Maoism, Anti-Imperialism, and the Third World

The Case of China and the Black Panthers

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At the height of the Cultural Revolution, Maoist China became a symbol for anti-imperialist movements throughout an imagined 'Third World'. While scholarly attention has been paid to Third-World Maoism in countries of the Global South, fewer scholars have considered how Maoism was received by organisations within the 'First World' that considered themselves part of the global Third-World struggle against oppression. This essay helps to address this gap by examining how the Black Panther Party in the United States was inspired by Mao Zedong's writings and formed connections with the Chinese Communist Party.

Black Panther Party (BPP) delegation visits Beijing, 1971. PC: Black Panther Community News Service, 1971.

Peking is a tremendous city. I believe there's a population of about 6 or 7 million. That's almost the population of New York, and yet, it's not like New York because the people are not squashed into housing ... When you're in China, everything is clear, everything is beautiful.

— Elaine Brown (Black Panther Community News Service 1970)

Reporting on her visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1970, Elaine Brown, a high-ranking member of the Southern California Chapter of the Black Panther Party (known

colloquially as the Panthers) described her state of enamour with Beijing. What Brown saw on her visit—a cityscape characterised by wide streets, countless bicycles, and grey ‘Mao jackets’—was a carefully controlled propaganda effort by Chinese officials to present the country in a positive light to its foreign visitor (Brady 2003). But for Brown, it reflected the utopian potential of a socialist society and struck a sharp contrast to her experiences as a black woman in America. Brown’s visit to China was part of the Panthers’ ‘anti-imperialist’ delegation to the PRC, which was arranged by the organisation’s then Minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver, at a time when diplomatic relations between the US and PRC governments were still formally severed. The Panthers’ visit to Beijing, and to other socialist countries including North Korea, Vietnam, and Algeria in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Wu 2013), was in purposeful defiance of the US Government’s bans on civilian travel to these states at the height of the Cold War.

During their repeated visits to the PRC, Black Panther delegation members toured key sites, interacted with (carefully handpicked) locals, and met high-ranking officials. On her return to Beijing the following year, for example, Brown was accompanied by Huey P. Newton, the organisation’s co-founder, to meet with the PRC’s Premier, Zhou Enlai, and Chairman Mao Zedong’s wife, Jiang Qing, to discuss Chinese Communist Party (CCP) support for African-American activists. While Brown and Newton were not granted the highest honour of an audience with Mao himself—unlike previous African-American visitors to the PRC like W.E.B. du Bois and Robert F. Williams—they were invited to participate in the PRC’s National Day celebrations on 1 October 1971, which was a privilege shared by few Americans.

The Panthers’ courting of the CCP is one of the many ‘unanticipated alignments’—to borrow the historian Arif Dirlik’s (1989) term—of the Cold War. China’s Cultural Revolution (1966–76)—an intensely violent period in which Mao unleashed the masses against the bureaucracy and incited revolutionary fervour—coincided with the mobilisation of myriad social movements around the world, including America’s civil rights movement and the more radical Black Power move-

ment (Qin 2011). In contrast to Martin Luther King Jr.’s preaching of nonviolence, radical activists in the Black Power movement, such as Black Panthers co-founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, incorporated ideas from black nationalism, Marxism, and Maoism into a political organisation capable of supporting their words with action, including violence if necessary (Gong 1968[?]). For some participants in the Black Power movement, the CCP provided not only a potential partner, but also an ideological guide for how to conduct successful revolution against a capitalist and imperialist state. To the Panthers, visits to the PRC were therefore activities in relationship-building with the CCP—a potentially powerful ally that could provide international support, legitimacy, and guidance for their organisation’s struggle against the US Government. From the CCP’s perspective, its support for the Panthers and other African-American activists represented concrete actions meant to affirm and demonstrate their support for global revolution, particularly against US capitalism and imperialism on America’s own soil.

Cao Youcheng, 'Firmly Support US Black People's Just Struggle against Racial Discrimination' [坚决支持美国黑人反对种族歧视的正义斗争], People's Fine Art Publishing House, Shanghai, 1963. PC: Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, Harvard University.

This arrangement between the CCP and African-American activists in the 1960s and 1970s—described by Keisha A. Brown (2015) as ‘Sino-Black Relations’ and by Hongshan Li (2018) as a trans-Pacific ‘Black Bridge’—highlights the degree to which the CCP interacted with nonstate actors and organisations in not only what is more traditionally considered the Third World, but also with individuals and organisations within the First World who considered themselves among the globally oppressed. By centring on citizens, groups, societies, and collectives as pivotal players in the internationalisation of Maoism and African-American activism, an alternative picture of trans-Pacific connections and US–China relations emerges—one that contrasts sharply with what is largely considered to be a period of isolation between the two states.

How Did Maoism Become a Global Phenomenon?

The founding of the PRC in 1949 coincided with two dramatic changes in the global order. First, the great imperial powers of Europe and Japan found themselves in a state of ruin after World War II. The colonies that had sustained their empires, both economically and symbolically, were too costly to maintain for geographically distant European capitals. Local independence and anticolonial movements gathered momentum, drawing inspiration from global calls for an end to imperialism in the new postwar order. One after another, former colonies in Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas declared independence either peacefully or by force to create new states out of the ashes of empire. The CCP, whose successful revolution had emerged from the previous regime’s inability to expel foreign powers, saw clear connections between their own fight against imperialism and the pro-independence movements waged in many states that had become independent or were in the process of winning their independence (Friedman 2015).

Second, the PRC’s decision to align with the Soviet Union in the Cold War was soon thrown into question with the death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1953. Tensions between the PRC’s emphasis on anti-imperialism and the Soviet Union’s stressing of anti-capitalism as the main driver of socialist revolution had been largely put to one side in the early days of the PRC. But Stalin’s replacement, Nikita Khrushchev, decided that Stalin’s extreme style of governing was leading the Soviet Union down the wrong path; a new ‘de-Stalinisation’ of the Soviet Union was required to correct Stalin’s violent cult-like personal rule (Lüthi 2008). Unfortunately for Mao, Stalin’s style of governing was precisely what he had hoped to replicate: a cult of personality, with the leader indivisible from the party-state system (Leese 2011). Mao’s belief in Stalinism was therefore not just about what he believed was in China’s best interests; it was also crucial to ensuring his unchallenged leadership of the CCP. Mao’s dedication to Stalinist rule and Khrushchev’s commitment to de-Stalinisation meant relations between the two Eurasian giants dramatically shifted from dedicated co-revolutionaries to suspicious competitors in a process known as the Sino-Soviet split (1956–66).

By 1960, relations between the erstwhile allies, Moscow and Beijing, had become so tense they had taken to publicly denouncing each other, often through proxies like socialist Albania. The PRC’s objections to Khrushchev’s calls for peaceful coexistence with the capitalist bloc cleft the socialist camp into pro-Khrushchev and pro-Stalinist factions, with existing fissures widening between individuals, party factions, and even states. As the champion of Stalin’s legacy, and in contrast to Khrushchev’s ‘revisionist’ path, the PRC assumed leadership of the radical ‘anti-revisionist’ faction within global socialism. The Sino-Soviet split reverberated across the world as communist parties in countries as disparate as India, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom divided into ‘pro-Soviet’ and ‘pro-PRC’ factions, and eventually split into separate parties. The anti-revisionist camp—consisting of the PRC, Albania, and a handful of splinter Marxist-Leninist parties—therefore faced

the unenviable position of being simultaneously against *both* the US-led capitalist bloc and the Soviet-led socialist bloc.

Under these tense conditions, the CCP leant into Mao's writings—collectively known as Mao Zedong Thought (or Maoism), to differentiate the PRC's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism from the Soviet Union's revisionism. Maoism is an ideology of complex contradictions based on Mao's writings about Marxism, Leninism, and the CCP's revolutionary experience (Lovell 2019). For example, Mao's essay 'On Democracy', published in 1940, applied Lenin's classification of imperialism as the highest form of capitalism to China's history of unequal treaties with foreign powers and semi-colonialism for the purpose of tying Marxism-Leninism to the CCP's 'anti-imperialist' position. While Mao would never have claimed that his Thought was distinct from Marxism-Leninism—he saw his interpretation as the 'correct', orthodox version of Marxism-Leninism—the infusion of the CCP's revolutionary experiences into Lenin's ideas arguably created an adaptation of Marxism-Leninism according to Mao's world view.

Anti-Imperialism and Mao's Three Worlds

With the Sino-Soviet split, the CCP needed to distinguish the PRC from the Soviet Union as an alternative world leader. Key to the CCP's anti-Soviet campaign was the leveraging of race and empire; it was not a huge leap to emphasise that the Soviet Union was racially a majority-white imperial power, in stark comparison with the non-white PRC with its history of suffering at the hands of foreign empires. Through efforts like the 'Three Fights and One Increase' (三斗一多) campaign to combat imperialism, revisionism, and reactionaries, Mao intertwined ideas of race, anti-imperialism, and his new stance against the Soviet Union into a division of three separate 'worlds', of which the PRC was firmly part of the 'Third World' (第三世界) (Li and Xia 2014).

When most people think of the Third World (a now somewhat outdated phrase), they generally think in economic terms—that is, of poorer states in the Global South that stand in contrast to wealthier states in the Global North. During the Cold War, this framework—coined by the French academic Alfred Sauvy in the 1950s—categorised countries not just in terms of economic development, but also according to which bloc each country aligned with: the capitalist First World, the socialist Second World, or the non-aligned Third World. In splitting from the Soviet Union, Mao's declaration that China was part of the Third World—and not the Second—was therefore significant. But for Mao, the 'Third World' meant more than economic development; it stood as a relational term between imperialism and anti-imperialism, between oppressor and oppressed. Mao's theory of Three Worlds argued for a First World of colonisers (including the United States and the Soviet Union), a Third World of the colonised (Africa, Asia, and Latin America), and an intermediate Second World (Europe and Japan) that simultaneously played both roles. As Teng Wei (2019: 285) notes of Mao's theory: 'The Third World is not necessarily located only in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but may be close at hand—as every place of poverty and every destitute person is the Third World.'

By framing the world into oppressors and oppressed, Mao recast China as the leader of the oppressed in its global revolutionary struggle against US and Soviet imperial designs. But Mao's Three Worlds were malleable and subjective, which meant that categories could apply not just to states, but also to societies and even to individuals according to their state of oppression. Moreover, this malleability meant Mao could change who and where was included or excluded from each of the three categories as he saw fit—a feature that became particularly useful as states aligned or fell out of alignment with the PRC in the following decade.

The oppressor–oppressed dichotomy was most clearly articulated in terms of race. By casting white people as the global oppressors and non-white people as the global oppressed, Maoism transformed the 'white' Soviets from allies into oppressors and as analogous to the United States. This,

in turn, was used as a litmus test for constructing Maoist ideology and its revolutionary world view. But much in the same way the Third World was a flexible category, so, too, was race. Even white supporters of Mao, like the Albanians, were considered honorary non-whites, and antagonists like the Japanese were, by contrast, considered white. Race was therefore conceptualised not just in terms of skin colour, although that certainly played a large role, but also in terms of one's relationship to oppression.

Mao's message of struggle against oppression resonated loudly with states, governments, communities, and individuals all over the world. From newly independent states trying to establish postcolonial systems of governance to groups fighting racial injustice, Mao became a symbol of inspiration and victory. Maoist texts like the *Little Red Book* were readily translated into major world languages and reprinted both by the CCP in China (San 2004) and by groups around the world. As Mao's message circulated globally, it took on new meanings and interpretations, with groups and individuals adapting and interpreting the call for world revolution according to their local conditions. Students in Paris took to the streets to protest global inequality; guerrilla fighters in Peru armed themselves in the name of revolutionary war against the Peruvian state; and African Americans in Oakland, California, brandished Mao's writings as proof that their fight against racism was part of a global movement against oppression (Cook 2010; Christiansen and Scarlett 2012). What began as a way for Mao to distinguish China from the Soviet Union took on new significance as Maoism coincided with local grievances to ignite revolutionary fervour around the globe. The struggle against oppression felt by so many individuals in the mid-twentieth century now had a broader calling in Maoism; no longer was the fight local; it was now a part of a global revolutionary moment.

Maoism not only served as a guide for how the CCP had successfully conducted a revolution and established a socialist state; it also provided a syntax for how organisations and individuals could participate in a global anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movement. Maoism became a rallying cry, a revolutionary grammar for the oppressed, the

disadvantaged, and the downtrodden in an interconnected contest against empire, dependency, and suppression. Through understanding these connections during the Cold War, a globalised image emerges of Mao and the PRC's central role in constructing a worldwide anticolonial and anti-imperial solidarity that provided direct transnational links between local social movements and global power structures.

Why Was Maoism Appealing to the Black Panthers?

The combination of Maoism's anti-US platform and the potential for solidarity with an imagined Maoist Third World centred on race and racial oppression made it an appealing and malleable framework for the Panthers. A global anti-imperialist movement provided a lexicon for them to link

The Black Panther, October 1970.

Header of the 'Intercommunal News' section of the Black Panthers' newspaper, 30 January 1971, page 12, depicting revolutionary leaders including Mao Zedong (second from right).

their local and national efforts to something bigger. It also helped the Panthers' leaders to legitimise their goals to their members. By leaning on Mao's framing of the United States as a (white) imperial power, the Panthers tied their championing of antiracism, anti-capitalism, and anti-imperialism to an interconnected revolutionary network. Mao's image, among others, became a shorthand for a plethora of complex, diverse, and competing goals among otherwise disparate revolutionary groups. Mao was not the only symbol for revolution, however, and the banner running across the 'international section' of the Panthers' party newspaper shows that he was but one of several leaders who collectively served as icons for anti-imperialism, including Cuba's Che Guevara, Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh and North Korea's Kim Il-sung. But Mao—alongside Che—was perhaps the most recognisable of the group, aided in large part by the CCP's active translation, printing, dissemination, and promotion of Mao's writings and image.

How did the Panthers interpret Maoism for a US context? Maoism was not just a set of ideals; it also provided a handbook for how to act. The Panthers fused Maoist ideological tenets—specifically, Mao's calls to adapt Marxism-Leninism for different times and locations, his emphasis on revolution

as issuing from the masses, and his promotion of guerilla warfare tactics—with their own experiences in the United States, in addition to examples from other Third World revolutionaries. As Huey P. Newton wrote about those who influenced his own understanding of revolution:

Mao and [Frantz] Fanon and [Che] Guevara all saw clearly that the people had been stripped of their birthright and their dignity, not by a philosophy or mere words, but at gunpoint ... for them, the only way to win freedom was to meet force with force. (Newton and Blake 1973: 70)

Force was indeed one component of how Mao's messaging was weaponised by the Black Power movement. Robin Kelley and Betsy Esch (1999: 13) for example, point to Black Power advocate Robert Williams' promotion of self-defence groups for African Americans in North Carolina, and his advocacy to 'meet force with force', as evidence of a Maoist-inspired theory of guerrilla warfare in the United States. Invoking the Chinese 'Red Guards' who formed an integral part of the Cultural Revolution, a guide written in the early 1970s by Muhammad Ahmad (1971), a leader of a Black

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Third World Maoism and Black Power: A Reimagining of China Studies

The CCP's support for the Black Panthers was short-lived. Just a few years after the Panthers' visit to Beijing, Mao's meeting with US President Richard Nixon catalysed a dramatic realignment of the PRC's foreign policy towards the United States. The Panthers' anti-US stance, inspired in no small part by Mao himself, became an inconvenient thorn in the side of the PRC's attempts to forge a new friendship with Washington. As engagement with the US Government increased, the utility of African-American activists to the CCP declined. Organisations like the Panthers were useful to the CCP only insofar as they could be co-opted for the CCP's own goals and, by the mid-1970s, their utility had passed.

As scholars reassess the global connections forged by the CCP during the Cold War, a new picture is emerging of the vast network of connections forged between the PRC and a diverse array of actors across the world. In the case of the Panthers' interactions with the CCP, scholars like Robin Kelley and Betsy Esch (1999), Matthew Johnson (2013), Robeson Taj Frazier (2015), Keisha A. Brown (2015, 2016), Hongshan Li (2018), Zifeng Liu (2019), Ruodi Duan (2019), and Yunxiang Gao (2021), to name a few, are at the forefront of expanding the field of China Studies to include perspectives from African-American history, Black Internationalism, and global history. Understanding how Maoism attracted such diverse actors across an imagined Third World space provides a window on to understanding not only how ideas travel, are adapted, and are retransmitted between states and nonstate actors, but also how we might diversify our understanding of US–China relations beyond the elite narratives of the White House and Zhongnanhai that are so often prioritised. ■

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