

Wartime Ambassador:

Hu Shih in Washington, October
1938 – September 1942

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Hu Shih served as China's wartime ambassador to the United States between October 1938 and September 1942. Yet despite his central position in Sino-American relations during World War II, Hu has received fleeting scholarly attention.¹ The objective of Hu's ambassadorial mission was to convert American sympathy for China during its war against Japan into substantial aid and assistance. At the beginning of his ambassadorship, Hu faced a strong American isolationist sentiment that advocated avoiding political, diplomatic or military entanglements with other countries. This policy of isolationism proved a significant obstacle to securing American support. The attitude of the American public, due at least in part to Hu's influence, continued to shift gradually from mere sympathy into positive action. Besides Hu's personal influence, changes in the international scene also contributed to his success. The conclusion of the Tripartite Pact between Japan, Germany and Italy in September 1940 strengthened American support for China. After the conclusion of the pact, the United States proved more forthright in its aid to China. From thereon, he secured a Lend Lease program for China in May 1941 and convinced the United States to abandon a *modus vivendi* with Japan before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941. This article argues that these achievements demonstrate that Hu's ambassadorship was not only a success, but that current scholarship does not award him the credit he deserves.

When war between China and Japan broke out in September 1937, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek sent Hu to Washington first on a listening mission and then as China's Ambassador to the United States one year later. Hu was officially appointed Ambassador in September 1938, and presented his credentials to U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt on 8 October 1938. These credentials included a recipient of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship to continue his studies in the United States, a PhD in Philosophy from Columbia University and his involvement in the May Fourth and New Culture Movements in 1919. Hu reluctantly accepted the ambassadorship, even though he much preferred

¹ See Susan Chan Egan and Chih-p'ing Chou, *A Pragmatist and His Free Spirit: the half century romance of Hu Shih & Edith Clifford Williams*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2009; Stacey Bieler, *Patriots and Traitors?: A History of American-Educated Chinese Students*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004; Richard Dean Burns and Edward M. Bennett ed., *Diplomats in Crisis: United States – Chinese – Japanese Relations, 1919-1941*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1974; Ernest O. Hauser, "Ambassador Hu Shih", *Life*, December 15, 1941, 129.

his 'academic career and role as a social and political critic to that of the practical reformer and politician.'² He felt he could not escape his duty, which he described as 'a kind of military draft against which [he had] not been sufficient[ly] strong a conscientious objector.'³ Hu confided in his old friend Edith Clifford Williams:

I do believe that it is my duty to make the attempt when the call comes. I am seriously undertaking my present task in the belief that I may grow more fit for it. At least I do not like it *now*. It may be that the fight necessary in the work may make me like it more and more. I hope so'. Hu nonetheless joked that he had 'degenerated into an ambassador.'⁴

Still, he performed his duty seriously and commanded respect from officials in Washington. U.S. Secretary of State, Cordell Hull described Hu as 'one of the ablest and most effective public servants this government has had in the foreign diplomatic corps in Washington.'⁵ At the news of his appointment, the *New York Times* rejoiced that 'few Chinese are so thoroughly representative of the best of the new and old China ... few are so well qualified to explain China to the United States and the United States to China.'⁶ Aside from Hu's reservations over his role as ambassador, it was clear that even at the outset of his appointment he was received favourably by the United States.

The objective of Hu's ambassadorial mission was to convert American sympathy for China during its war against Japan into substantial aid and assistance. This task was by no means straightforward. Hu faced a strong American isolationist sentiment as exemplified by the Neutrality Acts. These acts placed a general prohibition on the sale of arms and war materials and on loans or credits to all belligerent nations. Hu was well aware of this sentiment: in 1938, Far Eastern Chief of the State Department Maxwell Hamilton told Hu that 'this is a matter of survival for China. It must fight for itself. No one else can help her.'⁷ The success of China's continued resistance was thereby dependent on Hu's ability to change isolationist sentiment in the United States toward China. Hu's ambassadorial approach focused particularly on changing American public opinion, which he believed ultimately determined American foreign policy.⁸ Consequently, he preferred to promote the Chinese cause through his skilled lecturing and writing, presenting the 'gentle, refined arguments of an honest, passionately committed intellectual.'⁹ Hu delivered hundreds of speeches at educational, cultural and political organisations across the United States.

In mid-1940, non-committal American and British policies Far Eastern policies precipitated uncertainty in China. Although the Americans were deeply sympathetic towards the Chinese, they also wanted to avoid war with Japan. Aid to China at least raised that possibility, and so the United States and Britain were cautious in their efforts to aid China. Influential Chinese began contemplating abandoning their "fruitless policy" of dependence on the United States and Great Britain, and instead aligning with Germany.¹⁰ Even Hu, who had 'for the last two years maintained

2 Letter to E.C. Williams, August 25, 1938, Vol. 40, 344.

3 Letter to E.C. Williams, October 14, 1938, Vol. 40, 350.

4 Bieler, *Patriots and Traitors?: A History of American-Educated Chinese Students*, 227.

5 *New York Times*, June 15, 1942, 4:4 in Burns and Bennett, *Diplomats in Crisis*, 169.

6 Bieler, *Patriots and Traitors?: A History of American-Educated Chinese Students*, 228.

7 Egan and Chou, *A Pragmatist and His Free Spirit*, 297.

8 Burns and Bennet ed., *Diplomats in Crisis*, 160.

9 *Ibid.*, 153.

10 Memorandum by American Ambassador in China, Nelson Johnson, January 3, 1941, FRUS: The Far East, 1940, vol 4: 481.

a constantly optimistic attitude,' was becoming disenchanted with the lack of American assistance in China's war of resistance. In a meeting with the Advisor on Political Affairs Stanley Hornbeck, Hu described the deteriorating and "gravely difficult" situation in China.¹¹ The closure of China's only remaining overland routes, (and, therefore, their only viable means of receiving foreign aid and assistance) on the Indochina railway and the highway from Burma had exacerbated the situation. In these dire circumstances, Hu stated that China needed from the United States 'more positive action than mere words of encouragement, something more positive than mere promises of finance assistance to China' to prevent a breakdown of Chinese morale and resistance.¹²

On 27 September 1940, Japan concluded the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy. The signatories of the pact pledged to 'assist one another with all political, economic and military means when one of the three contracting powers is attacked by a power at present not involved in the European war or in the Chinese-Japanese conflict.'¹³ The conclusion of this pact made American officials see the wars in Europe and the Far East as unequivocally connected. More importantly for the Chinese, the pact effectively convinced the Americans that they could no longer afford to be indifferent to the outcome of the Sino-Japanese war. The National Director of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies Clark Eichelberger wrote in late 1940 that 'China in the Pacific, with Britain in the Atlantic, now constitute our first line of defence,' and 'it would now seem that China is unmistakably an ally' worthy of the Committee's support.¹⁴ Chiang Kai-Shek also recognised these rapid international changes as a result of the Tripartite Pact. He tried to capitalise on China's new privileged position as an American ally to gain more substantial aid and assistance from the United States. This became a highly successful strategy of warning that the Chinese government would not be able to continue fighting unless its requests for aid were fulfilled.¹⁵ On 30 November, Washington approved a \$100 million credit for China.¹⁶ Although Hu was feeling more optimistic with the U.S. government's newfound commitment to assist China, he was also aware of the reality that 'the end of all troubles, East or West, [was] still far off'.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the conclusion of the Tripartite Pact strengthened American support and aid which in turn served to commit China to its fight against Japan.

American aid continued to increase, culminating with the passage of the Lend Lease Act on 11 March 1941. The Lend-Lease Act was introduced to amend the 1937 Neutrality Act, which was enacted initially to prohibit the sale of arms and war materials to any belligerent nation, irrespective of whether the nation was the aggressor or victim. The Lend Lease Act gave President Roosevelt executive power to '[sell], transfer, exchange, lease, lend or otherwise dispose of' any war materials to any government whose defense was deemed vital to United States security.¹⁸ Although

11 Memorandum by Advisor on Political Affairs, Stanley Hornbeck, July 12, 1940, FRUS: The Far East, 1940, vol 4: 48.

12 Memorandum by Hornbeck, July 12, 1940, FRUS: The Far East, 1940, vol 4: 48.

13 Three-Power Pact Between Germany, Italy, and Japan, September 27, 1940, Article III. <<http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/triparti.asp>>

14 Eichelberger to Mrs Lewis Mumford, October 22, 1940. Papers of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, Princeton University in Cohen, *America's Response to China: An Interpretative History of Sino-American Relations*, 150; Clark Eichelberger to William Allen White, October 1, 1940. Papers of William Allen White, Library of Congress in Cohen, *America's Response to China: An Interpretative History of Sino-American Relations*, 150.

15 Taylor, *Generalissimo*, 174-175.

16 Ibid.

17 Personal letter to Mr Harold Riegelman, October 12, 1940, 67.

18 *Lend-Lease Act* (1941) Section 3(2), <http://www.pbs.org/behindcloseddoors/pdfs/LendLeaseAct.pdf>

the Lend-Lease Act was designed primarily to support the British war effort, it was extended to include China on 6 May.¹⁹ Despite increased aid to China, the United States continued to maintain trade relations with Japan. In other words, the United States was literally fuelling its war effort against China.

The informal American–Chinese relationship continued to strengthen as Hu’s confidence in America remained unyielding. His optimism continued until late November 1941, when American–Japanese negotiations to reach an agreement to end the diplomatic impasse began in Washington. Previously, Hu believed that a negotiated peace with Japan was not a realistic option. In a meeting with Cordell Hull, Hu stated: ‘I am sincerely afraid that any serious attempt in such a direction would have to involve a surrender of the principles for which the Anglo-Saxon peoples have been fighting, and I am inclined to think that even a complete surrender (which will irretrievably damage the spirit and morale of the fighting democracies) will not make Japan really desert the Axis powers.’²⁰ He observed that only two things had prevented Japan from aiding the Axis powers: first was the war in China, and second was the presence of the American fleet in the Pacific. Hu understood the American government’s motive in aiding China was not mere sympathy but its own self-interest. He thereby advocated that ‘as long as China fights on and a sufficiently strong portion of the American fleet is maintained in the Pacific, there will not be active and effective Japanese assistance to the Axis powers in the Pacific.’ However, if China was to collapse, ‘then no amount of appeasement, nor any Japanese pledge can stop Japan from playing the role of an active partner of the Axis powers and completely cutting off Australia and New Zealand from participation in the war in Africa and Asia, as well as effectively intercepting all material supplies from the United States and Canada.’²¹

The American–Japanese negotiations in 1941 deeply concerned the Chinese and their representatives in Washington. In the course of these negotiations, the Roosevelt Administration toyed with the idea of a *modus vivendi* which would keep negotiations going for six months and in the process buy some much needed time to build up American defences. In November, Hull created a final draft of the *modus vivendi* proposal, reducing it to a three month period. The proposal required the Japanese cancel any further military advances and withdraw its troops from Southern Vietnam. In return, the United States would lift the embargo and allow limited exports to Japan including oil for civilian purposes. Hull presented the proposal to Hu, British Ambassador Lord Halifax, the Dutch Minister Alexander Loudon and Australia’s Minister to the United States Richard G. Casey on November 22, 1941. Hull commented that ‘each gentleman present seemed to be well pleased ... except the Chinese Ambassador who was somewhat disturbed as he always [was] when any question concerning China arises not entirely to his way of thinking.’²² Hu strongly opposed the proposal on the grounds it did not restrain the Japanese from continued attacks on China during the three month period.

Upon hearing of the proposal, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, who had long been suspicious that the Americans would appease Japan at the expense of China, became so alarmed that he could not rely solely on the efforts of Ambassador Hu to express Chinese opposition. Chiang believed

19 Cohen, *America’s Response to China*, 151.

20 Memorandum by Hu Shih, May 26, 1941, FRUS: The Far East FRUS, 1941, vol 4: 225.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Memorandum by Hull, November 22, 1941, FRUS: The Far East, 1941, vol 4: 640.

that Ambassador Hu's performance was "not satisfactory" and shared the view expressed by the Foreign Minister, Dr. Quo Tai-Chi, that Hu's 'attitude is that 'one should not doubt a friend' [and he] may have been diffident about making China's position known.'²³ Instead, Chiang chose to flood Washington through multiple diplomatic channels with his fierce message of opposition. First Chiang sent a cable to his Harvard-educated brother-in-law and Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr T.V (Tzu-Ven) Soong. Chiang requested that Soong transmit the cable to Secretaries William Franklin Knox and Henry L. Stimson, stating that 'the morale of the entire people [of China] will collapse ... the Chinese Army will collapse; and the Japanese Army will be enabled to carry through their plans...such a loss would not be to China alone.'²⁴ At the same time as Chiang was sidelining Hu and instead working through Soong. Owen Lattimore, an American political advisor to Chiang, wrote to President Roosevelt's economic advisor Lauchlin Currie saying that 'any modus vivendi now arrived at with Japan would be disastrous to Chinese belief in America.' He went on to say that it is doubtful whether either past assistance or increasing aid could compensate for the feeling of being deserted at this hour.²⁵ Further, Chiang also cabled British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who promptly sent a message to President Roosevelt supporting the Chinese position. Churchill characterised the modus vivendi as "a very thin diet" and added that 'our anxiety is about China ... if they collapse our joint dangers would enormously increase.'²⁶

On 26 November Hu met with President Roosevelt, where for the first time in his diplomatic career, lost his temper and objected to the concessions given to the Japanese by the terms of the proposed modus vivendi.²⁷ Described in *Life Magazine* in 1941 as the "greatest triumph of his career," Hu was crucial in convincing the American government to abandon the modus vivendi.²⁸ The modus vivendi was eventually discarded because of Chinese "objections, arguments and pleas," the lack of enthusiasm amongst the other diplomatic representatives and what Hull described as only 'one chance in three that they [the Japanese] would accept.'²⁹ On the same day, Hull wrote the president recommending that the modus vivendi be withheld. Roosevelt approved the recommendation and instead Hull submitted the Ten Point Note to the Japanese Ambassador Nomura. The Ten Point Note demanded complete Japanese withdrawal from China and Indochina, Japanese abandonment of the puppet Nanking regime and recognition of Chiang Kai-shek's National Government as the government of the Republic of China.³⁰ The Japanese rejected these terms and on 7 December 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. The United States finally entered the war.

Immediately after the Pearl Harbor attack, Soong arrived in Washington to act as Chiang's personal representative. Remarkably, as China's Foreign Minister, Soong was stationed permanently in Washington for a further two years. This move illustrated not only how important the relationship with the United States was to China, but also indicates Chiang's growing dissatisfaction with Ambassador Hu's efforts. Chiang could now bypass the Chinese Embassy and Hu completely.

23 Memorandum by Third Secretary of Embassy in China, John Stewart Service, September 10, 1941, FRUS: The Far East, 1941, vol 4: 441.

24 Dr. T.V. Soong to Stimson, November 25, 1941, FRUS: The Far East, 1941, vol. 4: 661.

25 Mr Owen Lattimore to Mr Lauchlin Currie, Administrative Assistant to President Roosevelt, November 25, 1941, FRUS: The Far East, 1941, vol 4: 652.

26 The Ambassador in the United Kingdom, Winant to Hull, November 26, 1941, FRUS: The Far East, 1941, vol 4: 665.

27 Hauser, Earnest O, "Ambassador Hu," *Life Magazine*, December 15 1941, 124

28 Ibid.

29 Marshall, *To Have and Have Not*, 155; Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 238.

30 Document Handed by Hull to the Japanese Ambassador, Nomura, November 26, 1941, FRUS, 768-69.

Chiang opted to communicate with American authorities solely through Soong, which angered Hu and American Ambassador in China Clarence E. Gauss, who commented that ‘most of the conversations between China and the United States have apparently been through Soong who is in Washington.’³¹ There is no doubt that Soong was instrumental in securing large amounts of aid for China from the United States. However, Hu undeniably cultivated a mutual understanding and respect with the United States long before Soong set foot in Washington.

Tension built between the two diplomats who had both been charged with the task of representing China in the United States. At issue was their dramatically different diplomatic styles. Soong was outspoken, and often employed a strong lobbying approach. He also engaged in social activities such as hosting parties and playing bridge.³² The State Department disapproved of Soong’s style, describing his behaviour as arrogant, improper for foreign relations and “stepping out of line.”³³ Conversely, Hu refused to beg for loans and preferred to win American friendship by educating the American public about China’s war of resistance against Japan.³⁴ So convinced of the effectiveness of his method, Hu returned \$60,000 sent to him by the Chinese government for propaganda purposes, commenting that his ‘speeches are sufficient propaganda and they do not cost anything!’³⁵ He insisted that ‘propaganda is unnecessary for a diplomat who is accredited to a friendly government and people.’ His duty is to ‘understand and appreciate the country to which he is accredited...the rest is easy.’³⁶

Nevertheless, Hu refused to take on the responsibility of negotiating loans, leaving that to other more qualified individuals including Soong and Shanghai Banker, K.P. Chen. To Hu’s disappointment, Soong was appointed to replace Chen, who was trusted highly by the Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau. Morgenthau described Chen as a ‘Chinese gentleman, “gentleman” underscored in whom I have great confidence and it’s entirely on his personal word that I recommended the first and second loans... he’s a grand fellow.’³⁷ Chen, unlike his successor, understood that any loan negotiated would have to be structured as a commercial agreement to circumvent the Neutrality Act. In return, Morgenthau was willing to do everything he could to secure the loans negotiated by Chen - including bypassing the State Department - by waiting until Secretary Hull was on a boat to Rio de Janeiro before seeking State Department approval.³⁸ Hu identified correctly that Chen’s replacement, with the often forceful Soong, would damage Sino-American relations. Soong, who had lobbied persistently for a \$50 million loan to stabilise the Chinese currency, angered Morgenthau with his blatant use of connections and lobbying tactics.³⁹ In his diaries, Hu recalled when he and Soong were summoned to the Department of the Treasury on 21 April 1941 in relation to a loan to China.⁴⁰ During the meeting, Morgenthau, who deeply distrusted Soong, stated ‘I will do business with Chen, because he will keep his word...I can’t risk

31 Memorandum by the Ambassador in China, Gauss, 11 July 1942, FRUS: China, 1942, 110.

32 Kuo, ‘A Strong Diplomat in a Weak Polity: T.V. Soong and wartime US-China relations, 1940-1943’, 228.

33 Soong to Chiang, 6 July 1941, T.V. Soong Archive, Box 59, quoted in Kuo ‘A Strong Diplomat in a Weak Polity’, 229.

34 Ibid., 228.

35 Bieler, *Patriots and Traitors? A History of American-Educated Chinese Students*, 232.

36 Christian Science Monitor Weekly Magazine (August 1, 1942), 9 in Burns and Bennett, *Diplomats in Crisis*, 160.

37 Egan and Chou, *The Pragmatist and His Free Spirit*, 322.

38 Ibid., 321.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 323.

United States money trying to stabilise the currency.⁴¹ Although Soong got his way in the end, these negotiations did nothing to keep the Sino-American relationship on good terms.

It seemed that Hu's dislike of Soong was mutual. Soong often asked Chiang to replace Hu and 'appoint an able and efficient ambassador to the US who is thoroughly cooperative.'⁴² Although Chiang agreed that 'Ambassador Hu's performance [was] not satisfactory' and that he ought to be recalled, Chiang was anxious that any premature action to recall Hu might damage Sino-American relations.⁴³ Chiang, nonetheless, finally did recall Ambassador Hu Shih in September 1942. He was replaced by a rather ill-conceived substitute, Dr Wei Tao-Ming, who lacked proficiency in English and did not have any intimate knowledge of the United States.⁴⁴ Although no clear explanation has ever been given for Hu's sudden recall, it has been speculated that it was due to Chiang's increased dissatisfaction with Hu's approach.⁴⁵ Hornbeck described the decision to recall Hu Shih as 'a gesture with inescapable political significance,' arising out of disappointment and impatience on Chiang's part.⁴⁶ Hornbeck suggested it was an indication of the declining confidence in the United States and an 'expression of [Chiang's] exasperation: exasperation because the Ambassador has not achieved what his government wants; exasperation because the American government has not cooperated with China to the extent to which he feels that it should.'⁴⁷

Despite the lack of current scholarship on Hu's ambassadorship, it is clear he was highly successful in converting American sympathy into substantial aid and assistance. Hu successfully secured a Lend Lease program for China in May 1941 and dissuaded the United States from concluding a modus vivendi with Japan at the expense of China. He advanced China's interests in spite of the major challenges he faced including a strong American isolationist sentiment and his professional rivalry with T.V. Soong. On taking his official leave, Hu was met with admiration and respect from his colleagues and the American public alike. Hull congratulated Hu on his 'outstanding contribution to Chinese-American friendship' and "the extraordinary capable manner in which he had discharged his heavy responsibilities during his tenure of office."⁴⁸ The *New York Times* declared Hu's recall 'a mistake, unless some higher post is reserved for him at home.'⁴⁹ Although Hu was humbled by the 'many very kind editorials and personal letters expressing real regret' at his leaving office, it was a 'great relief...to be a free man and to have leisure to sleep!' He was happy to return to his relatively uncomplicated scholarly pursuits.

41 Ibid.

42 Kuo, 'A Strong Diplomat in a Weak Polity: T.V. Soong and wartime US-China relations, 1940-1943', 229.

43 Ibid.

44 Memorandum by Advisor on Political Relations (Hornbeck), August 17, 1942, FRUS: China, 1942, 134.

45 Egan and Chou, *A Pragmatist and His Free Spirit*, 249; Burns and Bennett ed., *Diplomats in Crisis*, 168-169.

46 Memorandum by Hornbeck, August 17, 1942, FRUS: China, 1942, 135.

47 Ibid.

48 Memorandum by Hull, September 2, 1942, FRUS: China, 1942, 147.

49 "Hu Shih will be missed", *The New York Times*, September 3, 1942 quoted in Egan and Chou, *A Pragmatist and His Free Spirit*, 299.