2016

H-Diplo

H-Diplo *Essay* No. 137
An H-Diplo Review Essay

Published on 3 May 2016

H-Diplo Essay Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse
H-Diplo Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Joyce Mao. ***Asia First: China and the Making of Modern American Conservatism*****.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 232 pp. ISBN: 978-0-2262-5271-1 (hardcover, $40.00).

URL: http://tiny.cc/E137

Reviewed by **Seth Offenbach,** Bronx Community College

Joyce Mao's *Asia First* is a book which sets itself apart from the historiography and makes the reader think about how and why American conservative foreign policy transitioned from isolationist to internationalist and interventionist. She argues that to understand conservative foreign policy, one must focus not on Europe or Cuba, but on conservatives' relationship to China. In the introduction, Mao states that "China was an integral part of what made the 'New Right' new" (2).

Asia First is a welcome addition to the small (though slowly growing) historiography of how foreign policy shaped the American conservative movement.[1] Although *Asia First* is the first book to focus exclusively on the conservative movement's Asian foreign policies, Mao does not allow that to be an excuse to just describe what conservatives said about Asia and China. Instead, she uses the book to make the argument that the movement needed China in order to "sustain right wing growth within a changing electorate [from 1945 through 1980]" and that the right's Asian foreign policy helped conservatism "develop into the most enduring political movement of the twentieth century" (2). This is an ambitious claim, but one which Mao supports through 177 meticulously researched pages.

To understand why foreign policy is so important to the history of modern conservatism, Mao begins chapter one with a description of the problems which conservatives and Republicans had in the early years of the Cold War. For instance, Republicans could not oppose Democrats on many foreign policy fronts in the late 1940s; after all, Europe was using American money to rebuild itself and the American occupation of Japan was viewed as a resounding success in the U.S. It took the rise of communist China and the war in South Korea to put Asia at the center of the political map. Mao argues that President Harry Truman's back-to-back failures in China and Korea gave Republicans and conservatives the ability

[1] Some recent books about conservative foreign policy include: Heather Hendershot, "God's Angriest Man: Carl McIntire, Cold War Fundamentalism, and Right-Wing Broadcasting," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (June 2007): 373–96; Andrew Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010); Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

to argue that containment was not a plan for victory. Instead of containment, they argued that Formosa must be protected at all cost. Additionally, the rise of communism in Asia helped convince conservative leader Senator Robert Taft that the U.S. must develop a pro-active, interventionist foreign policy. Taft's conversion from isolationism to interventionism is an important (and under-studied) point in the development of modern conservative foreign policy, and Mao discusses it thoroughly.

The early years of the Cold War coincided with an important internal struggle for control of the Republican Party. Though it might surprise contemporary observers of American politics, in the 1950s the leadership of the Republican Party was not dominated by conservatives such as Senator Taft, but by Thomas Dewey and Dwight Eisenhower who were moderate Republicans. While other historians such as Michael Bowen and Geoffrey Kabaservice have studied this period, Mao's voice is unique because she focuses on the foreign policy debates within the GOP.[2] Promoting President Chiang Kai-shek, General Douglas MacArthur, Senator Joseph McCarthy, and an aggressive alternative to containment in Asia helped to separate the conservatives from the moderate Republicans. Thus, Mao offers historians a fresh perspective about the debate between moderates and conservatives by injecting foreign policy into it.

After Mao explains the basic disputes between moderates and conservatives, she spends chapter two explaining the role of publisher Henry Luce, former congressman Walter Judd, businessman Henry Kohlberg and others in shaping "the so-called China Lobby" (43). The China Lobby, Mao states, was a "convenient catchall description for people in the United States who supported the Chinese Nationalists" (45). The China Lobby was neither as unified as its detractors claimed nor, at the outset, a conservative-led group. However, it eventually advocated its positions through conservative media, including William F. Buckley's *National Review* and Henry Regnery's press. Though she does not analyze how effective the China Lobby was at shaping public policy, and does not attempt to show how influential it was on grassroots political activists, Mao does demonstrate that many elite conservatives aided the Lobby.

Chapters three and four, which this reviewer found to be the most compelling chapters in the book, discuss the evolution of conservative interventionist foreign policy. One section of the book which would be of particular interest to scholars of modern American foreign policy is Mao's analysis of the Bricker Amendment (89-92). The proposed constitutional amendment would have limited executive power in making foreign policy. Mao argues that conservatives' support for the proposed constitutional amendment did not stem from their support for isolationist policies. Instead, she argues they wanted to protect the nation from "mistakes made by errant presidents." Specifically, supporters of the amendment believed that they had to do everything in their power to prevent another unequal treaty such as the Yalta agreements. Through this analysis, Mao is arguing that conservative supporters of the amendment were internationalists who wanted to promote "the very fabric of democracy" abroad while working to "stem the growth of dictatorship [at home]" (91). This analysis makes sense in light of the internal struggles taking place within the Republican Party, however, three pages is not much room for extrapolation; one

[2] Michael Bowen, *The Roots of Modern Conservatism: Dewey, Taft, and the Battle for the Soul of the Republican Party* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party*, Studies in Postwar American Political Development (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

can only hope that Mao or other scholars will author a more thorough study of the right's relationship to the Bricker Amendment.

In addition to offering a new interpretation of the Bricker Amendment, Mao also spends several pages in chapter three describing the delicate relationship between conservatives and the United Nations. Though there is no book analyzing how and why conservative opposition to the United Nations changed over time, there are several works which note that the right was weary of the international organization.[3] Mao claims that by the mid-1950s, the movement's opposition to the UN stemmed from an urge to promote American-style interventionism, not isolationism. This is one example of conservatives moving from isolationism (opposing the UN to keep the U.S. removed from world politics) toward interventionism (opposing the U.S. involvement in the UN because communist nations get a say in UN policies).

Mao's thesis about the relevance of Asia on conservative foreign policy comes out clearest in her analysis of Robert Welch's John Birch Society. In Chapter four she delves into Welch's background and the thinking which led to the creation of the John Birch Society, and she highlights the many references throughout the Society's writings which discuss Asia. She even analyzes Welch's decision to name the Society after the alleged first American casualty of the Asian Cold War; this, she says, is a sign of the conservative movement's Asia-first, interventionist, anti-communist foreign policy. As Mao states, Welch bet heavily on Asia: "Welch counted on the emotional weight of the 1949 'loss' to sustain popular anticommunism. The choice to name the group after John Birch illustrated how Welch presumptively relied on American orientalism" (122). This chapter about the John Birch Society elevates the historical understanding of the John Birch Society more than any work I can think of outside of D. J. Mulloy's *The World of the John Birch Society* and Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors*.[4]

In Mao's final chapter (aside from her seven-page conclusion), she writes about the 1960s conservative movement. This variant of the right was far more organized and stable than the 1945 through 1960 version of the conservative movement. The 1960s conservative movement had a more robust and unified ideology, making Mao's Asia-first thesis a bit harder to agree with. Still, she does an excellent job of highlighting the changing nature of conservative foreign policy during this period and how much the movement disapproved of President Richard Nixon's China and Vietnam War policies. Chapter five also reflects on how much the conservative movement's foreign policy had changed over the preceding fifteen years. As Mao states, Senator Barry Goldwater's seminal work *The Conscience of a Conservative* made no mention "of previous phases of [conservative] isolationism" (141). Instead, Goldwater and his followers assumed an interventionist, pro-American foreign policy which argued that whatever was best for the United States would also be best for the world.

---

[3] Bowen, *Roots of Modern Conservatism*; Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Gregory L. Schneider, *The Conservative Century: From Reaction to Revolution* (Lanham, PA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

[4] McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*; D. J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014).

One of the biggest problems for Mao's work will be finding the correct audience. Sadly, few scholars of the conservative movement in the middle of twentieth century study the importance of foreign policy on the movement. Additionally, scholars who are interested in how foreign policy ideologies change throughout society might be reluctant to accept Mao's thesis since she does not offer a clear definition of what she means by the term 'conservative movement.' Though this reviewer (who studies conservatives) recognized her definition, a non-specialist of conservatism might have some difficulties understanding who she was studying. Her definitions were made a bit more confusing because she speaks primarily of congressional and Republican leaders, even though most of the movement's leaders were outside the halls of power during the 1950s and early 1960s. By not offering a clearer definition of what the conservative movement is, I fear Mao has unintentionally limited her audience. This is a shame because this reviewer found much to admire about an understudied period in American conservative history and appreciated Mao's approach of focusing on the intersection between foreign and domestic politics.

Mao's work makes the original claim that the conservative movement's Asian foreign policy helped shape the movement's identity for the second half of the twentieth century. To reinforce her argument, Mao visited a plethora of archives while also reading all of the relevant secondary material which I could imagine. Unfortunately the University of Chicago Press did not include a works cited page (though they did include her endnotes), making a full analysis of her research difficult. Mao's research pulled from material at locations such as the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, the Library of Congress, the Sterling Library at Yale University, and other archives. She uses this research to make the compelling case that the New Right, which began dominating American politics during Ronald Reagan's first presidential run in 1976, might never have formed without the strong and unified interventionist foreign policy which became engrained two decades earlier. The right put Asia at the center of this new interventionist foreign policy in the 1950s. That she proves all of this in a brief and readable book only adds to her accomplishments.

Seth Offenbach is an Assistant Professor of History at Bronx Community College, which is part of the City University of New York. He earned his Ph.D. from Stony Brook University and he has presented his work at multiple SHAFR and Policy History conferences. He is currently working on his book *The Other Side of Vietnam: The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War.* He is also a list editor and book review editor for the H-Diplo network.