster terms, but fled to hide-outs including Hong Kong when the Communists arrived. There has been a limited re-growth of gangsterism in the post-Mao era, but mostly they keep a low profile and work with corrupt local authorities. As of 2016, President Xi is engaged in a grand clean-up of such things.

Guillain does not suppose that a Kuomintang government could have done better than Mao, saying "the memory of Chiang Kai-shek is still held in contempt" (Ibid., p184.) But he also imagines that the new regime is still resented. If so, it must have changed a lot by the mid-1960s, when Shanghai became a stronghold of the ultra-left.

Being French, and so inclined to resent everything Anglo, he has no trouble recognising the harm done by the USA's pig-headed refusal to face up to the collapse of their dream of China as 'the USA in Asia'. This grand sulk lasted until the 1970s, and gave some credibility to Chiang Kai-shek's repeated threats to retake the mainland. And US power did for a time stop most trade:

"Shanghai is in the doldrums. As I have already mentioned, the harbour is completely dead... This is the result of the American embargo, which has killed what was in the old days the busiest harbour in the Pacific and China's gateway to the West." (Ibid., p187)

This was also a piece of good fortune for Hong Kong, fairly unimportant before 1949. Mao left it alone as a useful gateway for Chinese trade: one of many examples of how Mao could be very flexible when it suited his long-term aims. And this also applied to his dealings with the Soviet Union, which Guillain misunderstand:

"Mao Tse-tung and his first cadres had absorbed large doses of Marxism, appealing to Russia for them. They approached Russia rather than vice-versa..."

"The invasion of every aspect of life by Russian methods, of the brains and the mouth of all the Chinese by ideas coming from Moscow." (Ibid., p211.)

This is inaccurate, but the early history of the party was obscure at the time. But we have also since learned that Mao was ready for a deal with the USA that would have kept things more balanced. Instead the USA engaged in a two-decade-long sulk. Meanwhile the USSR made a complete hash of an attempted reform of its own economy in the 1960s and 1970s. Khrushchev and Brezhnev also alienated Communist China by acting as if Moscow were automatically master of what was supposed to be a global Leninist movement in which all Communists were equals. This must have encouraged Mao to try more radical experiments later on.

Even in 1956, it was obvious that something radical for China was happening.

"A surprisingly changed Chinese, and one of the great changes is the Russian influence he has now absorbed, either unwittingly or not." (Ibid., p214.)

"How old in the China of today? Seven years old. Four thousand years of Ancient China have been relegated to the cemeteries and the museums..."

"Even if it should happen, as I think certain, that many of the deep-seated traits in the Chinese character and behaviour reappear after having been temporarily

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repressed, it is, in my opinion, out of the question that the ancient civilisation can be revived. A century of decadence had already left it moribund. New China is completing the strangulation process." (Ibid., p221-2.)

In my view, China was far from decadent when the Opium Wars disrupted it. The Manchu dynasty was in decline in the early 19th century, but this was a normal Chinese pattern. Left alone, China would probably have had a brief period of chaos and then a new dynasty. The West disrupted the process.

Let's imagine that history had gone differently in Europe. Suppose that Britain's Stewart dynasty does not die out. Queen Anne's son William, Duke of Gloucester does not die aged 11 but has a normal reign and fathers sons to continue the dynasty. And also suppose that this much stronger monarchy inhibits Britain's potential Industrial Revolution, as similar processes had been stopped elsewhere, including Renaissance Italy and the Dutch Republic. Then presumably there are no Opium Wars – Britain does not have the same advantages, and is also not so dominated by trading interests that want to push opium for a gigantic commercial profit. So maybe industrialism happens much more slowly and China under a new and vigorous dynasty can absorb what it can fit into its existing culture. In actual history, China had readily taken up New World crops, Window glass was also accepted as something that could be put in traditional Chinese windows. It would have been a very interesting line of development and might well have demonstrated that China had enough vitality to fully update itself, as Japan did.

On a separate matter, he's probably correct in speaking of 4000 year of Chinese history, rather than the current norm of 5000 years. The Neolithic began in China some 12,000 years ago, but the emergence of China as a distinct cultural entity obviously came much later. The existence of the Shang Dynasty has been confirmed by the Oracle Bones from 3200 years ago: bones marked with recognisable early versions Chinese ideograms. And the Oracle Bones script is an evolved system, with a presumed origin as actual pictures. It must have started centuries earlier, which support to the traditional date of Shang beginnings 3600 years ago. Before that, the bronze-age Erlitou culture may well be the same as the Xia Dynasty that was dated to 2070 BC by historians of the Han dynasty: but also perhaps not.

Nowadays China and Korea and Japan are all grandly claiming 5000 years of history. In terms of solid evidence, cultures existed long before that in all three countries, but not provably a single cultural or political entity before 3600 years ago in China. Something like Japan emerged from the Yayoi period about 2500 years back. Korea achieved something like its modern form with the Silla kingdom some 1200 years ago.

To get back to China in the 1950s:

"China is in the process of becoming ... Western. She had already tasted something of the West when the latter invaded her with the ideals, the techniques and the religion of liberal capitalist Europe. This was a disastrous failure, both of the conception and of those who propagated them. Is China returning to the East after this collapse? By no means. She has turned once more to the West, but this time to the Russian and Marxist West, rivals of the liberal European West." (Ibid., p222.)

He notes what Mao says about the process, but answers:

"True it accuses the West, but does it not also incriminate China, by inadvertently admitting that she had been unable to make good use of Western teaching, and that she demolished or corrupted everything that was brought to her by the West? Is this not tantamount to saying that for the Chinese liberty was a gift which they were not yet worthy to receive, or, at any rate, not ready to use for the good of their country? When, on the other hand, the system of totalitarian dictatorship in the Marxist form arrived, the Chinese recognised at last the method which suited them." (Ibid., page 223.)

China's initial attempt at a Western-style republic copied the end-product of centuries of European politics. This end-product existed only after centuries of development by methods that were far from liberal. (At least if you take 'liberal' to mean tolerant and law-abiding.) It had included civil wars and the execution of the legitimate monarch in both Britain and France. Also various authoritarian regimes that modernised without asking the people if they liked it.

The British parliamentary system began as a way to give a limited role to the representatives of less than one-tenth of adult males in a government dominated by aristocrats. Britain retained a powerful monarchy. France democratised earlier: at least it did so for men. But the French system was also chronically unstable. France in the 1950s was ruled by the ineffective 4th Republic, having also had two Empires, a restored Monarchy and a replacement liberal Monarchy since the French Revolution. De Gaulle as a war-hero ruled it as quasi-dictator from 1959 to 1969. That was when a lot of modernisation occurred. French politics became more or less stable, apart from a dramatic near-overthrow in 1968.

China under Mao achieved bigger changes rather faster, as Guillain sort-of acknowledges:

"China has therefore been Westernised for a second time, more completely than the first. China is no longer Asiatic. At most she will be Eurasian. She is turning aside from Europe is. And now China is doing the

Also

19th

But the French system

Anyway

By no

222.)

But the French

4th

223.)

Ibid.

She has turned once more to the West, but this time to the Russian and Marxist West, rivals of the liberal European West." (Ibid., page 222.)

It's misleading to speak of Asia as if it were a single civilisation in the way that Europe is. The Islamic World, Hindu civilisation and the various cultures of Central Asia and East Asia differ from each other at least as much as they differed from
pre-Industrial Europe. There were common elements in East Asia, certainly. But in history as it happened, the various states of East Asia have done off in different directions.

"A remarkable thing. The Westernisation of China in the middle of the twelfth century is much more brutal and complete than was ever that of her neighbour Japan in the nineteenth century... One thing at least remained locked in Japan – the Japanese heart. In China, on the contrary, the Revolution attached supreme importance to penetrating the heart of every Chinese in order to make a clean sweep and to install there without competition the Marxist-Leninist thought in its version imported from Russia. To find the Chinese civilisation of yesterday still living, you have to go ... to Japan." (Ibid., p224.)

Japan actually has very different cultural roots from China, a difference reflected in them having languages from separate language families. Japan also had for much of its history a two-layer power structure. There was an Imperial line that could not be replaced, unlike Chinese dynasties – though when it mattered for power-politics, it proved possible to set up two rival Imperial Courts. (Northern and Southern, a development with an odd similarity to the split between rival lines of Popes when they tried to become overlords of Latin-Christian civilisation.)

Japan when challenged by the West was ruled by efficient Shoguns who might well have resisted major changes, but who were deposed and reduced to the ranks of noblemen by a rebellion. It was done in the name of a powerless Emperor with no fixed ideas about what to do next and an inclination to stay neutral. Also the ruling class, the Samurai, were mostly retainers rather than individual landlords and could easily transform into civil servants or military officers. The big problem in China was landlords with scholar-gentry as their top layer. They were an enormously strong obstacle to necessary changes that would have made them as obsolete and marginal as similar people have been made in most of the world.

In Problems 21, I suggested that China's own Reform Emperor would have succeeded had he not been betrayed by Yuan Shikai. (Whose own later efforts to become Emperor ended in well-deserved ignominy.) Guillain prefers to think that China was always incapable of change:

"China could never return to the past. Her ancient civilisation parted company with that of the West, because it obstinately rejected three things which in those days contributed to the power of the West – invention, machines and arms. China wished to remain immobile; she despised mechanical devices and loathed soldiers." (Ibid., page 226.)

As I said earlier, Traditional China could accept novelties if they were compatible with Confucian culture and landlord power. Many inventions had occurred over the centuries, as Joseph Needham has detailed in various books. Mao was out to root out Confucian values – some of which have since revived. But he was also keen to use what was compatible in the existing culture. Guillain does notice one item:

"Today the Peking Opera is one of the rare product of ancient culture which has preserved its indestructible vitality. After proposing to ban it, the Party decided to preserve and even to encourage it, so that it might be used in the service of propaganda." (Ibid., p229.)

Unexpectedly, Beijing Opera was to be made very radical under Madam Mao, before reverting to older norms. And whereas most commentators see the Cultural Revolution as preplanned, my own view is that it was originally a minor skirmish on secondary matters that took off when there was unexpected vast enthusiasm from young people who were given a green light to challenge their immediate bosses. I see the Cultural Revolution as Mao's third attempt to take the process of remoulding further than had happened in the Soviet Union. (The first two were the Hundred Flowers and the Great Leap Forward.)

Guillain also mentions the idea of replacing ideograms with an alphabetic script. It was forecast for ten to twenty years, but did not in fact happen. Mao may have been intentionally stalling: and then Khrushchev helpfully gave him the ground for breaking with the Soviet Union on the grounds that they were betraying their own Soviet tradition. He could then reassert his own selection of Chinese traditions, with mixed results. But in the 1950s, things were running smoothly. Guillain keeps ducking the issues:

"China has been depicted for us in rosy hues. As though this formidable Chinese revolution could ever be pink and puny! On the contrary the most fascinating aspect, in my opinion, is the stark contrast of light and shade – the tyranny which often leads to a better world and the good intentions to which its hells are paved." (Ibid., p234.)

"At the opening of this book I regretted the disappearance or the eclipse of certain qualities I had once known among the best of the Chinese – independence of spirit, free and critical judgement, a love of debate and sharp wit. But these qualities, which I once took too much for granted, have become even more of a feature of Chinese life since I left. In fact there has been a remarkable revival of these qualities, which has been encouraged by the Party." (Ibid., pages 235-6.)

It is true that traditional rebellions were mostly a protests against governments not doing their job.
But _this was also the human norm_, with some rather limited exceptions. There had also sometimes been the notion of making a better world – the idea was about at the start of the Ming Dynasty, though it soon faded out. The Taiping, the first mass movement in China influenced by Western ideas, included a very strong notion of equality. Yet the rival idea of a detached elite ruling benevolently but unchallengeably was also very strong. There were strong signs of the Communist Party being absorbed into this pattern, as indeed has partly happened after Mao. Mao's various radical efforts make sense as attempts to fix this without losing the positives.

In ignoring Western liberal values, Mao was correct. They were simply not relevant:

"It is a beautiful Western myth which imagines all Chinese to be highly civilised individuals because their culture goes back to the dim past and has reached some very great peaks. This myth is less true than ever since the disappearance of what remained of the ancient elite and with the rise of the new men from the proletarian class."

(Ibid., p237.)

The men from the 'ancient elite' also did not understand the things they were trying to imitate. Were almost all guilty of the corruption, nepotism, snobbishness and disdain for physical work that made pre-Communist China ineffective. The educated classes were mostly against mobilising the masses on any basis. Those who weren't almost all became Communists.

After extensive reading about China, I have failed to find even one of the dissidents who shows the least awareness of the violence, brutality and autocratic methods that were used to create an environment in which allowed nice Western liberal values to flourish in the West. (Or could once flourish – liberalism has become a dirty word in the USA. Several countries in Middle-Europe proudly declare their belief in 'liberal democracy'.)\(^{11}\)

Of course most Western sources also have the wrong idea about how to improve things:

"China made me 'social' and 'socialist' in the ideal sense of the word – a socialism which still remains to be created and which, in any case, is certainly not Communist... A humanist socialism has still to be born; if we manage to understand that live is a far more powerful weapon than hatred, it will be infinitely better than all the regimes which have called themselves socialist. It will profit – for it is an ill wind that blows nobody good – by the experiments upon the unfortunate Chinese guinea pig."

(Ibid., p239-240.)

China is now efficiently following Moderate Socialism, though with a Leninist power structure. This could never have been done directly by a single 'Great Leap' carried through by a population that had utterly different ideas. People who initially had only a hazy notion of modern value.

Mao was also attempting to meet a widespread ideal, the aspiration for a society with more morality and less selfishness. This remains a global problem. The West in demolishing the festering remains of traditional Christian sexual morality allowed everything to become a grey area. And in the early 20th century, when Chinese were looking to it to guidance, it was going through a process of further transition to wider liberty, driven by people who had only a hazy notion of how their societies became what they were. Guillain doesn't see it, but does note that the process failed.

"For forty years nothing stable has been built on the ruins of ancient Imperial China. For forty years the Chinese had been the despair of the world and of themselves through their complete inability to translate into facts on a national plane the qualities they displayed on the individual or family plane. One of their writers, Lin Yutang, in his book _My Country and My People_ gave this witty pastiche of his contemporaries. 'Good soldiers but bad leaders; excellent business men but notices in the conduct of their affairs; accomplished citizens but lamentable statesmen; splendid democrats but a worthless republic.' What did they lack then? Lin Yutang replied without realising that he was being prophetic. 'To create the nation you need only a method and that is completely lacking'".

(Ibid., p240.)

In fact several different methods succeeded in various parts of Asia, including Taiwan succeeding with a little help from its friends – actually a great deal of help. Hong Kong and Singapore were remoulded by British Imperialism, with Singapore being taken over and brilliantly run by an English-educated elite, not all of them Chinese. Taiwan and to a lesser extent Manchuria were remoulded by Japanese Imperialism, as was Korea. Soviet and Comintern input created the Chinese Communists, who however needed further remoulding by Mao to be able to succeed in a hostile world. And the Kuomintang got a partial remoulding during their early-1920s alliance with the Soviet Union, but not well enough to let them achieve much on mainland China. Their main success was one that global imperialism was very happy to let them have: they built more roads. Roads opened up even more of the decaying rural economy to cheap foreign goods. China before 1949 was prevented from using the tariff protection that is a normal part of modernisation.

The Kuomintang on Taiwan succeeded with a lot of Western help, and with a solid base built by Japan. This matters, because the New Right are now claiming that they could have modernised Mainland China, and label as misled or inaccurate the great diversity of people who saw and reported the Kuomintang's mainland failure. On Taiwan, they had an economy that had been modernising nicely under Japanese rule.

The recognised expert on global growth is the late Angus Maddison. He said:

"Japanese colonialism [in Taiwan] was different from that of the western powers in Asia. There was a much bigger settlement of Japanese civilians, a much larger military and police control, bigger investment in industry (especially in Korea and Manchukuo)...."

"From 1913 to 1941, Japanese GDP grew by 4 per

\(^{11}\) See for instance _Illiberal central Europe: Big, bad Visegrad_ from _The Economist_, Jan 30th, 2016
cent a year, and the per capita gap with the advanced capitalist countries was substantially narrowed. As can be seen from Table 3.17, its colonies also grew much faster than the Asian and world average in this period.12

The table shows that Taiwan averaged a remarkable 4.5% growth-rate between 1913 and 1941. It was already a flourishing economy and the Kuomintang merely kept it on track. It was part of a general growth in the Japanese Empire, which would have been much wiser to have avoided further ventures into imperialism. Japan for the period 1913-1941 was growing fast, as did Japanese-ruled Korea, which averaged 3.7%. This compared with 0.7% growth for China, 0.4% for India and 1.7% for the United Kingdom.

Taiwan in 1945 had largely escaped war damage and was a success that merely needed to be allowed to continue. This broadly is what happened, and it should not be cited as evidence that the Kuomintang might have succeeded in Mainland China. Note also the Kuomintang escapees were the most modernised of them. They were also unconnected to the landowning class on Taiwan, and so willing to do a land reform. They were well placed to achieve on Taiwan what they had failed to manage on the mainland. Given another attempt at modernising mainland China, they would almost certainly have failed again.

Despite which, Taiwan seems much less modern in its thinking than post-Mao China. There is remarkable little analysis of China come out of Taiwan, at least in English – but one would expect anything useful to be translated. One would expect the New Right to publicise it, if there were anything that might be taken seriously. What I’ve seen is superficial, obsessed with conspiracies and not at all grasping the real shape of social forces.

The Western Allies were unfair in not allowing Taiwan to decide if it wanted to return to China. Of course it might well have chosen to do so – the KMT were initially well received and only later alienated people. Also that's not how history went. Returning Taiwan to China was one of many such choices made on the basis of sheer power: such things are best left alone once done. The world has no automatic system of justice, for all the big talk about International Law. The United Nations is powerless except when the Big Powers are agreed as to how to use it. The United States in its brief 1990s hegemony was cheap-minded, dishonest and broadly foolish, creating a great deal of chaos and with few positive results. The biggest success was incorporating most of the existing states west of Ukraine into an expanded European Union: this was done by ignoring the arguable unfairnesses of existing borders. Also by allowing vast numbers of individuals from the former ruling Communist Parties to become part of the new order. The big mess-up was Former Yugoslavia, where the

existing Union Republics were encouraged to exercise their theoretic right of secession without regard for minorities who had a sensible claim to re-drawn borders. Of course it led to ethnic warfare in which various violent and dubious characters played a large role: that is a very normal when ordinary people are dumped into such an abnormal situation. Something not all that different happened across thirty years in Northern Ireland, except that the British Army was always there to prevent outright ethnic warfare, while the IRA avoided sectarianism and always included some members of the rival ethnic bloc. The current peace was established by a rather unusual system of enforced power-sharing between rival ethnic blocs, which might have sensibly been copied elsewhere, including Former Yugoslavia, Iraq and Ukraine. The USA had the power to impose such solutions, but not the common sense to do so. Northern Ireland was special because Irish-Americans are a powerful bloc who approve of the IRA’s objective of a United Ireland. (Which is likely to be the end result of the current peace.)

To get back to China: the initial republic created in 1912 was based on a narrow franchise. This failed to work, because socially the voters were utterly unlike equivalent people in the West. There was no bourgeoisie in the sense Marx had used the term: no propertied elite that sought to organise and lead ‘the nation’. Those among that class who had the right instincts generally rejected their own class and became Communists.

"To repeat Lin Yuntang’s words: it [Chinese Marxism] has at once succeed in ‘creating the nation’. It has produced a sort of abrupt crystallisation of all the Chinese virtues which had for so long awaited a catalyst. In every domain of collective life the Chinese were the first to be surprised at seeing anarchy replaced by order and corruption by method…"

"To have created the nation, to have stood up to the West in Korea and to have survived the American embargo, here are successes which are powerful arguments for the Revolution… The humiliations suffered by the Chinese in the old days at the hands of foreign imperialism are effaced by a legitimate feeling of pride for which the Peking Government claims the credit.” (Ibid., pages 240-241.)

Guillain says 'claims', as if there were doubt about it. Creating something to be proud of needs the efforts of many, but it also needs coercion and it needs the right people at the top and in control. People who work together and do as much or as little as might be necessary in the circumstances.

In China in the 1950s, doing little was not an option. This was utterly unlike the situation in the late 1970s, when there were efficient modernising forces that would operate if the CPC gave them leave to do so.

Guillain does have some good insights on other issues:

"Chinese nationalism today is not necessarily directed towards victories abroad. In his dreams the patriot sees
factory chimneys rather than battlefields and armies." (Ibid., p241.)

"The Chinese population... will reach the milliard mark in 1980. Nor is that the ceiling. It is estimated that China has every chance of doubling its present output (sic) before the year 2000 and even then the limit will not have been reached." (Ibid., p250.)

"The birth rate, as far as we can tell from Kuomintang statistics, was 35 per thousand. It has risen today to 37. Mortality on the other hand has decreased, from 25% to 17%... the People's Republic, by bringing peace, hygiene and a rise in the standard of living, has increased the natural birth rate from 1% before the Revolution to 2% today." In other words... China today increases twice as fast as it did yesterday.

"China can in fact nourish twice as many Chinese," I was told in Peking by an American doctor, George Haytem [actually George Hatem], who after living for years in China, has become a Communist and a naturalised Chinese.

"It is proved to him [a visiting journalist] that the agricultural and industrial production envisaged by the Plan is rising faster than the 2% increase in population." (Ibid., pages 250-251.)

He mentions attempts at birth control from 1955. Quotes from a magazine called Youth of China:

"A great curbing of births in a country by order of the Government would be something quite new. The problem of over-population have assumed such proportions that I think we shall see it here. The control exercised over each individual is such that the thing is possible. And who will control the birth control? Quite simple; the street committee. It will fix the quotas, give advice and keep an eye on married couples." (Ibid., pages 253-4.)

But this never got very far; nor the problem properly faced up to. Official sources continued to speak of '600 million Chinese' long after it was obvious that there were far more. Mao let the population grow unchecked, so that food supplies became strained in the 1970s. An earlier introduction of the One Child Policy would have let Mao's system work rather better. As things were, Deng got the benefit of a young and mostly well-educated population. Those who had been through the Cultural Revolution had had their education interrupted, but had a lot of originality of thought.

Deng's One Child Policy was of course coercive, but also necessary for the common good. Remarkably little was said about it in the Western media, for as long as Deng was seen as useful to the Anglo hegemony.

A View From 1950

Guillain's expectations back in 1950 were different from his 'Blue Ants' view, as he himself makes clear. I found them translated into English in an interesting book called New China: Three Views. Actually it is four views, the first being an introduction by someone called Kingsley Martin:

*The collapse of the extravagantly selfish, corrupt and incompetent regime of Chiang Kai-shek and the substitution of a young, confident and ruthless Communism is the most important event of our day. It changes the balance of world forces... It raises the question whether the awakened nationalism will become allied wholly with Communism or whether the West will maintain an economic and political foothold." (New China: Three Views. Page vii.)

What happened in the rest of Asia after 1949 was that the USA promoted some radical measures. Including land reform that got a lot of land into the hands of individual peasant farmers. US and West European markets were opened up to allies like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, but they were allowed to protect and subsidise their own industries.

Had the West followed the 'wisdom' of the modern New Right, they would have left it to Market Forces to work 'miracles' that haven't actually happened anywhere where New Right policies were followed. They would have lost the Cold War.

None of this was foreseeable in 1950. But editor / contributor Otto B. van der Spenkel notes a key matter that the New Right are now denying: that the Kuomintang had been a hopelessly bad government. That the Communists gave the society a new dynamic:

"On the people of the great cities the Communist impact was sudden... This organised effort aimed at changing the basic pattern as well as the outward face of society, at transforming social values and creating new modes of thought and a new outlook." (Ibid., p2.)

"I hardly ever entered a Kuomintang office without seeing four or give of its inmates fast asleep at their desks. The officials of the new government have very little leisure". (Ibid., p6.)

There was a successful reform of the written language:

"The newspapers of Nationalist China were written in a special style, sufficiently distinct from either the literary or the colloquial to be regarded as a separate language. In Western Universities where Chinese is taught it was necessary to conduct special courses in 'Newspaper Chinese' and provide special textbooks. To-day the newspapers use a language which is very nearly the colloquial speech of the people and are consequently able to reach a far wider audience." (Ibid., p12.)

Both the inefficiency and the lack of a popular propaganda style were very different from European fascism. An authentic Chinese fascism might have worked, as other fascist systems have worked elsewhere, eventually delivering a Western-style society in places like Portugal and Spain. You could very reasonably say that this was what the Kuomintang did in exile on Taiwan. What happened in South Korea with home-grown leaders who had been broadly obedient to Imperial Japan when Japan ruled there, though an exiled anti-Communist nationalist called Syngman Rhee was

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made President to give it respectability.

In 1950, few people expected the Kuomintang remnant on Taiwan to last long. The USA was not protecting it: they only moved in their fleet after North Korea invaded US-protected South Korea.

The almost-complete victory of the Chinese Communist in 1949 may explain their initial mild attitude:

"Indeed the lack of political vindictiveness and general absence of any disposition to take advantage of the revolutionary situation to pay back old scores has proved one of the more surprising and welcome features of the Chinese revolution. In all the universities under the old regime there were Kuomintang 'spy students' placed there by the ministry...

"When Nankai [the National Nankai University at Tientsin (Tianjin), where Sprenkel was a lecturer] resumed classes for the first time after the Liberation, I was most surprised to see all my old 'spies'... back in the classroom. One of them, an objectionable character who had been directly responsible for having one of my best students jailed and very nearly killed a few months before, I immediately barred from my lectures. Soon after, I was waylaid by a member of the Registrar's office, who explained to me that the question of whether these spy students should be allowed to re-register had been fully discussed, and that it had been decided to admit them. 'Before, you see,' I was told, 'these people were a danger. They had the whole power of the Kuomintang behind them. Now they are harmless. They have nothing behind them. And they are after all Chinese boys and girls, our fellow citizens. It would be wrong for us just to write them off as being beyond redemption...

"In this approach, which was typical outside as well as inside the university, there is, it seems to me, a strong religious feeling. The Communists are quite certain that what they knew is truth, and that truth must prevail. No brand is so far gone that it cannot be plucked from the burning.

"The story told here is not exceptional... The same treatment has been extended to almost everyone, except the very small group of war criminals, provided they show themselves willing to co-operate with the new regime." (Ibid., pages 64-5.)

It is of course possible that these spies were tolerated because they had offered to become spies for the new regime. Most governments do things like that. But other sources also say that attitudes were mild at first. The USA did a lot of damage by its 20-year sulk over 'Red China'. Their presence gave some credibility to Chiang Kai-shek's repeated promises to re-take the mainland. Incidentally, this was taken seriously by some of my fellow schoolboys in Britain in the 1950s. I remember also reading a lot of absurd anti-Communist stuff in mainstream publications: stuff which I haven't in most cases been able to track down. Someone with access to a Copyright Library\(^\text{14}\) (which I don't have) could make a search and bring to light stuff that would seem absurd now, but was taken entirely seriously at the time.

In 1950, the Kuomintang hold-out seemed odd but unimportant:

"In China the man who is clearly defeated is expected to concede the victory and retire (as gracefully as circumstances permit) from the struggle. Chiang's blind and completely unrealistic determination to prolong to the last possible moment China's agony of civil war was of incalculable benefit to the Communist cause." (Ibid., p70.)

Chiang was expecting the USA to help him, of course. His viewpoint was still that of the warlord era, when foreigners could pick winners among rival Chinese if they felt strongly about the matter. He blamed the Soviet Union for his defeat, as did many others, but all of them mistaken:

"There are two widely-held views about the relation between Communist China and the Soviet Union – both equally wrong-headed. The first is that China is a Soviet satellite. The second that Mao Tse-tung is, or at any event one day will be, the Far Eastern Tito...

"It cannot be too often stressed that the Chinese Communists are nationalists as well as Marxists." (Ibid., p71.)

Would Mao have broken from the Soviet Union much earlier than he did, given a different US approach? Possibly. But I strongly suspect that Mao would never have got dependent on the West in the way Tito did, to the ultimate ruin of most of his Yugoslav achievements. Still, Mao was probably interested in some sort of balance. It was the USA that was unwilling until the early 1970s.

Pages 78-121 of the book are by Robert 'Blue Ants' Guillain. As he says in that book, in 1950 he was wondering if the Communist Revolution would be as big a flop as the earlier Kuomintang effort:

"For almost forty years China has been trying to give shape to its desire for a new order and a modern economy. But lacking the method and the means of overcoming the inertia and corruption of Chinese society, each attempted revolution in turn has failed. First that of Sun Yat-sen in 1911 founded a sea of troubles. Then the second Kuomintang revolution in 1925-26 was diverted from its course by Chiang Kai-shek's counter-revolution of 1927 that petered out at last in anarchy and decay...

"The Sino-Japanese war, from 1937 onwards... shook the former Confucian traditions to their foundations and mixed up all the elements of the dying social world by uprooting masses of people and depositing them pell-mell elsewhere." (Ibid., p79.)

"The Chinese Revolution is still a compound of the best and the worst elements... If we wish the Chinese well we must recognize that these men are China's opportunity. But we must not, for all that, fool ourselves. The Peking regime is totalitarian. Those who do not agree with it will have to submit or be left aside. There is no hope of liberty for the Chinese. Their highest duty will be to love the regime, to think and act along the 'right lines'..." (Ibid., pages 81-2.)

\(^\text{14}\) Britain and many other countries have a legal requirement for all books to send a copy to one or more national libraries in order for that book to have copyright protection. Books that have otherwise vanished can be found there.
"The Marxists are tackling the enormous problems which face them at every point... The most formidable problem will probably be the apathy of the Chinese themselves. Theirs is obviously a world that remains far more Chinese than Communist." (Ibid., p85.)

"If only it lasts", say the sceptics, Chinese or foreign, reminding one that the Kuomintang also began in a spirit of austere zeal and honesty. To this one can only reply that the Communists show an acute sense of the dangers that await them... The strength of the Party can be summed up in two words: organization and discipline." (Ibid., p87.)

And remain so. After Mao, corruption returned, but most of it was 'patriotic corruption'. You have officials taking an unfair slice of the wealth, but also bringing about a general improvement. And not neglecting the strong foundations that Mao had built. There were real threats back in the early 1950s:

"Shanghai is a rapidly dying city... Chiang Kai-shek's blockade of the port is completely effective. Trade has ceased, the factories are idle; firms, big and small, are facing bankruptcy". (Ibid., pages 102-3.)

"The Communists' aim is to change Shanghai from one of the capitals of international commerce, living off China like a parasite, into a Chinese city dependent on the hinterland... The dancing girls of Ciro's and the Little Club are looking around for husbands. And the prostitutes of Love Lane and Shanghai's equivalent of Luna Park are being sent into re-education workshops to sew olive-green blouses for the soldiers of the People's Army." (Ibid., page 104.)

That's Guillain's contribution. He isn't fair when he calls Shanghai a parasite: it had a lot of manufacturing and was always a big cultural centre.

Michael Lindsay completes the book:

"My wife and I had left China in November 1945, after spending nearly four years in the Chinese Communist areas. Shortly before leaving Yenan we had our last talk with Mao Tse-tung. He was bitterly disappointed at the failure of the Kuomintang to observe the terms of the agreement of 10th October 1945, but still hoped that a settlement could be reached. Other people in Yenan were less hopeful of avoiding civil war. Though everyone was confident of ultimate Communist victory, they talked in terms of a ten-years war, if war did come." (Ibid., p124.)

Mao was probably less disappointed than he appeared. He probably knew that no true compromise was possible. But he did want to collect as much of the middle ground as he could. He may have planned a much more gradualist approach, in line with what he wrote in his 1940 essay On New Democracy. I assume he did not anticipate how utterly hostile the USA would be.

Lindsay had returned to China in 1949:

"From talks with old friends in Peking it soon became clear that the Communists have been remarkably successful in winning over educated Chinese opinion. The great majority of the students in Peking are enthusiastic supporters of the new regime. What is much more striking is the support of professors who knew the West and have an understanding of British or American institutions... The Communists had encouraged free discussion and had really tried to find out popular opinion and to elicit criticism of their policies and suggestions about changes which should be made. The reaction was to say: 'This is really democratic even though the forms are different from those of Western democracy.'" (Ibid., page 125.)

"In the summer of 1948, Representative Walter H. Judd, a 'China expert' of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, was still saying that Chiang Kai-shek was the greatest democratic statesman since Abraham Lincoln, and, in November 1949, General Wedemeyer was still 'convinced of his desire to establish true democracy in China'. This powerful group has made American appear in China as the consistent supporter of the most corrupt and reactionary forces in Chinese society." (Ibid., page 141.)

As ruler of Taiwan, Chiang remained a dictator. He successfully passed on power to his son Chiang Ching-kuo, who ruled unchallenged until his death in 1988. Only with his successor Lee Teng-hui did the system become something like a democracy, with Chen Shui-bian elected in 2000 after a genuine contest. He was narrowly re-elected in 2004, and then jailed for corruption after the Kuomintang returned to power in 2007. We now have another elected non-Kuomintang President of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen, who is due to take power on 20th May 2016. It will be interesting to see how this works out. 16

**Ignorance in the USA**

Chiang's survival on Taiwan was helped by massive ignorance among most US citizens of the real situation in China. Felix Greene's *A Curtain of Ignorance* exposed the lies, as I detailed in *Problems 24*. But lies and distortions by media tend to drown out truth. The Kuomintang had for years been telling lies about the Communist armies, claiming that these were disorderedly bandit forces. As I said earlier, someone with access to a copyright library that stores all books, good or bad, could dig out some of the rubbish that was talked at the time. The only thing I could recall well enough to find was an inferior and little-known 1950s US science fiction novel called *The 27th Day*.

Like many US novels, the overall assumption is of a vicious struggle for survival, with the anti-Communist fight being a small part of it. An alien species whose own world is due to be destroyed by a nova need a new world, but it seems that all available worlds have intelligent inhabitants. Since the Galactic Council rate the most formidable ones whose own world is due to be destroyed by a nova need a new world, but it seems that all available worlds have intelligent inhabitants. Since the Galactic Council rate the most formidable

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16 Interestingly, my Microsoft Word spell-checker tried to change the second (personal) part of her name to 'no-win'. This might indeed be how it will be for her.
in 1963, five humans are randomly chosen, from the USA, Britain, West Germany, the Soviet Union and China. China as the typical 1950s US citizen imagined it to be:

"The fifth and final encounter took place on a small Chinese farm near the village of Ho Chin in the foothills of the Kunlun Mountains in the province of Singhai, China. A few minutes before the incident, the farm had been looted and burned. The Communists insist that the attackers were brigands; there are others who insist they were Communist hirelings… Two older brothers were abducted and an eighteen-year-old girl by the same of Su Tan was raped. Her clothes were torn and she was badly beaten; presumably she was believed dead."¹⁷

Previous Chinese armies were often guilty of rape, but many eye-witnesses testified that the Chinese Communists stamped this out and their armies were remarkably well-behaved. It must have helped that rapists were quite often executed, a pattern that continues down to the present day and makes China fairly safe for women: much safer than India and safer than most of Europe and the USA. Communist China was and still is safe if you keep the rules and do not come under suspicion. But typical US citizens of the 1950s had been successfully convinced otherwise – just as a new wave of truth-twisters have convinced the present generation that China made no progress at all under Mao.

The Kunlun Mountains are real and are located in the Chinese province of Qinghai, previously known in English as Tsinghai and maybe occasionally Singhai. The province has a mix of Han, Tibetans and a Muslim minority called Hui. It was affected by a combined Kuomintang / Hui bandit insurgency that lasted until 1958. Elsewhere, bands mostly fled or let themselves be captured. A few stood and died, but not many. Cold courage is not often found among bandits or other professional criminals. A few have managed it, but they are exceptions and should have done something else with their lives.

The notion that the Red Army were just bandits was begun by Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang. You find quite a lot about it in Edgar Snow's Red Star Over China, as a notion that was taken seriously in the 1930s. But that's the real world. In the SF story, each of the five humans is given three lethal weapons in a tiny box, to use or not as they see fit. The Chinese lady kills herself upon returning, after first supposedly thinking the following:

"Out there were the countless millions she had never known – the races who did not know or care what had happened to China and her people, the China her father had told her was once the greatest nation of the face of the earth – a China that now grovelled in misery and famine beneath the heel of evil and ruthless men – men who this night had taken the lives of those closest to her and destroyed the body that might one day have borne her a son." (Ibid., p35)


Unexpectedly, the weapons disintegrate upon her death. Surprisingly, she hadn't thought to hide her lethal burden or drop it somewhere where it might be lost. It's left to the English lady to sensibly throw her own weapon-box out to sea. This is typical of 1950s attitudes: most Westerners in the 1950s viewed Chinese as likeable but inferior, an attitude that hasn't entirely vanished even now.

News of this odd happening passes to an American agent in China – another surprise since they'd have mostly worked through the remaining Kuomintang, or other anti-Communist groups. And once again we see what people in the USA imagined that China was like:

"Money was hard to come by in Communist China. Life was cheap and there were many who disliked the Communist war-lords and who were willing to risk their lives to Li Wan information which could put food in their bellies." (Ibid., p116.)

This being 1950s SF, there is a happy ending. Or at least an ending judged happy by the author. One of the five manages to reprogram the weapons to just selectively kill very bad people, give a nasty jolt to those only moderately bad, and make everyone else behave better:

"The Iron Curtain is gone, splintered into a million fragments incapable of reparation [sic].¹⁸ Delirious crowds are celebrating in Leningrad, Moscow, Peiping, Prague and Warsaw...

"Reports are still coming in confirming the sudden and inexplicable death of tyrants and evil-doers in high places throughout the globe. Hospitals are filling to capacity with victims of shock...

"The most unlikely people have fallen victim to the epidemic – gossip columnists, preachers, psychiatrists, senators, plumbers, merchants, thieves; there have been attacks in every profession."

(Ibid., p186.)

Bankers are not specifically mentioned – but in the days before deregulation, bankers were mostly seen as pompous, foolish but honest, like Captain Mainwaring in the BBC comedy Dad's Army.

The book is not just prejudiced about Chinese Communism. Communism in the 1950s and 1960s was still popular in the places named, apart from Warsaw where traditional Polish hatred of all things Russian had never died, and is still active. Communism then was also popular in Western Europe, with the Italian Communists getting between a quarter and third of the votes in the 1950s and 1960s, while the French Communists got between a quarter and a fifth from the 1940s to 1970s.¹⁹ Communists then were the main champions of demands for class, racial and sexual equality that have since become mainstream.²⁰

¹⁸ The normal meaning to ‘reparation’ is compensation for a wrong done. But it does have the older meaning ‘being repaired’ without any such overtones.


²⁰ http://gwydionwilliams.com/history-and-philosophy/the-left-redefined-the-normal/
Eastern Europe, Prague was enthusiastically leftist until the amazingly-foolish invasion of 1968, when bunglers led by Brezhnev prevented reforms. Reforms that would probably have produced something like what Deng achieved in China, but with far less need to tolerate corruption and inequality or to make concessions to the West. But the Communist Party of the Russian Federation are the main opposition in post-Communist Russia.21

Saying 'Peiping' was a US habit at the time. The rest of the world accepted that China's government had restored its older name, Peking, later officially modernised as Beijing. The USA said 'Peiping' as part of its denial of the actual existence of People's China until the early 1970s. This was enforced, not by law but by a public opinion trained to complete intolerance of anything that might sound sympathetic to Communism. Only in the 1960s did this start to break down.

Interestingly, the book unknowingly imagines something not unlike what the Chinese Communists were actually doing under Mao. Force people to be virtuous: and if it causes some deaths then it is worth it. The professor who reprogrammed the weapons explains his logic:

"In the Alien's talk with us there was a very strong clue... He told us that their morality did not permit them to invade, destroy or attack any other race or intelligent life form, even at the risk of total destruction of their own. Then he went on to say, somewhat later, that although they were constantly running into races in the Galaxy which were ruthless killers, their science had so far enabled them to deal with these races. Now, if they could not attack these psychopathic peoples and were not permitted to destroy them, they must perforce have developed some means of diverting or eliminating their aggressive instincts." (Ibid., page 189.)

He's not at all bothered by very large numbers of deaths caused by his own actions. Part of it was self-defence – he knows that the Soviet leader had had three of the weapons and was likely to use them. But he isn't also obliged to change the rest of the world: he takes on himself the right to do so. I'd call the whole process is morally questionable – why kill anyone when they can hopefully be rendered harmless? The deaths reported seem to go well beyond crimes that would carry the death penalty even in the 1950s USA. And since it seems that the aliens already had the power to reform humans, it should not have been morally acceptable for those aliens to make it possible for redeemable humans to kill each other off to make a convenient free territory for people that the Galactic Council view as much more useful.

The story ends with a similar choice being given to another warlike alien species, with no indication of how it would work out. Very much in line with 1950s US attitudes, when their own replacement and near-destruction of Native Americans was still seen as virtuous.

The book makes what I'd see as a common moral error – seeing dubious actions as more acceptable if you set up the circumstances and then let it happen. Now such crimes are undoubtedly much easier to perform; just as Nazi camp guards found it easier to gas people out of site in rooms made to look like showers. But morally there is no difference.

Let's imagine that someone stood to inherit a fortune from some distant relative they had no particular liking for. Many people might accept if their nurse offered to shorten that person's life in return for a cut of the inheritance. One could test this: change the imagined scenario so that the subject was called on to do the deed themselves rather than just verbally agree to it, even if they assured the risk of being caught was very low. And it would also be easier for many people if the action were not obviously violent – substituting the wrong medicine or similar.

I make this prediction on the basis of responses to the famous 'Trolley Problem'22. Many people say they would change a set of points on a railway to kill one and save five. Rather less would push a fat man off of a bridge to get the same result. I'm confident that hardly anyone would agree it should be done if the victim were a child, even if the five to be saved were also children. That is how human minds actually work. How you'd expect them to work, though it seems that philosophers flounder with the issue. You have to be a much colder, nastier or more hate-filled person to do the deed yourself – all sorts of mixes of these three are found among people capable of face-to-face killing. But my view, which seems very much a minority view, is that the moral rightness or wrongness remains exactly the same. This is something I am going to deal with at length elsewhere: it is a vast matter in itself. Briefly, it is much easier to be selfish and greedy at a comfortable distance than face-to-face. A strong discouragement of selfishness is feasible but difficult: Mao's rule up until the Cultural Revolution had made a lot of progress in this direction. The attempt to take it much further in the Cultural Revolution backfired badly and did a lot of damage: but this was in part because he chose to undermine his own creed by making peace with US Imperialism and by implicitly accepting that there was no World Revolution happening very soon. Had things gone otherwise and the US involvement in Vietnam led to a wider war that extended to an invasion of China, things might have been very different and Mao's last decade of rule might have seemed vindicated.

Nothing But Blood, Opium and Gunboats
Agnes Smedley was a US writer best known for her semi-autobiographical novel Daughter of Earth. But she also wrote a lot about China, moving there in 1927 as a left-wing journalist. Though never a member of any Communist Party, she did have


contacts with the Comintern and with the Chinese Communist underground in Shanghai. Her involvement with Richard Sorge is fascinating: he was a German working for Soviet intelligence who managed to pass himself off as a Nazi and infiltrate both them and their Japanese allies. Smedley played a role, by convincing his most important Japanese contact Hotsumi Ozaki that Sorge could be trusted. All of this I will cover in a future article, plus Smedley's general writings on China, which are unreasonable neglected. But what she says in her book China’s Red Army Marches is very relevant to an understanding of the Amethyst Incident, which seemed to me to be a natural companion to Blue Ants as an indicator of changing Western attitudes to China. Smedley was no longer in China when the Amethyst sailed up the Yangtze without permission and suffered for it. But she gives an account of events in 1930 which give the broader context for what happened in 1949.

The Chinese Communists had begun among urban intellectuals and recruited a lot of the urban working class. But from 1927 onwards, the Kuomintang working as agents of global imperialism were able to crush the various city revolts. Survivors took refuge in the countryside and tried organising peasants there.

After the success of Mao and others in preserving and enlarging small units of the Red Army in rural areas, a faction led by Li Lisan decided to try to take back China’s cities. They got as far as capturing Changsha, provincial capital of Hunan. But this was already risky, and to have tried to take larger cities would have been foolish. Even what they had was hard to hold:

“Other Communists fought Li Lisan saying an uprising and the occupation of the Wuhan cities would lead to one of the most fearful slaughters in history. For the imperialist gunboats would not only bombard the cities from the river, but would land troops everywhere to protect Kuomintang rule. Li Li-san was defeated. The Communist Party decided to wait.

“But even before the Communist Party reached this decision, American, British, Italian, French and Japanese gunboats were sliding down the Siang river on which the walled city of Changsha stands. As they passed the city of Yochow to the north, peasants and workers on the banks fired at them. Their rifle shots only flattened against the steel hulls. The gunboats tore up the very earth in reply.

“The Political Department of the Red Army issued a manifesto to the people of Changsha. The hated Kuomintang, corrupt and vicious, it read, was too weak to stand against the might of the Chinese people. Puppets supported entirely by the imperialists as rulers and exploiters of the Chinese people, it was the imperialists who were now coming to their aid. The Soviet Revolution now stood face to face with imperialism which appeared in naked form to fight down the Chinese masses. The masses of Changsha must meet the imperialists in battle.

“Following this manifesto Changsha and the entire region along the Siang river became lined with masses of men, women and children. Red troops built barricades and all kinds of defense works along the river banks before Changsha, and behind them mounted cannons and machine guns. Thousands of people carried stones and sank them in the river thinking they could fill up the stream and keep the foreign fleet from the city.

“But on the afternoon of July 30th the foreign gunboats, led by the American gunboat Palos, lay before Changsha and began the bombardment of the city. Buildings smashed into ruins and began to burn.

“But their weak barricades and defense positions, from the city walls of Changsha, and from the open river banks, the Red Army, the Workers Militia, the Red Guards and Peasant Partisans fought.

“Thousands of men in the revolutionary army had never seen a gunboat before. In vain their rifles and guns peppered them. In reply machine guns from the gunboats swept their ranks, leaving heaps of dead and wounded.

“The Red forces hoped for the cover of darkness when their volunteers could swim out and attack the gunboats, pitting the flesh of their bodies against the steel of foreign imperialism. But when darkness fell blinding searchlights from the gunboats began to sweep the river banks. They revolved, leaving moments of darkness, then swooped down on Red positions again.

“Despite the searchlights the volunteers who were to swim out and attack the gunboats crept on their bellies to the river’s edge and silently dropped into the dark flood. With knives and swords they would fight imperialism! But lights swooped down again, lingered on the surface of the river, found the black heads swimming silently, and turned machine guns on them. The river Siang became covered with the floating bodies of the Chinese dead.

“Five days passed and the unequal battle continued. But the Red forces still held their positions. Thousands lay dead and wounded. To the seven foreign gunboats were now added two little Chinese hulks. Like the class brothers they had always been, these two little Nanking vessels slid up in the protecting shadow of the foreign monsters and timidly but hopefully trained their guns on the Chinese people of Changsha. The little Kuomintang flag fluttered like a cocky little bantam rooster in the shadow of foreign flags that had forced all Asia to its knees.” (China’s Red Army Marches, pages 156-7.)

This and similar events would have been remembered at the time of the Amethyst Incident: one of a string of events that marked the decline and fall of the British Empire. Britain and other Western powers had gained the right to sail up Chinese rivers after winning the Opium Wars. Despite the formal abolition of such privileges during the Second World War, Britain in particular was unwilling to give up such things. You get right-wingers nowadays saying it was all about ‘free trade’. But in the early 19th century, opium was a vital part of that trade. A book called Hostage on the Yangtze explains this:

“While the demand for Chinese imports of tea, silk, jade, and spices seemed insatiable in a Europe reveling in the peace of the post-Napoleon period, the British made a discovery that would totally transform the terms of their

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trade with the East. After running a large deficit in its China trade in the past, Britain found that in Indian opium they possessed a commodity that the Chinese apparently wanted in almost inexhaustible amounts. In the hands of such merchants as William Jardine, James Matheson, and Lancelot Dent, the lucrative opium trade flourished in Chinese waters. By 1829 the value of British opium exports to China exceeded by $1,83 million that of their exports of Chinese tea. By 1833 the gap between the two had risen to over $4.25 million.\(^{24}\)

Millions back then were more like billions nowadays. It was an immoral decision based on huge economic advantage:

"As the [East India] Company's dominion was extended over India, it became evident that to supply opium to Indian subjects was a short-sighted policy on account of its pernicious effects. A decision was taken at the time of Warren Hastings to decrease home consumption and develop an export trade. It was well known that the Chinese would buy; the Portuguese had been selling them for generation opium they procured at Malwa on the Indian coast north of Bombay. This was done very methodically, possession being obtained later on of the Malwa crop, a move which completed the ruin of the Portuguese at Macao and created a Company monopoly for all India. Though opium was also exported from Turkey to China, chiefly by the Americans, this brand was very inferior and had only a small market, so that the Company had obtained in fact a world monopoly. At first some of their ships carried it, but they soon abandoned this practice, because, the drug being contraband, they feared altercation with injury to the tea trade. They never believed that the local authorities at Canton [Guangzhou] had any moral objection to opium, but since the Court at Peking [Beijing] had forbidden its importation, experience told them that the imperial edicts against it would be used... as an excuse to squeeze the legitimate trade."\(^{25}\)

The East India Company found a safe solution; what would now be called Outsourcing:

"A way therefore had to be found of selling it in China which would give the authorities no handle against the Company. Neither the Dutch nor the Portuguese had the ships, the capital, the enterprise nor indeed the courage to undertake such a trade in the big way which the Company had in mind. Nor was it desirable that a valuable trade should be abandoned to foreigners. But there existed a British agency competent to undertake it. The country firms whose business had always been to handle trade inside Asia, were able and willing to assume the whole risk... Having worked out this policy in close agreement with Parliament, they nursed the country firms at the risk of their merchants becoming one day more powerful than themselves. The firms were most successful in selling the drug and were able to take up larger and larger quantities. The Company's revenues from their sale of it at the Calcutta auctions rose steadily. In 1783 it stood at a quarter of a million pounds... and in 1832 at just under one million, a figure which, representing as it did about of the sixth of the whole Indian revenue, was clearly of the greatest importance to the administration." (Ibid., page 69-70)

In terms of economic power, one million pounds sterling in 1832 would be four billion nowadays.\(^{26}\) That's why the British government used its navy to defend the trade. Someone may well have said 'there is no alternative'. But the drain of silver wasn't in fact serious: there was plenty of silver about. It was the demand for ever-increasing profits by shareholders in the East India Company that caused common morality to be abandoned.

The biggest of the opium smugglers were Jardine Matheson, still existing but now an entirely respectable company, though they moved their registration to Bermuda when Beijing recovered Hong Kong. They were sentimentalised and glorified in a 1966 novel called Tai-Pan by James Clavell, one of the 'paperback tigers' who did a lot to popularise the viewpoint that later emerged as Thatcherism and the New Right. The reality was much more squalid than Clavell's fiction:

"William Jardine...dealt in Malwa opium. He was so successful in selling this contraband that in 1824 he was given a partnership in the firm of Magniac, at that time the leading opium firm... Jardine was widely held to be a man of great strength of character, and, while a good friend, to be an implacable foe. The Chinese called him the Iron-headed Old Rat, a name dating from an occasion when he remained unruffled by a heavy blow on the head while presenting a petition at the city gate. Hollingworth Magniac retired to England soon after Jardine's appointment, Daniel Magniac taking his place. Two years later Daniel transgressed the code of the firm by marrying his Asiatic mistress, probably a half-cast Portuguese of Macao, by whom he had had two children, and was retired by his brother on a very beggarly pension, for these opium firms were, it seems, very particular in some matters. This left Jardine in sole executive charge till he took in Matheson in 1828... till 1832, when the firm was formally registered as Jardine and Matheson." (Ibid., page 72.)

In China as in India, the 19th century British imposed a rigid racism. None of the local population were admitted to what increasingly became a dominant ruling group that represented the British Empire in China. Men could have fun with the local women, but it was unacceptable to marry them. It had been much less so in 18th century India, and was also less true for the French, Spanish or Portuguese. The British Empire in the 19\(^{27}\) century was based on racist rules.

One extra: the current headquarters of Jardine Matheson in Hong Kong is a skyscraper that chose to use porthole-style windows in honour of its maritime traditions. But the local Chinese took to calling it 'house of a thousand arseholes', which is not just a comment on the architecture.\(^{28}\)

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\(^{26}\) https://www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/relativevalue.php


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Issue 25, Page 19
Back in the 1830s, British sea-power was decisive. The world’s first militarily steamship was the *Nemesis*, which was also the first British ocean-going iron warship. It had sails, but was also a steam-powered paddle-boat able to go up rivers where regular warships could not have gone. But while impressive technically, its purpose and role were not at all heroic: in fact disgraceful. This was noted in Britain at the time:

"Although commissioned by the Secret Committee of the East India Company (EIC) in 1839, the vessel did not appear in the EIC’s list of ships, leading *The Times* to comment:

"This vessel is provided with an Admiralty letter of license or letter of marque. If so, it can only be against the Chinese; and for the purpose of smuggling opium she is admirably adapted." (*The Times*, 30 March 1840)."

'Letters of marque' were an old system that authorised ships that were not part of the British Navy to attack and capture enemy ships. This was the basis of privateering: without it such an act by a civilian ship would be piracy. The rules by then were that only the regular military fought, by land or by sea, with the rest of the population expected to stay out of it. Merchant ships were often armed, but without special authorisation they were only supposed to fight in self-defence, against pirate attacks.

The First Opium War began in 1841, but the seizure of opium by China’s Commissioner Lin had happened in March 1839. Both the British government and the gigantic semi-governmental East India Company were preparing for war. And the *Nemesis* did its job, going places no sailing ship could have gone and becoming known as a 'devil ship'. But Britons were understandably reluctant to remember it as the first militarily useful ship with an iron hull. History instead remembers the first fight between two ironclad vessels: the *Battle of Hampton Roads* in the USA’s Civil War, which happened more than 20 years later.

The *Nemesis* was not quite an Ironclad in the way later warships were. But for China in the 1830s, this was not significant:

"The Chinese army ... differed little in 1836 from what it was in 1275, the date given for the Chinese invention of gunpowder. The Jesuits of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries certainly cast good cannon for the Emperors, but for some reason these were not copied, and the cannon generally in use burst so often that they were more dangerous to their gunners than to the enemy. If they did not burst, it was because the powder was of the lowest grade... It being observed that many of the balls bounced off the [British] ships' wooden bulwarks, if they reached so far, which few did, even at point-blank range." (*Foreign Mud*, pages 180-181.)

There was some sympathy for the Chinese from Britons. Mostly from the Tories, at that time an authentically conservative party. Gladstone, later a leading Liberal but at that time a Tory, said:

"It is a matter of certainty that if we stopped the exportation of opium from Bengal... we should greatly cripple, if not extinguish, the trade in it... They [the Chinese government] gave us notice to abandon the contraband trade. When they found that we would not, they had the right to drive us from their coasts on account of our obstinacy in persisting in this infamous and atrocious traffic". (Ibid, p274.)

China in the 18th century had been admired in Western Europe by progressive and rationalist elements among the privileged. Those people allowed the Industrial Revolution in Britain without quite realising what the implications were. In the 1830s, the privileged still had their privileges, but the society as a whole was widely seen as out of control:

"Britain was, from the Chinese point of view, as revolutionary a state as later, to Britain, was to be communist Russia." (Ibid, p206)

But not a promoter of equality, as the Soviet Union was. *Hostage on the Yangtze* speaks of *a Europe revelling in the peace of the post-Napoleon period*. In Britain, it was only the well-off who were revelling. Ordinary Britons were suffering. The factory system and the rise of reactionary anti-reform attitudes during the wars against first the French Revolution and then the militaristic radicalism of Napoleon had upset the social balance. Factory owners an enormous advantage over workers, particularly since Enclosure was driving many ordinary rural Britons off the land. It needed a hard battle to get the *Factory Act* of 1833, which included provisions such as:

- "Children under 9 could not be employed in textile manufacture (except in silk mills)."
- "Children (ages 9–13) must not work more than 8 hours with an hour lunch break. (Employers could (and it was envisaged they would) operate a ‘relay system’ with two shifts of children between them covering the permitting working day; adult millworkers therefore being ‘enabled’ to work a 15-hour day)."
- "Children (ages 14–18) must not work more than 12 hours a day with an hour lunch break."  

Such things were mostly made law by Tories. They were traditionalist, but also well aware that society existed and was both dynamic and capable of being changed drastically. Those at the top would not prosper in the long run if they neglected the base of the society. Such Tories largely went extinct under Thatcher, heir to an asocial Liberalism that had to seek refuge in the Conservative Party after British Liberalism did a lot to wreck the world by trying to curb the rising power of Germany by contriving the First World War.

(Anyone who thinks that war an accident or the fault of Germany must also believe that it was a pure accident that Britain failed to tell the Germans

28 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nemesis_%281839%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nemesis_%281839%29) as at 2016/03/03


that a march through Belgium would mean war with the British Empire. They had asked about it during the early stages of the crisis brought about by the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne by Serbian terrorists. Suspicions of a wider plot were reasonable: the Serbian government, had come to power after the assassination of the king and queen of one of Serbia’s two rival dynasties, with the other dynasty taking over. But Tsarist Russia protected Serbia, while Germany protected Austria-Hungary and knew that a war with Russia also meant a war with France. They hoped to knock out France with a swift march through Belgium – but not if Britain felt obliged to act on the basis of its 1830 guarantee of Belgian neutrality. Since German plans were just to march through Belgium and not take it over, it was an open question. 'Mysteriously', they were not warned off when they had the option to choose some other plan, or else push for a peaceful solution.

(Could it have been a British oversight? Sir Edward Grey was Foreign Secretary from 1905 to 1916, the longest continuous tenure of any person in that office. It is not believable that he could have given the wrong signals by accident. Unknown to Germany, a small group within Britain's Liberal government had for years been considering a war to curb the growing strength of United Germany. But they needed the issue of ‘gallant little Belgium’ to persuade the majority of Liberal MPs to support such a war.31) They might still have started a war with Tory support, but that would have left a large body of Liberals in opposition, as had happened with the Boer War.32)

Liberals were guilty, but Tories were far from innocent. Most of them did not mind foreign societies being wrecked, so long as it didn't involve undue expenditure for them as rich tax-payers. They formed the government for a small portion of the Second Opium War, February 1858 to June 1859, but their main concern was established direct British rule over India after the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the so-called Indian Mutiny. Neither party would risk a weakening of the British Empire. So the British Tories ended the first phase of the Second Opium War with the Treaty of Tientsin. This was one of many Unequal Treaties, and included a formal legalisation of the import of opium. It also established the right of foreign vessels including warships to navigate freely on the Yangtze River, right into the heart of China. It expanded the power of the foreign settlements at the previously-unimportant city of Shanghai, opened to trade after the First Opium War.

The Chinese Emperor tried rejecting the Treaty of Tientsin, but had to accept it after further defeats in the second phase of the Second Opium War. But this included one notable Chinese victory:

"By preventing the ... chief superintendent of British trade, from sailing unmolested up the Peiho River to Peking [Beijing], the Chinese gave notice that unless His Majesty's Government was prepared to do something about it, the provisions of the Tientsin treaty were worthless. (Hostage on the Yangtze, page 8.)"

The Peiho (also known as the Hai) is important because it gives access to Beijing, whereas the mighty Yellow River is not navigable. British officials and military officers were determined to use the Peiho to send warships inland when their civil officials were blocked:

"Incensed by this discovery and impatient for some action, Bruce [the chief superintendent of British trade] passed the issue for resolution to the British naval forces – consisting of one ship of the line, two frigates, and thirteen gunboats – which was drawn up under the command of Admiral Sir James Hope... Hope ... launched at attack ... designed to smash through the heavy boom laid across the entrance to the river... Hope's tactical plan ... a bludgeoning frontal attack on the boom and forts by the massed forces at his disposal... The attack was severely repulsed by accurate fire at close range from the guns of the restored Taku forts. Six British gunboats were put out of action, 89 sailors and marines were killed, and a further 345 were wounded, including Admiral Hope. Not even the American Commodore Tatnall's welcome but equally surprising intervention in the battle and his famous explanation that ‘Blood is thicker than water' could disguise the fact that the British had suffered a stunning and unexpected defeat." (Ibid., pages 8-9.)

It's a general rule of naval warfare that while warships can be brutally devastating against cities, it is unwise for them to attack forts. Francis Drake, famed for his bold attacks on coastal cities like Cadiz, was also clever enough to land some of his sailors and have them attack threatening coastal forts from dry land. But most naval men overestimate their warcraft's power. The North in the US Civil War was foolish in its use of the ironclad Monitors, despite being advised that a single bad hit may sink a ship, while 100 shots may not silence a fort. Earth and stone protect better than metal: but are much too heavy for a ship.

As it happened, there were people on the British side who understood this:

"Not wanting to repeat the same mistake ... the allies decided to land at Peitland to the north of the river defences ... and capture the forts by artillery and infantry assault." (Ibid., page 9.)

It was an interesting lesson in the limits of naval power, but one which seems to have been ignored in China. Ignored until rediscovered, maybe by accident, during the Amethyst Incident. When Chinese dared challenge foreign invaders on a Chinese river, they didn't even need a fort. Properly places and protected artillery was quite

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31 For more on the build-up to war, the best existing account is several chapters in Britain’s Great War on Turkey, from an Irish Perspective by Pat Walsh.

32 I've written an Alternate History about how such a split might have worked out, see http://gwydonmadawc.com/060-my-own-science-fiction/the-seven-months-war-of-1914-part-one/

33 The book definitely says 'His Majesty', even though the incidents occurred during the long reign of Britain's Queen Victoria and it should be 'Her Majesty'.

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sufficient. But the Kuomintang generals seem not to have understood this when the Northern Expedition reached the Yangtze in 1927:

"By the end of 1924, many Chinese people, not just radicals and militants, agreed with Dr. Sun Tat-sen that extraterritoriality [exemption from Chinese laws] and the entire apparatus of the unequal treaties were an unjustifiable anachronism that ought to be abolished." (Hostage on the Yangtze, page 20.)

Extraterritoriality was not actually abolished until 1943, when much of China was occupied by Japan and both Britons and Americans in China had been imprisoned by the Japanese as enemy aliens. Why did it last so long? Simply because Chiang Kai-sheh took over the bulk of the Kuomintang and did a deal which abandoned most of Sun's radical program. Intimidation by sea-power played a role:

"Whenever it became threatening, British naval vessels were called action to try to curb the excesses of the Kuomintang's (KMT) more volatile supporters. Anyone with a sense of history witnessing the unrestrained naval bombardment of Wanshien of 5th September 1926, for example, would have recognised a Palmerstonian dimension to the shelling of the old city by HMS Widgeon and HMS Cockchafer.

"Fortunately, sanity soon prevailed; the British government came to the rather belated conclusion that incidents like that at Wanshien were harmful and that an accommodation would have to be made with the most vibrant force in Chinese politics at the time, namely, the Nationalist government installing the south of the country." (Ibid., pages 20-21.)

It was classic divide-and-rule. An offer of immediate power won over enough of the Kuomintang to curb Chinese radicalism. Bribed with money and power, these allowed Global Imperialism to keep its privileged position in China. But it needed more gunship intimidation to enforce this hegemony:

"Both the leftists, who had established a provisional government with Russian backing at Hankow in January 1927, and those of a more moderate political persuasion who sympathized with the aims of the Northern Expedition, had used antiforeignism as a popular rallying cry to gain popular support in the past, and neither group would lay this attitude aside for the time being." (Ibid., p21.)

There was nothing moderate about Chiang Kai-shek's government: nor was moderation a serious option for anyone trying to rule China as it was in the 1920s. But there was an opening for the KMT who had congregated at Wuhan. The rest of the Kuomintang army failed to change radically from the disorderly armies of the warlords, who acted as 'nationalists' because after 1927 they ceased to be that. The same applies to the old-style warlords, with the exception of a handful who actually did take the risks Chiang avoided. But in 1927, it needed a few more nudges to make the mainstream Kuomintang obedient:

"Encouraged by the scale of their success, the Nationalists began to make threatening suggestions about the future existence of the International Settlement at Shanghai. Rumours of this sort led to a massive naval demonstration off the port by thirty warships drawn from eight nations with interests in China. By the end of the month, some forty thousand foreign troops were assembled and ready for combat should the KMT or its supporters attempt to overrun the Settlement...

"In Nanking, matters came to a head in March 1927 when serious looting and mob action once again became the norm. Aggravated by what was happening in the city and anxious lest the situation deteriorate even more, the British and Americans retaliated by instructing their warships to bombard Nanking until order was restored... Other ships performed similar tasks elsewhere on the Yangtze...

"After being at such a low ebb, Anglo-Chinese relations began to make a dramatic recovery, in the following months, mainly as a result of the Chiang Kai-shek's decisive action in April 1927 against the leftists in the KMT who had congregated at Wuhan." (Ibid., 21-22.)

'Decisive action' meant mass slaughter of those Chinese who took serious the Kuomintang's original aims. Gangsters played a major role in this in Shanghai: most of their money came from opium. A lot of the foreign 'business interests' also involved opium, which was mostly grown in India under the supervision of an official government department that was unblushingly known as the Opium Department (even though opium had long been outlawed in Britain itself, and its consumption was discouraged in British India). One senior employee of this Opium Department was the father of George Orwell (Eric Blair). While posing as an upholder of Absolute Truth, he evades this awkward fact by calling his father 'an official in the English administration there [British India]."

It was also true that there was looting and disorder in China in 1927. But it did not happen in sections of the army under Communist control – the units that later rebelled and became the core of the newly created Red Army. The rest of the Kuomintang army failed to change radically from the disorderly armies of the warlords, who acted

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34 Here and elsewhere, I omit diacritical marks (also called accents), because the Anglo hegemony still prevails in software. Unicode can handle these, as well as ideograms and a great variety of alphabets other than the Western one. But I've learned from bitter experience that many IT and web functions made a hash of such things. You can see an example of this at https://www.flickr.com/photos/45909111@N00/2303992756/in/album-72157649702061378/.

mostly as agents of Imperialism.

In the end it was left to the Japanese to abolish the foreign enclaves in Shanghai, turning them over to their puppet Chinese government. And it still needed pressure from the USA to persuade a crumbling British Empire to legally abandon what they had lost: the enclaves that were legally abolished in 1943, along with extraterritoriality. But the Kuomintang ‘nationalists’ were still happy for foreign warships to sail freely up rivers at the heart of China.

Britain in 1927 did make a few small concessions, talking about the idea of abolishing extraterritoriality, though not actually doing so. In 1929 and 1930 they did give up some small concessions, nothing important (ibid., p.23). They retained the substance of power by keeping both gunboats and larger warships on the Yangtze:

“Just when it appeared that political stability had settled upon China in 1930, the country was plunged once more into the maelstrom of civil war. British gunboats saw a great deal of action during this turbulent year, none more so that HMS Teal, HMS Aphis, and HMS Bee, all of which were caught up in the fight for control at Changsha in late July.” (Ibid., p.23.)

That's the same battle that Smedley describes from the viewpoint of the victims. British navel power did make the seizure of cities impractical: Li Lisan’s rash venture might have worked if the British Empire had not been there to look after its latest set of Chinese lackeys.

Even the genuinely brave stand by the Kuomintang government and armies against Japan’s capture of Shanghai and the Yangtze Valley as far as Wuhan fitted with their continuing dependence on the British Empire and the USA. They assumed that their Imperial masters would rescue them if they could hold out for long enough. They had to mobilise genuine Chinese nationalism to do this, but notably relaxed when it became a global war. They could sensibly expect that the US-Soviet alliance would eventually destroy both Nazi German and Japan, with a reduced role being played by what survived of the British Empire.

The three British ships mentioned were gunboats in the strict sense of the term: “a naval watercraft designed for the express purpose of carrying one or more guns to bombard coastal targets, as opposed to those military craft designed for naval warfare, or for ferrying troops or supplies.” A website that lists the past and present ships of all the world’s navies says of HMS Teal: “After completion she was disassembled then shipped to China and reassembled for use as a river gunboat on the Yangtze and West River.” The Aphis had a wider role, having been used on the Danube in World War One and being moved back to take part in the war in Europe in 1940. Such ships could be and were used against regular military, but were also used extensively as ‘weapons of mass destruction’ against cities that rebelled against foreign domination. (And not just outside Europe: there was artillery shelling of Dublin during the 1916 Easter Rising.)

The Red Army had very little artillery in 1930 and could not hold Changsha. But I’d have thought the Kuomintang armies back in 1927 had enough big guns to take on the warships in the way that was done 20 years later in the Amethyst Incident. Had a Chinese equivalent of Ataturk been in charge, it would certainly have been tried and might have changed history dramatically. Land-based artillery ought to be superior to warships confined to the limited space of a river, even a river as big as the Yangtze. But it also needs a militant spirit, and that was what the Kuomintang Right lacked. They still saw foreigners as all-powerful. They were also scared of their own people, who were threatening the privileges of the landlord class that most of them had come from.

In 1949, when the Amethyst Incident occurred, things were different. The British Empire emerged from World War Two much weakened, and there was also a new mood in Britain, where many people felt that the Empire’s very existence was immoral. There was also considerable pressure from the USA to abandon direct imperialism in the long run – but not immediately. From the US viewpoint, the problem was that Communist-led nationalists had in many cases been the most effective nationalists and anti-Fascist fighters.

- In Yugoslavia they were allowed to take over. Tito was later detached and became neutral in the Cold War.
- In Greece, there was a genuine hard-right nationalism that had played a secondary but genuine role against the Nazis. In 1946 to 1949, British intervention gave them victory. It included Georgios Grivas, who later drove Britain out of Cyprus.
- Britain under its new Labour government moved quickly to abandon the Indian subcontinent, though hampered by the Muslim-Hindu split that previous British administrations had done so much to encourage.
- In Malaya, rubber and tin were valuable assets. The local Communists were mostly long-settled populations of Chinese origin. Britain mobilised the indigenous Malays against them and created another anti-Communist nationalism.
- In the US-administered portion of Korea, non-Communist nationalism had been marginal, but was placed as a top layer on a South Korea dependent on Koreans who had been part of the highly efficient modernisation of Korea by Imperial Japan.
- In Indochina the French were allowed back after World War Two, but had no very credible alternative to the Communists.
- In Indonesia, the Dutch briefly got back their colonial authority. But there, the nationalist

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36 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunboat as at 29/01/2016
movement that later gained independence was split. In the mid-1960s the USA managed to orchestrate an apparent coup by pro-Communists that was followed by an apparent counter-coup. And then an all-too-real massacre of Indonesia's Communists, who never recovered.

- In Singapore, Lee Kwan-yew as a nationalist sometimes friendly to Communists managed to broker a deal that made him a useful Cold War ally and his tiny country a rising Asian Tiger.

China was different again – always nominally independent but with most of the non-Communist nationalists subverted from 1927 onwards. At the time, only a few right-wingers in the USA treated the Kuomintang as serious modernisers: the general view was that they were corrupt and useless:

*It was, therefore, wise of the British government not to push the issue at the outset and join the other major world powers at Moscow in December 1945 in officially adopting a policy of non-intervention in the Chinese civil war... This arrangement suited the British admirably in the coming months as disenchantedment with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and his corrupt, neofascist regime continued to grow, and concerns about the long-term threat to regional security posed by Mao and the forces of the Communist party remained a nagging problem that refused to go away.* (Hostage on the Yangtze, p28.)

But it wasn't real neutrality:

*The British government loaned a sloop (HMS Petunia), a 1000-ton destroyer... a light cruiser of 5,270 tons (HMS Aurora), two submarines, and eight harbour-defence motor launches to the KMT navy for a five-year period...*

*Unfortunately, crises dogged the enterprise from the outset. Shortly after being put into service, HMS Petunia was sunk in a collision off Formosa [Taiwan]" (Ibid., p30.)

*The [British] Admiralty handed over the corvette Petunia. But the survivor of the Battle of the Atlantic would find the questionable navigating skills of Nationalist sailors too great a challenge. In March 1947 Petunia, renamed Fubo, sank after colliding with a merchant ship off the coast of Formosa [Taiwan] with the loss of all hands.* (Yangtze Showdown, page 207.)

Despite this, several other ships that Britain found too expensive to keep after World War Two over were turned over to Kuomintang China as part of a settlement of other claims:

*China withdrew it claims for compensation against the British government for its requisition in 1941 of six Chinese customs cruisers for use in the war against the Japanese. This agreement did not end the matter, for on February 1949 the officers and crew of the Aurora (which was by that time renamed the Chungking), the most potent vessel in the Nationalist fleet, defected to the Communists. Enraged by this embarrassing defection, KMT aircraft managed to locate, bomb and sink the Chungking off Hulutao, in the Liaotung Gulf.* (Hostage on the Yangtze, p30.)

Another source says the ship was sunk in Taku Harbour, near to the Taku Forts that had scored their isolated success in the Second Opium War. Whichever, Mao accused the USA of helping the Kuomintang sink the rebel ship (which might otherwise have hampered the flight to Taiwan). And while China's fate was still uncertain, there were many Britons in China who wanted to restore the old Imperial relationship, though Attlee's Labour government was unwilling to do so. Hostage on the Yangtze mentions this on page 31.

The possibility of a division of China between Communists and Kuomintang along the line of the Yangtze was one possible outcome, much discussed at the time. A similar outcome was imposed on Vietnam between 1955 and 1975, and still exists for Korea. The Soviet Union favoured it behind the scenes. And it is an interesting though mostly-overlooked fact that while the Communists took Beijing on 31 January and captured the Kuomintang capital of Nanjing on 23 April, the actual proclamation of the People's Republic in Beijing was delayed to 1 October 1949. It was also a government that included elements from China's weak but well-connected Third Force.

As I said earlier, Mao at that time was seeking compromise. He took a harder line later when the USA embarked on a 20-year policy of non-recognition that included the possibility of an invasion with Taiwan as a front. Mao also never dropped the Third Force elements and let them have greater prominence when the USA finally conceded in the early 1970s. But back in 1949, there were much larger and more significant Third Force elements in play. Mao offered terms for a peace that would have excluded Chiang Kai-shek. As he put it in March 1949:

*"Those trying to wreck the negotiations are Chiang Kai-shek and his sworn followers. Chiang Kai-shek still has sixty divisions south of the Yangtze and they are preparing to fight. Our policy is not to refuse negotiations, but to demand that the other side accept the eight terms in their entirety and to allow no bargaining. In return, we would refrain from fighting the Kwangsi [Guangxi] clique and the other Kuomintang factions which favour peace, postpone the reorganization of their troops for about a year, allow some individuals in the Nanking government to take part in the Political Consultative Conference and the coalition government and agree to protect certain interests of the bourgeoisie in Shanghai and in the south. The negotiations are to be on an over-all basis and, if successful, they will reduce many obstacles to our advance into the south and to the take-over of the big cities there, which will have great advantages. If they are not successful, then separate negotiations on a local basis will be held after our army*

39 After a huge city on the upstream Yangtze basin, now known as Chongqing

advances. The negotiations on an over-all basis are tentatively fixed for late March. We hope to occupy Nanking by April or May, then convene the Political Consultative Conference in Peiping, form a coalition government and make Peiping the capital.” 42

Interestingly, Mao had accepted the change of name. Even though he was in a position to have declare a new government, he sought compromise. He may have been hoping to include more Third Force elements than in fact came over.

He was also well aware of the danger of the old society absorbing the party, the process that Guillaun had been expecting to happen in 1949 and was appalled to find had not happened in his 'Blue Ants' book. Mao was alert to the danger:

"To win countrywide victory is only the first step in a long march of ten thousand li. Even if this step is worthy of pride, it is comparatively tiny; what will be more worthy of pride is yet to come. After several decades, the victory of the Chinese people's democratic revolution, viewed in retrospect, will seem like only a brief prologue to a long drama. A drama begins with a prologue, but the prologue is not the climax. The Chinese revolution is great, but the road after the revolution will be longer, the work greater and more arduous. This must be made clear now in the Party. The comrades must be taught to remain modest, prudent and free from arrogance and rashness in their style of work. The comrades must be taught to preserve the style of plain living and hard struggle. We have the Marxist-Leninist weapon of criticism and self-criticism. We can get rid of a bad style and keep the good. We can learn what we did not know. We are not only good at destroying the old world, we are also good at building the new. Not only can the Chinese people live without begging alms from the imperialists, they will live a better life than that in the imperialist countries." (Ibid.)

In my view, this was the logic behind ventures like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. After Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping made a compromise with global capitalism: but did so on excellent terms. Terms he'd not have got had not Mao's methods already made China very strong, contrary to what most Western books insinuate, without ever mentioning the overall achievements of the Mao Era. 43 Terms which have made China nearly the equal of the USA, and steadily rising as the USA declines.

Back in 1949, Chiang was looking to the USA to save him in return for his loyal service. When peace was offered, he responded evasively. He resigned as President in January of that year, but without really abandoning power. He had briefly done this once before, in 1931, when he was nominally replaced by Sun Fo, the not-very-effective son of party founder Sun Yat-sen. Both times, those who mattered must have been aware that Chiang had no intention of actually being replaced and was still in charge. Mao took it for granted that the sixty divisions on the Yangtze still obeyed Chiang.

Hostage on the Yangtze gives rather a soft description of the process:

"He [Chiang] did not wish to issue an outright rejection of the Communist ultimatum at this time and immediately resume the war with the PLA. Instead he played for time by dramatically retiring from the fray, leaving Li Tsung-jen [Li Zongren] as acting president to piece together a mutually acceptable settlement... As General Li tried unsuccessfully to square the circle over the next few months, a cease-fire on the war front brought much-needed relief to China.

"While Li was engaged in his task of stalling for time and because no one seriously expected the KMT to agree to Mao's demands, a decision was made by his government to move the seat of power from Nanking to Canton where the Nationalists were more entrenched and less vulnerable. When the KMT administration decided to move south, it issued a formal request for the withdrawal of all foreign vessels from the Yangtze by 8 February. According to the British interpretation of this instruction, however, the Nationalists were not objecting to the presence of foreign navel craft on the river per se, but were going through the motions in order to indemnify themselves in advance should some mishap involving any foreign vessels occur on the Yangtze in the future. Confident that they would not offend the Nationalists by ignoring their request, the British preferred to take their chances and continue to maintain a naval presence at Nanking for the foreseeable future. Their belief in the deterrent value of the white ensign [the British Royal Navy flag] was totally misplaced, as later events would prove." (Hostage on the Yangtze., p35.)

This is evasive about the central fact that Britain's presence on the Yangtze was no longer legal. The naval authorities would of course have known that Chiang still held the real power and did not want them to go. He wanted Britain and the USA to step in and save him, maybe as part of World War Three.

The British Navy behaved in a way that was either astonishingly short-sighted or else an attempt to get Britain involved in China's civil war in defiance of the wishes of the Foreign Office and the Labour government. They'd have been aware that this government had been willing to aid the anti-Communist forces in the Greek civil war, and that the USA had got involved later on.

It was clear by the time that the Amethyst sailed that the war was about to resume. It was expected that the Communist forces (now known as the People's Liberation Army, though not meaningfully different except in size from the previous Red Army) would attempt to cross the Yangtze. It was also known that this might be difficult operation: it would have been costly if the defenders had shown normal military determination. In fact they seem to have concluded that Mao was going to win regardless and had no enthusiasm about dying for a dying cause.

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The crossing had an historic significance additional to what was apparent at the time. Deng Xiaoping, then almost unknown outside China, played an important role as Political Commissar of the 2nd Field Army, which undertook the difficult river crossing. This successful venture must have helped his rise to the most senior party ranks. He'd been a mid-ranking supporter of Mao in the Jiangxi Soviet, lost his job when Mao's power was reduced and recovered his mid-ranking position on the Long March. He is not mentioned in Red Star Over China; nor by any other English-language source in the 1930s and 1940s, as far as I know. He wasn't one of the original thirteen members of the Seventh Politburo of the Communist Party of China, elected by the Central Committee in 1946. He gained membership in 1955, along with Lin Biao. When the Eighth Politburo was elected in 1956, he ranked seventh on the Politburo Standing Committee. Purged during the Cultural Revolution, he was restored by Mao to his senior positions in 1974-5, including membership of the Politburo Standing Committee. Despite being dismissed from his governmental positions in 1976, this left him senior enough to become the top leader after Mao's death. It's moot if any of the other surviving senior leaders could have managed such a smooth and decisive transition: chaos or stagnation could easily have happened.

What role if any Deng played in the Amethyst Incident is unknown. It began well below his level and was probably passed up at once to more senior levels who'd have communicated directly with the men the British met.

Foreign naval forces on Chinese rivers might have made a big difference, as they had in the past. There was reason to be suspicious:

"Part of a report that the Admiralty originally wanted to keep secret until the year 2025 – a staggering seventy-six years after the attack – revealed that Amethyst had tried to sail past an area on the north bank identified as San Chiang Ying, 'an assemblage point of craft for a man crossing of the Yangtze River... The batteries would, therefore, be very much on the alert and extremely trigger happy.' The Communists were in no mood to show caution. Warships of the Nationalist navy had been 'extremely active' in bombarding Communist positions in the weeks leading up to Amethyst's voyage... There were about forty junks, each capable of carrying between 500 and 1000 soldiers, in a creek on the north bank." (Yangtze Showdown, pages 6 & 8).

Britain's Royal Navy was not yet resigned to its lesser role. When the Tories got back into power, the remnants of British Imperialism managed one last grand gesture with the Suez Invasion of 1956 – a plot with Israel that would have been dismissed as a crazy conspiracy theory except that it has all been admitted and well documented. In 1949, similar ambitions existed.

*A paper for navel chiefs stressed:

"British interests are worldwide and the inherent mobility of the navy makes it still an effective and economical instrument for settling minor troubles or disputes. The mere existence of a strong navy is a considerable influence for peace and quiet." (Ibid., p 11.)

The Amethyst's Pointless Voyage

Britain had a destroyer called HMS Consort at Nanking, where the British embassy was. The Amethyst was sent on the pretext of replacing it and re-supplying the embassy. Also to evacuate Britons if there were a break-down in law and order. But did the task need a warship?

"In reality, the ships were 'flying the flag'... In reality, one of the Royal Air Force's Sutherland flying boats based in Hong Kong could have brought the supplies and taken part in an evacuation." (Ibid., page 12.)

Had things gone to plan, the 'resupply' would have meant two British warships in place at a time when it might matter.

The Consort had been scheduled to be replaced by an Australian warship. But like virtually all other foreign observers, the Australian ambassador had become contemptuous of the Kuomintang forces:

"The Nationalists may try and hold the Yangtze line, as they have 19 armies... Although this sounds a considerable force, most of the troops are ill equipped, badly fed and clothed, and with practically no morale left." (Ibid., page 13.)

Australia sensibly refused to send a ship up the Yangtze. The frigate Amethyst was sent instead:

"While events on the political stage in Peking were reaching a delicate stage, the British destroyer HMS Consort stood waiting to be relieved at Nanking. After the Communists issued their first ultimatum to General Li, with its scarcely veiled threats to cross the Yangtze if the Nationalists had not agreed to peace terms by 12 April, Sir Ralph Stephenson, the British ambassador, met his Australian counterpart to discuss the deteriorating situation in China... both felt that the passage of the Australian frigate Shoalhaven up the Yangtze on this date might be recklessly provocative, Stephenson sent a cable on 7 April requesting permission from Vice-Admiral Alexander Madden – the flag officer second in command of the Far East Station – to postpone the trip... the flag officer proposed... that HMS Amethyst should be substituted for Shoalhaven as relief, because the latter was scheduled for operational duty in Japan... at the end of the month." (Hostage on the Yangtze, page 39.)

"According to established practice, ships on the Far East Station were never supposed to let their stock of usable fuel fall below 35 percent. Madden was aware that he had no more than a week to spare before Consort reached this stage... Madden may have felt... she would have soon urgently required additional supplies of fuel and food and that this task might have proved difficult to arrange from purely local sources...

"Madden can hardly be faulted for wishing to avoid such a scenario as this...

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44 The Amethyst was built as a sloop, but in 1948 the British Navy re-classified all of its surviving sloops as frigates. It was both Sloop U16 and Frigate F116 during its period of service.
"What remains utterly indefensible, however ... was his inexplicable decision, supported at least tacitly by the British ambassador, to send another warship to Nanking in order to relieve Consort. Although it is true that maintaining a naval presence on the Yangtze had yielded some useful advantages for the British in the past, it is highly improbable that these were of such magnitude that they could not be done without in the future. It is still simply astonishing to think that this policy was not subject to critical reexamination ... In fact, it says much about the adroitness of British foreign policy concerning the Far East in 1949 that a closer watch was not kept on regional decision making by British government officials in China...

"By no stretch of the imagination could the relief of Consort by Amethyst be regarded as merely routine. Yet the matter appears to have been handled as if it were a procedural item of little international significance. A decision about whether to send the Amethyst upriver was not referred to higher authority, but appears to have been made in the first place by the flag officer and endorsed subsequently by the British ambassador...

"By the time [British ambassador] Stephenson proffered his own advice ... he had learned that the Nationalist were virtually certain to reject the Communist peace terms ... was likely to lead to the immediate forcible crossing of the Yangtze by the PLA [People's Liberation Army], and he pointed out this probability in a cable to the Foreign Office in London on 18 April. Yet on the same day ... he had nonetheless sanctioned the changeover desired by Madden... Stephenson's decision not to oppose the sailing of the Amethyst upriver to Nanking, an area that was almost bound to be a battle zone within a matter of days, must be judged as being both reckless and ill conceived.

"His error was compounded by the unwillingness of the flag officer to alter his plans. Even without receiving the necessary clearance from the Nationalist government, Madden still resolved to begin the relief mission... In fact, he did not obtain permission from the KMT for the passage of the two British warships on the Yangtze until some hours after the Amethyst had left." (Ibid., pages 39-40.)

The navy may have been acting against the wishes of the Britain's Labour government:

"This first parliamentary inquiry into the incident had revealed that the prime minister apparently knew little anyway about events on the Yangtze than did anyone else in the United Kingdom. Attlee did not need to cover up the government's role in the crisis, for the alarming fact was that it had performed no function at all. (Ibid., page 123.)

Yangtze Showdown goes further, saying (pages 16-17) that Prime Minister Attlee "was not being told the truth" about what British ships were doing. There was plenty of time to recall Amethyst. There had been no need ever to send it:

"The main reason Madden gave for sending Amethyst at such a critical time during the civil war was fear that Consort might not have enough fuel to return to Shanghai if she remained too long at Nanking... But Madden neglected to reveal that a large quantity of fuel was being stored at Nanking for emergencies." (Yangtze Showdown, pages 15-16.)

But it went anyway, and was forcefully opposed. The British account of what happened is that some shells fell near them at 8:30 on April 20th, perhaps accidentally as part of shelling of Kuomintang forces. At 9:30 there was a very serious attack, doing damage and fatally wounding both the Captain and the Chinese pilot. It also jammed the steering, so that the ship ran onto a mudbank on the Kuomintang side of the river. Stuck, they still came under fire. Amethyst fired back but got very much the worst of it.

The Chinese insisted that the Amethyst fired first. There may have been a misunderstanding:

"The voyage resumed at 0734. During the next hour it was decided to test the firing circuits of the main guns – perhaps not the wisest move – and this noise may have alerted Communist troops. The first attack came soon afterwards." (Yangtze Showdown, p17.)

Whatever, the British Navy's response was to bring down the destroyer Consort from Nanking. Consort was also fired on and battled it out with the Communist gun emplacements, suffering damage and with ten of her crew killed. The idea had been for them to tow the Amethyst, but this proved too difficult, particularly since the steering on the Amethyst was damaged. The crew of the Consort knocked out some gun emplacements, but eventually sailed on down-river.

That wasn't the end of it, of course. The navy tried again, this time with a much more powerful ship, the cruiser London. It had eight 8-inch guns and eight 4-inch guns as against six 4-inch guns on the Amethyst and four 4.5-inch guns on the Consort. The London was supported by the Black Swan, a small frigate very similar to the Amethyst. These met up with the Consort, but the Consort was too damaged to risk again and was sent downriver to Shanghai. The other two warships were still nineteen miles from the Amethyst when sustained shelling damaged the London, killing the Chinese pilot and injuring others, including the ship's captain. Vice-Admiral Madden, responsible for the original decision to sent the Amethyst, ordered them back.

Incidentally, Chinese working for the British had a rough time of it. While the British sailors were keen to fight, the Chinese serving them were not:

"At that moment the bridge was hit by two shells and a third, killing the Chinese pilot and injuring others, including the ship's captain. Vice-Admiral Madden, responsible for the original decision to sent the Amethyst, ordered them back."

Yangtze Showdown, pages 235-6. The Consort also had torpedoes, but may have been weaker than the Amethyst in a fight with land-based artillery, having larger guns but fewer guns.

45 Hostage on the Yangtze (pages 50-51)
46 Hostage on the Yangtze, pages 55-57
47 Yangtze Showdown, pages 235-6. The Consort also had torpedoes, but may have been weaker than the Amethyst in a fight with land-based artillery, having larger guns but fewer guns.
48 http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1949/apr/26/attacks-on-hm-ships-china
49 Hostage on the Yangtze, pages 72-3
Showdown doesn't bother to name him, either there or in the Appendices. It gives all of the British casualties on the various ships by name and rank, but says "Three Chinese, including a Yangtze pilot, also died" at the end of the list of dead for the Amethyst (page 238). It later says "A total of about fourteen Chinese – stewards, cooks, tailors, laundrymen – were on board when Amethyst was attacked" (page 242), again not thinking them worth naming. Chinese serving the British were also killed on the cruiser London when it tried to force its way up the river. They get not even a hazy indication to go with the detailed list of British dead and wounded on that warship.

Looking more widely: if anyone had been thinking that the British Navy could prevent the PLA from crossing the Yangtze, they must have changed their minds. A relatively small part of the Chinese forces had driven off several first-rate British warships.

"Despite London's considerable attributes, she remained vulnerable to the high-velocity 37-mm armor-piercing shells that the Communists possessed, for these were capable of penetrating even the supposedly extra-thick, protective steel walls of the turrets and gunhouses of the cruiser." (Hostage on the Yangtze, page 73.)

These must have come from the vast stock of Kuomintang weapons turned over by Chinese armies that surrendered or switched sides. The 'Nationalists' had been given good weaponry, but armies that surrendered or switched sides.

British warships. Chinese forces had drive from crossing the Yangtze, the British dead and wounded on that warship. It later tried to force its way up the river thinking them worth naming. (page 20.)

"But eight ratings, the last to get ashore … did not know about the minefields and several of them actually sat on mines... Luckily, none of the mines worked." (Ibid., page 20.)

That book also tells of a case when Kuomintang inefficiency saved British lives. Some Amethyst sailors made for the south bank, still controlled by the Kuomintang armies:

"When the first sailors reached the south bank of Rose Island, which was controlled by the Nationalists, they faced another hazard – minefields. Fortunately, they were spotted by friendly soldiers and guided through the danger.

"But eight ratings, the last to get ashore … did not know about the minefields and several of them actually sat on mines... Luckily, none of the mines worked." (Ibid., page 20.)

This was typical lack of effectiveness. Or maybe they already planned to surrender and were keen not to anger the enemy. They did abandon Nanking far too easily. And there was disorder in the interval between the Kuomintang retreat and the Communist take-over.

"In Nanking, Ambassador Stevenson remained at his post. Nationalist leaders had abandoned the capital, along with their soldiers and police... Before the PLA marched into the city local Communists broke cover and made some attempt to keep order in the face of looting by civilians.

The looters targeted empty government offices and homes of officials who had fled as well as British firms. They took everything from plumbing and electrical fittings to windows and doors. At the airport the wealthy piled onto planes with as many possessions as they could take, only to discover that the pilots had defected or disappeared. Demolition charges left by the Nationalists caused some civilian casualties and explosives destroyed the entrance hall of the railway station, although the tracks were undamaged." (Ibid, page 80.)

There was no more danger once the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was in full control:

"Mao, in fact, gave instructions on how soldiers should behave towards foreigners in Nanking. All foreign institutions were to be protected but there would be no recognition of embassies or their diplomatic personnel. Foreigners would not be arrested even if they broke martial law regulations." (Ibid, page 81.)

Interestingly, Hostage on the Yangtze mentions two instance in which Kuomintang forces fired on the British ships. (Pages 75-6 and 86). Maybe they were realising, very late in the day, that this is what they should have been doing from 1927 onwards. And the book contains another report of Kuomintang inefficiency and Chinese Communist mastery of Western ways: a point that would not need to be made more than once except for the gaggle of right-wingers claiming that 'recent research' shows otherwise. A British diplomat called Edward Youde had gone to negotiate for the release of the Amethyst. He saw exactly the same as almost everyone else who was there:

"The men learned that the town was littered with nationalist mines. Fortunately these mines had already been detected and marked with chalk and vegetation, so the unit was able to pass through the area with no difficulty.

"This experience seemed to illustrate the marked difference between the rival armies in the civil war. Whereas the Nationalists appeared rather woebegone, lacking in morale and ideas, the Communists tackled problems sensibly, coolly, and efficiently. Indeed throughout his mission, Youde had been impressed by the esprit de corps displayed by both the officers and troops of the PLA; relations between them appeared to be good, discipline was excellent, orders were carried out promptly, and everyone with whom he met and talked seemed to know the importance of the cause for which they were fighting." (Hostage on the Yangtze, p101.)

Weirdly, the British Navy was still claiming that the Yangtze was an international waterway (Ibid., pages 94-5). It was an obvious absurdity, since it didn't lead to anywhere except the interior of China. But though the British Labour Government of 1945 was excellent for internal reforms, the bulk of the party continued to take a soft attitude to lingering imperialism until it became unsustainable in the 1960s and 1970s. (And found it all too easy to revert in the 1990s as New Labour.)

Back in 1949, the British did finally abandoned their claim to sail freely on the Yangtze (page 110), which had become absurd after the PLA crossed the river with unexpected ease and now controlled

50 Yangtze Showdown, page 35
both banks of it. But there was still the matter of them having gone there after the Communist side in China's Civil War had clearly told them not to. This was raised at the time in the British House of Commons (page 119), a debate which I quote from later. Prime Minister Attlee, who'd been an army major in the First World War, very sensibly said that warships were not designed to fight big guns that were well emplaced on a riverbank. But this hasn't been a problem in the 1920s and 1930s. The real point was that the Chinese armies trained and motivated by the Chinese Communists were now as efficient as European forces, which the British Navy had apparently not realised.

Similar errors were made later in the Korean War, with the USA not listening to what a lot of their own people had been telling them. This was the foolishness of an Anglo elite who for several generations supposed themselves to be the top layer of a global hierarchy of nationality and colour.

They needed a lot of hard knocks before they learned better. And a revived version of the same foolishness appeared in the 1980s and has been making all sorts of messes since the 1990s, when the Soviet collapse boosted Anglo self-confidence.

Back in 1949, Western Imperialism was in full retreat, and the military were deeply resentful of it. The People's Liberation Army had demanded that all foreign forces get out of China, including its territorial inland waters. But Britain refused to accept guilt and its warship became stuck where it has run aground. The crew kept up a defiant attitude.

A lightweight chatty book called Yangtze Incident even claims that sailors trapped on the Amethyst were unwise enough to hang an effigy of Mao, labelled as such.51 I don't believe this, in part because the other books don't mention it. The Amethyst was stuck and could have been destroyed at any time. But that the tale was told in a mainstream British book does say something about lingering notions of British superiority.

What eventually happened is that the Amethyst managed to slip away and sail safely out of China. Oddly, this was seen as a sort of triumph and a rather bombastic film was made about it.52

The Kuomintang evacuated the mainland later in 1949. They lost Chengdu in Sichuan in December, their last mainland position. Were once again defeated and driven out of Hainan Island in April 1950. If the North Korean invasion of the south in June 1950 been postponed for a few months, the new Communist-led government would have almost certainly completed matters by capturing Taiwan later in 1950.

This last may not have been an accident. Everyone who's studied the Korean War53 agrees that Mao did not approve of Kim's action in starting his war before Mao's own was completed. It's not even certain that Mao was told just when it would happen, though he did help it by releasing from the Chinese army a large number of ethnic-Korean troop who'd been fighting as part of the PLA, most of them refugees from the Korean Peninsula when it belonged to Japan. But Kim II-Sung was largely a Soviet creation, having had a middling role in anti-Japanese guerrilla warfare before that. With certainty he did not act without Stalin's knowledge and permission.

One would not have expected Kim II-Sung to be worried about whether his own venture might cost China the chance to complete their unification. But it hardly seems likely that Stalin would have failed to think the matter through. There were US troops in South Korea, unlike Taiwan. They would be certain to join in the fighting, making a wider war likely. He would also have known that the US Seventh Fleet was in the region and could be used to block the Taiwan Strait, as in fact happened. Did Stalin overlook the possibility of this happening, or did he perhaps desire it? Certainly, it vastly reduced the possibility of the USA recognising Beijing and perhaps becoming reconciled. Such a recognition of failure would have been likely after Taiwan had been conquered, as it almost certainly would have been if the USA had stayed out. This in turn made China more dependent on the Soviet Union and less likely to follow a Titoist road – or at least Stalin might have seen it so. And it's worth noting that the Soviet authorities had been oddly protective of Chiang Kai-shek over the years. They had given him a lot of his military training, and had done much to boost his power by getting him appointed Commandant of the Whampoa Military Academy. It was also Stalin's orders that forced the Chinese Communists to work to save Chiang's life during the Xian incident.

That's speculation. What happened was that Chiang and the Kuomintang got US protection. Taiwan remained separate, a split which remains unresolved. As for the Third Force, they never became anything serious, nor did they particularly deserve to. Li Zongren had unintentionally served Chiang's purpose by confirming that the Communists were not going to offer terms that he and the other Kuomintang moderates might consider accepting. The Wikipedia puts it thus:

"Li's attempts to carry out his policies faced varying degrees of opposition from Chiang's supporters, and were generally unsuccessful. Chiang especially antagonized Li by taking possession of (and moving to Taiwan) US$200 million of gold and US dollars belonging to the central government that Li desperately needed to cover the government's soaring expenses. When the Communists captured the Nationalist capital of Nanjing in April 1949, Li refused to accompany the central government as it fled to Guangdong, instead expressing his dissatisfaction with

53 Everyone apart from Chiang and Halliday in Mao, the Unknown Story. The book full of unlikely claims: see

Chiang by retiring to Guangxi."54

He's one of a number of lesser figures in 20th century Chinese who are worth further study. Sadly, there seems very little about them available in English. If there was an alternative in China, he was part of it – but no one seems to want to know. He had never been in command of the political-military machine that escaped to Taiwan. Chiang took back the Presidency in February 1950, and gradually reduced Li's power to nothing. Then in 1965, Li Zongren caused a minor sensation by returning to Mainland China in July 1965 – just in time for the opening of the Cultural Revolution. He was not a lucky man.55

Li was however luckier than General Feng Yuxiang, the most substantial of the Third Force warlords and a man who had dared fight the Japanese well before Chiang tried it. I mentioned in Problems 24 how he died in a mysterious fire while passing through the Soviet Union with the intention of forming part of the anti-Chiang coalition. It rather fits with my suspicions about why the Korean War began before Mao could capture Taiwan. And many people believe that the Soviets murdered some inconvenient pro-Soviet leaders who had created a small East Turkistan Republic on what most Chinese viewed as Chinese territory. The official cause was an air crash: but after the Soviet collapse, some KGB sources endorsed the story.

The Declining British Empire

To get back to the Amethyst Incident. There was an interesting debate on it in the British House of Commons. Churchill was Leader of the Opposition:

Mr. Churchill (by Private Notice) asked the Prime Minister whether the Government will make a statement about the situation on the Yangtse River, and the circumstances in which His Majesty's ships were attacked and British sailors killed and wounded...

"The Prime Minister (Mr. Attlee): I will first explain what our position is with regard to the civil war in China. It has been repeatedly stated in this House that our policy has been governed by the Moscow Declaration of December, 1945, in which the United Kingdom, the United States and the Soviet Union declared a policy of non-intervention in China's internal affairs. In view of the considerable British interests in China and of the presence of large British communities, His Majesty's Government decided some months ago that His Majesty's Ambassador and His Majesty's Consular Officers in China should remain at their posts...

"In the disturbed conditions which have prevailed in recent months, warships of various Powers have been at Shanghai and Nanking so that in the event of a breakdown of law and order as the result of hostilities they would be able to assist in the evacuation of their nationals. When the Chinese Government decided to move to Canton, it is true that a warning was issued about warships in the Yangtse. Nevertheless it is a fact that since that time the movements of our warships in the Yangtse have taken place with the full knowledge and consent of the National Government of China. I want to make the point therefore that when the incident took place to which I am about to refer, H.M.S. 'Amethyst' was proceeding on her lawful occasions and that there was no other properly constituted authority to whom His Majesty's Government were under an obligation to notify her movements even had they been in a position to do so.

"The House will wish to know whether any steps were taken by our authorities in China to make contact with the Communist authorities. Some time has lapsed since Communist forces overran Mukden, Peking and Tientsin where we have Consular posts. His Majesty's Consular Officers at these posts have been endeavouring for some time past to reach day-to-day working arrangements with the local authorities. Their approaches have, however, been rejected on every occasion without any reason being given for such a rejection. The same policy was followed in rejecting a letter from His Majesty's Consul in Peking about the 'Amethyst' when the incident had occurred." (Hansard, April 26th 1949 56)

That's not actually true. The Chinese Communists had clearly stated that all foreign forces should leave the whole of China.

Attlee also gives the excuse that the ship should have been in place before hostilities resumed:

"H.M.S. 'Consort' was already due for relief, but this relief was postponed in view of a Communist ultimatum which was due to expire on 12th April and which might have been followed by the crossing of the Yangtse. On 12th April His Majesty's Ambassador learned that the ultimatum had been extended to 15th April. The relief had therefore to be postponed. Only on 18th April was it learned that the final expiry of the ultimatum might lead to the crossing of the Yangtse by Communist forces on 21st April...

"Perhaps I may at this point anticipate two questions which may possibly be asked. First, how was it that H.M. ships suffered such extensive damage and casualties, and second, why they were not able to silence the opposing batteries and fight their way through. In answer to the first, I would only say that warships are not designed to operate in rivers against massed artillery and infantry sheltered by reeds and mudbanks. The Communist forces appear to have been concentrated in considerable strength and are reported as being lavishly equipped with howitzers, medium artillery and field guns. The above facts also provide much of the answer to the second question, only I would add this. The Flag Officer's policy throughout was designed only to rescue H.M.S. 'Amethyst' and to avoid unnecessary casualties. There was no question of a punitive expedition and H.M. ships fired only to silence the forces firing against them.

"I will at this point briefly summarise the losses which resulted.

"H.M.S. 'London': 13 killed. 15 wounded.

"H.M.S. 'Consort': 10 killed 4 seriously wounded.

54 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Zongren#Chinese_Civil_War as at 8th February 2015

55 This would be a good title for a biography of Li.

56 http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1949/apr/26/attacks-on-hm-ships-china
"H.M.S. 'Amethyst'; 19 killed. 27 wounded.  
H.M.S. 'Black Swan'; 7 wounded.

"In addition, 12 ratings are still missing. Of the damage to the ships, the 'London' suffered the most severely, having been holed repeatedly in her hull and upper works. The damage to the 'Consort' and the 'Black Swan' was less serious. 'London' and the 'Black Swan' have already completed their emergency repairs. The 'Amethyst' suffered severe damage but was repaired by the efforts of her own crew so as to be capable of 17 knots...

"At this time Mr. Edward Youde, a third Secretary in His Majesty's Foreign Service who has a good knowledge of Chinese, volunteered to try and contact the Communist forces north of Pukou in the hope of reaching some commanding officer with sufficient authority to stop the firing... Thanks to his courage and determination Mr. Youde succeeded in reaching the forward headquarters of the People's Liberation Army... Their headquarters took the line that clearance had not been obtained from the People's Liberation Army and that she had entered the war area. They also complained of heavy casualties incurred by their troops as a result of fire from H.M. ships. They refused to admit justification of self-defence. After consulting higher authority the headquarters stated that in the circumstances they would be prepared to allow the ship to proceed to Nanking but only on condition that she should assist the People's Liberation Army to cross the Yangtse. Such a condition was obviously unacceptable.

"My attention has been drawn to a communiqué broadcast by the Communists which said that on the date in question warships on the Yangtse opened fire to prevent its crossing by Communist forces. It further stated that it was not until the following day that they learned that these ships were not all Chinese but that four British ships were among them. The Communists state that their forces suffered 252 casualties as a result of this firing and claim that His Majesty's Government have directly participated in the Chinese civil war by firing on Communist positions. These claims are, of course, so far as they relate to His Majesty's Government or the Royal Navy, as fantastic as they are unfounded." (Ibid)

Attlee had said 95 British casualties – 42 killed and 53 wounded. Accepting the figures from both sides as true, it cost the Chinese 5 for 2 for a decisive victory. It closed a long chapter of foreign military interventions in China – the USA must have considered it but never dared try it. Got mauled when they tried it on smaller enemies, though it depended on the target being ready to accept an enormous suffering, as in Vietnam.

MPs did ask about the critical matter of ignoring warnings:

*Mr. Clement Davies: "May I ask the Prime Minister two questions? He has referred to the warning which had been given by the Nationalist Government before they moved to Canton. Can he tell us exactly when that warning was given, the nature of it and to whom it was given, and why it was that His Majesty's Government came to the conclusion that they should not heed that warning whatever happened? Secondly, may I ask him what steps are now being taken, or can be taken even at this late stage, for the further protection of His Majesty's subjects in this danger zone?"

"The Prime Minister: "On the first point, I have not got the exact date by me, but it was a considerable time ago. The right hon. and learned Gentleman will remember that the Chinese Government moved to Canton, that various changes in the Government took place, and that they subsequently came back to Nanking. For a considerable period of weeks, indeed I think months, there has been the passage of our ships and the ships of other nations up the Yangtse. I think one would be entitled to say that it was notified on every occasion and there was no objection. As a matter of fact, this practice has been allowed.

"Mr. Davies: If the right hon. Gentleman was disregarding that serious warning, in view of the steady advance made by the Communist armies, if no guarantee could be obtained from both sides before the ship was sent up, would it not have been better to withdraw our nationals and protect them at that particular moment?

"The Prime Minister: The decision was announced in the House that we did not propose to withdraw our nationals, and that decision was taken in consultation with other nationals there. I think it is right that they should remain." (Ibid.)

Some MPs talked as if they hadn't adjusted to the loss of Western privilege in China:

"Mr. Wyatt: Can the Prime Minister say whether the Government have any indication of the general attitude of the Communist authorities in China towards the treaty rights of foreign powers as a whole, because we ought to avoid further incidents of this kind?

"The Prime Minister: We have had no answer from the Communist authorities... As I have already stated, we have made and are making every effort to get in touch with the Communist authorities, but so far we have not been able to get a letter through.

"Mr. Gammans: In view of the changed circumstances, do the Government still regard themselves as bound by the Moscow Declaration which means that, while we are doing our best to halt Communism in Europe, we are prepared to do nothing to check it in Asia? In view of the southward advance of the Communist forces, can the right hon. Gentleman give this House an assurance right here and now that Hong Kong is safe both from external aggression and fifth column activity from within?

"The Prime Minister: I would prefer to have these detailed questions put on the Order Paper; they do not arise directly out of this incident." (Ibid.)

Willie Gallacher, Communist Party MP for West Fifeshire from 1935 to 1950, did raise the vital matter of why a warship had been used to bring supplies:

"Mr. Gallacher: The Prime Minister said that the Consulate at Nanking was short of supplies, but is he not aware that during the period of the truce both the road and rail were open and could have been used, had it been desired, for sending in supplies?" (Ibid.)

He had found a weak point: there had been no need whatsoever to send a warship, a point detailed in Hostage on the Yangtze (page 122-3.) The book also notes that Gallacher made a tactical error by going on to mention the separate matter of the immanent end of the cease-fire:

"In joining with the expression of sympathy with the
friends of those who have been lost—[Interuption]—surely, I know what it is to suffer bereavement and I deplore this wanton sacrifice of British lives—may I ask the Prime Minister, in view of the fact that the authorities must have known that the Kuomintang authorities were not going to accept the terms of the truce, whether there will not be an independent inquiry into the responsibility for sending this ship up the Yangtse at a time when it was known that hostilities were going to start?

"The Prime Minister: The hon. Member is, of course, quite wrong. I have no information as to what the Kuomintang authorities were likely to do. I have already told the House that our information was that hostilities would not begin until the time given on the 21st. Had this firing not taken place before the ending of that armistice, there would have been no question of the ship being hit." (Ibid.)

Gallacher should have stuck to the matter of the warship being sent. He got no further chance to pursue it.

Attlee also faced criticism from the opposite direction, a Tory MP who seems to have been thinking in terms of a rapidly-vanishing world of gunboat diplomacy:

"Mr. Boyd-Carpenter: Is it not a fact that until 1947 there were two aircraft carriers on the China station? Could the right hon. Gentleman say why, in the face of the obviously deteriorating situation in China, His Majesty's Government reduced rather than reinforced this squadron?

"The Prime Minister: I certainly could not answer that without notice." (Ibid.)

He dodged the matter, but was well aware that the Empire was not what it had been before the Second World War. Japanese successes like the Fall of Singapore in 1942 had dented the long-cherished notion of a Superior White Race. The Amethyst Incident was evidence it was not just the Japanese who could successfully adapt to the modern world. Chinese under suitable leadership could do the same. But in China as in many other countries, only Communists could provide such leadership.

As it happened, Mao learned of the British debate and replied to it:

We denounce the preposterous statement of the warmonger Churchill. In the British House of Commons on April 26, Churchill demanded that the British government should send two aircraft carriers to the Far East for 'effective power of retaliation'. What are you 'retaliating' for, Mr. Churchill? British warships together with Kuomintang warships intruded into the defence area of the Chinese People's Liberation Army and fired on the People's Liberation Army, causing no less than 252 casualties among our loyal and gallant fighters. Since the British have trespassed on Chinese territory and committed so great a crime, the People's Liberation Army has good reason to demand that the British government admit its wrongdoing, apologize and make compensation.57

A Need For Reminders

The Amethyst Incident has been largely forgotten by Britons, and by the world in general. Maybe the Chinese should revive memories, maybe funding an English-language film or drama series to be made by some sympathetic or cash-needy Western director. Ocean Devils would be a suitable title: it is one of the Chinese terms for Westerners and not one that most Westerners would find insulting.

To work, it would need to show the bigger picture, as I have shown it here. Maybe tell the story as a series of episodes, beginning with the murderous Nemesis in the First Opium War.

It's counter-productive to insult Britons, even when they deserve it. And the bald facts are that there were always some Britons took a moral stand. One could give the contribution of the young Gladstone in his exact words. Get the history straight.

Also mention the Third Forces. If there was some better way for China than Mao's way, most foreigners involved with China were guilty of not allowing the Chinese to take it. I've talked about them here and elsewhere.58

Almost everyone else seems to have assigned to what Trotsky called 'the dustbin of history'.59 A film could at least note that they existed.

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57 https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/msvw4_63.htm
58 Problems Number 22.