

To Peking For Peace:
How Daring Diplomacy Transformed Sino-American
Relations

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11th Grade

David McCullough Submission

2473 Word Paper

“In his essay, ‘Perpetual Peace,’ Immanuel Kant, argued that peace would eventually come to the world in one of two ways, by human insight or by conflicts and catastrophes of a magnitude that left humanity no other choice. Today we met at such a juncture.” - Henry

Kissinger, Former Secretary of State

The existential threat of the Soviet Union engrossed most geopolitical pundits in the West in the latter years of the 1960s. But while most attention was concentrated elsewhere, a small group of ingenious diplomats began to turn their sights south of the Soviet Union, imagining the unbounded potential of a rising China. They saw in China both a potential counter-balance to America’s Cold War rival and a malleable nation with mutual interests, one that perhaps could be induced to liberalize and join the international community. But anti-communist sentiment still raged within the US, and the idea of an American president stepping foot in China would have been utterly preposterous at the time. Understanding the delicacy of the situation, American and Chinese special envoys worked in secret to formalize diplomatic ties and pave the way for official channels, eventually culminating in President Richard Nixon’s one-week trip to China in 1972. What resulted was one of the greatest triumphs of diplomacy and bilateral debate in modern history. Starting largely in 1971, the consequences of this diplomatic effort transformed not only the path of the Cold War but also the two respective nations themselves. Undaunted by the considerable ideological and political barriers, Sino-American diplomats worked together to counter the Soviets and ushered in decades of coevolution and coexistence between the United States and China.

The American Landscape

The true brazenness of this diplomacy from the American perspective must be understood in the political context of the time. Still very much in a cold war mindset, the American people, broadly speaking, detested and feared the specter of communism. But Nixon had long established himself as a vehement anti-communist, thanks in large part to his aggressive campaign ads for the presidency. In one such ad, when asked how he planned to negotiate with Soviet leader Khrushchev, Nixon famously declared “The only answer to communism is a massive offensive for freedom.”¹ Thus, while nearly any other politician seen shaking hands with a communist leader would most certainly have been labeled a communist sympathizer by his domestic rivals, Nixon was immune to this attack.² However, the explanation of why Nixon was open to such a diplomatic move goes deeper than his “anti-red” resume. Nixon had experience and expertise in foreign affairs and saw himself as a grand strategic thinker with long-term plans. He laid out his projection for Asian policy publicly in 1967, writing in *Foreign Affairs Magazine* that America must deal with China sooner rather than later.³ Nixon understood his transcendent position in the domestic debates over working with communists and used this advantage to seize a diplomatic opportunity few politicians could, or would, have done.⁴

Undoubtedly, Nixon’s decisions were not solely of his own formulation. The great mastermind and orchestrator of these negotiations was his Secretary of State and long-term advisor, Dr. Henry Kissinger.⁵ Kissinger, like Nixon, saw the geo-political world like a

¹ Advertisement for Richard Nixon on Communism and Khrushchev. Oct. 1960. *John F. Kennedy Center-Victoria Schuck Collection*, www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/VSC.

² Daly, Robert. Personal Interview. 28 Jan. 2022.

³ Nixon, Richard M. "Asia After Viet Nam." *Foreign Affairs*, new series, vol. 46, no. 1, Oct. 1967.

⁴ Mansfield, Mike. "Mike Mansfield on President Nixon." *US News and World Report* [New York City], 38th ed., Dec. 1971. *US News and World Report*. Interview.

chessboard and he had his own vision as to how to create a new global order. In his book “Diplomacy,” Kissinger argued that the configuration of power most likely to produce such order was ideally a balance between three superpowers. An astute student of history, Kissinger argued that since the 17th century only two global configurations had produced notable stability: the Concert of Europe, created after the Congress of Vienna in 1815; and the liberal order that followed the aftermath of World War II. But neither, he explained, was ideal and both failed to last because they lacked the proper balance. The former involved too many powerful nations, and the latter involved only two.⁶ Only in a new three-way balance, Kissinger deduced, could power be checked. In America, China, and Russia, Kissinger saw the three chess pieces he needed. This theory, and assurances from Kissinger to Nixon that the international community would eventually back this move, proved enough to convince the American president that diplomacy could be the path forward.⁷

The Chinese Landscape

In China, the domestic political scene was less convoluted than that in America because, for all intents and purposes, the political scene was dominated by one man. Chairman of the Communist Party, Mao Zedong, had an iron grip over the party and the party had an iron grip over the country.⁸ Despite his near dominance, Mao still had many complex factors to consider.

⁶Kissinger, Henry, Dr. Diplomacy. New York City, Simon & Schuster, 1994.

⁷House, Office of the Historian. Memorandum From Lindsey Grant and Hal Saunders of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs. Government Publishing Office, Aug. 1969. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XVII, history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d26. House Document 26.

⁸ Kaiser, David. "The Cultural Revolution and the History of Totalitarianism." *TIME*, vol. 187, no. 19, 16 May 2016. *TIME*, time.com/4329308/cultural-revolution-history-totalitarianism/.

At the time of American outreach in the early 1970s, China was in the midst of a cultural revolution. Formally known as the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," domestic life for many was upended.⁹ There was little sense of normality in the public sphere, and Mao understood the underlying vulnerability caused by this turmoil. Even though he largely benefited from this revolutionary fervor, Mao was keenly aware of its danger. A society mobilized against itself in class warfare would be unable to mobilize against an existential threat, like the Soviet Union. And Mao, perhaps even as much as the US, feared Soviet aggression. Indeed, Mao so feared Soviet aggression that he ordered the construction of underground bomb shelters across China.¹⁰ This development was of particular interest to the CIA, and internal documents reveal the agency believed that perhaps "A new period of open hostility between the two powers has arrived."¹¹ Similar to the US, Mao saw the need for a bilateral counterbalance to the Soviets. Hence, as their mutual interests became evident, openness to diplomacy became a viable option.

Kissinger's Gamble

With an understanding of the possibilities before him, Kissinger found his first opportunity to launch dialogues with China in 1969, after the Sino-Soviet border conflict on the Ussuri river.

The crisis was precipitated by the Soviet military, who appeared to have been building up forces along the border, suggesting serious conflict was imminent.¹² Via secret hand-delivered letters, using the American embassy in Pakistan as a middle man, Kissinger and his Chinese counterpart, Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai, began communications. In these letters,

⁹ Gao, Mubo. *The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*. London, Pluto Press, 2008.

¹⁰ Daly, Robert. Personal Interview. 28 Jan. 2022.

¹¹ Sheppard, Capt. "The President's Intelligence Checklist-21 September 1962." 21 Sept. 1962. *CIA Reading Room*, www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005995941.pdf.

¹² Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, Boston, Little Brown & Company, 1979.

both parties expressed their willingness to talk in person. Even more, the Chinese delegation wrote that they saw in-person meetings as a prerequisite to any real diplomatic success. This was articulated to the US in Zhou Enlai's letter to Kissinger asserting "However, if the relations between China and the U.S. are to be fundamentally restored, a solution can be found only through direct discussions between-high levels persons of our two countries."¹³In delivering this letter to Nixon, Kissinger called it the "most important communication that has come to an American president since the end of World War II."¹⁴ With this aspiration, Kissinger secretly made his way to Beijing on July 9th, 1971, where he met face to face with Premier Enlai. As written in the American transcript of the meeting, the two began discussions over three main points of concern. The first topic was their mutual understanding and alliance over the issue of the Soviet Union. Kissinger went as far as to say that the US would "make no moves affecting your [China's] interests without informing you first." The second point was the issue of Taiwan. Regarding this concern, the two sides were at clear odds. Nonetheless, they agreed to disagree. While they differed on the issue, they understood each other's positions, and in an effort to keep the talks alive, they chose to shelve the issue for another time.¹⁵ Such a decision demonstrated not only remarkable tolerance and openness but also reflected the optimism the two sides felt toward a peaceful discourse over the issue in the future. The third, and perhaps most groundbreaking, resolution was a verbal agreement on President Nixon making a trip to Beijing to meet with Chairman Mao. The details of this visit were mapped out on Kissinger's second secret visit on

August 6, 1971, where Enlai again expressed a general sentiment of optimism

¹³ En Lai, Chou, Premier. Memo. 27 Apr. 1971. *The National Security Archive*, nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-17.pdf.

¹⁴ Isaacson, Walter. *Kissinger: A Biography*. E-book ed., New York City, Simon and Schuster, 1992.

¹⁵ United States, Congress, Foreign Affairs Committee. *My Talks with Chou-Enlai*. Government Publishing Office, 14 July 1971. *The Kissinger Report*.

about the visit and its potential.¹⁶ As for Kissinger, in describing the ordeal he wrote emphatically “My visit to Peking resulted in the most searching, sweeping and significant discussions I have ever had in government.”¹⁷

Nixon’s Visit: The Week That Changed the World

Nixon’s ensuing arrival in Beijing in February 1972 formalized all that Kissinger had dreamed and covertly worked to realize: the end of the bipolar division of the world. During the visit, symbolic gestures between Nixon and Mao were celebrated by both American and Chinese media. Spectacular banquets, a visit to the Great Wall, and press conferences with Mao left images that quickly became iconic. The image of President Nixon shaking hands with Chairman Mao was splashed on the front page of newspapers across the western world. (See appendix A) During this visit, diplomats on both sides meticulously focused on the litany of issues on which the two powers could compromise. Nixon’s personal meetings, as with most of the high-level meetings, focused largely on the global balance of power and creating a new international order.¹⁸

This groundbreaking diplomacy came to its denouement in the Shanghai Communiqué. Much of the wording of the Shanghai Communiqué itself is brilliantly ambiguous. While that description may seem oxymoronic, given the staunchly differing opinions of the two sides on

specific issues, this was the only way any mutually agreeable document could have been produced. A good illustration of this is the document's handling of Taiwan. The compromise

¹⁶United States, Congress, House, Office of the Historian. *Memorandum From President Nixon to his Assistant for National Security Affairs*. Government Publishing Office. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, China*, history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d3.

¹⁷United States, Congress, Foreign Affairs Committee. *My Talks with Chou-Enlai*. Government Publishing Office, 14 July 1971. *The Kissinger Report*.

¹⁸Daly, Robert. Personal Interview. 28 Jan. 2022.

was that the two sides agreed to merely acknowledge, but not agree with, the other side's position. Chinese diplomats insisted on the “One-China principle” stating that Taiwan was a part of China and nothing more than a runaway province, whereas American diplomats pushed for the recognition of Taiwanese sovereignty.¹⁹ By acknowledging each other's stance, without conceding their own, they were able to keep a working relationship alive in the name of pursuing a greater common interest.

Conclusion

The consequences of this frenzy of diplomacy transformed the world stage. Patiently building mutual trust over the course of six years, the US formally agreed to recognize the People's Republic and established official diplomatic relations under President Jimmy Carter on December 15, 1978.²⁰ Soon after, at China's behest, the US and its allies slowly began to surrender Taiwan to China's sphere of influence, and the US broke off diplomatic relations with Taiwan and withdrew any official US military presence from the island. On the other hand, just as Kissinger had envisioned, economic liberalization occurred in China following political opening. While the Russian economy stagnated and the Soviet Union broke apart, China experienced unprecedented growth. China joined the World Bank and the International

Monetary Fund in 1980, a decade before Russia did.²¹ China transformed into an export-led economy, making products that became a crucial part of consumption in the US and across the larger western world. Since 1978, China's GDP growth has averaged almost 10 percent a year

¹⁹ State Department. Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (Shanghai Communiqué). Government Publishing Office, 28 Feb. 1972. Wilson Center Digital Archive, digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121325.

²⁰ Daly, Robert. Personal Interview. 28 Jan. 2022.

²¹ *The World Bank in China*. Washington D.C, World Bank, 12 Oct. 2021. *World Bank*,

(See Appendix B), and more than 800 million people have been lifted out of poverty.²² This economic development in China must be viewed not just as of benefit to China, but also as a fundamental humanitarian victory for the world. Chinese economic development meant better standards of living for millions of its people, and that in itself is an achievement worthy of recognition.

There is also the success of negotiations, in a geopolitical sense, to consider. In this regard, diplomacy was objectively successful. Sino-American war was avoided, and the Soviet Union was toppled without the Americans or Chinese having to fire a single shot. These two fundamental goals of the original Shanghai Communiqué were met unequivocally. This detente set in motion by Kissinger and Enlai facilitated coexistence, coevolution, and economic integration, all of which could have only occurred in the context of peace.

With the benefit of hindsight, some have questioned if the opening of China was a miscalculation based on myopic interests. The source of this discontent is understandable as, since 2012, China has grown openly hostile towards the US under Xi Jinping. China began to close itself off from the world, reverse liberalization, and Xi Jinping has consolidated progressively more totalitarian power.²³ While this is a truly tragic development, most so for the Chinese people, it is not a

development that either was, or could have been, anticipated in the era of Nixon and Kissinger. It is an unfair historical standard to question how politicians of decades past did not predict every possible development and transformation emanating from the modern era. Critics also point to economic predictions of Chinese economic power soon eclipsing that of the US as a discredit to the Nixon-Kissinger mission, though this too is misconstrued. True, it is a statistical reality that China has grown at a faster rate in terms of GDP than America, but China

²² *Ibid*

²³ Daly, Robert. Personal Interview. 28 Jan. 2022.

also started at a lower point and thus had far more room to grow. In 1971, China's GDP was 99.8 billion, nearly a fraction of America's GDP of 1.165 trillion that same year.²⁴ Global prosperity and human economic success are not zero-sum games. Furthermore, lifting a large swath of humanity out of poverty is a self-justifying goal. China today accounts for one-fifth of the world's population. Therefore, the economic growth this nation experienced after its opening, which benefited one-fifth of mankind, is a success of epic scope and scale.

Learning from this history may even give insight into today's debates over policy with China. Some pundits argue the chances for diplomatic success with China today are unlikely. Yet such a pessimistic outlook ignores the lessons of the past. America and China have always been ideological rivals, but diplomacy and bilateral exchange have made it so they do not have to be incompatible. Moreover, their interests do not have to be mutually exclusive. Today, the two nations, as a direct result of prior diplomacy, have shared economic interests and integrated industries. Perhaps the most meaningful common interest, though, is the avoidance of a mutually destructive war. While tensions are high and both sides are skeptical of, have grievances against, and do not full-heartedly trust the other, the diplomacy of the past teaches that these barriers can

be transcended in the pursuit of mutual interest. Thus, once again, the world is at a juncture. On one path, today's leaders can approach the other in the spirit and promise of diplomacy, where they allow economic integration to foster prosperity in both countries, as it has done so far. Conversely, the leaders can shun diplomacy, further dividing the countries and damning each other to the turbulent fate of what could become a new Cold War. A shining lesson for the leaders of today, the opening of China speaks to the power and promise of debate, diplomacy, and the resulting mutually beneficial coexistence of two adversarial nations.

²⁴ *The World Bank in China*. Washington D.C, World Bank, 12 Oct. 2021. *World Bank*,

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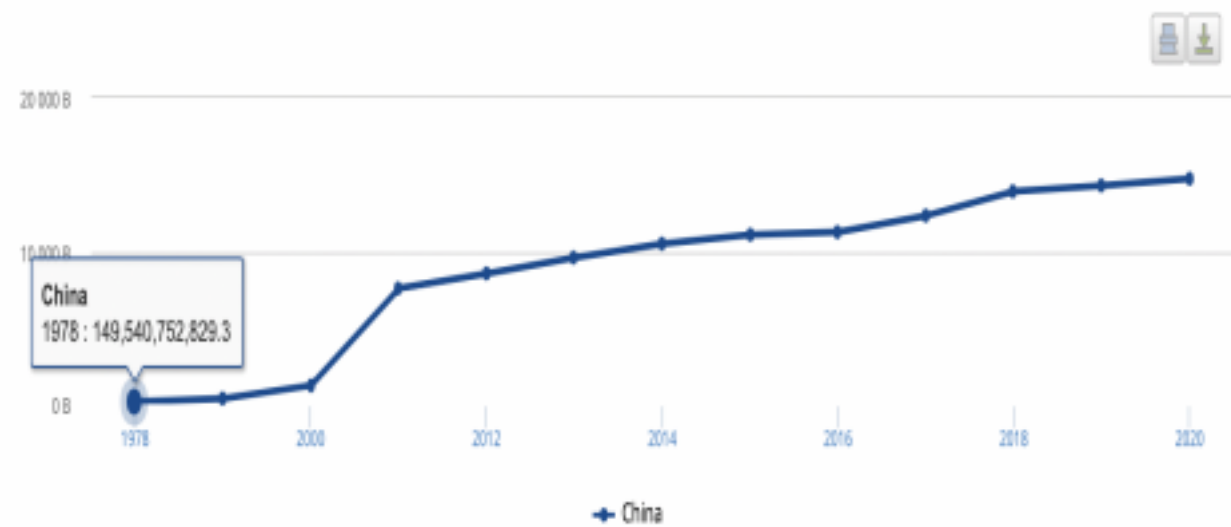
Appendix A



Pictured here, Mao Zedong greets President Richard Nixon, at Mao's personal residence, near the Capital of Peking. This image soon became the iconic symbol of a new era of Sino-American diplomacy.

Appendix B

China GDP Annual % Growth Since 1978



Source: World Development Indicators

This graph, made by the World Bank, puts into visual representation the boom China's economy experienced since opening up economically in 1978. Specifically, it depicts China's annual GDP percent growth from 1978 to 2020.

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Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Advertisement for Richard Nixon on Communism and Khrushchev. Oct. 1960. John F.

Kennedy Center-Victoria Schuck Collection, www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/VSC.

In this Republican 1960 campaign ad, then-candidate Richard Nixon spoke harshly against “the growing menace of Communism”. Nixon established himself in such ads as a strict anti-communist, which was fundamental to Nixon having the credibility to meet with Mao.

En Lai, Chou, Premier. Memo. 27 Apr. 1971. *The National Security Archive*,
nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-17.pdf.

In this classified letter, delivered by hand to Henry Kissinger, the Chinese diplomats express their satisfaction with negotiations thus far and offer to publicly receive a visit by the American President. This document, like most other memos I used in my research, has since been declassified by the US government and is now available to the public for research.

Kissinger, Henry, *Diplomacy*. New York City, Simon & Schuster, 1994.

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In his book “Diplomacy” Kissinger lays out his doctrine of foreign policy and explains his rationale for the decisions he and Nixon made. The novel as a whole serves as a fascinating window into the mind of a diplomatic genius and specifically helped me better understand his theory of “Three-Way” power balance.

Kissinger, Henry. *White House Years*. Boston, Little, Brown, 1979.

In his book "White House Years" Kissinger reflects on his first approach to the Chinese, and how the Sino-Soviet border skirmishes presented him with the opportunity he needed. The book helped me understand this process and provided me with a first-hand account of the man who facilitated the process's success.

Mansfield, Mike. "Mike Mansfield on President Nixon." *US News and World Report*

[New York City], 38th ed., Dec. 1971. *US News and World Report*. Interview.

In this interview with Democrat Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, Mansfield expresses the idea that only Nixon could have gone to China. The transcript of this interview was published in 1971 in an edition of "US News and World Report", and I found an archived version of it on the paper's website.

Nixon, Richard M. "Asia After Viet Nam." *Foreign Affairs*, new series, vol. 46, no. 1, Oct. 1967.

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Publicly laying out his analysis of the current state of Asian geopolitics, a year prior to his re-entry to the political scene as the Republican candidate for President, Richard Nixon authored this article in the *Foreign Affairs* magazine. This article was a useful window into the mind of Nixon and what he saw when he looked at the global political stage.

Sheppard, Capt. "The President's Intelligence Checklist"t-21 September 1962." 21 Sept.

1962. CIA Reading Room, [www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/ DOC_0005995941.pdf](http://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005995941.pdf).

This declassified CIA report, still only partly made available to the public in 2015, reveals the extent to which the American government was consciously keeping tabs on the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations. The release of internal CIA documents was of great use in my research, especially since China strictly bars the release of internal intelligence documents to the public, even decades later.

United States, Congress, House, Office of the Historian. *Memorandum From President Nixon to his Assistant for National Security Affairs*. Government Publishing Office. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, China, history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d3. House document 3.

Another now declassified series of the Nixon Administration's internal documentation, this volume includes telegrams, memoranda, memorandum of conversation, telephone conversations, transcripts of presidential tape recordings, and briefing books with

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extensive handwritten annotations by Nixon. The volume documents how President Nixon wanted Kissinger initially to engage the Chinese and how Kissinger went about doing so.

United States, Congress, Foreign Affairs Committee. *My Talks with Chou-Enlai*. Government Publishing Office, 14 July 1971. *The Kissinger Report*.

In this top-secret memorandum, written directly by Kissinger to Nixon, even Kissinger seems stunned by his initial success, and he advises Nixon to continue as planned. The declassification of these internal documents once again enhanced the accuracy of my research on what these diplomats were thinking in real-time.

House, Office of the Historian. *Memorandum From Lindsey Grant and Hal Saunders of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs.*

Government Publishing Office, Aug. 1969. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XVII, history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d26. House Document 26.

This memorandum was authored by Kissinger's team with the purpose of assuaging the president's concerns about the potential geopolitical ramifications of being seen making peace with China. As this document proves, Kissinger's and his men's advice to Nixon in large part characterized the foreign policy decisions made by the Nixon Administration.

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State Department. Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (Shanghai Communiqué). Government Publishing Office, 28 Feb. 1972. Wilson Center Digital Archive, digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121325.

The Shanghai Communiqué was the foundational document of improved relations between the United States and China. It made official for the world what the two sides agreed on, where they differed, and most importantly, their willingness to commit to

future diplomacy.

Daly, Robert. Personal Interview. 28 Jan. 2022.

Robert Daly is Director of the Wilson Center's Kissinger Institute on China and served as a U.S. diplomat in Beijing as well as an interpreter for President Carter and Secretary of State Kissinger. He is also the head of China Programs at Johns Hopkins University, Syracuse University, and the University of Maryland. Daly has testified before Congress, and regularly offers analysis for top media outlets.

Secondary Sources:

Gao, Mobo. *The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*. London, Pluto Press, 2008.

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Written by a man who grew up in a period of famine during the “Great Leap Forward”, this book provides a Chinese perspective of the rule of Mao. Mobo’s discussion of the cultural revolution, and the widespread fervor it fomented, informed my writing on Mao’s mindset heading into negotiations.

Isaacson, Walter. *Kissinger: A Biography*. E-book ed., New York City, Simon and Schuster, 1992.

Isaacson's biography of Kissinger focused less on the details of Kissinger's work and more on the stories that characterized Kissinger as a man. Nonetheless, these anecdotes were of great value to my research and paper. Specifically, with regard to his early negotiations in China, the book gave a good account of Kissinger's understanding of the gravity of what he was doing and its historically important potential.

Kaiser, David. "The Cultural Revolution and the History of Totalitarianism." *TIME*, vol. 187, no. 19, 16 May 2016. *TIME*, [time.com/4329308/cultural-revolution-history-totalitarianism/](https://www.time.com/4329308/cultural-revolution-history-totalitarianism/).

This article, published on the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, analyzed its consequences and specifically the rise of Mao Zedong. Its focus was on the totalitarian nature of his rule, and the command he had over party policy. It helped me understand why really he alone made the decisions that characterized China's foreign policy.

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The World Bank in China. Washington D.C, World Bank, 12 Oct. 2021. *World Bank*, www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview#1.

With regards to statistical analysis and depth of data collection, the World Bank is one of the foremost agencies publicly available. Their data put into an objective metric the enormity of the growth the Chinese economy experienced.