

## MEDIA RESOURCES

*Editors' Note: We have invited David Tyler from Adam Matthew Digital in London to write this brief synopsis of a new online document resource that we think may be of interest and utility to our members and their students in pursuing research on the early years of the PRC.*

### **Foreign Office Files for China, 1949-1976: Complete FO 371 and FCO 21 files from The National Archives, Kew**

David Tyler  
Adam Matthew Digital

*“The era from 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party won power, until Mao Zedong’s death in 1976, is a colossally important period in modern Chinese history. Britain was one of very few western countries to maintain diplomatic relations with China and from 1950 onward, and from their vantage point in Beijing British diplomats reported on the turbulent and confusing political, social, and economic developments. Making these records available in digital, searchable form will be exceptionally valuable to all scholars and students of post-1949 China.”*

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This collection from Adam Matthew Digital makes available the complete digitized images of all British Foreign Office Files dealing with China, Hong Kong and Taiwan in this period. These files are particularly important because Britain was one of the

first countries to recognize Communist China, had special interests in the region, and often took a different policy approach from that of the United States. The project includes a full-text search facility and detailed meta-data.

Published in three sections covering the periods 1949-1956, 1957-1966, and 1967-1976, this digital project addresses a crucial period in Chinese history, from the foundation of the People's Republic, in 1949, to the death of Zhou Enlai and Mao, the arrest of the "Gang of Four" and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

The digitized files for 1949-1956 provide excellent material on the following subjects:

- the Communist Revolution and all the major figures involved;
- China and the Korean War;
- the economic situation in China, industrialization, and the first Five Year Plan, 1953-1957;
- *HMS Amethyst* and the blockade of the Yangtze River;
- the differences between British and American policy on China;
- Hong Kong, Nanjing, and Shanghai;
- Agriculture, Land Reform, and redistribution, benefitting some 60% of the population, but persecuting another 5% who were landlords;
- American military support and financial aid for Taiwan.
- Quemoy, the Matsu islands, and the First Taiwan Straits Crisis;
- railway and road construction in China; and
- the US embargo on exports to China.

From the seizure of power by the Communists forces, with dramatic accounts of the civil war years, the fall of Nanking, the fate of *HMS Amethyst* on the Yangtze River, and the

repercussions for international companies with a strong presence in China, through to the Communist Party's first attempts to implement a Soviet-style, centrally planned economy with the emphasis on heavy industry, the material in Section I provides extensive coverage of major events with regular analyses by British officials.

There is a constant exchange of information between London and the British Embassy in Beijing and its consular outposts. This communication is augmented by a continual dialogue on issues relating to East Asia between Britain and America as well as with European and Commonwealth partners. Sino-Soviet relations also become a very important consideration in the Cold War era.

By early 1950 China was firmly under Communist control (apart from a few pockets of Guomindang resistance), and the new Government enjoyed "a wide measure of support from the great majority of the people." Internationally, although China was not popular with Western countries, an increasing number were recognizing the new regime at the expense of the Nationalist Government, and despite the hostility of the United States, the People's Republic was not without friends. The Soviet Union and its satellites were quick to establish links with the Beijing Government, and various treaties were signed to strengthen the growing body of countries that were joining the Communist camp.

The files show that China's involvement in the Korean War had a crippling effect on the Chinese economy and put pressures on the leadership as it tried to carry through land and industrial reform. Nationwide planning began in 1953 after political control had been consolidated in rural and urban areas. Official pronouncements suggested a determination to build a powerful industrial economy based upon the Soviet model. Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, and Liu Shaoqi were the key figures in pushing forward these policies in the early years of the PRC.

Interesting sources include Sir John Hutchinson's report on conditions in China compiled during his 18 months' stay as HM Chargé d'Affaires in Beijing, filed in 1951, a paper

comparing Chinese and Soviet Communism, and Humphrey Trevelyan's annual report for 1953 from the British Embassy in Beijing, with its assessment on the first year of the first Five-Year Plan:

In 1953 they set about building the new industrialised Socialist State.... There has been mismanagement in the State industries and in the distribution of goods, and inadequate financial control, which had been fully reported in the Chinese Press under the system of public confession, but it appears probable that the deficiencies are disproportionately emphasised in the non-Communist Press. Development will no doubt be uneven, and lacking in the administrative and technological refinements of more advanced countries, but it would be a mistake to discount the progress made.

With the documents in Sections II and III it is possible to look at how Mao Zedong rejected Stalinism in the late 1950s and began the process of hammering out a Chinese economic alternative. There are files on the "Great Leap Forward" campaign of 1958-1962, further details on the Chinese production of steel, coal and electricity, the collectivization of agriculture, and reports on the political machinations of Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi, the launch of the Socialist Education Movement, the Red Guard factions, the "Down to the Countryside Movement" encouraging "young intellectuals" to move from the cities to the countryside, the final downfall of the "Gang of Four" and the re-emergence of Deng Xiaoping.

Section I: 1949-1956 has just been released. Files for Section II: 1957-1966 and Section III: 1967-1976 are currently being digitized. For more information please see: <http://www.amdigital.co.uk/collections/FO-China/Default.aspx?collectionSection=detailed>