

 **Article REVIEW**

Michael M. Sheng. “Mao, Tibet, and the Korean War”. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 83 (Summer 2006): 15-32. doi: 10.1162/jcws.2006.8.3.15.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2006.8.3.15> .

Reviewed by **James I. Matray**, California State University, Chico
Published by H-Diplo on 27 July 2007

Michael M. Sheng examines the reasons behind China’s invasion of Tibet in October 1950, the same month that it sent volunteers to fight in the Korean War. The decision of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to conduct a two-front war, he writes, surprised world leaders, especially those in India and Britain. But Mao Zedong was determined to extend his revolution to Tibet. Sheng shows, however, that Mao’s “initial policy of ‘military liberation’ was replaced by a policy of ‘peaceful liberation’ after the Chinese government encountered tremendous difficulties posed by the formidable Tibetan terrain and the eruption of the Korean War” (16).

Sheng begins with a solid historiographical summary, noting how previous writers have attributed China’s invasion of Tibet either to Beijing’s imperialist agenda or “foreign intrigue” in collusion with the “old Tibet elite” (15). As promised, the author presents a more complex explanation, but no new revelations. Mao, Sheng writes, “believed that China must assert control over Tibet as soon as possible, that the use of military force was inevitable, and that the only question was how much force to use and when to use it.” He “made up his mind early and never wavered” because he feared that “Britain, India, and the United States were turning Tibet into an anti-Beijing front” (17).

A strength of this article is the author’s reliance on newly declassified Chinese resources, especially telegrams, recollections of contemporary participants, and historical accounts of Chinese scholars. Sheng documents how the PRC began planning to invade Tibet in November 1949, tracing how Mao changed military strategy and delayed implementation as a result of logistical problems that slowed road building. In response to the absence of a quick Communist victory in the Korean War, Mao adopted a “shrewd” strategy to achieve “peaceful liberation” (21). China’s military strike in October 1950 intimidated not only Tibet, but also India and Britain, who pressed for a negotiated settlement. Mao then exploited “the Dalai-Panchen conflict” (31) to secure an agreement approving Tibet’s incorporation into the PRC.

Sheng breaks new ground in his treatment of how the Korean War provided leverage for Mao to play “hawk and dove alternatively or at the same time” (27) in his skillful manipulation of India to block British action at the United Nations and U.S. aid to Tibet. Further insights will await the release of more documentary evidence from the

Communist side. Indeed, Sheng admits that Joseph Stalin's role "will remain an intriguing question until more archival material surfaces" (19f). By contrast, the author had access to secondary sources that utilize American archival materials to explore postwar U.S. covert operations in Tibet, but does not reference these works. In sum, this article addresses a neglected event in the early Cold War, but it is exploratory because of resource limitations and a narrow perspective.

James I. Matray is Professor and Chair of History at California State University, Chico. He has authored or edited six books, as well as writing more than forty articles and book chapters on issues related to the Korean War and U.S.-Korean relations. His latest book is *Korea Divided: The 38th Parallel and the Demilitarized Zone*.

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge