Who Are Our Friends?

Maoist Cultural Diplomacy and the Origins of the People's Republic of China's Global Turn

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Even before formal diplomatic recognition, efforts by the Chinese Communist Party and cultural mediators such as friendship associations, ideological allies, and luminaries with a keenness to explore New China paved the way for formal state-to-state relations. This essay focuses on the three important case studies of Mexico, Ghana, and Italy to highlight the global reach of Maoist cultural diplomacy across three continents. Each case represents a rich example of different modes of cultural diplomatic engagement between China and these countries at different stages of development, with a view to painting a fuller picture of Maoist China's global turn.

Diego Rivera, *Pesadilla de guerra, sueño de paz* (The Nightmare of War, Dream of Peace), 1952, reproduced in Mary Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012, 58–59.

At the thirtieth Politburo Central Committee Collective Study Session on 31 May 2021, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary and paramount leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping, delivered a speech to Party officials. In the face of international condemnation of the Party's human rights abuses in Xinjiang and its suppression of protests in Hong Kong, Xi stressed to CCP officials the importance of projecting a favourable image of China. Xi (2021) averred: 'We must understand deeply the importance and necessity of strengthening and improving international communication in the new situation and make great efforts to strengthen our international communication capacity.' This type of call is hardly new terrain for the CCP. In fact, since the PRC's inception, it seems, the CCP has committed itself to an almost cyclical endeavour of damage control, image revamp, and international outreach.

After its foundation on 1 October 1949, the PRC did not have many international friends, but it had many enemies. How did the CCP boost relationships with its friends? How did the Party forge new ties with countries that condemned its authoritarian leadership? Somewhat similar to President Xi's emphasis on 'actively promoting Chinese culture to go global' (积极推动中华文化走出去), Mao Zedong intimated that culture and art might serve to this end. 'Before the revolution', he urged, 'revolutionary culture is the ideological preparation for revolution; in the revolution, it is a necessary, and indeed important, front in the general revolutionary front, and revolutionary cultural workers are commanders of the various levels on this cultural front' (Mao 1971: 199). Only a few years later, in his famous Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao stressed that the CCP could, and indeed must, harness cultural expression and mobilise art and literature in service to national aims. In his words:

Art for art's sake, art that stands above class and party, and fellow-traveling or politically independent art do not exist in reality. In a society composed of classes and parties, art obeys both class and party, and it must, of course, obey the political demands of its class and party, and the revolutionary task of a given revolutionary age: any deviation is a deviation from the masses' basic needs. Proletarian literature and art are a part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; as Lenin said, they are 'a screw in the whole machine,' and therefore, the Party's work in literature and art occupies a definite, assigned position within the Party's revolutionary work as a whole. (Mao 2015: 121)

This essay examines important historical precedents in China's international engagements and their manifestations in the form of a triptych in which three important sites—Mexico, Ghana, and Italy—were host to hallmark examples of CCP outreach. Present-day 'people-to-people diplomacy' (民间外交)—one of the five pillars of the

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—often builds on these earlier experiences of cultural diplomacy and friendly exchange. Here, an analysis of past CCP propaganda, cultural diplomatic endeavours, and China-curious cultural mediators offers us new perspectives about debates surrounding 'Global China' today, allowing us to track the antecedents of the BRI. The goal is to provide historical context to Mao-era CCP diplomatic efforts that, ultimately, provide us with a precursor to current discussions of Beijing's methods of international appeal and attraction.

Historical Precedents of CCP International Engagement

The ambitions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) to establish Soviet authority over Marxist-Leninist organisation and ideology globally via its 'two camps' strategy were influential on CCP approaches during the PRC's early years (1949–53) (Garver 1993: 118). In a secret agreement between CPSU General Secretary Joseph Stalin and CCP Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi on the "division of labour" for waging world revolution', both resolved that Moscow must guide the global proletarian revolution whereas Beijing must promote 'Eastern revolution' (Chen 2001: 3; 1994: 74–75). An insular first stage of consolidating Party-State rule within China overlapped with PRC intervention against US and UN command forces in the Korean War (1950–53), after which the PRC endured harsh diplomatic and economic sanctions and embargoes. To break from its isolation from nations outside the socialist bloc, CCP leaders embraced the de-Stalinising Soviet Union's relaxation of international tensions. Between 1953 and 1957, Beijing launched a 'peace offensive' in which the CCP initiated a global outreach campaign. The Party hinged this effort on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (和平共处五项原则)—essentially, a commitment to 'non-interference in internal affairs' and

‘respect for independent choice of development paths and social systems’—which Chinese and Indian representatives codified and then signed, in Beijing on 28 April 1954, as the Panchsheel Treaty. The CCP formalised the Five Principles as China’s official foreign policy in 1954. But, by the following year, Chinese policymakers’ designs shifted gradually to a foreign policy of extending rhetorical and material support for nations that were socialist or hosted socialist organisations yet maintained relations with the United States or the de-Stalinising Soviet Union (Garver 2016: 92–112; Tan and Acharya 2008: 134–35).

By the time of the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, however, the CCP leadership broke from Moscow by not pressing the reception and adaptation of its ideology in foreign countries, and developed its ‘peace offensive’ into a global cultural diplomatic offensive. To do this, the Party-State built on organisations it had created over the previous decade. As early as 1954, the CCP had established the Chinese People’s Association for Cultural Exchanges (中国人民对外文化协会) to ‘improve China’s international image’, ‘facilitate non-official contact with other countries’, and ‘expedite the development of international relations’ (Brady 2003: 90; Han 1994: 53). Also at the ‘non-official’ (非官方) end of Chinese diplomatic endeavours was the Party’s founding, and then mobilisation, of the affiliated Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (中国人民对外友好协会, or 对外友协; CPAFFC), which was established in 1954 (Brady 2003: 8, 13–18). Initially, these associations were created in socialist bloc countries, but over time, they became more commonplace in non-communist states as well—often founded by local people with no government ties (Han 1994: 52). For instance, one association explored below, the Mexico–China Friendship Society, was founded in Mexico in 1957 even though no Latin American nation had yet formally recognised the PRC (Rothwell 2013: 19–20, 29; Soldatenko 2018: 176–77).

Another important feature of this diplomatic masterstroke was a hosting program whereby the CCP welcomed ‘foreign guests’ (外宾) on guided tours of China that portrayed the country in an overwhelmingly positive light (Lovell 2015: 141).

From non-communist leaders like Cambodian head of state Norodom Sihanouk (a frequent visitor between 1956 and 1970) to ideological allies such as Cuban industry and finance leader Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara (who visited in 1961 and 1965), foreign guests arrived to grandiose receptions for highly publicised visits (Cheng 2007: 80n.4, 82, 88, 94–95; People’s Daily 1958). CCP hosting duties ‘underscore[d] at home the triumph of the revolution’, as one scholar so described it (Lovell 2015: 135). Soon, the PRC opened its doors to activists like members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence from the United States (see Evans’ essay in the present issue) and likeminded artists and luminaries, including French existentialist philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in 1955, Italian writer-filmmaker Curzio Malaparte in 1956, and Italian novelist Alberto Moravia in 1967, for ‘extended tours and to observe China’s road to socialist modernisation’ (Frazier 2014: 30). A select group even received offers to ‘contribute to the Chinese Communist Revolution’ as lecturers, doctors, and translators, among other professions (Frazier 2014: 30).

At the other end of this diplomatic effort, leaders of the CCP often travelled abroad to newly independent non-aligned countries across the Global South. For instance, in 1956, the CCP sent Zhou Enlai on a highly publicised visit to neutral Cambodia, where he arrived at Phnom Penh’s Pochentong Airport to raucous applause from overseas Chinese (华侨) (Sino-Khmer Daily 1956), and on a ‘very visible’ tour of African nations between December 1963 and February 1964 (Bräutigam 2009: 32). Zhou’s African tour, in particular, recalls yet another dimension of the CCP’s diplomatic turn: exporting Mao Zedong Thought and the Chinese revolutionary experience globally.

A few years before Zhou’s highly publicised tour to Africa, Mao had observed: ‘We [the CCP] don’t have a clear understanding of African history, geography and the present situation’ (Li 2005: 62). As a corrective, in July 1961, the CCP Central Committee International Liaison Department (中国共产党中央委员会对外联络部) directed research outlets in China to collect information and produce official briefings on Latin American, African, and Asian nations. The September 1961

Non-Aligned Movement conference in Belgrade served as the backdrop for the CCP's establishment of the Research Institute for Latin American Issues (拉美问题研究所) and the Research Institute for Afro-Asian Issues (亚非问题研究所). Both institutes served as precursors to CCP relations with non-aligned and newly independent nations across the Global South, which represented fecund ground for stirring radicalism (Shambaugh 2002: 577; Large 2008: 46).

Indeed, by the time of the Cultural Revolution, CCP propagandists had initiated a global campaign to posit China as 'an example with applications in other parts of the world' (Xu 2014: 76). As part of the prevailing Mao-centric maelstrom, CCP leaders fixed their collective gaze on accelerating anti-imperial revolution globally through the mass translation and dissemination of Mao's works. The Foreign Languages Press (外文出版社) translated Mao's works for a global readership, and the International Bookstore (国际图书) distributed these translations via embassy personnel, progressive bookstores, and private collectors at virtually no cost (Cao 1989: 17, 39). Between October 1966 and May 1967, for instance, the International Bookstore sent copies of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* to more than 100 countries (Xu 2014: 76). *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* (毛主席语录), most famously known as the *Little Red Book*, even influenced a range of progressive leaders to design versions of their own (Lal 2014: 108), from Tanzanian Vice-President Abeid Karuma (*The Little Blue Book*, 1967) and Libyan revolutionary leader Muammar Gaddafi (*The Green Book*, 1975) to Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah (*Axioms of Kwame Nkrumah*, 1965).

As part of this export initiative, the CCP also sent art troupes to perform in friendly countries. In the early Cold War, 'ballet emerged as an important artistic medium for international competitions of influence and legitimacy' (Wilcox 2019: 140). Eager to place the PRC at the forefront of socialist culture globally, the CCP sent acrobatic troupes and dance delegations to captivate foreign spectators. 'New China', Khmer Rouge intellectual Suong Sikœun reflected, 'occupied a special place in our hearts and in our thoughts, symbolised by Mao, the graceful dancers of the Beijing Opera, the

fantastic acrobats of the Sheng Yang circus, or the fabulous magicians of Shanghai' (Suong 2013: 57). A 1957 performance in Ghana by Chinese acrobats (examined below) underscored the extent to which CCP cultural planners played an active role in situating the fine arts as a constituent part of the PRC's diplomatic endeavours in the Mao years (Wilcox 2018: 798–800).

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Return of the China Galleon to the Port of Acapulco: The Mexico-China Friendship Society

I toast a new period of fraternal friendship between China and Mexico. I remember that the only country on the American continent that had relations with China for many years, starting in the 17th century, was Mexico ... Let me end by voting for the return of the China galleon to the port of Acapulco ... to communicate to Mexico the ideals of the People's Republic of China and pick up the highest aspirations of the Mexican people.

— Vicente Lombardo Toledano's toast at a banquet held by Zhou Enlai in Beijing (Lombardo Toledano 1950: 108–109)

No story of the Mexico–China Friendship Society (Sociedad Mexicana de Amistad con China Popular, SMACP) can begin without mentioning Vicente Lombardo Toledano (1894–1966), one of the foremost twentieth-century Mexican labour leaders and founder of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (Confederación de Trabajadores de México) (Pensado 2013: 24; Mabry 1982: 112; Burke 1977: 268). An outspoken public figure who called for radical wealth redistribution and socialist education in Mexico, Lombardo Toledano visited the PRC in 1949 as a member of the executive bureau of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), an international federation of unions primarily affiliated with or allegedly sympathetic to communist parties. His memoir, *A Travel*

Vicente Lombardo Toledano on 2 May 1938.
PC: Harris & Ewing Collection, Library of Congress.

Diary to New China (1950), a ‘curious pamphlet filled with ardent praise for the land of Maoism’, introduced Mao and Maoist China to a curious Mexican readership (Gallo 2006: 67).

Lombardo Toledano’s visit to the WTFU-organised Union Conference of the Countries of Asia and Australasia, held in Beijing between 15 November and 1 December 1949, led him to admire Mao and the Chinese revolution—an approbation he conveyed vividly in his writing. Maoist China captured Lombardo Toledano’s imagination principally because it ‘demonstrated how a third world country could break the paradigm of economic dependence’ (Toledo Brückman 2016: 121). His enthusiasm for what he witnessed on his visit permeated his memoir. Just as the sun travels from East to West, so, before long, will the Chinese Revolution bring light to the peoples of the West’, Lombardo Toledano wrote with praise for the CCP’s revolutionary victory. Mao Zedong, he urged, was ‘the leader of the greatest national anti-imperialist revolution of history, the liberator of the Chinese people who make up a quarter of the planet’s population’. ‘I have witnessed’, he exclaimed, ‘how a long past of man’s exploitation of man, of ignorance, enslavement, and grief is dying, and how a new world of energy, creative spirit, social justice, economic progress, popular education, and heightened political awareness is being born’ (Lombardo Toledano 1950: 132; also quoted in Gallo 2006: 67).

His glowing review of Maoist China coincided with a post-World War II ‘Sinophilia’ that had emerged among leftist Mexican intellectuals. Many prominent Mexican figures, from avant-garde artists to student activists, developed a nascent China-curiosity. Famous muralist and communist Diego Rivera included portraits of Chairman Mao in several murals. As Rubén Gallo (2006: 67) intimates, Rivera was also ‘fond of suggesting parallels among the Mexican, Russian, and Chinese revolutions, events which he saw as paving the way to a not-so distant communist utopia’.

Lombardo Toledano also promoted his fascination with the Chinese revolutionary experience through his political party, the Popular Socialist Party (Partido Popular Socialista, PPS), established in 1948, which then set the stage for the

1957 foundation of the Maoist SMACP (Soldatenko 2018: 176–77). Economist Luis Torres Ordoñez, a PPS member, founded the SMACP to disseminate Maoist literature and arrange trips to China by Mexican intellectuals and leftists. SMACP's 'Declaration of Principles and Statutes' reinforces Ordoñez's precis of its principal aims: to establish 'cultural and fraternal ties' between Mexico and the PRC, spread news about economic and cultural developments there, and advocate for the PRC to occupy China's seat at the United Nations (Rothwell 2013: 37). SMACP-organised trips to China linked Mexican visitors to 'professional counterparts' there and fostered transnational bonds. SMACP tourists often recounted their wonderful travel experiences in China on their return to Mexico. As for cultural exchanges, SMACP meetings often mixed

admiration for Chinese art and culture in general with particular admiration for socialist art or science and the alleged ability of socialist society to make new and rapid breakthroughs on these fronts (with the clear implication that, were Mexico to become socialist, or at least adopt more socialistic policies, similar breakthroughs could be made in Mexico). (Rothwell 2013: 35–36)

SMACP's commitment to proselytising about Maoist China, its direct contact with the CCP in Beijing, and its overtly Maoist meetings established it as the 'main conduit for Chinese propaganda entering Mexico' (Rothwell 2013: 36; see also Ruilova 1978: 136).

Because most of SMACP's activities 'focused on organizing presentations by activists who visited China and the distribution of Chinese publications', one of its successes was that it brought Mao's most famous writings into the orbit of China-curious Mexican students (Soldatenko 2018: 176–77). At the time, Mexico was

one of the Latin American countries in which the free circulation and sale of Chinese propaganda was permitted, and there was even a specialised

bookstore dedicated exclusively to the sale of material published in the People's Republic of China at reduced prices. (Ruilova 1978: 136–37)

Campuses with communist student organisations such as the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Autónoma de México) were fecund ground from which China-curiosity sprouted (Sloan 2009: 4; Mabry 1982: 215, 290–92). This China-curiosity developed gradually into Maoist student groups in Mexico's radical 1960s. By mid-decade, a small number of student groups that 'broadly self-identified' as 'Maoist', 'Trotskyite', and 'Guevarist' and which practised 'self-criticism' and 'ideological experimentation' had emerged on university campuses in the Mexican capital. Members of these organisations, Jaime Pensado (2013: 159–60) notes, hosted

heated debates [on] a variety of issues that ranged from the Cuban Revolution, to the writings and ideas of Jose Revueltas, Mao Tse-tung, Che Guevara, and Regis Debray, to the merits and errors of international and national models of resistance.

Although the Mexican Dirty War of the 1960s and 1970s made radical student groups targets of the US-backed Mexican Government, Mexico–China relations nevertheless developed in a positive direction. Domestically, the Mexican Government made unfounded claims that foreign influence, particularly from Maoist China, was behind the mounting Mexican Student Movement of 1968 (Kriza 2019: 93). Government officials used such heinous charges as justification for the Tlatelolco Massacres. One Mexican deputy, Adrian Tiburcio Gonzalez, claimed in December 1968 that the student protestors were not students at all, but in fact 'traitors' and 'professional terrorists' who employed 'Maoist Communist tactics' to sabotage the Mexico City Olympic Games (Brewster 2002: 175n.10). Internationally, by contrast, Mexican leaders were keen to formalise diplomatic relations with the PRC, which they did on 14 February 1972. Mexican President Luis Alvarez Echeverría even visited China in 1973 and met personally with Mao and Zhou Enlai (González 2017: 177).

Top: A Chinese acrobatic troupe performs for teachers, students, and parents at a middle school near Mexico City. *China Pictorial*, no. 6 (1973): 35. PC: Public Domain. Bottom Left: Mexican musicians performing folk music from Michoacán in the Tarascan (Purepecha) language. Bottom Right: President of Mexico, Luis Echeverría Álvarez, at a banquet in China. PC: *China Pictorial*, no. 7 (1973): 4.

President Echeverría's official state visit to China in 1973. PC: *China Pictorial*, no. 7 (1973): 1.

The Forefront of Struggle: Maoist Cultural Diplomacy in Ghana

China is flesh of your flesh and blood of your blood. China is colored and knows to what a colored skin in this modern world subjects its owner. But China knows more, much more than this: she knows what to do about it ... China has been in hell too long, not to believe in a heaven of her own making. This she is doing. Come to China, Africa, and look around.

— W.E.B. Du Bois, *New World Review*, April 1959

‘Africa is the forefront of struggle’—Mao made this powerful statement in April 1961, in a speech in which he stressed unity, Africa’s large population,

and the record of accomplishment of anticolonial movements (Mao 1998: 355). Such shows of rhetorical support were the norm rather than the exception. For decades, CCP leaders and propagandists held aloft the banner of a unified struggle of the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Mao delivered impassioned speeches in which he decried colonialism and lauded the prodigious and just struggles of African revolutionary movements.

One example of Maoist rhetorical support and cultural diplomatic outreach was China’s relationship with the Republic of Ghana, which was an early recipient of Chinese aid and the second sub-Saharan African state to recognise the PRC officially. The CCP established formal diplomatic relations with the country on 5 July 1960. It was a strategic choice, as Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah was avowedly socialist. ‘In contrast to the “revolutionary performance and culture” dispatched to socialist countries’, historian Liu Haifang (2008: 19–20) notes, ‘the content of Chinese cultural diplomacy towards African,

Zhou Ruizhuang, 'Vigorous support the anti-imperialist struggle of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America' (坚决支持亚洲非洲拉丁美洲人民的反帝斗争), Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe (c. 1964). PC: Image courtesy of the IISH/Stefan Landsberger Collection.

Asian, and Latin American countries tended to be traditional cultures and performances with local colour'. In line with this approach, the CCP sought to initiate friendly relations in a 'strategically significant region' and, in particular, in the 'politically active nation-state' of Ghana on its independence from British rule in 1957 (Chau 2014: 73).

Chinese art troupes were important conduits of the CCP's cultural diplomatic endeavours and often paved the way for formal diplomatic relations where they did not exist previously. As Zhou Enlai urged at the 1955 Afro-Asia Solidarity Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, the Afro-Asian nations of the world must 'develop economic and cultural cooperation with each other to eliminate the under-developed status caused by long-term colonialist exploitation and oppression' (Song and Li 1997: 314). Just two years later, the CPAFFC sent a Chinese acrobatic delegation to North Africa and Ghana with the aim to 'prepar[e] public opinion' for the formalisation of such relations between

China and several newly independent nation-states on the continent (Liu 2008: 19). A Chinese arts troupe visited Ghana again on 6 March 1958 to commemorate the country's first anniversary of independence, with the Chinese acrobatic delegation scheduled to perform several times in the Ghanaian capital of Accra to coincide with the ongoing Conference of Independent African States (Peking Review 1958: 22). The troupe also 'gave a special performance' attended by Prime Minister Nkrumah and other major Ghanaian Government officials (Chau 2014: 77; Peking Review 1958: 20).

Further cultural diplomatic endeavours provided the *mise en scène* for Beijing's geopolitical designs. 'As a means of influence', Donovan Chau (2014: 77) notes, the CCP (via the CPAFFC) 'used the troupe to shape the perception of China in the minds of African leaders, particularly Nkrumah, as well as to gain knowledge of the local environment'. Instrumental to this aim was the China-Africa People's Friendship Association (CAPFA), which

was established in April 1960 under the aegis of the CPAFFC. As two of the six main CAPFA mandates stipulated, its goals were to establish and develop 'cooperation with friendship-with-China organisations, social communities and personages ... in Africa to increase mutual understanding and develop friendship through exchanges of visits, commemorative meetings, lectures, seminars, bilateral and multi-lateral meetings, exchange of publications, etc' and 'China–Africa nongovernmental cultural exchanges' (CPAFFC n.d.).

An additional aim was to win support from newly independent nations for the PRC to take China's seat at the United Nations, which until 1971 was held by Taiwan. A mere nine months after the first Chinese acrobatic delegation visited Ghana, Ghanaian Minister of Foreign Affairs and of Labour and Cooperatives, Ebenezer Ako-Adjei, led a Ghanaian delegation to the United Nations, where he voiced his unequivocal support for the PRC to occupy China's seat (Chau 2014: 6; Anderson 1958: 6). 'If China joins the United Nations', President Nkrumah noted in conversation with Zhou Enlai, 'the situation will be easier. Ghana will do its utmost to educate African countries in the United Nations to vote according to their own conscience, rather than that of others' (Zhou and Nkrumah 1964: 7).

But perhaps the most important moment in contemporary China–Ghana relations occurred when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai embarked on his African tour between December 1963 and February 1964. On the Ghanaian leg of his tour, Zhou sat down for a conversation with President Nkrumah during which he announced his Eight Principles of Chinese Foreign Aid (that it should be provided interest-free or with low interest; see also Rudyak's essay in the present issue), which he framed on the earlier Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Zhou and Nkrumah 1964: 23–24; Bräutigam 2009: 313–14). Zhou also stressed the primacy Beijing placed on Ghana's position on the continent and lauded its leadership in spearheading the pan-African anti-imperial movement:

Our visit to Black Africa starts with Ghana, which shows that our relations are good and that we respect Ghana's position in Africa ...

We regard Ghana as the first country in visiting Black Africa. Your country makes us know the spirit of the great African people who are demanding freedom and liberation. (Zhou and Nkrumah 1964: 4, 25)

This inspiration went both ways. Nkrumah first visited China in August 1961 and 'was increasingly friendly to China ... as his pan-African aims became frustrated' (Ismael 1971: 507). He was impressed with China's development, though he questioned whether such a development model had total applicability in Ghana or Africa more broadly (Nkrumah 1963: 37, 54–55, 164–65; Ismael 1971: 527). He nevertheless shared Mao's zeal for workers' potential and revolutionary willpower: 'African workers, once they are liberated from colonialism, will soon show the world what they are capable of the same way as workers in Russia and China' (Nkrumah 1963: 37). Most of all, Nkrumah clearly drew inspiration from Mao in packaging his own thoughts for a broader readership in his homeland. The booklet *Axioms of Kwame Nkrumah*, which comprised nearly 90 select quotations from Nkrumah's writings, was published in 1965, less than a year after *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* went into broader circulation within China and globally (Lal 2014: 108).

Although much has changed in both countries since the eras of Mao (who died in 1976) and Nkrumah (who was deposed in 1966), many of these earlier cultural diplomatic exchanges between China and Ghana paved the way for contemporary Chinese investment in cultural diplomatic exchanges between Beijing and African nations. Liu (2008: 20) references a January 2007 interview with then Chinese Ministry of Culture official Xie Fei, who noted that the CCP was devoting an annual allotment of 5–6 million RMB to facilitate such endeavours, with half of the total budget funding people-to-people exchanges. A 2019 art exhibition in Accra is one such example of recent China–Ghana cultural diplomacy at work (Mu 2019). At the state-to-state level, in 2018, President Xi hosted Ghanaian President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo on an official state visit at the Great Hall of the People. Both leaders met in advance of the Beijing summit of the Forum on China–Africa

Cooperation to discuss revitalising bilateral relations (Boateng 2020; Xinhua 2018). But for this meeting and those since, the focus in Ghana–China relations has shifted primarily to what is at stake for both nations vis-a-vis infrastructural development within the BRI in coastal Africa.

Useful Foreigners: Italian Cultural Mediators and the Image of Maoist China

Friendships are not chosen by chance, but according to the passions that dominate us.

— Alberto Moravia, quoted by Xi Jinping in an article for Italy's *Corriere della Sera*, 23 March 2019

It may not have been until November 1970 that Italy recognised the PRC and initiated formal diplomatic relations, but unlike elsewhere in Europe, Italian society was receptive to curiosity about the PRC. After World War II, the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) was the second-largest political party in the country and one of the largest communist parties in the Euro-American world. The prominence of like-minded socialist parties, too, played no small role in enabling a curiosity about Maoist China to grow organically among Italian progressives (Schaufelbuehl et al. 2019: 9). But in the 1960s, one major push for Italian leftists to turn to Maoism was that the PCI and another major leftist party, the Italian Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano), both recalibrated their strategies along arguably 'revisionist' and reformist lines, respectively.

'Italian Maoism' grew gradually as Padua-based communists broke with the PCI in 1962 and 'began publishing a Maoist periodical, *Long Live Leninism!* (*Viva il Leninismo!*)' (Galimberti 2020: 215).

PRC Premier Zhou Enlai joins Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah for dinner in Accra during the Chinese statesman's African tour in January 1964. Nkrumah visited China twice (in 1961 and 1966). PC: *People's Pictorial* (人民画报), no. 4 (April 1964).

The following year, Italian Sinologist Giuseppe Regis established the Eastern Editions (Edizioni d'Oriente) publishing house, which 'translated several texts by Mao and edited a monthly magazine, *New Unity* (*Nuova Unità*)', which was an allusion to PCI newspaper *Unity* (*L'Unità*). By the end of the decade, avowedly Maoist publications also included *Wind from the East* (*Vento dell'Est*) and *Political Work* (*Lavoro Politico*) (Galimberti 2020: 215–16).

What antedated this spread of China-curiosity and interest in Maoism? In the 1950s and 1960s, Maoist China 'fascinated grassroots activists' and 'high-profile left-wing intellectuals' alike (Galimberti 2020: 216). Italian delegations of leftist intellectuals, including luminary Curzio Malaparte and socialist politician Pietro Nenni (both of whom visited China in 1955), as well as author Alberto Moravia (who visited in 1967), journeyed to Maoist China on official visits (Fu and Indelicato 2017: 52). All three important Italian cultural mediators occupied important roles in spurring further China-curiosity in their homelands and had a hand in normalising Italy–PRC relations through their artistic mediums and personal diplomacy.

Tuscany-born writer-journalist Curzio Malaparte (born Kurt Erich Suckert, 1898–1957) represents a perplexing case of an Italian cultural mediator who helped to bridge the gap between Italy and the PRC. His political allegiance oscillated from far right to far left. In the 1920s, Malaparte was a pro-fascist intellectual who participated in the March on Rome that led to the rise of the fascist regime in 1922. But over the course of three decades, he reestablished himself as a vocal anti-fascist and China-curious luminary (DeGrand 1972: 73). In his dying days, he left his estate to Maoist China. 'In his last will, incorrigible contrarian to the end', writes David Spina (2016: 17), Malaparte 'bequeathed his house on Capri to the government of the People's Republic of China' so that it may one day serve as a meeting ground for Chinese intellectuals (Liu 2014: 26).

Curious about China's radical social transformation under Mao, Malaparte received, and accepted, a formal invitation to visit Beijing in 1956 to observe in person the commemoration day of

influential Chinese writer Lu Xun. Although he was not the first leftist Italian intellectual to visit Maoist China (De Giorgi 2020: 81–94), Malaparte may have been the first with profile and celebrity (Beyer 2018; Lin 2020: 59). As a representative of the Italian Communist Party weekly, *New Ways* (*Vie Nuove*), Malaparte arrived in Beijing to begin his sojourn. Though his visit ended abruptly due to illness, Malaparte met with Mao and wrote favourably about his experiences in China. His journal *Me, in Russia and China* (*Io, in Russia e in Cina*), which was published in 1958 after his death, captured his 'affection for China and Chinese people' and expressed his deep-seated faith in 'China's immense revolutionary vitality' (Liu 2014: 26).

Malaparte died from lung cancer a few months after his return to Italy, but the long shadow cast by his unrelenting praise of Maoist China in *Me, in Russia and China*, alongside similar works by Italian leftists Franco Fortini and Carlo Cassola, had a much wider impact. Indeed, a 1966 Goffredo Parise interview with an officer of the People's Liberation Army revealed that even a decade after his visit, Malaparte remained an important symbol of friendship between the two countries. In all, Malaparte's visit, reportage, and likeminded works that cast China in a positive light ultimately shifted the paradigm away from *othering* China to 'provid[ing] an alternative model that challenged Italy to reappraise and reform its indigenous institutions and thought systems' (Liu 2014: 26).

On the political and economic fronts, there was Pietro Sandro Nenni (1891–1980), a leader of the Italian Socialist Party whose personal diplomacy paved the way for Rome's formal recognition of the PRC (Tamburrano 2000: 366; Rostagni: 2017: 107). As Italian foreign minister (1946–47), Nenni had pursued a 'policy of equidistance' between the Soviet Union and the United States, but on opposing his country's joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), he devoted himself fully to 'détente, neutrality, and peace' (Rostagni 2017: 109). In the realisation of the first of these, China figured prominently. Détente, Nenni averred, was imaginable 'if finally one decided to recognise or one resigned oneself to recognising the reality of what had happened in China' (Nenni

Photo of Curzio Malaparte on the Great Wall of China from his book *Io, in Russia e in Cina* (*Me, in Russia and China*) (1956). PC: Wikimedia Commons.

1981: 538; Rostagni 2017: 109, 113–14). Nenni was also acutely aware that other prominent US-allied countries like the United Kingdom and France had approached Beijing. In September 1955, he wrote to Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Gaetano Martino (1900–67) to urge Rome to send an economic mission to Asia. He held that the

Italian economic crisis, in particular in the industrial sector, and the deficit in the balance of payments made it necessary to access the markets of Eastern Europe, the Middle and Far East, and not let precious opportunities for Italy fade away, especially as other [Euro-American] states already had initiatives under way. (Rostagni 2017: 113–14)

Nenni thus determined that Rome must strike while the iron was hot.

In 1955, Nenni seized on the opportunity to visit Maoist China on receipt of a formal invitation from Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. He made his visit

‘in an official government capacity’, albeit absent Rome’s stamp of approval (*sub rosa*), to establish an Italian trade office in Beijing (Rostagni 2017: 115). Nenni’s visit to Beijing and meetings with high-ranking CCP leaders were a great success. He met with Zhou and Mao to discuss ‘Sino-Italian problems’ and the prevailing circumstances in global politics. In Nenni’s discussion with Zhou, the Chinese Premier ‘expressed the PRC’s willingness to “deal with the problems of organizing peace on all levels” by claiming a permanent seat on the [UN] Security Council, and indicated that the attitude of the United States was China’s main problem’ (Rostagni 2017: 115). However, to normalise commercial relations between Rome and Beijing, Zhou had one major caveat: Rome must cease relations with Taipei. ‘On this point Beijing was intransigent’, says Rostagni (2017: 115). As Nenni recalled, the CCP clearly wanted to negotiate, ‘but was not in a position of one who is about to drown’. His visit nonetheless yielded an important discovery: Maoist China’s ‘immense

Photograph of Alberto Moravia in 1982. PC: Paolo Monti. Servizio fotografico, BEIC 6361580.

possibilities for development’ and the possibility of the country becoming ‘one of the factors that would influence the future of Asia and balance of world power’ (Rostagni 2017: 115; Nenni 1981: 703).

Although on Nenni’s return to Rome he discovered that his visit ‘had taken on a political tone in Italy’, it was nevertheless a watershed moment in postwar Sino-Italian relations (Rostagni 2017: 115; Nenni 1981: 694). In January 1969, Nenni proposed that Rome formally recognise the PRC. This was far from a *fait accompli*, and certainly not the product solely of his own work and invention, but Nenni’s personal diplomacy and meetings with Zhou and Mao set in motion a chain of events that normalised Sino-Italian relations and contributed to Rome’s recognition of the PRC on 6 November 1970.

Finally, the last of the three Italian cultural mediators under analysis to visit China was Malaparte’s friend and occasional critic (he once intimated that Malaparte was ‘not an intellectual’ because ‘he did not believe in ideas’), novelist Alberto Moravia (Spina 2016: 12–13; Lambron 1989). The legacy

of Moravia’s effect on Sino-Italian relations was evident as recently as March 2019 in an article by Chinese President Xi Jinping in advance of his official state visit to Rome. In the article, Xi (2019) quoted Moravia directly: ‘Friendships are not chosen by chance, but according to the passions that dominate us.’

Not unlike Malaparte’s reportage more than a decade earlier, Moravia’s 1967 book, *The Red Book and the Great Wall: An Impression of Mao’s China* (*La rivoluzione culturale in Cina. Ovvero il Convitato di pietra*), provided an early account of the radically iconoclastic Cultural Revolution for Italian readers. Through Moravia’s writing, ‘Italians could catch a glimpse of what was happening beyond the Great Wall’ (Galimberti 2020: 221). In this travelogue, Moravia, who was an ardent critic of consumerist society, provides a critical yet nonetheless positive take on Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution. In the opening chapter, for example, Moravia indicates that he prefers the standard of living in China to that in Italy or elsewhere in Euro-America. The Chinese people, Moravia idealised, have attained a certain type of utopia in their pursuit only of that which they need, rather than what they purely desire.

Subsequent sections explore the maelstrom of Mao-centric iconoclasm of the era, particularly the phenomenon of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*, the Red Guards, and the Mao personality cult. In terms of content, Moravia described *Quotations* as the quintessence of the ‘Confucianisation of Marx’s thought’ and ‘the Confucianisation of Maoism’. But in terms of form, in one telling description, Moravia describes *Quotations* as

a substitute for conscience and at the same time the axis of a system of ritual behavior ... The book is carried around to show that one has it, thus we have demonstration ... It is waved in the air at meetings, parades, and gatherings, thus we have exultation of the book, or threat and challenge by means of the book. It is opened and glanced at, and thus we have consultation. It is read aloud in answer to someone, and thus we have citation, communication. Closed it is caressed with the hand or pressed to the heart, and

thus we have affection. It is held in the hand during dances, songs, propaganda, recitals, and thus we have symbolization. (Moravia 1968: 36–37)

He also made rather explicit allusions to religion at different points of his journey. Moravia referred to the airplane on which he travelled from Guangzhou to Beijing as ‘a flying chapel’ and compared the Red Guards to the 1212 CE ‘Children’s Crusade’ by European Christians to establish a Latin kingdom of Jerusalem in the Holy Land (Moravia 1968: 31, 72). These semiotically loaded allusions serve to highlight the reverence for Mao that the Chinese held, and capture Moravia’s own recognition, albeit not uncritically, of an alternative modernity taking shape under the Great Helmsman’s leadership. Moravia, of course, did not see the Cultural Revolution’s worst excesses, including mass violence, public displays of humiliation, and rampant killings.

Ultimately, each of these three cultural mediators played an important role in stoking the fires of China-curiosity among prospective readers. Writings by Malaparte and Moravia cast Maoist China in an unremittingly positive light, while Nenni’s diplomatic efforts helped bridge the gap between the two countries and initiated the process whereby Rome would recognise the PRC.

A Longer Historical Continuum

Present-day friendly exchanges between Chinese leaders and representatives from Mexico, Ghana, and Italy do not happen in a void, but are part of a longer historical continuum. They did not start smoothly or with the pomp and circumstance that are commonplace in state-to-state visits or arts exhibitions in lavish centres. Decades ago, cultural diplomacy between China and the Global South was a gradual process—one that was fostered occasionally in the China-curious country first. In the Mexican case, Vicente Lombardo Toledano’s memoir of his travels spirited the foundation of the Mexico–China Friendship Society, which

then propagated Maoism and the CCP’s radical socialist project to a generation of China-curious Mexican progressives. Mexican students, avant-garde artists, and activists visited China years before formal relations had begun or drew inspiration from the Maoist vision to the point of drawing the Mexican Government’s ire domestically even as international ties between Mexico and Beijing warmed.

Similar methods of cultural diplomatic exchange also facilitated the formalisation of friendly relations between China and Ghana. Chinese arts troupes at first and then a friendship association laid the groundwork for Ghana to become the second sub-Saharan African nation to recognise the PRC. Leading Ghanaian politicians also drew inspiration from Mao in popularising their own socialist ideals nationally. The CCP’s strategic use of cultural diplomacy won Accra’s voice of support in Beijing’s quest to occupy China’s UN seat as the CCP sought to establish a foothold among newly independent nations across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Much like the Mexican case, Italian cultural mediators took the initiative to grease the diplomatic wheels through travel writing and face-to-face meetings. Visitors who ranged from members of the leftist intelligentsia to card-carrying politicians marshalled their visits to Beijing into rich opportunities to link Beijing to Rome. Whether by dint of Curzio Malaparte’s or Alberto Moravia’s popular travelogues or Pietro Nenni’s personal diplomacy in meetings with Mao and Zhou, such efforts played their respective parts in demystifying Maoist China for people and politicians in NATO-aligned Italy.

National leaders from Ghana and Italy recently feted their nations reaching a milestone in their diplomatic relations with the PRC. Ghana celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of its formal relations with the PRC in June 2020 via an online symposium (Liu 2020). In November of that year, Italian President Sergio Mattarella celebrated the half-century of formal ties with a phone call with Xi Jinping (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020). Mexico will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its relations in February 2022. Now that the CCP has all but traded in the grand Maoist global vision for

a more economically driven worldwide infrastructure project (the BRI), will these nations remain 'friends' of China? Will their 'friendships', forged in the crucible of those earlier cultural diplomatic exchanges, remain equally as fraternal, or become contingent on their accession to Beijing's economic interests vis-a-vis the BRI or prevailing geopolitics? As China continues to rise to global superpowerdom, might these 'friends' of yesteryear merely slip into the background so as to not disrupt the *grande vedette* of the PRC as it pursues its new global vision? ■

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