The Transformation of Cain: Karl August Wittfogel’s American
Acculturation and the Cold War, 1934-1963

Master’s Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Department of History
David Engerman, Advisor

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for

Master’s Degree

by

Matthew D. Linton

May 2011
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For Emily & my parents,
Whose love and support propel me ever forward
Abstract

The Transformation of Cain: Karl August Wittfogel’s American Acculturation and the Cold War, 1934-1963

A thesis presented to the Department of History
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

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The focus of this paper is to analyze Sinologist Karl August Wittfogel’s transformation from a German to an American intellectual after his immigration to the United States in 1934. Wittfogel’s career in Germany was defined by his fierce advocacy of Communism and his interest in the history and society of China. Once Wittfogel was forced to emigrate from Germany due to the rise of Nazism, he was able to adjust his political and scholarly views to accommodate trends in American scholarship and politics. His willingness to adapt was aided by the rapidly changing climate of the United States from the 1930s to the 1960s. Wittfogel was able to transform from a politically engaged Communist to an apolitical cultural anthropologist in less than a decade. This intellectual flexibility occasioned his rise to prominence as an anthropologist and eventually as an anti-Communist analyst of Sino-Soviet relations in the 1950s. Supported by a large and powerful anti-Communist intellectual community, Wittfogel became a leading analyst of the Sino-Soviet Alliance and the threat it represented to Western democracy. As his anti-Communist position became fully developed in print – culminating in his master-work *Oriental Despotism* in 1957 – he lost much of the intellectual flexibility that occasioned his rise from an obscure immigrant Sinologist. With the gradual collapse of the Sino-
Soviet Alliance in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Wittfogel’s popularity waned and he was no longer able to keep pace with the rapid cultural changes of the mid-1960s. In this way, Wittfogel is a case study in how the intellectual flexibility imposed upon scholars after immigration was an asset because it gave them experience radically accommodating their ideas to dramatic cultural change.
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Introduction

Karl August Wittfogel’s intellectual legacy in America has been almost completely eclipsed by his political missteps during the Red Scare. If remembered at all, he is primarily known for his anti-Communist political position and his testimony before the McCarran Un-American Activities Committee in 1951 where he implicated as Communists fellow intellectuals including Sinologist Owen Lattimore, diplomat Herbert Norman, and sociologist M.I. Finley. Despite being an active Communist growing up in Germany, Wittfogel was an authentic and enthusiastic American anti-Communist during the early 1940s through the 1960s. Regrettably, Wittfogel’s politics have overshadowed his fruitful career as an American Sinologist and his ability to adjust his scholarly research to accommodate new methods and find an American audience.

The purpose of this thesis is – at least partially – to overcome the tendency to define Wittfogel solely through the Manichean lens of the Cold War and reclaim his intellectual legacy. Politics during the Cold War was incredibly fickle and those intellectuals who were unable to adjust to the constantly changing political situation quickly became irrelevant. As is evinced by his public political disengagement during the 1940s, Wittfogel had a fruitful and intellectually significant career in the United States before becoming enmeshed in the politics of the Cold War. The Cold War, particularly the relationship between the Soviet Union and the PRC, would be central to his popularity in the 1950s and early 1960s. Yet, because he allowed his utility as a scholar to be defined by his ability to explain to the Sino-Soviet Alliance he lost the intellectual
flexibility which made him successful after his immigration to the United States.

Rendered ideologically inflexible by his Cold War writings, Wittfogel was unable to keep pace with the rapid political and intellectual changes of the 1960s, especially once the ideological division between the USSR and PRC became evident in 1963.

Historian Lewis A. Coser in his landmark work *Refugee Scholars in America* restates Franz Neumann’s claim that those intellectuals who were most successful after their immigration to the United States were those who were able to integrate their previous European scholarship into prevailing trends in American academia. Wittfogel undoubtedly fills Neumann’s criteria for successful intellectual immigration; however, both Neumann and Coser fail to recognize how ideological changes forced upon immigrant intellectuals may have aided their ability to adjust themselves to the *Sturm und Drang* of American politics and intellectual culture between the mid-1930s and 1960s. Wittfogel, as a quintessentially German intellectual impelled to adapt to American scholarly life, represented both the incredible hardship many intellectuals faced in adapting to American culture and the ways in which the intellectual flexibility developed as a refugee scholar was an asset in rapidly changing American society. Wittfogel’s 1930s intellectual flexibility hastened his rise as an American anthropologist, but once he became associated with the Sino-Soviet Alliance his intellectual production ossified. With the Sino-Soviet Split, Wittfogel no longer had the intellectual or political flexibility to adequately redefine his position on Sino-Soviet relations and remain relevant.

The time is ripe for a reevaluation of Wittfogel as an immigrant intellectual. Sufficient time has passed since the end of the Cold War for an objective examination of

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Wittfogel’s anti-Communist political position and how it came to dominate his thinking in the 1950s. Furthermore, his rapid rise, first as an anthropologist and then as a commentator on Sino-Soviet relations, testifies to the how the rapid pace of political and intellectual change in the mid-20th century effected academics. Finally, Wittfogel is a case study in how immigrant intellectuals shaped American life during and after World War II. Wittfogel’s political commentary animated scholarly discussion regarding Communist China and the precariousness of American democracy during the Cold War. Like other immigrant intellectuals including Franz Neumann and Hannah Arendt, Wittfogel illustrated the valuable role intellectual immigrants could fill in explaining the place of American society and government at the dawn of the Cold War.
Chapter I: Wandering Birds and Iron Eagles

Wittfogel’s intellectual origins operated at the nexus of the scholarly and the political. Beginning in 1912 with his involvement in the *Altwandervogel* youth movement and culminating with his devotion to Communism in the early 1920s, Wittfogel’s scholarship was always fused with political aims. Even his research on China was ultimately employed in his landmark work *The Economy and Society of China* to spur political revolution. The fusion of the scholarly and political, his interest in China, a commitment to Communism, and a stubborn belief in intellectual freedom were traits Wittfogel developed as a neophyte academic which would define him as a scholar for the next half-century. Tensions between these traits, most notably between his commitment to intellectual freedom and his belief in Communism, would animate his academic and scholarly development during the 1920s. By the time of the slow Nazi ascension to power in the 1930s, the backbone of the Leftist resistance in Germany was broken and Wittfogel’s faith in the historical mission of Communism was shaken. Though by the time of his emigration from Germany in 1934 Wittfogel had retreated from the radical Communism espoused when he was at his most politically active, his scholarly positions remained bound to political issues of Marxism and intellectual freedom which he developed in the political turmoil of Weimar Germany.

Coming from the conservative, rural hamlet of Woltersdorf, Germany Wittfogel’s first bold intellectual statement came when he joined the *Altwandervogel* youth
movement in 1912.\textsuperscript{2} He was originally drawn into the movement because he “met…two Youth Movement \textit{Altwandervogel} boys who were older than I, who played the guitar and sang.”\textsuperscript{3} Wittfogel continued in the movement because of the “romantic feeling of freedom” espoused by adolescents and the young adult leaders of the movement.\textsuperscript{4} Paramount for Wittfogel was intellectual freedom. Wittfogel was exposed to the avant-garde dramas of Ibsen and Strindberg, as well as the philosophy of Nietzsche, through the \textit{Altwandervogel}. Even as Wittfogel remained quintessentially German – if the \textit{Altwandervogel} had cosmopolitan literary and philosophical interests they were borne from uniquely German social pressures – the broadening of his intellectual horizons opened him to burgeoning political radicalism whose proliferation was accelerated by the outbreak of World War I.

World War I was a watershed moment in the young Wittfogel’s political development. He was the only student from his Gymnasium not to volunteer for the army at the outset of the war, dissenting from it on moral grounds.\textsuperscript{5} His isolation from his schoolmates drew him further into the \textit{Wandervogel} movement, which split in 1918 over participation in the war effort. A student leader of the anti-war branch of the \textit{Wandervogel}, Wittfogel was forcibly drafted into the military in 1917. In response, he joined the Independent Social-Democratic Party then under the leadership of Karl Kautsky, which was one of the few parties still denouncing World War I. Just as Wittfogel began to experiment with politics, he also became interested in the Far East, especially China. It remains unclear why Wittfogel became interested in China during

\textsuperscript{2} For more on the \textit{Wandervogel} movement see John Alexander Williams, \textit{Turning to Nature in Germany}.  
\textsuperscript{4} Greffrath, Raddatz, and Korzec, “Conversations With Wittfogel,” 145.  
\textsuperscript{5} Greffrath, Raddatz, and Korzec, “Conversations With Wittfogel,” 145-146.
this time, but Wittfogel’s biographer G.L. Ulmen has hypothesized, “he was interested in part by a general interest in Germany of ‘things Chinese’ during and after the First World War, in part by the insecure European situation and in part by Richard Wilhelm’s translations of the Chinese classics.” Regardless of its origins, Wittfogel’s knowledge of China was known and respected by Spring 1919 when he gave a series of lectures on Lao-tse and Chinese Buddhism in Berlin.

By 1920, Wittfogel’s interest had shifted from adolescent autonomy to the dual poles of Marxism and Sinology. With his growing interest in Marxism he became alienated from the increasingly fragmentary Wandervogel movement. Employed as a teacher and newly acquainted with a radical Marxist philosopher named Karl Korsch, Wittfogel threw all his political efforts – including his still sizable influence within the Altwandervogel - behind the Independent Social-Democratic Party. Strain within the party was growing however, and at the Halle Congress later that year the party split. Wittfogel allied with other left-leaning socialists, including Karl Korsch, and joined the German Communist Party (KPD).

Still a neophyte Marxist, Wittfogel devoted much of the early 1920s to understanding the nuances of Marxism. This research culminated in Wittfogel’s first scholarly publication titled The Science of Bourgeois Society in 1922. Derived from a series of lectures delivered in Leipzig and Brno, The Science of Bourgeois Society represented Wittfogel’s first foray into questioning the relationship between Marx and what he termed “bourgeois” or traditional sciences. Though the monograph abounded in youthful enthusiasm and rhetorical flourishes condemning bourgeois science as a means

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of disorienting the proletariat, it stopped short of calling for the abolition of scientific positivism. Scientific method, Wittfogel argued, could be utilized for reactionary or revolutionary purposes. For orthodox Marxists, academic science was a bourgeois tool used to blind the proletariat to their own class interest. Instead, according to Wittfogel, science should be reoriented towards aiding the proletariat through universal education and teaching about theories of class and class behaviors. To Wittfogel, science had the potential to unlock and explain the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat and aid in the global revolutionary project of Communism. The project illustrated his intellectual apprenticeship to Korsch whose own examination of Marxism and bourgeois science, *Marxism and Philosophy*, would be published in 1923. Both scholars sought to salvage academic thought from those within the Communist camp who fetishized praxis by linking it with socialist aims. For Wittfogel and Korsch, only a unity of theory and practice built upon the foundation of bourgeois thought and action could prepare the proletariat for revolution. Though Wittfogel situated himself firmly within the Communist camp, *The Science of Bourgeois Society*, by extolling the formal virtues of bourgeois science, echoed his previous commitment to a more gradualist socialism and

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10 Wittfogel, *Die Wissenschaft der Bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*: 90.
12 Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*: 74. There is also a renewed focus on the significance of academic philosophy by both camps. There are obvious similarities between Wittfogel and Korsch’s work and Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, also published in 1923. Korsch and Lukács were well acquainted with one another by 1922 and Lukács had met Wittfogel in 1920. Despite common concern for the role of German academic philosophy, especially Kant and Hegel, in Marxism, it remains unclear how much influence Lukács had on Wittfogel’s *Science of Bourgeois Society*. Lukács’s relationship with Wittfogel would become more significant after Wittfogel joined the Institute of Social Research in 1925.
pointed towards his eventual embrace of Max Weber and sociological method after its publication.\textsuperscript{13}

The most significant contribution of *The Science of Bourgeois Society* was it represented Wittfogel’s first attempt to link his Marxist theoretical interests with his research on China. Despite the great cultural, political, and literary importance of China, it was poorly understood and hardly researched by the West because of disorienting “academic anarchism” that put little emphasis on understanding non-Western society.\textsuperscript{14} A revolutionary academic system would more thoroughly attempt to understand the significance of China because of its size and cultural importance even if this came at the expense of “ancient Indian, Egyptian, Assyrian, Berberian” studies.\textsuperscript{15} Though tangential to the political bent of *The Science of Bourgeois Society*, by incorporating a defense of Sinology into a Marxist tract, Wittfogel was unwittingly uniting the two central themes that would define his academic career: his analysis of Chinese society and his flair for the political.

Shortly after writing *The Science of Bourgeois Society*, Wittfogel formally came under the influence of sociologist Max Weber. Weber was in nearly every way a traditional, bourgeois academic. Wittfogel was drawn to Weber because of his analysis of the “hydraulic-bureaucratic official state” and his sociological method, which drew liberally from diverse academic traditions ranging from history and philosophy to economics and archeology.\textsuperscript{16} Wittfogel saw parallels between the type of hydraulic-

\textsuperscript{13} For illustration of Wittfogel’s commitment to the revolutionary cause during this period pay special attention to the chapter entitled “Kulturreform oder Revolution?” (90–92) where he liberally quotes Rosa Luxemburg’s rejection of positivist Revisionism of the type espoused by Eduard Berstein.
\textsuperscript{14} Wittfogel, *Die Wissenschaft der Bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, 32.
\textsuperscript{15} Wittfogel, *Die Wissenschaft der Bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, 32.
\textsuperscript{16} Ulmen *The Science of Society*, 37.
bureaucratic official state described by Weber and the static nature of Chinese society described by Marx. Though Wittfogel remained critical of what he understood as Weber’s imperfect synthesis of idealism and empiricism, in his future writing he drew heavily on Weberian methods to create complex, multilayered analyses of Chinese society. Furthermore, Weber’s analysis of hydraulic states would become the conceptual foundation of Wittfogel’s hydraulic despotism thesis first delineated in *The Economy and Society of China* (1929) and then expanded in *Oriental Despotism* (1957).

Two years after the publication of *The Science of Bourgeois Society, The History of Bourgeois Society* (1924) extended his Marxist analysis of bourgeois society by expanding it out from the role of science into the role and revolutionary potential of the European city. Most significantly, Wittfogel explored how different civilizations could utilize different paths to Communist revolution. This was true of both European and non-European societies and drew heavily on Weberian analysis comparing the development of modern European cities from feudalism and the lack of a feudal stage in the history of Chinese development.\(^{17}\) Though Wittfogel primarily quoted Weber when espousing his theory of multilinear development in *The History of Bourgeois Society*, he believed the concept was originally Marx’s.\(^ {18}\) Multilinealism was an interpretation of Marx, which argued that there were multiple paths to proletarian socialism.\(^ {19}\) Due to different natural conditions and geography, all societies develop differently and many of those paths have the potential to create conditions favorable to proletarian revolution. Sympathetic to a theory of multilinealism, Wittfogel was willing to see the revolutionary potential in


classes deemed reactionary by orthodox Marxists. The rural peasantry was one example of a reactionary class, which Wittfogel believed had revolutionary potential. His embrace of agriculture as the motivating force of capitalism put him at odds with Marx’s emphasis on urban development. With his rural upbringing and burgeoning interest in the Chinese peasantry, Wittfogel’s interest in the peasants and the possibility of Communist peasant revolution, per multilineal development, was unsurprising. Multilinear development would be a hallmark of Wittfogel’s theoretical writings throughout the 1920s which, combined with his acknowledgement of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, would put him at odds with an array of notable Communists.

Despite some criticism for his embrace of multilinealism, by 1924 Wittfogel considered himself an orthodox communist. He was no longer involved in the splintered Wandervogel movement, had begun to embrace Vladimir Lenin, and had participated – however partially – in the German October of 1923. His primary intellectual mentors were Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács, both of whom published landmark books in 1923 and whose writings would give birth to what is commonly called “Western Marxism.” More politically active and less heretical than either figure, after the publication of The History of Bourgeois Society Wittfogel became increasingly desirable to the KPD leadership who were intrigued by his orthodoxy, charisma, and erudite social analyses.

By November 1924, Wittfogel was frequently in the company of Communist luminaries including Ruth Fischer and Z.D. Manuilski. Impressed by his scholarly work

20 The most substantial sections concerning peasant revolution are found from pages 131-163 of The History of Bourgeois Society. Wittfogel only examined European examples in these pages, but he did account for the unique natural elements present in examples ranging from Viking-era Greenland (136-138) to England (147-152).
and devotion to the Communist cause, Wittfogel was appointed cultural editor of *The Red Flag*, a prominent Communist newspaper.\(^{24}\) His editorship bore little intellectual fruit, but exposed Wittfogel, and his writing, to more prominent Communists and opened further opportunities for advancement within the KPD. Though his *Red Flag* appointment was more politically prestigious, it was Wittfogel’s decision to join the fledgling Institute of Social Research which was most significant to his future intellectual development. His appointment at the Institute of Social Research would be long lasting and a significant spur to intellectual growth outside the constraints of politics.

Wittfogel had been close with Institute founder Felix Weil and its first director Karl Grünberg since 1922 when Wittfogel had been introduced to Weil by Karl Korsch. Korsch was an early candidate to be Institute director and thought Wittfogel’s understanding of Marxism, especially explaining Marx’s views on the Far East, would be a valuable addition to an organization still in its infancy. Even though he was a highly regarded philosopher and was politically well connected, Korsch was dropped for consideration due to his Communist political activism.\(^ {25}\) With Korsch occupying a less prominent position at the Institute, Wittfogel’s candidacy also fell by the wayside.\(^ {26}\) The Institute finally named Carl Grünberg director in May 1924 and after some wrangling – and due in no small part to his wife Rosa’s involvement with the Institute – Wittfogel joined in 1925.

\(^{24}\) Wittfogel was appointed as cultural editor because of his earlier dramatic and fictional writing. His most famous dramatic work was a comedy titled *Who is the Biggest Boob? (Wer ist der Dummste?)* completed in 1923. The play was so popular it was eventually brought to the United States in the 1920s where it was translated by Upton Sinclair and performed by the Worker’s Drama League in New York under the directorship of Mike Gold. See Ulmen, 1978 (28-29).


Joining the Institute paid almost immediate dividends for Wittfogel. Surrounded by like-minded scholars and mentored by Grünberg, Wittfogel began systematically analyzing the economics and society of China for the first time. His first publication sponsored by the Institute, *Awakening China*, prophesized China’s “awakening from their “historic sleep” would become an important element in the global revolutionary movement.” China’s lengthy slumber was due to their peculiar Asiatic mode of production, which was defined by water regulation and permeated all facets of social life. Significantly, *Awakening China* represented Wittfogel’s first systematic, Marxist examination of Chinese society in the context of its own history and independent of Western development. For the rest of his German career, all of Wittfogel’s scholarly production would be focused on China and understanding China’s place within the global Communist revolution.

With the completion of *Awakening China* in 1925, Wittfogel left his position as cultural editor of *The Red Flag*, but he continued to be active politically. Certain of Wittfogel’s political allies, most notably Karl Korsch, were becoming frustrated by the KPD’s subservience to the Soviet-led Comintern. Korsch complained of a lack of initiative taken by Comintern leadership to advance the cause of global revolution. He was expelled from the KPD in 1926, vowing to write “an anarchist critique of Marxism.” Due to his association with Korsch and other heretical Communists, like Ruth Fischer, Wittfogel was unsure of his standing within the KPD at the close of 1926.

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Some of Wittfogel’s fears were put to rest when in Spring 1927, days before the Congress Against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism in Brussels, he received a mysterious offer to come to the Soviet Union from a Comintern representative. The Comintern lacked Western experts on China and believed a better knowledge of China would be imperative were they to develop a successful East Asian front in the fight against global imperialism. They were also curious about the Institute of Social Research and how they might contribute academic orthodox scholarship on Marxism.30 Thus Wittfogel was offered a Faustian bargain: aid the Comintern in understanding Chinese society and his previous engagement with disreputable individuals – not to mention his own heterodox defense of bourgeois intellectuals like Weber – would be forgotten.31 Wittfogel complied, toeing an orthodox line during the Congress Against Colonial Oppression and in 1928 embarking on a trip to the Soviet Union.

In July 1928 Wittfogel left for the Soviet Union unsure of what to expect. Once there, he was both horrified by the living conditions of Russians and frustrated by the arrogance of Party politicians. Wittfogel’s position on China was “well received by real scholars” in the USSR including David Ryazanov, but made politicians uneasy.32 It remains unclear whether this was due to Wittfogel’s echoing of Weber’s caution against bureaucracy as a ruling class, but Wittfogel came away from his trip with mounting concerns about the viability of Soviet political leadership in the Comintern. The same seemed to have been true of the Soviet reaction to Wittfogel’s ideas. His argument that

30 Another young Institute scholar, Friedrich Pollack, was also invited to the Soviet Union in 1927. Like Wittfogel, he came away with an unfavorable impression of Soviet industrial planning and state organization, which he published in Experiments in the Planned Economy of the Soviet Union, 1917-1927 (1928). See Wiggershaus, The Frankfurt School, 61.
China had developed a uniquely Asiatic mode of production and had never developed feudalism was entirely rejected by the Soviet leadership in both theory and practice. As an explanatory framework, Wittfogel’s multilinearism was formally rejected as Party heresy after 1931 when it was condemned by Stalin. Practically, the continued support of the bourgeois-democratic Kuomintang despite their lack of revolutionary potential confirmed the continued Soviet belief that China existed in a feudal stage of development. Regardless, Wittfogel received no further invitations to the USSR after 1928 and became increasingly skeptical of the Soviet leadership’s control over the Comintern and KPD.

Wittfogel returned to Frankfurt formally committed to orthodox Communism, but increasingly skeptical of the party apparatus set to implement it. Pessimistic about the future of German Communism, Wittfogel turned his focus towards more scholarly pursuits. He had been working on an in depth, multi-layered examination of Chinese society since he joined the Institute, but its completion had been derailed by his political involvement. With his dismal Soviet experience behind him, Wittfogel refocused his attention on his neglected project and by mid-1928 he had completed his first masterwork: *The Economy and Society of China*.

*The Economy and Society of China* was Wittfogel’s first interdisciplinary analysis of China. In the forward, Wittfogel made explicit that *The Economy and Society of China* was written as a broadly social scientific monograph in the style of

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Marx and Weber, not a narrow work of Sinology.\textsuperscript{35} He drew liberally from disciplines including anthropology, geology, art, philosophy, and religion, weaving them into a historical narrative of Chinese economic and social development.\textsuperscript{36} For Wittfogel, Chinese society grew out of an agriculture system reliant on irrigation systems to deliver water to arid areas. Over time, managers of the irrigation systems gained a disproportionate amount of authority over their fellow farmers because only they possessed the specialized knowledge of how to most effectively utilize and repair irrigation systems (canals, dams, etc.). Able to manipulate their specialized knowledge for personal gain, irrigation managers developed into a ruling class. This ruling class’s specialized knowledge gave it monopolized access to the means of production and allowed it to ossify into a despotic managerial bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{37} By buttressing his Marxist analysis of Chinese social and economic development with interdisciplinary evidence, Wittfogel was able to maintain his commitment to scientific inquiry while still creating a grand narrative of Chinese development.

Built on the rigorous scientific ethos of Weber and Marx, \textit{The Economy and Society of China} attempted to provide a holistic picture of Chinese social stagnation with an eye to how revolutionary change could restart its march towards a more egalitarian future. Though a volume of incredible scholarly value, the ends to which \textit{The Economy and Society of China} was designed to reach were political. \textit{The Economy and Society of China} “received its impulse from the living present” and contrary to the bourgeois sciences which have “been content to interpret the Chinese world in various ways”,

\textsuperscript{35} Karl August Wittfogel, \textit{Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas}, (Leipzig: Verlag von C.L. Hirschfeld, 1931), IX
\textsuperscript{36} Wittfogel, \textit{Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas}, 1.
Wittfogel’s “Marxist analysis” sought to change it.\textsuperscript{38} To Wittfogel, because of China’s unique social development into agricultural despotism instead of feudalism a more systematic analysis of Chinese development was necessary in order for the global Communist revolution to succeed. Displeased by his experience in the Soviet Union and convinced they were erring in their support of the Kuomintang, Wittfogel likely understood \textit{The Economy and Society of China} as a rejection of Soviet unilinealism. As a document meant to stir political change, \textit{The Economy and Society of China} represented a final attempt to persuade the Comintern of the superiority of multilinealism and of a new strategy in China. The Soviet failure to accept his position would be a deciding factor in his slow break with orthodox Communism.

For a tome with such lofty scholarly and political aims, \textit{The Economy and Society of China} is especially striking because Wittfogel had never been to China\textsuperscript{39} or even out of Europe by the time the volume was completed in 1928.\textsuperscript{40} He attempted to bridge this lack of direct contact in two significant ways. First, by accruing geographical information about China – the geological, agricultural, and hydraulic hard data – and integrating it into Marxism, Wittfogel believed he could reasonably trace social development from its material base. This assumption is made explicit in the structure of \textit{The Economy and Society of China}, which moves from chapters on “The Natural Productive Powers of the Chinese Economic Process” to how social and socio-economic relationships developed

\textsuperscript{38} Wittfogel, \textit{Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas}, XVII. Translation is G.L. Ulmen’s from \textit{The Science of Society}, 111.

\textsuperscript{39} He would not have the opportunity to travel to China until 1935. See Ulmen, \textit{The Science of Society}: 186-205.

\textsuperscript{40} The farthest afield Wittfogel had traveled was to Moscow in 1928. It appears Wittfogel would have liked to travel more, but had neither the time nor the finances until the 1930s. Before the publication of \textit{The History and Society of China} Wittfogel was still mostly known for his plays and was not as widely known in the German intellectual community as other Institute researchers like Korsch and Lukács.
from their origins in nature.\textsuperscript{41} Second, by buttressing his historical understanding of Chinese society with anthropological accounts. Shockingly for a Communist monograph, some of the accounts were from missionaries to the Chinese and were replete with racially charged titles like \textit{The Jews of Honan: A Tragic Story of Submergence}.\textsuperscript{42} Tainted though they were, these early ethnographies provided Wittfogel with a glimpse into contemporary Chinese society. Wittfogel was able to cover his lack of first hand experience in China by joining anthropological accounts to Chinese literature and history. Placing this evidence within the interpretive framework of Marxism allowed Wittfogel to present a holistic picture of Chinese society.

Upon its completion in 1928, \textit{The Economy and Society of China} represented the most systematic and thorough examination of China available in the Western world. For Wittfogel, it represented the crystallization of his diverse political and academic interests within a coherent whole. Fusing his academic and scholarly pursuits, Wittfogel presented a clear picture of Chinese society and pointed towards an egalitarian future in the Far East once Oriental despotism had been overthrown in global socialist revolution. Over time Wittfogel’s political position would dramatically shift away from Communism, however the significance of a free Chinese society for the happiness of the Chinese people and global safety would remain with Wittfogel throughout his career. China was largely ignored by Western political scientists, especially those with strong Communist loyalties. In response, \textit{The Economy and Society of China} was Wittfogel’s first assertion

\textsuperscript{41} Wittfogel, \textit{Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas}: XX-XXIV. The sections on nature are broken down elementally beginning with the land (30-61) and progressing through examinations of sunlight (61-77), water (77-93), and natural resources (93-122).

\textsuperscript{42} Wittfogel, \textit{Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas}, 9.
that China must be understood on its own terms and that this understanding was essential to Western economics and politics.

_The Economy and Society of China_ was published to academic acclaim in 1931. It was a pivotal year for Wittfogel as seismic political shifts shook Germany and the Soviet Union. After a sweeping electoral victory in September 1930, the German National Socialist Party was beginning to assert itself with increasing violence by early 1931. Since Communist affiliated workers were often the subject of attacks, Wittfogel was becoming increasingly concerned about Nazi repression. The Soviet leadership did not share in Wittfogel’s concern. Continuing to be blinded by their own myopic fears of intra-party treachery, the Soviet Communists, lead by the ready ascendant Josef Stalin, continued to view non-Communist socialists as the primary threat to Communist success in Germany. The Comintern urged the KPD to fight other socialist groups instead of the Nazis which further divided the German Communists between those who kept to the party line and opposed the socialists, and those, like Wittfogel, who dared to resist National Socialism. Still nominally an orthodox Communist, Wittfogel’s break with Stalin’s tolerant stance towards Nazism and his subsequent total commitment to opposing the Nazi cause defined Wittfogel in the early 1930s.

From 1931 until his arrest by the Nazis on March 10, 1933, Wittfogel was primarily concerned with agitating against the National Socialists. With the retirement of his mentor Carl Grünberg as Director of the Institute in 1929 and his subsequent replacement by a young philosopher named Max Horkheimer, Wittfogel’s ties to the Institute were loosened. With a radical change of leadership at the Institute, Wittfogel

43Ulmen. _The Science of Society_: 143-144.
was able to focus entirely on his political opposition to National Socialism. Writing in Communist newspapers and magazines including *The Red Flag* and the *Red Building*, Wittfogel charged the Nazis with a variety of misdemeanors including misappropriating Hegel and Goethe, rejecting scientific method, and poaching ideas of a German people’s party from the socialists who preceded them.\(^4^4\) Most significantly, Wittfogel was one of the first German Communists to condemn the vicious anti-Semitism espoused by the party. He was even willing to work with Communism’s traditional enemies, anti-fascist nationalists including Friedrich Hielscher and Ernst Jünger, in order to protect Jewish workers and intellectuals, which did little to endear him to his KPD allies.\(^4^5\)

In fact, Wittfogel was becoming increasingly estranged from the KPD because of their continued failure to appreciate the threat Nazism presented to German Communism. Still reeling intellectually from Soviet refusal to accept multilinear Marxism, Wittfogel still believed the Soviet model exhibited the most systematic and successful attempt to create a dictatorship of the proletariat. However, the KPD’s failure to protect workers from Nazi bullying and lack of a clear vision to realize Communist revolution in Germany, strained Wittfogel’s patience. Skeptical as to whether the Soviet-controlled KPD had Germany’s best interest in mind when pursuing a policy of non-aggression against the Nazis, Wittfogel left Germany for the Soviet Union in August 1932 to press for a more active anti-Nazi Communist policy in Germany. Accompanied by Olga Joffe, a Russian journalist who would be Wittfogel’s second wife, Wittfogel traversed the Soviet Union from Moscow to Sochi condemning Nazism and promoting a stronger anti-

Nazi Soviet policy towards Germany. No one in the USSR was interested in Germany or listening to Wittfogel. Soviet leadership had more pressing domestic concerns like managing the fallout from Stalin’s disastrous forced collectivization in the Ukraine to involve itself in German affairs.

Returning home infuriated by Soviet intransigence, Wittfogel continued to churn out articles broadly condemning fascism and specifically attacking Nazism. However, time was running short for Wittfogel. Hitler and his compatriots were gradually wresting absolute control of the German government away from their feckless democratic and socialist opponents. In a final desperate attempt to curry Soviet favor, he attempted to persuade Karl Radek, a sympathetic Soviet party intellectual, of the imminent danger Nazism presented to German workers. Radek demurred, claiming that at worst “German workers…would have to accept ‘two years of Hitler.’”

With this Wittfogel gave up on cooperating with the Soviet Union to fight Nazism. Though he attempted to forge alliances with anti-fascist nationalists like Hielscher, there was no broad base of support on the socialist Left to support such partnerships. With the January 22, 1933 SA march through the Red Wedding section of Berlin, the defeat of the KPD was complete and German Communism ceased to viably oppose Hitler. Wittfogel continued desperately to try to forge political alliances opposing Nazism, but it was too late. As the Nazis consolidated power, they began to imprison their critics and political opponents. An outspoken critic of Nazism since 1928 and one with clear KPD affiliations, Wittfogel was a wanted man. Despite continual attempts by Horkheimer and his other colleagues at the Institute to convince Wittfogel to leave

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Germany he demurred in response to their warnings. He was successfully able to evade capture for over a month between the end of January and March 1933, however in one last brazen act of defiance Wittfogel voted in the Reichstag election in March 1933. He was apprehended by German police near the Swiss border two days later.

Wittfogel’s apprehension and subsequent detention by German authorities ended his political and scholarly career in Germany. He spent the next eight months in various German prisons and concentration camps. His experience in the camps and with the people he met there, primarily political prisoners and radical intellectuals, were important in further shaping his concerns about bureaucratic despotism he had read in Weber. Furthermore, as similar screams from the atrocities committed in the Soviet Union under Stalin began to be heard in the West, Wittfogel’s concentration camp experience sensitized him to the dehumanizing violence wrought by totalitarian states. Compared to many of his fellow detainees, Wittfogel was extremely fortunate. His wife, Olga Joffe, worked tirelessly to secure his release, enlisting the domestic support of nationalists like Hielscher as well as international support from the likes of Sidney Webb and Harold Laski. Released in December 1933, Wittfogel immediately went into exile in England where he published a fictionalized account of his experiences titled State Concentration Camp VII. After six months recuperating in England, Wittfogel set sail for the United

50 Wittfogel was so notable as a concentration camp inmate that he was mentioned in a 1933 New York Times article condemning the Nazi imprisonment of dissenting intellectuals alongside Wili Herzfeld and Karl von Ossietzky. See “Churches Protest on Anti-Semitism”. March 25, 1933. The New York Times, 10.
51 It remains debatable as to who was instrumental in securing Wittfogel’s release from Lichtenburg. The roles of Olga Lang and Friedrich Hielscher are beyond dispute, but Ulmen’s crediting of Karl Haushofer was firmly rejected by Olga Lang in a series of letters to Ulmen after his publication of “Wittfogel’s Science of Society” in 1976. See Letter from Olga Lang to G.L. Ulmen February 14, 1976. Karl August Wittfogel Papers: Box 294, Folder 3. The Hoover Institution, Stanford University.
States in September 1934 to join his confederates at the Institute of Social Research exiled in New York City.
Chapter II: The Unlikely Anthropologist

Karl Wittfogel came to the United States harboring serious doubts about the scientific validity of Communism. Having seen the hope of proletarian revolution in Germany dashed in 1923 and then definitively crushed with the rise of Hitler, Marx’s pronouncement – echoed by the Soviet Union – that a global revolution was imminent and inevitable seemed to be mistaken. Since Wittfogel had originally been drawn to Marx for the coherence of his scientific system, its failure to predict the German Sonderweg encouraged Wittfogel to seek alternative approaches to conducting social-scientific research.

The timing of Wittfogel’s move to the United States was fortuitous because it coincided with an appreciation of the role of social science in academia. Nowhere was this growth more pronounced than in the field of anthropology. Before the turn of the century, anthropology had been a field at the periphery of American academic life. With the development of cultural anthropology under Franz Boas at Columbia University, however, anthropology gained credibility as a means of explaining how societies may fundamentally differ even as their members remain part of the same human species. Under Boas’s leadership, the anthropology department at Columbia grew from a staff of two in 1919 to a world-renowned center of cultural anthropology, home to luminaries including Ruth Benedict and Ralph Linton.\footnote{Esther S. Goldfrank, Notes on an Undirected Life: As One Anthropologist Tells It, (Flushing, NY: Queens College Press, 1978), 4.} The materialism embraced by cultural
anthropologists was in line with Wittfogel’s views about the central importance of the relationship between humans and their natural surroundings in shaping social development. Furthermore, Wittfogel’s trip to China in 1935-36 reinforced the importance of fieldwork—a central tenet of Boasian anthropology—in his Sinological studies.

Beginning with his fieldwork in China and culminating with the publication of *The History of Chinese Society, Liao* in 1949, Wittfogel’s embrace of American anthropology was the most significant development in his early American writing. Equally inspired by Boasian cultural anthropology and the structural anthropology espoused by Ralph Linton, Wittfogel drew liberally from diverse—oftentimes opposing—schools of American anthropology. Most significantly, Wittfogel was able to combine the social focus of Boas with Linton’s emphasis on the psychology of the individual. For Boas, “the individual appears rarely, if ever” in anthropological study because individual tendencies are dictated by cultural norms. Boas believed that anthropologists should work closely with sociologists and historians in developing holistic pictures of cultures including the derivation of its modern beliefs and the current dynamics of its society. In contrast, Linton, allying himself with psychology, argued that society is the product of an interaction between individual personalities and environmental factors, not the first cause of individual development. Wittfogel would attempt to carve a via media between the theories of Boas and Linton, retaining Boas’ focus on society while maintaining a concern for individual differences within society and deviance from societal norms. In Wittfogel’s writings on Oriental society, American cultural anthropologists found an

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attempt, using Marxism, to understand why Eastern societies developed differently from the West. In cultural anthropology, Wittfogel found a substitute for Communist dogmas about Oriental society derived from Hegel and Marx. The reciprocal relationship between Wittfogel’s developing theory of Oriental society and the burgeoning field of cultural anthropology would fundamentally shift Wittfogel’s research and shape his masterpiece *Oriental Despotism*.

Wittfogel arrived in the United States in 1934 as an alienated German Communist working for an organization, the Institute for Social Research, whose direction was increasingly at odds with. Though his relationship with Max Horkheimer, who had chaired the Institute since 1930, remained congenial, Horkheimer’s influence had shifted the dominant methodology of the Institute away from the quantitative social sciences – most notably economics – toward qualitative disciplines like philosophy and psychoanalysis. Under Horkheimer’s leadership a new generation of researchers including the philosopher Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm joined the Institute replacing friends like Korsch and Lukács who had left the Institute in the wake of the post-1933 German Communist diaspora. Wittfogel had been close with the Institute’s previous director, Carl Grünberg, who had originally hired him and to whose journal, the *Grünberg Archiv*, Wittfogel was a regular contributor. Furthermore, Wittfogel’s political activism drew the ire of his less politically active colleagues who thought his politics drew attention away from the theoretical mission of the Institute.

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56 For the correspondence of Karl Wittfogel and Max Horkheimer see Box 22, Folder 33 of the Wittfogel Papers. The Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

Despite his hostility toward the direction of the Institute under Horkheimer’s leadership, even the staunchly subjective, humanist Institute of Social Research became enamored with the prevailing trend of quantitative social science research. Before the Institute had been forced into American exile, Horkheimer had hoped to undertake a multi-dimensional look at authoritarianism in the family from perspectives ranging from literary criticism and philosophy to psychology and cultural anthropology. In creating what became *Authority and Family* (1936), Horkheimer hoped to mobilize the entire Institute, using their diverse specialties to offer a holistic look at a phenomena that Horkheimer felt was one of the underpinnings of Nazism. The collection of empirical data, in the form of questionnaires, was largely undertaken in Europe by Erich Fromm, but the interpretation of the data by Fromm and Paul Lazarsfeld – though never published – was completed in the United States and was informed by the publication of the *Middletown* study in 1929.

Wittfogel’s proposed role in *Authority and Family* was small because of his disagreement with the humanistic focus of the studies. Horkheimer hoped to expand the scope of the study outside of narrow Western concerns and Wittfogel was the only Institute researcher interested in non-Western topics. As the sole expert on Eastern affairs, Horkheimer charged Wittfogel with expanding the scope of *Authority and Family* by undertaking a systematic study of the role of authority in the Chinese family. Yet, Wittfogel was unsure that he could undertake such a study without conducting empirical research in China. Wittfogel and Horkheimer had discussed traveling to China in 1931, but as Wittfogel was set to embark the rise of Nazism had him sufficiently concerned that

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he chose to remain in Germany. Now in America, removed from actively participating in the fight against Nazism, the timing of a trip to China was more auspicious. Wittfogel would have the opportunity to conduct field research in China for the first time and improve his written and spoken Mandarin, which he begun during his research for *The Economy and Society of China*. Furthermore, empirical data culled from Chinese archives could be the catalyst Wittfogel was hoping to find to hasten the development of the second volume of *The Economy and Society of China*, which he had been working on since the late 1920s.

The most significant obstacle impeding Wittfogel’s trip to China was a lack of funding. Though the Institute was one of the only German academic bodies to remain fiscally secure in exile, the type of trip envisioned by Wittfogel and Horkheimer – a transcontinental multi-year excursion employing two Institute researchers and numerous Chinese graduate students – would be far too expensive for the Institute’s budget. Fortunately, during his brief stay in England after leaving Germany in 1933 Wittfogel had become acquainted with Edward Carter, the Secretary General of the Pacific Council of the Institute of Pacific Relations. Carter had “expressed his willingness to interest the IPR [Institute of Pacific Relations] in Wittfogel’s research” and in subsequent meetings Carter formally invited Wittfogel to act as a researcher for the Institute of Pacific Relations while in China. Between the Institute of Social Research and the Institute of Pacific Relations, enough funding was made available to send the Wittfogels to China in early 1935.

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Before Wittfogel left for China he published an article titled “The Foundations and Stages of Chinese Economic History” in the Institute’s Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung. Not only was it Wittfogel’s first article published in English, but it also illustrated a shift in focus toward American Sinological developments and recent archeological findings in China and away from economic and political theory.  

Wittfogel argued, inspired by developments in Chinese archaeology, that China’s “economy and social system” had gone through several significant shifts before European’s discovered Asia. Challenging prevailing notions of China’s static feudalism, he posited that China’s economy was “Asiatic” in that it depended on massive irrigation works for cultivation of its arable land.  

The bureaucracy developed to maintain these irrigation systems had an ossifying effect on Chinese society, as the managerial elite became the primary power brokers in rural regions. In putting forth this thesis, Wittfogel was above all influenced by archeological findings in China in the 1920s. New discoveries of bones and tools allowed Sinologists to call into question many of the assumptions about early Chinese history made by Chinese philologists and cast new light on the development of the Chou and Han periods.  

However, unlike his writing in the late 1930s and 1940s, Wittfogel cites no Western anthropologists and is more interested in studying China as a means of understanding the evolution of capitalism than for its own sake. It would take Wittfogel’s trip to China where he conducted field research for the first time, for Wittfogel to embrace anthropology and begin to cast off the fetters of Marxist orthodoxy.

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Karl and Olga Lang Wittfogel left for China in early 1935, arriving in Peking in June 1935 after brief interludes in Hawaii and Japan. In a letter he wrote to Stephen Duggan at the Institute of Pacific Relations on August 2, 1936, Wittfogel outlined a trio of projects he hoped to complete while in China.\(^67\) The first project was to analyze the social bureaucracy of the ruling class for the second volume of *The Economy and Society of China*. This was his personal research and his top priority while in China. The second project was the “study of the sociology of the modern Chinese family, its background, dynamics, and change” conducted jointly with Olga Lang Wittfogel in his capacity as a researcher for the Institute for Social Research.\(^68\) This project entailed using the quantitative methods developed by Erich Fromm and Paul Lazarsfeld as part of the *Authority and Family* and applying it to Chinese civilians of different economic and social backgrounds. Wittfogel further notes that it was Olga who did most of the questioning of subjects and the day-to-day management of the project. Finally, on behalf of the Institute of Pacific Relations, Wittfogel hoped to begin translating the extensive Chinese Dynastic Histories into English. The Dynastic Histories delineated “2100 years of China’s economic and social development” and would be invaluable source material to historians and social scientists.\(^69\)

Wittfogel’s studies in China brought him into contact with numerous prominent social scientists and saw him adopt anthropological methodology for the first time.\(^70\)

\(^{67}\) Letter from Karl A. Wittfogel to Stephen Duggan, August 2, 1936. Box 243, Folder 4 of the Karl August Wittfogel Papers. The Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

\(^{68}\) Letter from Wittfogel to Duggan, August 2, 1936.

\(^{69}\) Letter from Wittfogel to Duggan, August 2, 1936.

\(^{70}\) Regrettably, there is a significant gap in Wittfogel’s correspondence and notes during the two years he spent in China. This could be due to the intensity of his research during these years or it could have been because of the steep cost of postage. As a result I have primarily relied on Ulmen’s biography of Wittfogel, *The Science of Society* and an interview Wittfogel conducted with *Telos* from 1979 for the factual information about Wittfogel’s stay in China from 1935-1937.
Until his research in 1935, Wittfogel had never undertaken fieldwork before. His writings during the Weimar period were drawn from secondary accounts of the Far East as well as economic and political tracts concerning the place of the East within a global context. Working in Chinese archives and interviewing Chinese subjects gave him a new perspective on how successful research could be conducted. Meeting with other successful Sinologists in China in the mid-1930s, including Owen Lattimore and John Lossing Buck, Wittfogel led the shift in Far Eastern studies away from theoretically based philosophical or economic tracts about Asia’s place in the world and towards examining Asian geography and culture for its own sake.

Wittfogel’s adoption of anthropological methodology in China was clearly manifest in his study of authority in the Chinese family. Drawing from archival material, archeological findings, and interviews, Wittfogel determined that a shift from matriarchal to patriarchal family structure coincided with a shift from nomadism to agriculture. However, there is a clear tension in Wittfogel contribution to the Authority and Family - entitled “An Economic History of the Foundations and Development of Family Authority” – between the Orthodox Marxism of his Weimar period work and his burgeoning interest in objective social science methods. In outlining the problem of understanding the relationship between family economics and authority, Wittfogel equally credits economists (Engels for instance) and observational social scientists (most notably Franz Boas) in diagnosing how economics shape society. Drawing from economics, sociology, and anthropology, Wittfogel examines the symbiotic relationship between social structure and economic development. Though focusing on China and

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Japan, Wittfogel incorporated anthropological research on Eskimos, Australian aborigines, and Native Americans in Central America to give credence to the universality of primitive kinship patterns. Though radically departing methodologically from his earlier work, Wittfogel was still beholden to the concept of teleological history and societal development. By claiming that all primitive societies share certain features, he was explicitly arguing that there is a universal way to measure societal development. This Hegelian view of societal development was at odds with prevailing trend of cultural relativism within anthropology during the 1930s and exemplifies the partiality of Wittfogel’s break with Marxism before 1939. As an essay, “The History of the Economic Foundations and Development of Family Authority” demonstrated Wittfogel’s adoption of American social scientific methods and his continuing dialogue with Marxism in the mid-1930s. As the decade wore on, Wittfogel’s belief in the validity of Marxism as a science would diminish as his adoption of anthropology appreciated.

Despite the imminent publication of Wittfogel’s examination of authority and the Chinese family, the most significant project in the long term that Wittfogel undertook while in China was translating parts of the vast Chinese Dynastic histories. Covering the entire period between the 3rd century BCE and the early 20th century, the twenty-six volumes of the Dynastic Histories represented – and continue to represent – the most complete documentation of the history of Chinese society and politics. Working with Chinese scholars from different specialties, Wittfogel hoped to compile and translate much of the immense socio-economic and institutional data contained in Peking archives.

for the benefit of Western humanists and social scientists.\textsuperscript{74} As the coordinator of the project, it was his job to systemize the data collected by various the Chinese researchers into a cogent, holistic picture of a particular dynasty. In examining fields ranging from economics, anthropology, agriculture, sociology, military history, and government the scope of Wittfogel’s examining of Chinese society was unprecedented.\textsuperscript{75} Though he began with the Liao Dynasty (907-1125), Wittfogel hoped to write a work examining each Chinese dynasty in the same exhaustive detail.

Unfortunately, the Wittfogels’ stay in China was shortened by the escalation of hostilities between the Kuomintang government and Japanese invaders in Manchuria in 1936. Though many American researchers stayed in China, Horkheimer and others expressed concern that if Wittfogel was captured by the Japanese his uncertain citizenship status and Communist past could endanger his life.\textsuperscript{76} Despite his departure, Wittfogel’s trip to China had been a success beyond anything he could have imagined. All three of his projects had been completed or nearly completed and he had made personal connections in the field of American Sinology that would benefit his career enormously.\textsuperscript{77} Though his relations with the Institute of Social Research continued to be strained, developing relations with prestigious academics like Owen Lattimore allowed Wittfogel’s earlier work to gain notoriety in American Sinological circles forwarding his career in American academia. Most importantly, his work on the Chinese Dynastic histories would attract the attention of American social scientists, especially cultural

\textsuperscript{76} See Letter from Max Horkheimer to the American Consul General Tiensin, China. April 3, 1936. Box 22, Folder 22.33. The Hoover Institution, Stanford University.
anthropologists, and occasion a further shift in his scholarship away from the theoretical work of the Institute of Social research towards observational social sciences.

The year 1939 was pivotal in reorienting Wittfogel’s thought away from Marxism and towards cultural anthropology. Returning home, further plans were made between Wittfogel and the Institute of Pacific Relations to expand on the research he did in China on the Dynastic Histories. Upon receiving a Rockefeller Foundation grant in 1939, the Chinese History Project, jointly sponsored by the Institute of Pacific Relations and the Institute of Social Research, officially began. More importantly, the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on August 23, 1939 confirmed Wittfogel’s suspicions during the early 1930s of an inherent closeness between the two totalitarian systems. His feelings about Communism since the early 1930s had been ambivalent, but after the Nazi-Soviet Pact he broke totally from the party and began to reference Marx less frequently in his writing.\textsuperscript{78} For the young Wittfogel, Marxism had represented a scientific justification for his radical politics. As he came to reject Communist politics during his American exile, so his faith in the Marxist foundation of his political beliefs also waned. For the next ten years Wittfogel’s writing would be completely politically detached as he searched for a new political identity. Instead, his research during the 1940s would rely heavily on archaeology and anthropology to examine the history of Chinese societal development. Wittfogel’s utilization of American social scientific methodology post-1939 occasioned his transformation from a displaced European intellectual into an American social scientist.

\textsuperscript{78} Ulmen. \textit{The Science of Society}, 225.
Though his work on the Chinese History Project opened up opportunities in American academia, it signaled the end of his engagement with the Institute for Social Research and many of his friends and colleagues that he had met before his immigration to the United States. The Institute would continue to partially fund his research with the IPR and Wittfogel would continue to be nominally affiliated with the organization, but he ceased to write for the Institute’s journal and was totally alienated from their gradual development of a new method which would become critical theory in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1939 Wittfogel published his last essay in the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung; entitled “The Society of Prehistoric China,” this essay drew generously from American anthropology and was concerned primarily with the impact of new archeological findings on the study of prehistoric China.79 These themes were of no interest to other members of the Institute because they did not relate to larger world-historical problems or engage Marxism in any significant way. The most important interpersonal break came with his divorce from Olga Lange late in 1939. She had been instrumental in Wittfogel’s research on Chinese family authority, but after they returned to the United States her research had trended towards studying “mass society” under Paul Lazarsfeld.80 Though it is difficult to determine what role their divergent research interests played in ending their marriage, there is a correlation between Karl Wittfogel’s academic shift towards American social science and the erosion of his interpersonal relationships with other European refugee intellectuals. The social, as well as the intellectual, void created by his deteriorating interpersonal relationships with his European friends and colleagues would be filled by the American intellectuals he met while working on the Chinese History Project.

Of the numerous American scholars Wittfogel associated with during the late 1930s, Owen Lattimore and Ralph Linton were the two most significant figures in reorienting Wittfogel away from European modes of thinking – with its heavy emphasis on economics – and towards more holistic approaches to society through examinations of culture. Lattimore had been editor of the IPR’s journal *Pacific Affairs* since 1933 and had spent as much time residing in China as any intellectual after 1925. He was known for his scholarly openness allowing known Marxists as well as native Chinese writers to publish in *Pacific Affairs*. This tolerance was a boon for Wittfogel who was a known Communist with few American connections. Friendship with Lattimore opened doors for Wittfogel in China and later in the United States where he would continue to seek Lattimore’s advice and assistance on various articles concerned with frontier China – Lattimore’s specialty - under the aegis of the Chinese History Project. Unlike Lattimore, Linton was the consummate academic outsider. Brought in by the administration at Columbia University to replace the retiring Franz Boas as chair of the anthropology department, Linton’s uncouth demeanor and individualized approach to anthropology alienated Boas’s allies within the department including the formidable Ruth Benedict. Linton’s primary addition to anthropology was in examining processes of acculturation in non-Western societies, especially between invading and colonized peoples. Linton and Wittfogel shared an outsider mentality and an interest in the acculturation of invading frontier peoples into the heart of Han China. As the chair of its most prestigious

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81 Lattimore had numerous controversial associates, most notably Agnes Smedley, whose work appeared in *Pacific Affairs*. He was also one of the first Westerners to broach the topic of East Asian decolonization in the pages of an academic journal. For more on Lattimore and *Pacific Affairs*, see Newman, *Owen Lattimore and the “Loss” of China*, 22-26.

department Linton’s support bolstered Wittfogel’s standing in the anthropology community and he undoubtedly influenced Wittfogel’s study of the Liao conquest dynasty. These two titans helped Wittfogel gain exposure and notoriety for his German work and were instrumental in shaping his work with the Chinese History Project.

The goal of the Chinese History Project was to translate and publish the Chinese Dynastic Histories in English so they would be more accessible to Western scholars. Since this project was of particular interest to social scientists and historians, it brought Wittfogel into personal contact with many of the leading scholars in fields such as anthropology, sociology, and archaeology. He strengthened ties with American scholars, including Owen Lattimore and R.S. Britton, whose work he had become familiar with in China and whose research was pivotal in shaping Wittfogel’s adopted social scientific Weltanschauung. The translation of the Chinese Dynastic Histories was of particular interest to cultural anthropologists because it represented the most comprehensive study of a particular period of Chinese cultural history ever undertaken in the Western world. His lectures on the hydraulic theory of Oriental society attracted such luminaries as Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict as well as Ralph Linton, the head of Columbia University’s anthropology department. Wittfogel and Linton shared concerns regarding the advancement of totalitarianism, as well as histories of controversial political involvement that alienated them from their colleagues. The interpersonal relationships Wittfogel cultivated as the founder of the Chinese History Project – including George E. Taylor,

83 Letter from George E. Taylor to John R. Welker. April 9, 1957. Box 244, Folder 2. The Hoover Institution, Stanford University.
84 Goldfrank, Notes on an Undirected Life, 146.
anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Clyde Kluckhohn, and Sinologist John K. Fairbank - would determine the direction of all of his published scholarship during the 1940s.

The most important relationship Wittfogel made with the American anthropological community was with Esther Schiff Goldfrank. Goldfrank was an anthropologist of the American Southwest and former student of Franz Boas at Columbia University. Unlike most prominent anthropologists, she was not affiliated with any university, instead publishing while living in White Plains, New York from 1920 until she met and married Wittfogel in 1940. Though she was a close friend of Boas and his coterie, her status as an academic outsider removed her from the internecine battle between Boas’s chosen successor to head Columbia University’s anthropology department, Ruth Benedict, and the appointed one, Ralph Linton. Goldfrank met Wittfogel at a party she hosted in January 1940, they connected immediately over “irrigation in the [Southwestern] pueblos” and were married on March 8, 1940.86 Wittfogel’s marriage to Goldfrank was a symbiotic one intellectually because it focused his thinking on issues of anthropology and expanded his study of hydraulic systems to the American Southwest. At the same time, Wittfogel’s imput broadened Goldfrank’s study of the American Southwest beyond cultural elements like native folklore and art into economic and structural issues.

The reciprocal relationship between Wittfogel and Goldfrank’s academic interests was most clearly manifest in two documents from the early 1940s: a review of Franz Boas and Ralph Linton that Wittfogel published in the journal Studies in Philosophy and Social Science and an article entitled “Some Aspects of Pueblo Mythology and Society” co-written by Wittfogel and Goldfrank. The review of Boas and Linton published in

86 Goldfrank, Notes on an Undirected Life, 146-147.
Studies in Political Philosophy is the first document published by Wittfogel that bears Goldfrank’s influence. Just as Goldfrank acted as a mediator between Linton and Boas, simultaneously acknowledging her debt to “Papa Franz” as a mentor and attending Linton’s lectures on acculturation, Wittfogel attempted in his review to link the two men as cultural anthropologists. He claimed that Boas, “raised the literary equipment of modern anthropology to a level never known before”, redefining anthropology as cultural rather than racial.\(^8\) Linton, on the other hand, through his concept of acculturation, was expanding the domain of cultural anthropology by examining how cultures interact with one another. Linton argued that independent cultures could coexist in the same geographical space without one assimilating the other. The second article illustrating the reciprocal academic relationship between Wittfogel and Goldfrank was “Some Aspects of Pueblo Mythology and Society” published in 1943. Drawing equally from the published work of Goldfrank and Wittfogel, the article extends Wittfogel’s concept of hydraulic society forwarded in Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas to the pueblo societies of the American Southwest by using myth to understand if societies like the Zuni and Hopi instituted hydraulic systems before the arrival of Western colonists.\(^8\) Though no definitive conclusion was reached by the study, it was the first serious non-Eastern article undertaken by Wittfogel since the 1920s. Furthermore, Goldfrank’s anthropology background in the American Southwest opened up the possibility that hydraulic societies with similar bureaucratic apparatuses existed totally apart from the Chinese model. Most

\(^8\) Karl August Wittfogel, “Review of Franz Boas, Race, Language and Culture; General Anthropology, edited by Franz Boas; and Ralph Linton, Acculturation,” Studies in Philosophy and Social Science 8, No. 3 (1940): 481.

importantly, their research on “Pueblo Mythology and Society” established a working relationship that would continue for decades.

Wittfogel’s forays into anthropology and his marriage to Esther Goldfrank established him as a credible, unique voice in the American anthropology community by 1943. Though an outsider, Goldfrank was well-connected to the Columbia anthropology department and her relationship with Wittfogel allowed him to become acquainted with the right people to successfully branch out into the field of anthropology. His connections bolstered the excitement surrounding the completion of the introductions to the various sections of History of Chinese Society, Liao, readying it for immediate publication. To advise its publication, Wittfogel assembled a board of notable American and European scholars including Owen Lattimore and Ralph Linton. Several of these intellectuals, including Lattimore and Linton, had advised Wittfogel as he crafted the general introduction to the History of Chinese Society, Liao and had encouraged Wittfogel to published the volume without delay. However, progress on the publication was impeded by a practical problem: the monograph – at nearly 900 pages – was too lengthy to merit consideration by most publishers who were handcuffed by paper rationing during World War II. Despite the difficulty finding a willing publisher, the excitement in the social science community surrounding the release of History of Chinese Society, Liao remained even as publication was delayed into the late 1940s.

The History of Chinese Society, Liao represented a fusion of cultural and structural anthropological thought, which allowed it to reach a wide audience in the

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90 See Letter from Ralph Linton to Edward C. Carter, February 14, 1941 and Letter from Cora DuBois to Karl August Wittfogel, November 12, 1942. Box 8, Folder 6 and Box 8, Folder 7. The Hoover Institution, Stanford University.
anthropology community. Like the cultural anthropologists, and Boas in particular, Wittfogel’s Liao volume compiled data from every corner of the social sciences and sought to synthesize it into a holistic picture of Liao culture. Though he began by analyzing the Liao Dynasty historically, he quickly recognized the “fact that historical knowledge is limited and indirect” and that it “cannot replace the description of human activity and social change” provided by the social sciences.\footnote{Wittfogel. “The History of Chinese Society, Liao (907-1125),” 30.} By turning to archaeology and literary sources - as Boas had analyzed findings in comparative anthropology and mythology when editing\textit{ General Anthropology} in 1936 – Wittfogel was able to provide an exhaustive picture of Liao culture and society beyond what he found in the Dynastic Histories. While Wittfogel remained beholden to Boasian method, he used it as a means towards fortifying Ralph Linton’s theory of acculturation. In Linton’s \textit{The Study of Man} (1936) he had hypothesized that, “the type of contact which makes acculturation possible is more likely to arise through conquest and the settlement of the conquering groups among the vanquished than through anything else.”\footnote{Ralph Linton, \textit{The Study of Man} (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company Inc., 1936), 335.} Wittfogel’s Liao study largely confirmed Linton’s hypothesis because it illustrated how cultural exchanges between the Liao conquerors and the native Chinese were common while close contact also propagated new customs, for example the creation of the herd-owning agriculturalist, which were a combination of Liao and Chinese traditions.\footnote{Wittfogel, “The History of Chinese Society, Liao (907-1125),” 14-16.} Harnessing the inclusive method of cultural anthropology to animate the paradigmatic case Lintonian acculturation, the conquest dynasty, brought together the two most popular schools of anthropology during the 1940s.
With its broad scope, there were several reasons for the eager anticipation of *History of Chinese Society, Liao* among anthropologists. Linton and his supporters at Columbia University were eagerly awaiting Wittfogel’s Liao volume because it presented the most comprehensive attempt to illustrate non-Western acculturation. The Liao Dynasty was the least understood of the great Chinese conquest dynasties at the time of Wittfogel’s publication. Prolonged contact between the two cultures in Manchuria fundamentally altered both, with the historically nomadic Liao in some cases becoming sedentary and adopting agriculture while the native Chinese adopted Liao political culture and officials. Wittfogel explicitly credited Linton, as well as like-minded anthropologists Robert Redfield and Melville Herskovits, with emphasizing the role of acculturation he used in analyzing the Liao Dynasty and quoted from a 1935 memorandum of Linton’s adumbrating the advantages of acculturation compared with the absorption theory of conquest. Though the Liao volume was of special interest to Linton’s coterie because it sought to validate their theory of acculturation, it was also seen as valuable to anthropologists outside of the Linton circle. In the introduction to *Liao*, Wittfogel expressed the hope that his study would shed “new light” on the economic, linguistic, religious, military, and kinship structure of the Liao Dynasty for the benefit of American social scientists. Anthropologist Cora DuBois exclaimed the Liao study was “invaluable because it corrects through the use of actual historic materials many of our [anthropologist’s] exaggerated assumptions concerning pastoral nomadism,

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and extensive versus intensive agriculture.”\textsuperscript{98} In examining an epoch of Chinese history holistically, Wittfogel provided anthropologists with a complete picture of historical Chinese society with which to compare later developments. Furthermore, anthropologists in China could draw on Wittfogel’s Liao analysis to trace economic, social, and cultural aspects of China to their historical roots or, at least, to an earlier period. Due to its scope, \textit{Liao} intensified Wittfogel’s relationship with the American anthropological community and represented the apogee of his anthropological career.

With the Liao volume completed, Wittfogel again ventured into the field, this time with Esther Goldfrank, to expand his research on irrigation systems of American Southwestern pueblo societies. He wanted to see the pueblos of New Mexico for himself. He wanted to do this for two reasons: to confirm the continued accuracy of Goldfrank’s anthropological analysis, which she had undertaken with Boas in the 1920s, and to witness the scale of irrigation in the American Southwest first hand.\textsuperscript{99} On this trip they were aided by Florence Kluckhohn, the wife of Harvard anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn. She had been conducting fieldwork among the Zuni under the auspices of the University of New Mexico, under her supervision Wittfogel examined the irrigation works of the Zuni pueblos.\textsuperscript{100} After a brief stay among the Zuni, Wittfogel and Goldfrank traveled to Mesa Verde which was the site of “that most impressive monument to pueblo planning, industry and discipline.”\textsuperscript{101} Wittfogel’s examination of the irrigation systems confirmed his hypothesis that manifestations of Zuni familial and tribal authority resulted from their reliance on irrigation to supply water to their crops.

\textsuperscript{98} Letter from Cora DuBois to Karl August Wittfogel, November 12, 1942. Box 8, Folder 7. The Hoover Institution, Stanford University.
\textsuperscript{99} Goldfrank, \textit{Notes on an Undirected Life}, 204-205.
\textsuperscript{100} Ulmen. \textit{The Science of Society}, 242.
\textsuperscript{101} Ulmen, \textit{The Science of Society}, 242.
Upon returning from the American Southwest in early 1947, Wittfogel received the good news that he had been appointed Professor of Chinese History at the University of Washington – Seattle. His connection to prominent American intellectuals including Ralph Linton and, most importantly, Harvard Sinologist John K. Fairbank had been instrumental in securing his appointment. Furthermore, the Far Eastern and Russian Institute, under which he would conduct research while at the University of Washington, was headed by George Taylor. Taylor was an old friend of Wittfogel’s from his time in China and had mediated relations between the Institute of Pacific Relations and the Chinese History Project. Despite the economic security offered by employment at the University of Washington and the light course load given to Wittfogel by Taylor, teaching in Seattle limited his ability to conduct fieldwork and interact with the friends he had made in the anthropology department of Columbia University. Wittfogel’s stay in Seattle would last for nearly three decades, but it represented the beginning of a shift away from anthropology and towards theoretical scholarship akin to his research on *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas*.

By 1949 Wittfogel had established himself as a respected member of the American anthropology community. His close ties with Linton and Goldfrank legitimated his work to many and the publication in 1949 of *History of Chinese Society, Liao* exposed his reach on hydraulic societies to those at odds with or outside of the cultural anthropologist’s stronghold Columbia University. Yet, despite the respect afforded him as an anthropologist, 1949 represented the beginning of Wittfogel’s reengagement with

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102 See the correspondence between Karl August Wittfogel and George E. Taylor in Box 8, Folder 6; Box 44, Folders 35 and 36; and Box 45, Folders 1 and 2.
political scholarship and a growing fissure between the aims of the Chinese History Project and the American anthropology community. The ascension of the Chinese Communist Party to undisputed rule in China awakened Wittfogel from his apolitical slumbers, forcing him to reengage with Marxism and speak out strongly against Communism. Though luminaries of anthropology including Franz Boas and Margaret Mead had been able to balance political engagement with dispassionate scholarship, Wittfogel was by nature a political animal whose scholarship in Germany had always been tied to political ends. Wittfogel’s political disengagement in the 1940s had occasioned his stunning rise as an anthropologist, but it was only an interlude in a scholarly career defined by political entanglements. By 1950 Wittfogel’s politics had alienated most of the prominent social scientists whom he had befriended in the United States and his writing diverged from topics of anthropological interest towards explicitly political topics.

Months before the publication of *The History of Chinese Society*, Liao, Wittfogel joined the newly reformed American Committee of Cultural Freedom (ACCF). The ACCF – then called only the Committee for Cultural Freedom - had originally been formed as Popular Front organization in the 1930s which allied myriad socialist, communist, and liberal groups under the banner of struggle against Nazism. After the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact destroyed the Popular Front in 1939, the ACCF went dormant with its membership decimated by those fleeing their prior involvement with organizations friendly to the Soviet Union.103 Dormant for almost a decade, the ACCF was revived by anti-Communist philosopher Sidney Hook in March 1949 in response to a

conference held at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel staged to urge peace with the Soviet Union. Prominent anti-Communists of all stripes, including Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., Irving Kristol, and Hook flocked to the ACCF because it broadly positioned itself against Communist totalitarianism. Though some of its members were politically conservative, the bulk of its membership – including its most prominent members – were anti-Stalinist liberals who supported free inquiry and disdained Soviet cultural totalitarianism. In step with the growing concern over Communist influence as the United States settled into a cold war with the USSR, the ACCF represented a new front of intellectuals and politicians united against totalitarianism.

Wittfogel was probably drawn into the ACCF because of the anger and disappointment in the hopes of the USSR shared by most of its members. Members of the ACCF also shared in Wittfogel’s concerns about intellectual freedom in the Soviet Union, which had begun with his first trip to the USSR in 1927. Furthermore, spending much of his time in New York City, Wittfogel was in close proximity to the core leadership of the ACCF including Hook and Kristol. A shared past and city brought Wittfogel in close contact with the ACCF, but formally allying himself with the organization would put him at risk of alienating the cultural anthropology community which had eagerly embraced his work. Perhaps Wittfogel believed he could be a passive member of the ACCF and avoid totally immersing himself in the cultural struggle against the USSR, while showing his support for the United States and its support of free


105 It is likely that Boas’s students at Columbia University would have been highly skeptical of any alliances with the ACCF because of the presence of Sidney Hook. As a Progressive leader in the 1930s, Boas had repeatedly refused to ally himself with Hook after Hook attempted to undermine the American Committee for Defense and Intellectual Freedom. Even with John Dewey mediating to mollify his antagonism towards Hook, Boas never forgave Hook and subsequently refused to cooperate with him on all future projects. See Kutulas, *The Long War*, 157-158, 190.
academic inquiry. Regardless of his motives, Wittfogel’s membership in the ACCF involved a series of scholarly and political tradeoffs between the disinterest necessary to conduct unbiased research and moral will to condemn Soviet suppression of dissenting opinion. Ultimately, Wittfogel’s membership in the ACCF would create opportunities in the realm of politics and allow him to reach a larger popular readership. Through the ACCF Wittfogel would become friends with editors Eliot Cohen and Sol Levitas whose patronage Wittfogel would come to depend on as he became more enmeshed in the anti-Communist discourse of the 1950s. Like the ACCF itself in 1949, Wittfogel was torn by competing allegiances and even after joining remained on the margins, unsure of his place within its competing centers of power. Wittfogel needed a cause to establish his place within the ACCF and on October 1, 1949 the formal establishment of the People’s Republic of China – a Communist government headed by insurgent leader Mao Zedong – would provide Wittfogel with a political issue at the nexus of his burgeoning anti-Communism and his background in Sinology to spur his political rebirth.

After October 1949, Wittfogel would never again undertake apolitical social scientific studies like *The History of Chinese Society, Liao* or “Some Aspects of Pueblo Mythology and Society.” He was sufficiently alarmed by the potential of a Sino-Soviet axis that he devoted his future scholarship almost solely to understanding the structure of Chinese and Soviet society. Furthermore, in the ACCF he had found a community of like-minded intellectuals who felt betrayed by the promises of Communism and saw the emergent Soviet Union as the new threat to global security. Wittfogel’s political reengagement pushed his anthropological interests to the background, where they would remain as he transformed into the most controversial American Sinologist in the 1950s.
Karl Wittfogel’s adoption of social science after immigrating to the United States in 1934 was a response to his unfamiliarity with American political culture. By adopting a qualitative social scientific method he transformed himself into a kind of American cultural anthropologist with highly regarded publications culminating with *The History of Chinese Society, Liao* in 1949. His scientific works cemented his status within the American social science community whose dual emphasis on objective social science and ethnography reached its apex in the 1930s and 1940s. His personal connections within American social science had eased his transition into American intellectual life and allowed him to avoid many of the vocational and social pitfalls that derailed the careers of so many brilliant European academics who immigrated to the United States before and during World War II. Furthermore, his emphasis on fieldwork and empirical evidence liberated Wittfogel from the strictures of Marxist ideology which defined his German scholarship. In short, Wittfogel’s embrace of American social science in general, and anthropology in particular, aided the acceptance of his research in American academia and occasioned his transformation into a uniquely American intellectual.

Over the next two decades Wittfogel would attempt marry social science and theory to understand the economic and cultural underpinnings of Communism in its Soviet and Chinese incarnations. His willingness to use empirical evidence gleaned from anthropologists and archaeologists for explicitly political ends alienated him from former friends like Owen Lattimore who rejected Wittfogel’s binary opposition between

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democracy and Communism. Developments within the Soviet Union, notably the first
detonation of a Soviet atomic bomb in 1949, and the escalating tensions between the
United States and the Soviet Union at the height of Cold War elevated Wittfogel’s fear
that a third world war was imminent. His fear was reflected in his scholarship, which
showed an increasing willingness during the 1950s and 1960s to eschew a balanced,
objective position regarding the Soviet Union and China in favor of dogmatic anti-
Communism.
Chapter III: Seeing Red

Wittfogel’s political reengagement in the United States was abrupt in its intentions, but slow in its execution. Parts of the two polemics Wittfogel wrote during his crisis over the Communist victory in China reached publication, but neither was taken seriously by those in power. Instead, they were dismissed in favor of Lattimore’s more measured response to China’s Communist turn.\textsuperscript{108} Despite personal connections from his membership in the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (ACCF) and the Institute for Pacific Affairs (IPA), his panicked tone and incommensurate proposed response effectively made his ideas politically untenable for a country still rebuilding after World War II. Though Wittfogel’s rash response to Chinese Communism in 1949 was not politically expedient at the time, as the 1950s began and the specter of Communism struck at the hearts of an increasing number of Americans, Wittfogel’s reactionary response to the spread of Communism into Asia became increasingly popular. During the 1950s, Wittfogel transitioned from an immigrant intellectual whose erudite tracts fusing German and American social science were prized by an intellectual elite to an anti-Communist political commentator whose opinions were widely read and whose words had the power to shape careers.

Wittfogel’s political reengagement has important similarities and dissimilarities with the synthesis of scholarship and politics achieved during his Weimar period. Like his work in the 1920s, Wittfogel’s writings became increasingly shaped by his political

worldview. He was also increasingly fearful of both the threat of Communism as a political force and the ambivalence towards it of many academics. Perhaps recalling the difficulties he had motivating the KPD to actively oppose Nazism, Wittfogel may have sought to preemptively strike against Communism and its American supporters by unequivocally opposing the spread of Communism into China, a topic in which he was an expert. Unlike Wittfogel’s Weimar political engagements however, Wittfogel remained a novice in American political maneuverings. Attempting to use force instead of tact to make his opinion heard, Wittfogel’s planned explosion onto the American political scene failed to detonate and instead led to a lengthy, torturous struggle to make his political ideas widely known.

By the time *History of Chinese Society, Liao* was published by the American Philosophical Society in November 1949, it was already unrepresentative of Wittfogel’s scholarly interest. The ascension of Communists to power in China had radically shifted Wittfogel’s focus. His understanding of both Chinese society and Marxism conditioned Wittfogel’s surprise at the Communist victory there. Wittfogel believed that the Chinese governmental system was Oriental despotism, which was defined by the crystallization of power relationships at every level of society. He had been arguing for the basic nature of Oriental despotism since 1928 and had reaffirmed his view in his 1936 study of authority in the Chinese family. Thus, an internally driven Communist revolution in China was fundamentally at odds with Wittfogel’s understanding of Chinese society and politics. Working from the assumption that a native Chinese Communist Revolution was structurally impossible in a state of Oriental despotism, Wittfogel had to assume that

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outside interference was at least partially responsible for its origins. Wittfogel’s belief in Soviet interference in spurring the Communist victory in China provided the foundation for his belief in the structural kinship between the USSR and the PRC, a belief which would become a touchstone of his scholarly publications in the 1950s.

Wittfogel began his examination of the relationship between the USSR and PRC in *Objectives and Methods of America’s Policy in Asia After China’s Shift into the Communist Orbit*, which he completed for the Department of State on October 3, 1949. It represented the most complete statement of his views regarding the Communist Revolution in China and the likelihood of Soviet interference in spurring the Chinese Communists to success.\(^\text{110}\) Wittfogel claimed at the beginning of the document that he viewed China “not as an isolated entity, but as part of a larger operational whole” because “there is in Asia today no isolated China problem, just as in Europe there is no isolated German problem.”\(^\text{111}\) Communism was likely to spread throughout Asia for if it was not checked by an aggressive American foreign policy. He lamented that the United States government had not “planned the creation of a strong anti-communist defense system in the south and southwest of China” in the immediate postwar.\(^\text{112}\) Now that China was firmly in communist hands, Wittfogel envisioned a new Communist axis formed around the alliance between the Soviet Union and China.\(^\text{113}\) Evoking memories of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, as well as the recent German-Japanese alliance, Wittfogel illustrated in *Objectives and Methods* the dangers of Communist victory in China. Though he was “not


\(^{111}\) Wittfogel, *Objectives and Methods*, 1.

\(^{112}\) Wittfogel, *Objectives and Methods*, 16.

\(^{113}\) Wittfogel, *Objectives and Methods*, 34.
too optimistic about the long range possibility for the peaceful coexistence of the Soviet
and non-Soviet worlds”, Wittfogel believed that if, and only if, the United States pursued
a policy of containment in East Asia while gathering reliable intelligence (presumably
through greater funding of Chinese area studies) world war could be avoided.114

A second important conviction which Wittfogel made explicit in Objectives and
Methods was the belief Maoist rebels were true Communists in the Soviet sense of the
term and that they were operating with Soviet support. Through their participation in the
Comintern until 1943, the Maoists were “for several decades exposed to the ideas of
Marx, Lenin, and Stalin” whose writings “other leading Chinese Communists identify
themselves [with] fully and systematically”.115 Most dangerously, unlike Soviet satellites
in Eastern Europe and Middle Asia, the Soviet Union and China were allies in a
reciprocal, and not dependent, sense. They were independent nations ideologically
connected, “like two poles of an axis, Russia being the senior partner and China the
junior partner.”116 For Wittfogel, this partnership illustrated the danger of communist
ideological expansion occurring without the threat of military force. Chinese Communists
were not coerced into allying with the Soviet Union; instead they believed that allying
themselves with the Soviet Union was in their political and economic interests.

If the Maoist victory in China was devastating to American foreign policy in East
Asia, Wittfogel was optimistic that it might provide new insights into Soviet ideology. In
an unpublished outline for a collection of essays composed only six days after Objectives
and Methods, Wittfogel articulated that American knowledge of “Soviet society is
pathetically poor” and “if an approach through the Oriental backdoor enables us to reveal

114 Wittfogel, Objectives and Methods, 59 and 2.
115 Wittfogel, Objectives and Methods, 27.
116 Wittfogel, Objectives and Methods, 34.
certain fundamental trends in Russia’s institutional past and present, it is our…duty to do so.”

Wittfogel had been contemplating a monograph on the rise of Soviet ideology since at least the mid-1930s and he hoped the new developments in China could give him a familiar point through which to access Soviet society and ideology. He was sufficiently caught up in the potential of his Soviet project that he hypothesized, “there will be no time for me to return to my book on Oriental Society immediately after the completion of the Russian book”, putting a project he had been working on since 1929 on hold.

When Wittfogel drew up the formal outline for “The Theory of Oriental Society from Adam Smith to Stalin” later that day, pulling excerpts from authors ranging from the classical economists to utilitarians through Plekhanov and Lenin to Stalin, the collection looked like a fusion of his long awaited second volume of The Economy and Society of China and his proposed volume on Russian society. Though Wittfogel sought to illustrate how Stalin had rejected his multilinear explanation of Oriental society, fundamentally breaking with Marx and Lenin, he also was attempting to strengthen the American political position “by critically evaluat[ing] the types of information or misinformation” propagated by the Soviet Union.

The outline for “The Theory of Oriental Society from Adam Smith to Stalin” can therefore be understood as Wittfogel’s first intentional attempt to unify his American scholarly and political writings into a singular project. Whereas Wittfogel’s work in the late 1930s and 1940s was depoliticized and Objectives and Methods was expressly political, almost all his subsequent work after “The Theory of Oriental Society” outline was an attempt to foster political change.

119 Wittfogel, Objectives and Methods, 34.
through academic scholarship. From 1949 through the 1960s, Wittfogel’s mission became to understand and undermine communism, a mission he understood as “a scientific and political duty.”

Now a political actor on a self-appointed mission to protect his adopted country from the increasing global threat of communism, Wittfogel redirected his own scholarship towards more explicitly political ends. He became increasingly weary of those who did not embrace his mission. Though it is easy to overstate Wittfogel’s paranoia as the 1940s drew to a close, *Objectives and Methods* illustrates his believe that emerging international communism was sufficiently dangerous to lead to a third world war. Likely adding to Wittfogel’s concern was the rejection of his suggestions by the Department of State and the rescinding of his invitation to the conference where he had hoped to present his views. Instead, the Department of State accepted the less urgent suggestions of Wittfogel’s estranged friend and colleague Owen Lattimore. Contra Wittfogel, Lattimore claimed the “Russian Communists should be seen as “not as aggressive as Hitler”” and that “Communist China should be recognized by the United States”. Lattimore even went so far as to suggest “Communist conquest in Asia was a natural and inevitable consequence of revolutionary ferment in Asia with its Communist nature being incidental.” These statements must have been intolerable to Wittfogel and must have affected, if not outright destroyed, his friendship with Lattimore. Lattimore’s statements on China seemed to Wittfogel both academically fallacious and politically

120 Wittfogel. “Report on ‘Russia’s Asiatic Restoration.’”
121 Karl August Wittfogel, *Objectives and Methods*, 37-42.
122 The friendship between Lattimore and Wittfogel had become strained during the 1940s due to growing political differences and an argument between Wittfogel and Lattimore over writing the introduction to *History of Chinese Society, Liao*. See Ulmen (1979), 269-272.
irresponsible. Though disappointed by his failure to be lent a sympathetic ear by the American government, Wittfogel already believed the dangers posed by Lattimore and like-minded intellectuals could only be overcome by state intervention. To Wittfogel, “if our policy-makers cannot autocratically determine the course of our Asiatic studies, they can strengthen their own position by critically evaluating the type of information or misinformation provided by these [academic] centers.”

Despite his failure to find a sympathetic ear in Washington, Wittfogel’s means of popularizing his views on communism were not exhausted. Since he had joined the ACCF earlier in the year he had come into contact with several prominent editors including Elliott Cohen (Commentary) and Sol Levitas (The New Leader). Both men were noted anti-Communists whose editorial power and growing readerships put them in enviable positions to influence policy. Though his views went unheard at the Department of State conference, Wittfogel parlayed his statements and personal connections through the ACCF into two articles: “How to Checkmate Stalin in Asia” published in the October 1950 issue of Commentary and “Asia’s Freedom and the Land Question” published in the November issue of The Survey. These two articles, combined with a third article titled “Russia and Asia” published in the July 1950 issue of World Politics, revealed Wittfogel’s unswaying commitment to anti-Communism as well as his burgeoning belief that Russia was at its base an Asiatic society.

Before any of Wittfogel’s articles were made public, a shift in American politics towards a more virulent anti-communism was beginning to take place. On January 25, 1950 Alger Hiss was convicted of two counts of perjury in relation to his trial for espionage beginning in 1948. Two months later, on March 21, 1950 Senator Joe McCarthy claimed Owen Lattimore was “definitely an espionage agent…the key man in a Russian espionage ring.”\footnote{Ulmen, \textit{The Science of Society}, 275.} Though McCarthy lacked sufficient evidence to charge Lattimore at that time, Lattimore had been named in two previous closed testimonies by Louis Budenz and Alfred Kohlberg. McCarthy was confident he could gather enough evidence to bring charges against Lattimore for espionage if he could discover another witness with a history of connections to the Communist Party, similar to the role played by Whittaker Chambers in taking down Hiss.\footnote{Robert P. Newman, \textit{Owen Lattimore and the “Loss” of China} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 310.} Lattimore was in Afghanistan until March 1950 and was only partially aware of the case being built against him. Upon returning to the United States he immediately began defending himself by drafting \textit{Ordeal by Slander}, a condemnation of “McCarthyism” and a vigorous defense of his own innocence.

In May, Wittfogel and Lattimore were invited to attend the Second National Conference on the Study of World Areas at Columbia University. Though there is no indication that the two men interacted during the conference, Wittfogel delivered an address at the dinner entitled, “Russia and Asia: Problems of Contemporary Area Studies and International Relations”. In his address, Wittfogel was finally able to air his belief in a fundamental political connection between Russia and Asia. To begin, Wittfogel stressed the importance of understanding Soviet policies and society because they “affect all, if
not nearly all, aspects of American life”.\textsuperscript{129} Regrettably, studying the Soviet Union was made difficult by the politics of the Cold War and ill-defined concepts. Wittfogel accepted that political barriers were unlikely to be breached in the near future as the soils of diplomacy were rendered barren by the frost of the Cold War. Defining the Soviet Union and its place in the global system was thus the best way to understand, and if necessary undermine, the Soviet threat.

Wittfogel believed academics could better understand the place of the Soviet Union by clarifying definitions within the social sciences, especially in the fields of area studies. First, he hoped to arrive at a suitable definition of the term “Oriental” and what qualities a society would have to possess in order to be labeled as such.\textsuperscript{130} Wittfogel believed that by arriving at a consensus in terminology, Western social science would be able to “clarify the character of the Soviet system of power and social control” and mitigate the damage caused by the “to-be-expected political earthquakes and conflagrations.”\textsuperscript{131} Taking an example from his own research, Wittfogel proposed a reevaluation of the term “Oriental” and its use in Western scholarly discourse. For Wittfogel, the term had been too bound to specific regions of East and Southeast Asia to reflect the true meaning of the term by Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx. “Oriental Despotism” was a type of society where economic and political power had ossified in the hands of a powerful bureaucratic apparatus causing societal stasis. By defining “Oriental” structurally instead of regionally, Wittfogel believed Russia could be viewed as an Oriental society despite a lack of sustained contact with Asian Oriental


\textsuperscript{130} Wittfogel, “Russia and Asia,” 447.

\textsuperscript{131} Wittfogel, “Russia and Asia,” 447 and 462.
societies. In determining if Russia was an Oriental society, Wittfogel called for closer cooperation between Russian area specialists and Orientalists to determine the structural character of Russian society and economics. Academically, Wittfogel’s “Russia and Asia” lecture was significant because it was his first public claim that Russia may be “Oriental” in structure.

The “Russia and Asia” lecture was a public articulation of Wittfogel’s increasingly dogmatic anti-Communism. Like Objectives and Methods, the “Russia and Asia” lecture was laced with comparisons between the Sino-Soviet alliance and the Germany-Japan axis during World War II. Wittfogel cautioned that structural similarities between the Soviet Union and China could lead to mutual support if the Cold War were to turn “hot” just as “Mussolini eventually dropped his neutrality to fight on the side of Hitler with whose regime fascist Italy was connected by vital ties of institutional similarity.” Though the lecture was addressed to an academic audience, for Wittfogel the immediate aims of area research ought to be political. A lack of adequate communication between Russian and Chinese area specialists occasioned a failure of American policy-makers to preempt the Communist takeover in China. To “defend the values of the West, and of Western civilization and society” from the Communist threat, a more integrated approach to area studies would be necessary. Though Wittfogel did not employ the same type of ominous language he did in October 1949, Wittfogel’s “Russia and Asia” lecture was the first public statement of socially active scholarship since he immigrated to the United States.

132 This is not to say that Wittfogel was unaware of the history of Russian invasion from the East. Those who attacked Russia from the East, most famously the Mongols, were nomadic peoples who did not use hydraulic agriculture in any systematic way.
133 Wittfogel, “Russia and Asia,” 461.
134 Wittfogel, “Russia and Asia,” 447.
The fusion of the academic and the political was radically at odds with Wittfogel’s position during the 1940s, yet it came to define Wittfogel as 1950 wore on. Two subsequent articles published in *Commentary* and *The New Leader*, built on the statements first made in *Objectives and Methods* and then publicized in the “Russia and Asia” lecture. Wittfogel’s Manichean view of the Cold War was not unique in the polarized academic environment of post-war America, yet few academics had travelled from Soviet apologist to anti-Communist as briskly or as fervently as Wittfogel. Furthermore, his unique credentials as a former-Communist, Nazi internment camp survivor, Orientalist, and gifted polemicist made Wittfogel stand apart from his fellow anti-Communists. With McCarthy hoping to win another victory against domestic Communism by indicting Owen Lattimore, though lacking a witness with sufficient credentials to bring formal charges, it should have come as no surprise when in Winter 1950 Wittfogel was subpoenaed to testify before a closed session of the House Un-American Activities Committee as part of the lead in to hearings regarding domestic Communists employed at the Institute of Pacific Relations.

Wittfogel’s research into the connection between the structures of Asian and Russian societies was finally reaching a popular audience due to his May 1950 lecture and his subsequent articles published in *World Politics, Commentary,* and *The New Leader*. As Wittfogel’s popularity grew however, Owen Lattimore continued to be interrogated by the United States government about his possible Communist sympathies. McCarthy’s accusations against Lattimore were brought into public focus during the Subcommittee on the Investigation of Loyalty of State Department Employees chaired by
Senator Millard Tydings of Maryland. Though the Tydings Committee was organized to investigate previous accusations made by Senator McCarthy regarding Communist activities of fifty-seven employees of the State department, during the investigation McCarthy expanded the list to eighty including Owen Lattimore. Lattimore had some success dismissing McCarthy’s initial accusations in March 1950, but McCarthy gathered further testimony during the Tydings investigation, from Budenz and Freda Utley labeling Lattimore not only a Communist, but a top Soviet agent.\textsuperscript{135} To McCarthy’s chagrin, other known Communist witnesses refuted the ant-Lattimore testimony and cast reasonable doubt upon Lattimore’s political support of Chinese Communism to annul the testimony of Budenz and Utley. The Tydings investigation of Lattimore ended in August 1950 when all charges against him were dropped, but he was now one of McCarthy’s top targets and his relationship with the Institute of Pacific Relations called the integrity of the entire organization into question.\textsuperscript{136}

Though the Tydings investigation failed to unearth enough evidence to convict Lattimore of any wrongdoing, suspicion of his involvement with Soviet and Chinese Communists continued. In December 1950, Senator Patrick A. McCarran of Nevada opened his own investigation of Communist infiltration in the United States government and the subsequent undermining of American interests by those infiltrators. McCarran had a long history of anti-Communism and “the intensity of McCarran’s anticommunism was matched by his devotion to conspiracy corollary.”\textsuperscript{137} The suspicion that Lattimore was a Soviet agent and that his loyalty to the Soviet Union undermined American foreign policy in China captured McCarran’s interests in anti-communism and conspiracy

\textsuperscript{136} Ulmen, \textit{The Science of Society}, 277-278.
theories. McCarran believed Lattimore was a Soviet agent and that he had manipulated the Institute of Pacific Relations into pursuing a policy of conciliation with Communist China in order to further Soviet interests in East Asia. Before the hearing was opened McCarran seemed certain of Lattimore’s guilt, but he also had learned from the failures of the Tydings Committee that to convict Lattimore he would need a new set of witnesses to attack Lattimore on two fronts: the personal and the professional.

Wittfogel was primarily a work associate of Lattimore, but he also had been personally close to Lattimore while they were both in China in 1936. Wittfogel had been an outspoken Communist and was familiar with Soviet Communist party politics. More importantly, Wittfogel was a true believer in anti-communism and since October 1949 had been outspoken in proclaiming the influence of the Soviet Union on China’s political shift into the communist orbit. As a recently naturalized American citizen and an individual with a checkered political past, McCarran believed Wittfogel would be willing to testify against Lattimore because he believed Lattimore was a threat to American political interests and to prove his loyalty to his adopted nation.

In Winter of 1950 the House Committee on Un-American Activities summoned Wittfogel to testify in a closed executive session, which took place on October 17, 1950. The open hearing would not officially begin until December, but the prosecution was convinced Wittfogel could provide essential testimony in convicting Lattimore of un-American involvement with the Soviet Union. The executive session was chaired by Representative John S. Wood of Georgia’s 9th Congressional District and Wittfogel was

139 Newman, Owen Lattimore and the “Loss” of China, 334.
examined by Donald T. Appell, Courtney Owens, and William A. Wheeler. Early in the testimony, Wittfogel’s past affiliation with the German Communist Party was examined and he denied any involvement with the American Communist Party upon immigrating to the United States in 1934. From Wittfogel’s political past the investigators moved to examine his time in China where he first met Owen Lattimore. When Wittfogel was asked whether he had “associations with persons in China whom you knew to be members of the Communist party” he replied noncommittally that he “knew persons who most likely were members of the party.” Refocusing his question, Appell asked if “there were any Americans whom you…had strong reasons to believe were members of the Communist party” to which Wittfogel replied that he had occupied an “in-between” position as a known Communist sympathizer with questionable party loyalty. In his statement Wittfogel mentioned two Americans he believed were likely members of the American Communist Party: Agnes Smedley and Philip Jaffe. Smedley, whom Wittfogel had met in 1927 and was a known Communist, had died in May 1950 and was of little interest to the Committee. Jaffe had been a target of the 1945 Amerasia case where he was accused of passing classified government documents to the Chinese Communists. He eventually pled guilty to illegal possession of government documents but served no jail time because the government had illegally obtained evidence while building its case against him. Wittfogel had met Jaffe in China through a “Dr. Chi” who later became an office-holding member of the Chinese Communist government.

141 Testimony of Karl August Wittfogel before the October 17, 1950 Executive Session of the United States House of Representatives, Washington D.C. (1)
142 Wittfogel Testimony October 17, 1950, 6.
143 Wittfogel Testimony October 17, 1950, 7.
144 Newman. Owen Lattimore and the “Loss” of China, 142.
Jaffe and Lattimore were known to have associated in China, where Lattimore agreed to be on the editorial board of *Amerasia*. After enquiring further about Wittfogel’s association with Dr. Chi, Appell began to question Wittfogel’s involvement with the IPR. \(^{146}\) Wittfogel claimed to be a peripheral member who had primarily used his membership as a tool to secure research funding. \(^{147}\) In explaining his relationship with the IPR, Wittfogel first named Lattimore as an associate. When asked by Appell about his published contributions to the IPR’s magazine, Wittfogel claimed, “Lattimore never asked me to write an article and I never wrote one.” \(^{148}\) After the subject of Lattimore was broached by Wittfogel, Appell began to inquire as to the depth of Wittfogel’s relationship with Lattimore in the 1930s and 1940s. Wittfogel claimed, “it is very hard to be close to Owen Lattimore, in a way, but for sometime [sic] I considered myself a good friend of Owen’s.” \(^{149}\)

It is unclear whether or not Wittfogel was aware that by announcing that he had a close personal and academic connection with Lattimore the testimony would shift from a general indictment of the IPR to a targeted attack on Lattimore, but nevertheless in the remaining pages of the testimony the prosecution focused almost solely on questions regarding Lattimore’s political and scholarly affiliations. Regarding Lattimore, Wittfogel was asked about the trajectory of their friendship, which Wittfogel claimed had been broken “in the fall of 1944” because Lattimore said, “I just don’t like to associate with these people in Baltimore. There are so many ex-Communists. What can you do with

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\(^{146}\) Wittfogel, Testimony October 17, 1950, 18.
\(^{147}\) Wittfogel, Testimony October 17, 1950, 18-19.
\(^{148}\) Wittfogel, Testimony October 17, 1950, 20.
\(^{149}\) Wittfogel, Testimony October 17, 1950, 22.
them?" Wittfogel interpreted Lattimore’s comments as a personal attack against his own anti-Communist sympathies. Appell then asked Wittfogel the “$64 question”, if he knew Owen Lattimore to be a Communist. Wittfogel demurred at first, accusing Appell of failing to specify his accusation against Lattimore in time and space. When Appell clarified that he was wondering if Wittfogel had “any knowledge at any time during…associations with Owen Lattimore that he was a Communist”, Wittfogel responded with a defiant negative. However, when Wittfogel was asked about Lattimore’s associates, his response was more opaque. Though he admitted he knew no known Communist associates of Lattimore, Wittfogel claimed if Lattimore were to associate with Communists he would not bother with fledgling American Communists, but would instead “be interested in the big shots in Moscow.”

After inquiring into Lattimore’s Soviet connections, Appell interrogated Wittfogel regarding Lattimore’s writings and whether they could be understood as sympathetic to the Chinese Communists. It is likely Appell was grooming Wittfogel as a possible expert witness on Asia, who, if called upon, could testify that Lattimore’s writings were pro-Communist and expressed his sympathy with the Chinese Communist cause. If this was Appell’s intention, it had mixed results. Wittfogel admitted he had “not sat down to read the collected works of Owen Lattimore”, but from what he had read the “political gist of it” was sympathetic to the Chinese Communists. Sensing a dead end, Appell tacked back to the break between Wittfogel and Lattimore in 1944. In discussing their break, Wittfogel made the bombshell claim that Appell and McCarran were looking for.

150 Wittfogel, Testimony October 17, 1950, 22-23.
151 Wittfogel, Testimony October 17, 1950, 24.
152 Wittfogel, Testimony October 17, 1950, 24.
154 Wittfogel, Testimony October 17, 1950, 27.
Wittfogel claimed that while he and Lattimore were arguing about politics, the argument shifted from Europe to Asia where Lattimore claimed “it might not be a bad solution of the whole thing if Korea would be handed to the Russians.” Recognizing the significance of Wittfogel’s claim, Wood asked him to repeat his statement and clarify it, which he did. With the necessary evidence in hand, the Committee asked Wittfogel a few perfunctory questions about other Communists and to clarify earlier statements about potential Communist-affiliates of Lattimore residing in Baltimore and then ended the session.

Wittfogel had hoped by participating in the closed meeting, he could avoid making public accusations against Lattimore and return to working on combining his analysis of Oriental society with Russia’s march toward Soviet totalitarianism. Against his wishes, in May 1951 Wittfogel was subpoenaed to appear before the public McCarran Committee, which began on July 25, 1951. Wittfogel repeated more or less the same testimony he gave in October 1950 regarding his personal relations with Lattimore. Wittfogel continued to say he had no hard evidence formally linking Lattimore to Communism, yet Wittfogel did state he believed Lattimore was a slippery character and that he made statements regarding Korea in 1944 that were “not exactly the way a representative of the American government should talk about its interests.”

Correspondence dating from 1944 and presented as evidence during the trial illustrated

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155 Wittfogel, Testimony October 17, 1950, 30.
156 Wittfogel, Testimony October 17, 1950, 32.
157 Ulmen claims that Robert Morris, one of the Committee Counsels, visited Wittfogel in New York City and tried to convince him to appear voluntarily, but Wittfogel refused. Unfortunately, Ulmen provides no citation to substantiate this claim and it is likely all knowledge of the event was gleaned from interviews conducted with Wittfogel by Ulmen in the 1970s. As described in the introduction, the reliability of Wittfogel’s claims regarding his involvement in the McCarran Committee made during the 1970s is questionable because he was trying to reconstruct his image as a social democrat at the time and was being hindered by his anti-Communist past.
158 Institute of Pacific Relations, Hearings (1951), part 1, 327-328.
the businesslike relationship between Lattimore and Wittfogel.\textsuperscript{159} Interestingly, the documents indicate that it was Wittfogel, not Lattimore, who was more ardent politically and that Lattimore was uncomfortable with Wittfogel’s forthright anti-Communism even demurring that he could “only make judgments on political problems and methods according to my own non-specialized, non-Marxist qualifications.”\textsuperscript{160}

Besides the use of letters between Lattimore and Wittfogel, another significant deviation between Wittfogel’s October 1950 testimony and his McCarran testimony was that during the intervening period he had more thoroughly familiarized himself with Lattimore’s scholarly writing. In doing so, he was deeply disturbed by what he found. Wittfogel discovered Lattimore repeatedly referred to Chinese society as feudal, which to Wittfogel was a “cover term” employed by Stalin and his fellow party cadres to obscure the Asiatic restoration that had taken place in the Soviet Union under Stalin.\textsuperscript{161} Lattimore had even used the term “feudal” to describe Chinese society in 1944, after he was familiar with Wittfogel’s writings on China’s Oriental past. Furthermore, Wittfogel claimed Lattimore had knowingly used the term feudal even after acknowledging “in his letters to me [Wittfogel]” that it was “Communistic criteria” to do so.\textsuperscript{162} To Wittfogel, Lattimore’s dishonesty describing China as “feudal” affirmed his suspect character and had “a political significance” regarding Lattimore’s sympathy toward Communism.\textsuperscript{163} In conclusion, Wittfogel reasserted the political significance of Lattimore’s understanding of China as feudal and claimed that though it would be possible for a neophyte scholar or

\textsuperscript{159} Institute of Pacific Relations, Hearings (1952), 5310-5313.
\textsuperscript{160} Institute of Pacific Relations, Hearings (1952), 5310.
\textsuperscript{161} Institute of Pacific Relations Hearings (1951), part 1, 335-336.
\textsuperscript{162} Institute of Pacific Relations Hearings (1951), part 1, 338.
\textsuperscript{163} Institute of Pacific Relations Hearings (1951), part 1, 339.
layman to err when defining Chinese society, Lattimore’s status as an expert and his knowledge of Wittfogel’s Oriental theory gave Lattimore no recourse to ignorance.

In the United States, Wittfogel’s career has been defined by his testimony delivered before the McCarran Committee in July 1951. Unfortunately, Wittfogel’s participation has become more a referendum on the ethical bankruptcy of McCarthyism than a nuanced examination of how Wittfogel’s fusion of his East Asian scholarship and his anti-Communist politics shaped his testimony and why he volunteered so much information about Lattimore and others even though he was clearly uneasy about the process. Participating in the McCarran Committee, Wittfogel was a perpetrator and a victim. From his previous experience with both the politically calculated Nazi trials and the Soviet purge trials, Wittfogel should have been more wary of the inherent biases of politically motivated trials. His undue optimism in the openness and freedom of American society blinded Wittfogel to the possibility that the McCarran Committee was corrupt from the top down. Furthermore, in the case of Lattimore, Wittfogel let personal animosity cloud his vision as to Lattimore’s actual political activity. He admired Lattimore as a scholar, but felt dejected by Lattimore’s hesitance to write an introduction to his Liao volume after their political differences became known.164 Despite these failures, Wittfogel was at least partly the naïve victim of a corrupt process.165 McCarthy’s drive to get Lattimore was the object of calling Wittfogel to testify, not for Wittfogel’s honest opinion regarding the degree of Lattimore’s sympathy with the Maoists. Wittfogel was a true believer in the struggle against Communism and thought it the direst global

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164 See Letter from Karl August Wittfogel to Owen Lattimore, January 24, 1947. In the Institute of Pacific Relations Hearings (1952), 5312.
165 Wittfogel seems to have gradually become aware of his naiveté and the miscalculations he made during the first day of his testimony. See Greffrath, Raddatz, and Korzec, “Conversations with Wittfogel,” 158.
threat after the defeat of the Nazis in 1945. His participation in the McCarran Committee hearings and the views he espoused in his testimony are entirely consistent with his published articles from the early 1950s. Wittfogel’s McCarran testimony was his last attempt to affect political change from the inside. Through his scholarly work, Wittfogel had gained the reputation as the preeminent anti-Communist Sinologist and it was his unique set of skills which allowed him to remain relevant during the period of broad denunciation which followed his participation in the McCarran Committee.

The *Sturm und Drang* of the McCarran Committee’s immediate aftermath galvanized Wittfogel as it isolated him from his more liberal friends and colleagues. After a month vacationing in Cornwall, Wittfogel contacted George Taylor about resuming his teaching duties at the University of Washington in September 1951. However, Taylor suggested Wittfogel remain in New York City because the political furor surrounding his testimony against Lattimore had roused the student body against him. Wittfogel’s ostracism from the University of Washington, as well as mounting personal and scholarly attacks, must have been an emotional drain on a man taxed by a fear of Communist aggression.\(^{166}\)

Despite the emotional toll of Wittfogel’s post-McCarran ostracism from academia, the period of his greatest personal isolation from Autumn 1951 through Winter 1954 was one of the most academically fertile of his career.\(^{167}\) The time away from the distractions of teaching, allowed Wittfogel to publish several articles sharpening the connection between

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\(^{166}\) Ulmen claims that during this period, Wittfogel wrote Chapter 5: Total Power – Total Submission- Total Loneliness of *Oriental Despotism* to express his feelings of alienation and isolation post-McCarran. I have found no archival evidence to support Ulmen’s assertion, but it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Wittfogel wrote Chapter 5 of *Oriental Despotism* during the Winter of 1952. See Ulmen, *The Science of Society*, 295-296.

\(^{167}\) Though Wittfogel was asked not to teach following his McCarran Committee testimony, he remained a professor at the University of Washington in a strictly research capacity.
Soviet and Chinese Communisms. More importantly, he finally had time to complete a first draft of the “Oriental Society” project he had been working on since 1929. Though Wittfogel remained a persona non grata in the academic sphere until 1957, his academic background in the abutting fields of Chinese area studies and Marxist intellectual history made him well-equipped to answer the pressing question of the origins of Chinese Communism and its relationship to its Soviet counterpart.

One of the only groups to remain loyal to Wittfogel after the McCarran Committee debacle was the ACCF. He was eagerly embraced by certain of the more conservative members for his bravery and willingness to confront domestic Communism publicly, even if it came at the expense of the respect of his liberal academic peers. It seems that he forged an especially meaningful bond with Sol Levitas at The New Leader because Wittfogel became a regular commentator on far Eastern affairs publishing eight review articles between 1951 and the publication of Oriental Despotism in 1957. With his profile raised by the McCarran hearings, Wittfogel took a more forceful stance within the ACCF writing a vicious condemnation of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s 1953 call for anti-Communists to respect academic freedom. Writing with Esther Goldfrank, they “rejected entirely Dr. Schlesinger’s statement which holds that Communist party membership is an insufficient reason for dismissing a teacher” claiming, “up to now we have seen no sign that the universities are effectively fighting Communist penetration in their field.” Unfortunately for Wittfogel, as the 1950s wore on anti-Communism

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170 Letter from Esther S. Goldfrank and Karl August Wittfogel to the American Committee for Cultural Freedom. June 1, 1953. Though Wittfogel was in the more violently anti-Communist camp of the ACCF,
became a less and less effective means of holding together an increasingly disparate collection of intellectuals. Even with the political fault lines of the ACCF clearly delineated, the organization was crucial for Wittfogel during the post-McCarran fallout because it provided him a base of emotional and scholarly support during a trying period of Wittfogel’s career.

With the ACCF as his main academic support, Wittfogel was able to get articles published in the immediate aftermath of the McCarran hearings. The first article Wittfogel published following his McCarran testimony was entitled “The Influence of Leninism-Stalinism on China” and represented his most complete attempt to establish a causal relationship between Soviet and Chinese Communism. Wittfogel claimed in the article, which he wrote in the days preceding his testimony before the McCarran Committee, “the Chinese found Marxism through the introduction of the Russians” and that Chinese Communism should be understood as Leninist instead of Marxist. Wittfogel contended most pro-Communist Chinese “had never ever read what Marx had written on China” and many dismissed Marx as “nothing but a ‘Western imperialist.’”

Nowhere was the Leninist-Stalinist nature of Chinese Communism more evident to Wittfogel than in the Chinese categorization of their own development from a feudal to a Communist society. In an argument eerily reminiscent of his accusations against Lattimore, Wittfogel contended that if the origins of Maoism were Marxist they would identify traditional Chinese society as Oriental and not feudal. By identifying traditional

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he was not nearly the most dogmatic. In a May 1955 letter to Sol Stein he cautions Stein about being too restrictive with Communist publications. Wittfogel argued that “stupid postal restrictions” ought not impede “serious professional interest” in Communism. Letter from Karl August Wittfogel to Sol Stein, May 24, 1955. Box 7. Folder . Karl August Wittfogel Papers, The Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

171 McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left*, 126-127.


Chinese society as feudal, the Chinese Communists had unwittingly let their debt to Stalinism be known. The employment of the state apparatus and leadership principle further illustrated the influence of Leninism-Stalinism on the Chinese Communists. To claim there was little commonality between Soviet and Chinese Communisms, as Lattimore did in 1949, was to therefore ignore many telltale signs of Soviet involvement in China and to imperil American interests in the region.

Wittfogel’s attack on Lenin, though not without precedent, placed the father of the Bolshevik Revolution firmly within the forefathers of Stalinist totalitarianism. “The Influence of Leninism-Stalinism in China” began a more penetrating analysis of possible despotic elements present within Marxism itself. This research was likely borne from Wittfogel’s continued work on his “Oriental Society” project, which he had returned to in 1950 after a three-year hiatus. As he worked on his “Oriental Society” project Wittfogel began to understand Marx’s contribution to the theory of Oriental despotism as part of a longer tradition of English economic theory on the topic. Furthermore, Wittfogel began to note numerous failings in Marx’s understanding of Oriental despotism and became increasingly critical of his former inspiration’s analysis of the power structure of Oriental society compared to his predecessors “Adam Smith, Richard Jones, and John Stuart Mill.”

Wittfogel made his concerns regarding Marx’s understanding of Oriental despotism public in his 1953 article, “The Ruling Bureaucracy of Oriental Despotism: A

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175 It is unclear whether or not Wittfogel was exposed to earlier French thought on the problem of Oriental Despotism in 1953. The most notable contribution was made by Montesquieu in The Spirit of the Laws [citation], but Montesquieu does not appear in any of Wittfogel’s published material until Oriental Despotism in 1957.
Phenomenon That Paralyzed Marx” published in *The Review of Politics*. For Wittfogel, Marx’s main failing had been “to indicate the character of the ruling class in Oriental society.”  

Like Smith, Jones, and Mill, Marx asserted that in Oriental society power was centralized in the state which had total control over the primary means of production: the land. However, Marx failed to expand upon the findings of the English economists. Most importantly, Marx did not extend his class analysis to Oriental society in determining how control of the land reified Oriental society and crystalized class formation. Wittfogel contends it was “highly improbable” that Marx’s evasion of the question of the class dynamics of Oriental society was due to either lack of interest or information. Instead, Marx was unwilling to acknowledge that it was the ruling bureaucracy which held power in Oriental despotism and was responsible for the reification of Oriental society. In refusing this admission, Marx represented the first in a long tradition of socialists to deviate from their scientific principles when confronted with the destructive effects of a bureaucratic apparatus state.

“The Ruling Bureaucracy of Oriental Despotism” represented a radical departure from Wittfogel’s earlier work on Oriental despotism where he readily praised Marx’s scientific method and acknowledged his debt to it. Though he never totally broke with Marx’s system of intellectual inquiry, throughout the rest of the 1950s Wittfogel placed Marx as one economist in a long tradition leading back to Adam Smith who attempted to understand Oriental society economically. Furthermore, by casting doubt on the scientificity of Marx’s understanding of Oriental despotism, Wittfogel was firmly

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rejecting the possibility of a Marxist scientific socialism.\textsuperscript{180} Marx placed ideology and doctrine over science in the case of Oriental society. Therefore, it was of little surprise when later ideologues like Lenin and Stalin subordinated science to ideology absolutely because it had occupied an ambiguous position in Marx’s theory of Oriental despotism from the beginning.

Finally, in June 1954 Wittfogel completed his first draft of what would become \textit{Oriental Despotism}. The completed draft acted as a genealogy of Wittfogel’s scholarly interests since 1929. \textit{Oriental Despotism} fused historical and sociological scholarship he had undertaken while in China with anthropological data he had gathered in the 1940s and the examination of Russian society he had planned after China’s Communist turn.\textsuperscript{181} What began as an examination of East Asian society from a Marxist perspective had morphed into a transnational examination of how hydraulic agriculture had concentrated power, to varying degrees, in a managerial elite. Most significantly, \textit{Oriental Despotism} was a political monograph designed to “wrest victory” over Communism from the jaws of defeat and “to change the face of a military and ideological campaign” against the Soviet Union and its allies.\textsuperscript{182} \textit{Oriental Despotism} became the culmination of Wittfogel’s scholarly and political undertakings since 1949. As a systematic scholarly examination of the fundamental connection between Soviet Russia and Communist China it realized his dream articulated in his May 1950 speech before the Second International Conference on the Study of World Areas: to fuse seemingly disparate areas together by examining fundamental economic, sociological, and historical similarities which may allow for

\textsuperscript{181} Ulmen, \textit{The Science of Society}, 354.
predicting their political behavior. Now that Wittfogel had achieved his scholarly goal, his hope was to use the knowledge gained with the publication of *Oriental Despotism* to halt Communist expansion overseas and, if possible, undermine Communism in the Soviet Union and China.

Wittfogel’s formal entrance into American politics after the creation of the PRC in 1949 occurred because he had both a scholarly expertise in China and a burgeoning fear of Communism. At first, Wittfogel attempted to bring his concerns directly to government through his *Objectives and Methods* report to the Department of State. The American government’s failure to heed his warnings compelled Wittfogel to express his concerns over Communist expansion in academic and political journals. While he preached a more holistic approach to the scholarly understanding of the global study of Communism, his political publications in *The New Leader* and *Commentary* attested to his growing horror at the prospect of further Communist expansion worldwide. His political publications also allied Wittfogel with the conservative core of the ACCF, which pushed him to support a state-sponsored crackdown on domestic Communism even if it came at the expense of academic freedom. This rightward political shift culminated in his testimony before the McCarran Committee. Testifying against Owen Lattimore – a fellow scholar – alienated Wittfogel’s few remaining liberal allies, strengthening his dependency on the right wing of the ACCF and isolating him from most of his colleagues at the University of Washington.

Despite the political turmoil, which enveloped Wittfogel throughout the period before the publication of *Oriental Despotism*, it was one of the most intellectually fecund
periods of Wittfogel’s life. His renewed attempts to fuse the scholarly and the political built upon the qualitative social scientific methods, including cultural anthropology, which Wittfogel had focused on during the post-immigration period of his career. Though his enthusiastic promotion of anti-Communism could be seen as a regression back to ideology, Wittfogel was not consciously seeking ideology in the 1950s as he was during his Marxist youth. Instead, he sought to utilize his position as a scholar to motivate meaningful political change against an international Communist movement whose existence he saw as a mortal threat to Western democracy. In Oriental Despotism Wittfogel would attempt to understand and explicate the fundamental link between Communism in the USSR and PRC in order to most effectively subvert its influence and curb its expansion. In the short term, Oriental Despotism would be praised as a masterpiece of social scientific scholarship, a holistic attempt to understand the natural foundation of despotic culture and society. In the long run, however, Oriental Despotism forced Wittfogel to see Russia and China as inextricably linked historically and would further call into question his ability to write objectively.
Chapter IV: The Phoenix and the Falling Away

The 1957 publication of *Oriental Despotism* was the apogee of Wittfogel’s popular readership and political influence. By undertaking a transnational examination of the natural foundations of numerous societies, it sought to explain both why certain societies were susceptible to Communist infiltration and why others upheld democratic institutions and free inquiry. Most controversially, Wittfogel linked Chinese and Russian societies through the common influence of hydraulic agriculture and the despotic apparatus bureaucracies that necessarily grew out of it. Attaching his political anti-Communism and scholarly interest in China, *Oriental Despotism* was the culmination of Wittfogel’s anti-Communist agitation after the 1949 Communist victory in China. The book reached a wide audience and reestablished Wittfogel as an eminent China expert after his testimony against Owen Lattimore elicited condemnation from most in the American academic world.

Like all apexes, *Oriental Despotism* represented both the height of Wittfogel’s influence in America and the beginning of his scholarly decline. During the 1950s he had built a career explaining the relationship between the PRC and the USSR. Even after his academic ostracism following his McCarran Committee testimony, Wittfogel was still a frequent contributor to conservative magazines – many of which were affiliated with the ACCF – on topics concerning China and Sino-Soviet relations. This would all change in 1957 following the publication of *Oriental Despotism* however. By then cracks in the Sino-Soviet Alliance were developing, which would continue to expand until the Sino-
Soviet Split in the early 1960s. Furthermore, his conservative support base, the ACCF, crumbled due to an increasing political divide between the conservative and liberal factions of the organization, which was exacerbated by a cooling of anti-Communist hostilities on the part of many liberals as the pessimism of the 1950s gave way to 1960s optimism. With anti-Communism underpinning his political and scholarly worlds, Wittfogel frantically attempted to adjust his interpretation of the Sino-Soviet Alliance to meet the changing political climate of the 1960s. His failure to successfully adapt to changes in American political culture and international relations in the 1960s doomed Wittfogel academically and politically. With few allies and little academic utility after 1963, Wittfogel became seen as a relic of the Red Scare and ceased to be a significant political or academic figure.

After a period of emotional hardship following the McCarran Committee hearings, the completion of his “Oriental Society” project in June 1954 ushered in a period of renewed optimism for Wittfogel. He had received tremendous encouragement from scholars and politicos to complete the project. Ralph Linton wrote to him in a 1947 letter that he was “looking forward eagerly to the appearance of the Liao volume, but even more to your book on Oriental society.”183 Similarly, Ruth Fischer wrote to Wittfogel in 1949, “everyone is very interested in your work on Asiatic restoration.”184 Hearing such enthusiastic praise, it is likely Wittfogel believed his “Oriental Society” project would be another critical success following on the heels of the Liao volume. The June 1954

183 Letter from Ralph Linton to Karl August Wittfogel, September 29, 1947 in Box 30, Folder 15 in the Karl August Wittfogel Papers, The Hoover Institution, Stanford University.
breakthrough came after Stalin’s death in March of the previous year and Wittfogel’s resumption of teaching at the University of Washington after a two-year hiatus following the McCarran Committee controversy. Furthermore, Wittfogel already had a book deal in place with Oxford University Press for the publication of his Oriental society project, and had thus avoided the complications he had encountered while trying to publish The History of Chinese Society, Liao in the 1940s. Because Wittfogel believed his Oriental project to be of political, as well as scholarly, interest, he hoped for its speedy publication so it could best exploit the changing political situation in the Soviet Union.

Unfortunately, an expeditious publication of the Oriental society project was not to be. The anonymous reader tasked with reviewing Wittfogel’s Oriental society manuscript on behalf of Oxford University Press did not recommend its publication because “there is no appeal to the general reader” and “no one is likely to order numerous copies.” The reader also doubted the scholarly integrity of the work claiming, “there is a strong bias against the USSR” in the book and the anti-Communist arguments in the manuscript had “practically no connection with the author’s main thesis.” For the anonymous reader, the scholarly and political aims of the Oriental society manuscript were working across purposes. Its overtly political aims tainted its scholarly credibility, yet its theoretical rigorousness and academic argumentation made it unsuitable for popular audiences. Without excising, or at least diminishing, either the scholarly or political aspect of the project, Wittfogel’s Oriental society manuscript would not be suitable for publication by Oxford University Press. Wittfogel, displeased by the anonymous review and unwilling to fundamentally alter a project on which he had

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expended so much time and effort, reached a mutual agreement with Oxford University Press to opt out of his contract in Spring 1955. Wittfogel’s struggle to find an American audience for his ideas would continue.

Frustrated, Wittfogel attempted to pitch his Oriental society project to Macmillan Press. Macmillan had contributed funds to his *History of Chinese Society, Liao* and Wittfogel was on friendly terms with the editor there.\(^{187}\) To Wittfogel’s chagrin, his manuscript was again rebuked by an anonymous reader on the grounds that it was too scholarly to attract a wide readership. Despite a futile attempt to curry favor with Macmillan by offering a subsidy for the project out of his own pocket, the publisher refused to publish Wittfogel’s manuscript outright and he was forced to abandon his courtship of Macmillan entirely.

During the aftermath of the McCarran Committee controversy, Wittfogel had become increasingly involved in the ACCF. Though he had been a member since 1949, his scholarly commitments had made any involvement before 1951 superficial. After he was stripped of many of his teaching commitments by the University of Washington however, Wittfogel was free to involve himself more deeply in the ACCF. He immediately positioned himself on the right wing of the organization. On June 1, 1953 Wittfogel and his wife Esther Goldfrank sent a letter to the ACCF disagreeing with Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s statements that “Communist party membership is an insufficient reason for dismissing a teacher.”\(^{188}\) Complaining that “up to now we have seen no sign that the universities are effectively fighting Communist penetration”, Wittfogel could

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\(^{188}\) Letter from Esther S. Goldfrank and Karl August Wittfogel to the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, June 1, 1953. Box 7, Folder 35. Karl August Wittfogel Papers, The Hoover Institution, Stanford University.
“see no reason why any one profession should be immune from processes of
investigation established by our government to check corruption and subversion.” 189 His
adamant anti-Communist sympathies and greater involvement in the ACCF, likely drew
Wittfogel ever-closer to Elliot Cohen, editor of Commentary. Therefore, it was of little
surprise when Wittfogel approached Cohen, who was “on the board of Yale University
Press”, about publishing his Oriental Society manuscript. 190

Cohen was sufficiently impressed with Wittfogel’s manuscript to recommend it
for publication by Yale University Press. Yet, even with Cohen’s influence, the editors at
Yale University Press were anxious about publishing the manuscript because they
believed “Wittfogel’s manuscript was really two books and that the sections on Marx,
Lenin, Stalin, and Mao should be excluded.” 191 This suggestion was in accord with the
criticisms of the anonymous readers at Oxford University Press and Macmillan and, as
with earlier cases, Wittfogel refused to excise the political message of his manuscript.
After financial haggling, during which Wittfogel paid a substantial subsidy, and political
involvement by Cohen, Yale University Press finally assented to publish Wittfogel’s
manuscript. 192 What’s more, the manuscript now had a tentative title, Oriental Despotism,
which was chosen by Chester Kerr copy editor at Yale University Press notwithstanding

189 Letter from Wittfogel and Goldfrank to the American Committee of Cultural Freedom, June 1, 1953.
190 Ulmen, The Science of Society, 308.
192 I did not find any receipts as to the actual amount Wittfogel paid to Yale University Press to publish
Oriental Despotism. Ulmen is similarly reticent and there is no footnote given by Ulmen attesting to how
he learned of the subsidy. I assume Ulmen learned of it through interviews he conducted with Wittfogel,
though there is no evidence to support my hypothesis. Ulmen is at pains to convince the reader of two
contradictory explanations of Wittfogel’s subsidy to Yale University Press. On the one hand he claims it
was “standard practice” to charge a publication subsidy. On the other hand, he claims Wittfogel paid it to
“keep the price of his book as low as possible so that more students would be able to buy it.” I believe these
are retrospective justifications made by either Ulmen or Wittfogel. It seems likely that paying the subsidy
was the only way Yale University Press would agree to publish the manuscript because it believed Oriental
Despotism would be unprofitable. See Ulmen, The Science of Society, 310-311.
a good deal of hand-wringing on the part of Wittfogel who expressed reservations regarding the theoretical baggage of such a loaded term.\textsuperscript{193}

\textit{Oriental Despotism} debuted during the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, held from April 2-4 1957.\textsuperscript{194} Since \textit{Oriental Despotism} was interdisciplinary in its approach, it drew rapid reaction from academics in a multitude of disparate fields. More controversial than the linking of academic disciplines was the evident political aim of the project. Like its precursor, \textit{The Economy and Society of China}, \textit{Oriental Despotism} sought to affect political change. Unlike its 1929 forbearer which hoped to garner Soviet support for a multilinear approach to international Communism, \textit{Oriental Despotism} was not meant to inspire positive change, but instead to classify and check the spread of Soviet-style totalitarianism. For Wittfogel, the analysis of hydraulic civilizations in \textit{Oriental Despotism} was a display of academic strength. It was an attempt to show Communist and non-Communist doubters alike that liberalism “possesses infinite reserves of superior strength” and “there is no excuse for letting them [totalitarian apologists] win the battle of ideas by default.”\textsuperscript{195} By obeying the “inner laws” of scientific inquiry, oppressive external strictures necessary to the functioning of the totalitarian state were rendered superfluous.\textsuperscript{196} Marrying science and politics in an anti-Communist polemic was a bold statement for any intellectual to make, yet alone one like Wittfogel who was already believed scientifically suspect.

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\textsuperscript{193} Ulmen, \textit{The Science of Society}, 311.
\textsuperscript{194} Ulmen, \textit{The Science of Society}, 321.
\textsuperscript{195} Wittfogel, \textit{Oriental Despotism}, 10.
\textsuperscript{196} Wittfogel, \textit{Oriental Despotism}, 10.
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The core of *Oriental Despotism* was a modification and expansion of his analysis of the hydraulic beginnings of Oriental society. In *The Economy and Society of China*, Wittfogel had examined how the building and maintenance of irrigation systems had laid the groundwork for the ossifying bureaucracy that defined Oriental despotism. Following in the footsteps of Montesquieu and Marx who believed Oriental despotism was native only to East Asia, he had confined his study of hydraulic society to China. *Oriental Despotism* on the other hand argued for a materialist and not regional definition of Oriental despotism. For Wittfogel, the conditions for Oriental despotism were present wherever large irrigation works were necessary to render arid land fertile.\(^{197}\) The intra-regional expansion of his Oriental despotism concept was entirely consistent with his 1951 complaints regarding the narrowness of area studies. By broadening the Oriental despotism concept by allying it with intensive forms of hydraulic agriculture, Wittfogel was able to transcend area studies concerns about cultural and social barriers and make broad transnational comparisons across time and space. Wittfogel added nuance to his transnational study of Oriental despotism by allowing for different intensities of despotism corresponding to the intensity of the agriculture and the corresponding size of the bureaucracy resulting from it.\(^{198}\)

The most radical single element of Wittfogel’s expansion of the Oriental despotism concept was the inclusion of Russia. Russia had been referred to in passing as a semi-Oriental society by Karl Marx in an article published on August 5, 1863 and the semi-Oriental nature of Russian society was perpetuated by Engels and later Lenin into the 1920s. To Wittfogel, it was not until Stalin’s consolidation of power in the 1930s that

\(^{198}\) This nuance is most clearly on display in Wittfogel’s chapter on the “Margins of the Hydraulic World,” 174-194.
Russia was reclassified as feudal and this reclassification of Russian society was a politically calculated maneuver to guard against accusations of Asiatic restoration by his political opponents.\(^{199}\) Though Wittfogel’s genealogy of the Oriental despotism concept in Russia represents a factual history of the concept, its method of scientific inquiry is at odds with the examination of other societies analyzed in *Oriental Despotism*. Wittfogel presents little anthropological, archaeological, sociological, or economic evidence to support the claim that Russia was a semi-Oriental society. Aside from a select few attempts to link Russia to other Asiatic societies historically, Wittfogel’s argument for Russian inclusion under the banner of Oriental despotism is nearly entirely dependent on analysis of contemporary Soviet society and its totalitarian dimensions.\(^{200}\)

Making Soviet society a more virulent, totalizing form of Oriental despotism was an attempt by Wittfogel to unite the scholarly and political dimensions of *Oriental Despotism*. The influence of the Byzantines and Mongols on Russian society had given it a semi-despotic character throughout the Tsarist period. With the overthrow of the Tsar in 1917 however, the Russians entered into an “open situation” during which a push toward democracy was possible.\(^{201}\) Wittfogel contended, “had the new [democratic] leadership defended and developed the new freedoms in a truly revolutionary way, they would have had more than a sporting chance of completing Russia’s transformation into a multicentered democratic society.”\(^{202}\) But without sufficient outside support or resolve, democracy in Russia failed and the Bolsheviks took power eventually ossifying into a

\(^{201}\) Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, 437. Though Wittfogel was an acquaintance of Alexander Kerensky, it remains unclear how much faith Wittfogel had in the White forces during the Russian Revolution. Neither Kerensky nor the White Army is mentioned in *Oriental Despotism*.
bureaucratic despotism of Asiatic flavor. The failure of the Russian Revolution was for Wittfogel a double-failure. Not only did the Russian Revolution fail to transform Russia into an open society, but it also presented transforming Oriental despotisms with another, non-democratic, development path. Instead of transitioning out of Oriental despotism through economic and political democratization, these societies could now be tempted by the short-term prospects of a Soviet-style revolution. Yet, without the proper historical conditions in place these revolutions were doomed to failure and counter-revolution. As happened in the Soviet Union, these states would become totalitarian preserving their Oriental despotism heritage in a more virulent form. Building upon his earlier essays about the fundamental structural connection between the Soviet Union and Communist China, Wittfogel asserted in *Oriental Despotism* that post-war China was faced with a similar open situation to Russia in 1917, but chose the Russian path of Communist revolution and Asiatic restoration instead of genuine democracy.

Politically, Wittfogel hoped that by better understanding how Oriental societies arrive at open situations - where democracy could be more actively promoted by external powers - his analysis could inform American foreign policy. For the United States to intervene successfully in areas of political flux, policy-makers had to be “both informed and bold” in opposing “bureaucratic totalitarianism”.\(^\text{203}\) With his personal experience of totalitarianism suffered in Nazi internment camps and his familiarity with Soviet Communism, Wittfogel believed he was uniquely positioned to inform American policy-makers regarding the dangers of “unchecked bureaucratic dominance”.\(^\text{204}\) At the international level, 1957 was an open situation between the democratic and the

\(^{204}\) Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, 447.
totalitarian, the Western allies and the Sino-Soviet axis. Wittfogel’s scientific examination of the Oriental foundations of the two largest totalitarian powers, the Soviet Union and China, was, in his own eyes, an attempt to tilt the balance of power toward democracy.

*Oriental Despotism*, by attempting to fuse the scholarly and the political, openly courted controversy and found what it was looking for. Since it was so wide ranging in its methodology and scope, *Oriental Despotism* was read by reviewers of a multitude of disciplines. All found fault with some aspect of the work. Area specialists were uneasy about its transnational character, anthropologists about its combination of the social and political, sociologists about the “failure to distinguish institutional and functional data”, and everyone objected to its political character.\(^{205}\) The great historian Arnold Toynbee went so far as to call *Oriental Despotism*, “A queer book by a fine scholar.”\(^{206}\)

The political dimension of the book became more controversial following the suicide of Herbert Norman in Cairo, Egypt on April 4, 1957. Wittfogel came to know Norman through their mutual involvement with the Institute of Pacific Relations during the late 1930s. Like Wittfogel, Norman was interested in China and Communism. Though they were never close friends, Wittfogel claimed he repeatedly saw Norman at social events of known Communist sympathizers and that Norman had shown interest in Communism as a political ideology. Norman left the IPR in the early 1940s and pursued a successful career as a Canadian diplomat. Once Wittfogel became involved in the

McCarran Committee hearings he testified against Norman in 1951 and it was rumored his testimony had seriously hindered Norman’s career leading to his suicide. Even after a Senate investigation into Norman’s suicide found he had been involved with Communism for “over 15 years” and may have used his diplomatic position to promote Communism in Lebanon, the Norman suicide became symbolic of the way Wittfogel’s public testimony destroyed lives.

Norman’s suicide and the overtly political nature of *Oriental Despotism* tarnished its reception as a scholarly work by forcing it to be a referendum on Wittfogel’s political past as well as a scholarly tract. Even more so, reading *Oriental Despotism* through the lens of the Norman suicide illustrated how Wittfogel’s work had stagnated in the six years since the McCarran Committee hearing. *Oriental Despotism* was widely read and reviewed, but it also emblematized Wittfogel’s limits as a scholar wedded to anti-Communist ideology and defined by his ability to use his scholarly expertise to explain the Sino-Soviet alliance in order to forward American international interests.

Wittfogel left the United States on April 9, 1957 on an international book tour. He left without responding to critics of the scholarly rigor of *Oriental Despotism* or those who accused him of being responsible for Herbert Norman’s suicide. Though planned before *Oriental Despotism*’s release or the Norman suicide, the book tour was seen by some as an alibi for taking leave of his American critics while the anger directed against him for his part in the Norman suicide was at its highest. Wittfogel’s three-month trip took him to Europe and Asia where he reunited with old friends and renewed old rivalries. He

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eagerly embraced his old friend Friedrich Hielscher who had been instrumental in securing his release from the Nazi camp system and had narrowly survived Hitler’s regime after being implicated in the Stauffenberg conspiracy, an effort to assassinate Hitler. Wittfogel’s reunion with the Institute of Social Research was less cordial. With the Institute having recently returned to Frankfurt and administered by the taciturn Theodore W. Adorno, Wittfogel no longer felt any connection with the Institute. Adorno, for his part, demonstrated no interest in Wittfogel’s research on Oriental society.

Similarly, the Asian leg of Wittfogel’s global book tour was fraught with tension over his statements about Communist China and its potential as an East Asian hegemon. Bolstered by Japanese nationalists, Wittfogel’s statements about the danger of Communist China found a substantial audience in Japan. Esther Goldfrank’s diary of her and Karl Wittfogel’s experience in Japan points to pervasive Japanese fears of Communism among Japanese nationalists as well as Wittfogel’s continued fear of Communist influence in undermining democratic regimes. Goldfrank wrote of several incidents during which Wittfogel “blew his top” after Japanese acquaintances were discovered to have Communist sympathies. Furthermore, Goldfrank’s diary illustrates pervasive concern over Wittfogel’s reputation after the Norman affair. Apparently, Wittfogel and Shigeto Tsuru, a fellow anti-Communist with links to Herbert Norman, were kept apart so as to not invite questions about the Norman suicide.

While Wittfogel traveled, promoted *Oriental Despotism*, and rekindled friendships in Europe and Asia, a more fundamental threat to his political career was emerging than either the Norman affair or the lukewarm reception to *Oriental Despotism*. Despite a number of impressive technical achievements by the Soviet Union, including the launch of Sputnik in October 1957, the Sino-Soviet Alliance was beginning to show signs of deterioration. With the death of Stalin in 1953 the Sino-Soviet Alliance had reached its apex. 213 Mao had chafed under Stalin’s condescension and shortly after his death Stalin’s replacement, Nikita Khrushchev, agreed to undertake a massive Chinese development plan to strengthen Sino-Soviet relations. 214 Though Khrushchev’s ascension renewed Chinese optimism in the Sino-Soviet Alliance, Chinese confidence would be short-lived. On February 26, 1956 Khrushchev condemned the violence and terror of the Stalin regime in what would become known as the Secret Speech. With the Secret Speech, the Khrushchev regime undertook a policy of political and intellectual liberalization known as destalinization. Mao was both personally offended by destalinization because he believed it undermined his authority within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and he believed destalinization invited ideological confusion within the socialist world. 215 Destalinization in the Soviet Union was combined with the failures of Mao’s Socialist High Tide economic program and Hundred Flowers campaign in 1956-7 in souring Mao on the direction of Sino-Soviet relations.

Further complicating their strained relationship, the USSR and the PRC were beginning to pursue divergent policies towards the imperial West, especially the United

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States. Mao believed the Communist Axis’ recent technological innovations put them in better position to force concessions from the United States. Success against imperialism would not be “achieved by compromising with the enemy, but by daring to confront it.” In opposition to the PRC, the Soviet Union believed a continued policy of deterrence was the best option for eventual victory. Soviet ideologues continued to believe capitalism would exhaust itself and recent Communist technological victories pointed towards an imminent socialist victory over a declining imperial West. Though the extent of disagreement between the USSR and PRC was not publicly known in the West or to Wittfogel, the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations after the Secret Speech would begin to undermine Wittfogel’s contention of a structural kinship binding the PRC and USSR ideologically.

Wittfogel returned to the United States in late 1957 at which time he began to respond to the mountain of criticism leveled against Oriental Despotism in the intervening months. Though the book had garnered its fair share of praise from the likes of Julian H. Steward – one of his few remaining allies in the Columbia anthropology department - and Reinhold Niebuhr, nearly every review expressed reservations about Wittfogel’s fusion of scholarly and political arguments. During the next several years, Wittfogel defended the scholarly and political positions put forth in Oriental Despotism, while continuing to examine the increasingly complex relationship between the USSR and the PRC.

Since his claims made in Oriental Despotism labeling Russia a semi-Oriental Society had garnered the most criticism, Wittfogel sought to clarify his position on

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Russian history by examining the changing political and ideological relationship between the USSR and the PRC. By March 1959 Wittfogel believed that the Sino-Soviet Alliance was strained by mutual distrust and China’s attempt to extricate itself from dependence on the USSR with the Great Leap Forward. Exacerbating differences in foreign policy between the USSR and PRC regarding the United States was Mao’s insistence that Soviet scientists aid Chinese nuclear weapons development. In 1958 the USSR and PRC had engaged in a series of talks over further developing China’s nuclear capability. The USSR insisted throughout the talks; however, that any aid in developing the PRC’s nuclear program “would be ‘for peaceful use’ only.” Mao interpreted Khrushchev’s refusal to aid Chinese technological development as an attempt to keep China dependent on Soviet industrial goods. Wittfogel began to understand the depth of Sino-Soviet distrust as something beyond simple foreign relations posturing in 1959. He responded with his first two articles “China: The Continuing Struggle” published in *National Review* and “Peking’s Independence” published in *The New Leader.* Both articles sought to demonstrate China’s attempt to break from Soviet dependence, while simultaneously acknowledging the Marxist-Leninist foundations of both ideologies. Despite his arguments for a greater Chinese push for independence, there is no indication Wittfogel believed the collapse of the Sino-Soviet alliance to be imminent or inevitable.

While initially surprised by the widening ideological division between the PRC and USSR, Wittfogel was willing to try to adapt his system to accommodate developing tensions in the Sino-Soviet Alliance. Wittfogel was not alone in his initial surprise, even

218 Zhang, *Economic Cold War*, 223.
219 Symbolically, this article was the last Wittfogel would publish for *The New Leader*. All of his articles for *The New Leader* had attempted to explain the kinship of the USSR and PRC, so it comes as little surprise that as relations between the two nations deteriorated into outright hostility Wittfogel ceased to publish for the journal.
to policy-makers in Washington with access to classified documents “the sudden escalation of the Sino-Soviet dispute came as an almost embarrassing surprise.” Unlike the politicos who could adjust American foreign policy to accommodate a Sino-Soviet split, Wittfogel had the daunting task of reevaluating the kinship between the PRC and USSR while fitting it into his greater structural analysis of Oriental society. Though Wittfogel scrambled to integrate the Sino-Soviet rift into his political ideas, his understanding of the basic affinity between China and Russia had been so thoroughly explained in *Oriental Despotism* that he had little flexibility in accommodating increasing Sino-Soviet tensions into his corpus.

Wittfogel’s most systematic attempt to revise his previously held beliefs regarding the natural kinship of the USSR and PRC came in 1960. It was one of the most fruitful years of Wittfogel’s career, during which he published no less than ten articles. Of the ten, three – “A Stronger Oriental Despotism”, “The Legend of Maoism”, and “Lenin and Mao Tse-tung” – explicitly attempt to draw attention toward differences between the USSR and PRC. These attempts were echoed in similar articles in 1961 and 1962. By the official Sino-Soviet split in 1963, Wittfogel had been in full retreat from his 1950s statements definitively linking the USSR and PRC for nearly three years.

In his trio of 1960 articles, Wittfogel first supplanted the primacy of the similarities between the USSR and PRC with their differences. In “A Stronger Oriental Despotism” he marked the significant differences between the USSR and PRC as

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originating in the degree they conformed to traditional Oriental despotism.\textsuperscript{222} Because China was a more traditional Oriental society and was less influenced by Western industrialization, it developed a more agrarian form of Communism and tended to place more faith in the revolutionary potential of the peasantry.\textsuperscript{223} Furthermore, the cult of personality surrounding Mao, akin to the reigns of Hitler and Stalin, put Chinese Communism at odds with a Soviet bureaucracy which after 1963 manifested power in a party and not an individual.\textsuperscript{224} Despite Wittfogel’s acknowledgement of friction between the USSR and PRC, he concluded “A Stronger Oriental Despotism” claiming a shared belief in the historical inevitability of global Communist victory over capitalism made “any idea of a break between Peking and Moscow palpably absurd.”\textsuperscript{225} Similarly, in “The Legend of ‘Maoism’” Wittfogel acknowledged substantial Maoist deviations from Marxist-Leninism, but continued to assert the fundamentally Leninist character of Maoism.\textsuperscript{226}

Finally, in “Lenin and Mao Tse-tung” Wittfogel analyzed Mao’s claim to Lenin’s legacy with a special emphasis on Mao’s embrace of the peasantry. Wittfogel argued that in Lenin’s early writings he was consistent with Marx and Engels in dismissing the revolutionary potential of the peasantry because of their petite-bourgeois aspirations of land ownership.\textsuperscript{227} Beginning in 1906 Lenin began to embrace the peasantry and by 1917 he “proclaim[ed] the crucial importance of the peasants for the Communist strategy.”\textsuperscript{228} The late Lenin believed the peasant class was of greatest importance in “backward

\textsuperscript{223} Wittfogel, “A Stronger Oriental Despotism,” 31-32.  
\textsuperscript{224} Wittfogel, “A Stronger Oriental Despotism,” 33.  
\textsuperscript{225} Wittfogel, “A Stronger Oriental Despotism,” 34.  
\textsuperscript{227} Wittfogel, “Legend of ‘Maoism,’” 77.  
\textsuperscript{228} Wittfogel, “Legend of ‘Maoism,’” 78.
Eastern conditions” where the proletariat was yet to develop. He even went so far as to advocate importing the peasant soviet system to East Asia to facilitate Communist development in areas with no proletariat.\textsuperscript{229} This theory was expanded at the Baku Congress in 1920 where the peasants were proclaimed the “main fighting force” in the development of Eastern Communism. For Wittfogel, after Baku an expanded role of the peasants in Eastern Communist revolutions was promoted by the Comintern and eventually came to animate the ideology of Maoism.\textsuperscript{230} In this way Mao was consistent with Leninist ideology, but not with Marx. In Wittfogel’s view, Lenin’s belief in multilinear Communist development allotted the peasantry the status of a revolutionary class in China where it was believed there was no urban proletariat.

Wittfogel’s 1960 attempt to adjust his philosophy in order to reassert the kinship between the USSR and PRC was rendered unworkable by the events of 1961-1962. First the two poles of the Communist world broke out in open argument during the 22\textsuperscript{nd} Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, but were able to resolve their differences. As Sino-Soviet relations limped into 1962 they were riven by two incidents: PRC condemnation of Soviet capitulation during the Cuban Missile Crisis and Soviet reticence at aiding China during the Sino-Indian War.\textsuperscript{231} Mao’s criticism of Soviet handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis was a natural outgrowth of Mao’s disagreement with Soviet deterrence policy vis-à-vis the United States. The USSR’s failure to install nuclear weapons in Cuba was a final realization for the PRC that the USSR’s non-confrontational policy toward the United States was cowardice disguised as caution.

\textsuperscript{229} Wittfogel, “Legend of ‘Maoism,’” 79.
\textsuperscript{230} Wittfogel, “Legend of ‘Maoism,’” 83-84.
\textsuperscript{231} For more on the Sino-Soviet alliance and the Sino-Indian war see Donaldson, \textit{Soviet Policy toward India}, 151-154.
Stinging from Chinese criticism and becoming concerned with Chinese aggression, Khrushchev condemned Chinese aggression against India as the cause of the Sino-Indian War. Combined, these actions signaled an end to the Sino-Soviet Alliance and with it a refutation of Wittfogel’s entire system alleging a foundational, unbreakable connection between the USSR and PRC.

In a final desperate attempt to accommodate his system to the changing political situation, Wittfogel published “Agrarian Problems and the Moscow-Peking Axis” in December 1962. The article was a radical revision of his earlier position touting the USSR and PRC as dual centers of the Communist world. Though Wittfogel continued to claim Maoism was heavily indebted to Leninism, it was no longer ideologically dependent, but was “repeatedly” at odds “in argument and action.” The reason for growing Sino-Soviet division during the 1950s was primarily due to “Mao’s growing megalomania” not structural discordances between the two nations. Mao’s madness, like Hitler’s and Stalin’s before him, made him an unpredictable actor whose actions overrode “the basic forces of institutional and social (‘class’) affinity that link the Chinese Communists to the Communist world in general and the USSR in particular.”

The collapse of the Sino-Soviet alliance and the corresponding weakening of the Communist world, irreparably damaged Wittfogel’s academic and political career. He never wrote for The New Leader or Commentary again, instead contributing short pieces

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232 Zhang, Economic Cold War, 258.
for marginal anti-Communist presses. Furthermore, it would be eight years before Wittfogel would write on the Soviet Union again, no longer satisfactorily able to connect it with his Chinese expertise. Though age – he was sixty-seven in 1963 – and academic isolation were factors in Wittfogel’s abrupt decline, the Sino-Soviet split made Wittfogel a superfluous political actor. Once an expert in explaining the ideological and political origins of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, he had built his career on defining the relationship between the two Communist powers and its significance for American foreign policy. Having been proven wrong politically and having alienated nearly all of the American anthropological community that had been inspired by him in the 1940s, Wittfogel had no place to turn once he had outlived his political usefulness. Though he continued to be an active scholar into his eighties, Wittfogel’s post-1963 material was little read and he sunk into obscurity at the University of Washington.

237 For evidence of Wittfogel’s decline in publication see the excellent chronological bibliography in Ulmen *The Science of Society*, 509-523.
Conclusion

In June 1971 Wittfogel received a notice from friends in Germany that a series of articles he originally published in the 1920s entitled “Concerning the Question of a Marxist Aesthetics” were being illegally reprinted in a journal called *Aesthetics and Communication*. Having received no royalties or notification from the journal, Wittfogel confirmed that indeed *Aesthetics and Communication* had published the articles without his permission. He immediately began composing a letter attempting to rectify the situation, claiming the republication “posed a legal problem,” though he assumed there was no ill intent on the part of the publishers.\(^{238}\) He even joked that the editors may have “heard that I [Wittfogel] was dead” and that those rumors were “exaggerated.”\(^{239}\)

The letter Wittfogel received in return confirmed both his divided legacy and his contemporary irrelevance. The editors of *Aesthetics and Communication* admitted that the illegal reprint of Wittfogel’s articles had been intentional and that “for Marxist theory and practice, you [Wittfogel] are certainly dead and have been for a long time.”\(^{240}\) The letter went on to lambaste Wittfogel for cooperating with “this anti-Communist senator [McCarthy] who sought to cripple a whole generation of American intellectuals with his persecutions and witch-trials” and labeled him “one of the most evil renegades in the

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history of the Communist movement.”\textsuperscript{241} Despite the general condemnatory tone of the letter, the editors praised Wittfogel’s early, German work “as a weapon in the struggle against the bourgeoisie and counter-revolution.”\textsuperscript{242} For Germans, especially Germans on the Left, Wittfogel’s intellectual death occurred after he emigrated from Germany to the United States. His American acculturation - symbolized by his shedding of Marxism as a political ideology and method of scholarly inquiry in favor of liberal anti-Communism and an American social scientific (including the incorporation of cultural anthropology) approach – caused a rift in his legacy between Europe and the United States which exists up to the present day. Few Americans know anything about Wittfogel’s German writing because little of it has been translated. Similarly, Wittfogel’s more academically rigorous American scholarship including the \textit{History of Chinese Society, Liao} never found a German audience because there was no interest in cultural anthropology in Germany at the time of its publication.

Understanding Wittfogel has also been complicated by the polarized political climate of the Cold War. His participation in the McCarran Committee hearings, especially in attacking a figure as notable as Owen Lattimore, has colored nearly all subsequent scholarship on Wittfogel. For his participation he has been labeled a saboteur who used his position as a witness to hamper Lattimore’s career because of scholarly and political disagreements regarding China.\textsuperscript{243} Though all of these hypotheses are partially true, all underplay how dire Wittfogel believed the Communist threat to be and

\textsuperscript{241} Ulmen, \textit{The Science of Society}, 473.
\textsuperscript{242} Ulmen, \textit{The Science of Society}, 473.
\textsuperscript{243} Newman, \textit{Owen Lattimore}, 334-335.
anachronistically misrepresent the domestic Communist threat in 1951 as a paper tiger.\textsuperscript{244} Like many Americans, Wittfogel may have overestimated the military threat of the Soviet Union and its infiltration into American academia. If this is true, it still does not hold that Wittfogel testified out of malice, contempt, or misunderstanding. Instead I believe he testified out of a belief that it was his civic duty as an American and one way to undermine the perceived threat of domestic Communism.

Wittfogel’s participation in the McCarran Committee hearings represent a single, albeit inflated, case of his commitment to American values. Unlike most of his fellow émigrés at the Institute of Social Research who fled back to Germany shortly after World War II, Wittfogel spent the rest of his life living in the United States adapting himself as a scholar to reach American audiences.\textsuperscript{245} As Lewis A. Coser argues in \textit{Refugee Scholars in America}, those intellectuals who most effectively acculturated themselves to American academia had the greatest success within the scholarly community and reaching a wider American public.\textsuperscript{246} Wittfogel was fortunate that he was relatively young when he came to the United States and was thus more willing and able to acclimate himself to trends in American scholarship. He demonstrated this with his eager embrace of cultural anthropology during the 1940s and later his criticisms of the narrow perspective of area studies despite his background as a Sinologist. His willingness to change carried over to

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\textsuperscript{244} Wittfogel held this position himself in the late 1970s. He regretted his testimony before the McCarran Committee, but claimed that he was “frightened…[by] the degree of American naivete” towards Communist infiltration into American government and thus saw testifying as a legitimate means create awareness of a potentially mortal danger to American democracy. See Greffrath, Raddatz, and Korzec, “Interviews with Wittfogel,” 170.

\textsuperscript{245} The notable exception here is Herbert Marcuse who also remained in the United States and found a tremendous popular readership among the New Left in the late 1960s. As their divergent career arcs indicate, Wittfogel and Marcuse were of different generations and had little intellectual common ground. Wittfogel even claimed to have never met Marcuse until he arrived in the United States. See Ulmen, \textit{The Science of Society}, 175.

the political arena as well where he migrated from alienated Communist to anti-
Communist torchbearer in a single decade. Unfortunately, the fickleness of American Cold War politics made Wittfogel’s political shift in the early 1950s seem foolhardy almost immediately, contributing to his decline and eventual irrelevance.

The gap in Wittfogel’s transatlantic legacy illustrates the depth of his American acculturation. Once a thoroughly German intellectual, committed to two of the titans of German thought Marx and Weber, Wittfogel’s ready adoption of American anthropology and gradual distancing from Marxist inquiry points to an almost immediate willingness to adapt to American intellectual culture. Embracing American culture allowed Wittfogel to publish two successful monographs *The History of Chinese Society: Liao* and *Oriental Despotism* which were met with critical acclaim in the United States. Furthermore, Wittfogel’s understanding of the American political situation during the Cold War made him a valuable contributor to the American debate surrounding the Sino-Soviet Alliance. Though his American career is often defined by his anti-Communist politics, Wittfogel ought to be esteemed for his analysis of hydraulic agriculture and his concern for free inquiry in an era of totalizing ideologies.

Wittfogel’s experience in America illustrated both the potential for immigrant intellectuals to succeed in the United States and the difficulties faced by all intellectuals in continually adapting to the fluidity of American culture in the mid-20th century. By being intellectually flexible and willing to learn from his adopted culture, Wittfogel found great success in the American anthropology community during the 1940s. Furthermore, his bold foray into Cold War politics demonstrated a type of civic pride and respect for American democratic institutions shared by many European émigré
intellectuals who chose to stay in the United States after World War II. The difficulty for Wittfogel and many other immigrant and native intellectuals was staying relevant in a political and intellectual climate perpetually changing. Wittfogel was both a beneficiary and victim of this continuous change. His ability to perceive and classify the relationship between the USSR and PRC occasioned his rise to prominence culminating in the publication of *Oriental Despotism* in 1957. Wittfogel’s success in the 1950s however, hindered his career once the Sino-Soviet Alliance collapsed and anti-Communist fervor subsided in the early 1960s. Ultimately, the necessary change foisted upon refugee intellectuals upon their immigration to the United States facilitated their success adapting to future American cultural shifts. When Wittfogel understood himself as an immigrant he was intellectually flexible, but once his American acculturation was complete his ideological positioned hardened and he no longer could keep up with the pace of cultural change occurring in the United States.
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