

## Roads to Reconciliation

People's Republic of China, Western Europe and Italy  
During the Cold War Period (1949-1971)

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## Living in Mao's China

### The European Experience 1949-1969

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**Abstract** During the Mao era a small number of Europeans lived in the PRC – most of them for two or three years, a few for the whole period. This article focuses on those who, unlike diplomats and a handful of foreign correspondents, worked or studied in Chinese institutions: 'foreign comrades' (both long-term residents and sojourners), 'foreign experts' and students. The article shows how the everyday lives of these Europeans were strongly influenced both by Mao era's 'politics in command' environment and by PRC policies that utilised them for political and pragmatic purposes while at the same time marginalising them from everyday Chinese life. It also illustrates the divisive impact of Maoist politics on each group. The Cultural Revolution brought a temporary halt to both the foreign expert and student presences in China, as well as being a traumatic period for the foreign comrades.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 'Foreign Experts'. – 3 Students. – 4 'Foreign Comrades': the Long-Term Residents. – 5 Conclusion.

**Keywords** China. Mao Era. Foreign experts. European students. European residents.

## 1 Introduction

The lives of European residents in China from the Opium Wars to the communist revolution have been researched by a number of historians (for example Bickers 1999; Wood 2000; Goodman, Goodman 2012), while the growth of a foreign, including a European, expatriate community since the 1980s has featured in media discourse in recent decades. In contrast, the Mao years have usually been seen as a period when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was closed to Europeans – and more broadly to Westerners – in a Cold War environment where China's 'bamboo curtain' was even more of a barrier than the Soviet Union's 'iron curtain'. Even before the PRC's tentative reopening to the West from the early 1970s, though, Mao's China was not only open to visiting 'friends of China' and

a range of delegations but had a small resident European community – or more accurately communities.<sup>1</sup>

While the new Chinese government was eliminating the former European presence (Thompson 1979; Hooper 1986; Howlett 2016), which it denounced as representing a century of imperialist aggression, it implemented its own policy towards accepting foreigners in China. Highly restrictive, this combined an ideological stance that only foreigners who were ‘friendly disposed’ to the PRC would be admitted,<sup>2</sup> with a slightly more pragmatic one in accordance with the principle of *yang wei Zhong yong* (using foreign things to serve China). The new non-official European presence was very different from the previous one, which revolved around businesspeople and Christian missionaries, and consisted basically of three categories of people. Two were short-term sojourners: ‘foreign experts’ recruited as polishers of foreign language texts and as foreign language teachers, and students who studied Chinese language and/or history, literature and a few other subjects. The third, a tiny group of ‘foreign comrades’ with an ongoing commitment to ‘new China’, lived in the PRC for all or a large part of the Mao era.<sup>3</sup> These three groups were distinctive in that, unlike diplomats of the few countries that recognised the PRC and a handful of foreign correspondents,<sup>4</sup> they worked or studied within Chinese institutions and were responsible to the PRC authorities, not to a European government or news organisation.<sup>5</sup>

Within the broader but still very small Western community, Europeans dominated the foreign expert and student groups, which also included a few Canadians and Australasians, and constituted a substantial proportion of the foreign comrades (the other major group was American). The

1 This article is about Western Europeans. It does not include foreign experts or students from the Soviet bloc whose experiences in the PRC during the Cold War years were of a different political nature.

2 Zhou Enlai enunciated the policy in some detail in discussions with Soviet Foreign Minister Anastas Mikoyan on 1 July 1949. Translated in ‘Memorandum of Conversation between Anastas Mikoyan and Zhou Enlai, 1 January 1949’, Cold War International History Project. *Bulletin* 16, 138.

3 I have put the terms ‘foreign experts’ and ‘foreign comrades’, both translations of Chinese expressions, in quotation marks only the first time I use them and in headings.

4 The only European countries with diplomatic representation in China before the 1970s were Britain, Switzerland, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries (which all recognised the PRC soon after the Communist victory) and France which established diplomatic relations in 1964. Reuters and AFP each had a representative in Peking from 1956 and the German news agency DPA (Deutsche Presse Agentur) from 1964. Communist correspondents during the period included representatives of the Italian newspaper *L’Unità* and the British *Daily Worker*.

5 All of these groups are discussed in detail in Hooper (2016) which deals more broadly with Western residents in the PRC during the whole of the Mao era.

national makeup of the European foreign expert community was mostly British and to a lesser extent French and Italian, and that of the foreign comrade community largely British. The students included Swedes and Italians in the early years, with French students dominant from 1964. Up to 1963-64, the total number of people was tiny: probably less than 100 (including families) at any one time. The establishment of the student exchange with France and the recruitment of some foreign experts, both of which were done for pragmatic rather than political reasons, increased the size of the total community, but it was still very small even compared with the early to mid-1970s when China began opening tentatively to the West.

This article examines the nature of the community and argues that its members were partially isolated and insulated from everyday Chinese life in accordance with an official policy of 'privileged segregation'. At the same time, their working or studying lives were influenced by the Mao era's 'politics in command' environment which in some cases compromised their *raison d'être* for being in China. Relations within individual groups were also influenced by the highly politicised environment, while the Cultural Revolution brought a temporary halt to the foreign expert and student presences as well as proving traumatic for the long-term residents. Individual sections of the article focus on the factors that were most pertinent to each group, while revealing the qualitative differences between being a short-term sojourner and a long-term resident for whom living in Mao's China involved an ongoing process of identity negotiation.

This article is part of a broader project on the Western (including the European) experience in China for the whole of the Mao era, published as *Foreigners Under Mao: Western Lives in China 1949-1976* (Hooper 2016). Like that project, the focus in this article is on everyday experiences, interactions and identities, not on the formulation and implementation of communist policy *towards* Europeans (or more broadly foreigners) which was examined by political scientist Anne-Marie Brady in *Making the Foreign Serve China* (2003). Utilising familiar social history sources, the article draws mainly on memoirs, letters, and personal interviews and communications.

## 2 'Foreign experts'

During the 1950s and 1960s, the PRC Government recruited a small number of Europeans as 'foreign experts' (*waiguo zhuanjia*) to help fill its need for foreign language expertise.<sup>6</sup> This section focuses on their recruitment,

<sup>6</sup> Although most of the long-term residents were also classified as 'foreign experts' in terms of their working roles and salaries, they essentially fell into that category rather than being recruited to it.

how their experience was characterised by privilege and segregation, the impact of Maoist politics on their teaching and text-polishing work, political divisions within the community, and their targeting during the Cultural Revolution.

The foreign experts, mostly from Britain and to a more limited extent France and Italy, started as a trickle of people in the 1950s. They were assigned to the PRC by their respective Communist parties in response to requests from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for assistance with its 'foreign propaganda work' (*duiwai xuanchuan gongzuo*) to supplement the foreign comrades who were already living in China. While appointees usually spent three or four years in the PRC, the British party encouraged them to stay longer because it had difficulty persuading members to go there.

In 1963-64, the demand for foreign experts increased when, with the Sino-Soviet split, English and French replaced Russian as the PRC's major foreign languages. China was also expanding – and attempting to improve – its foreign language teaching following Zhou Enlai's dissatisfaction with his interpreters during a visit to French-speaking Algeria. But this was happening at a time when the European Communist parties (which eventually supported the Soviet Union) were decreasing their contacts with the PRC.

It was in this context that the Chinese government implemented a new policy for the broader recruitment of foreign experts, mostly on two-year contracts. With pragmatism outweighing politics, its appointees were the first European sojourners admitted to the PRC for whom a declared allegiance to 'new China' was not essential. "All we ask of you is that you're not an enemy of the Chinese people and that you do your work well", Frenchman Maurice Ciantar was told (1969, i-ii). The positions were publicised, mostly by word of mouth, through China friendship associations and the PRC diplomatic missions in London and Paris.<sup>7</sup> By early 1965 an estimated fifteen British teachers had already gone to China, according to the scholarly journal *China Quarterly* (Note, 1965, 25, 207). Most of the appointees travelled to the PRC individually or as couples, but the first twelve French teachers were escorted as a group by a Chinese diplomat.

While the early foreign experts had been communist party members, those recruited in the mid-1960s were among the most diverse of all the European residents and fell into three categories. The first saw 'new China' as the bright new hope for socialism after becoming disillusioned with the Soviet Union. They included British journalist Eric Gordon and his wife Marie who had first met at a Communist Youth League meeting. Political idealists Monica and Peter Seltman had fallen out with the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) during the Sino-Soviet split, joined an 'anti-revisionist' group, and hoped that the PRC would give them "the opportu-

7 The PRC and France established diplomatic relations in January 1964.

nity to learn valuable political lessons” and to “make some small contribution to building socialism and opposing imperialism” (Seltman 2014, 101).

The second category, some of whose members were also sympathetic to ‘new China’, were Chinese language graduates for whom the foreign expert route presented a rare opportunity to spend a few years in the country they had been studying for many years. Most were single, like French graduate Marianne Bastid, while a few were accompanied, including British graduates Bill Jenner (with his wife Delia) and Andrew Watson (with his wife Maggie). The third, more disparate, category of foreign experts included language teachers who had previously worked in international schools (some of the French had taught in Algeria before its independence) and others who were simply interested in China, like fifty-year-old Parisian writer and adventurer Maurice Ciantar. Altogether, the foreign experts were a mixed bunch, thrown into – and often thrown together in – a high-politicised and restrictive society.

One of the most striking features of the foreign experts’ experience in the PRC was privilege and segregation, the combination of which isolated and insulated them from much of everyday Chinese life. This was in line with the Government’s aim to project its official version of ‘new China’ to foreigners and to prevent Chinese people from potentially becoming contaminated by ‘incorrect’ ideas. The foreign experts received free accommodation, medical expenses, and a foreign expert salary (depending on experience) of around 400-500 *yuan* a month, five or more times that paid to a senior Chinese professor.<sup>8</sup> In Peking, where the great majority worked, they were housed at the Friendship Hotel (*Youyi Binguan*), a huge walled complex on the city’s north-western outskirts which had been the focus of the Soviet expert presence before the Russians were suddenly withdrawn in July 1960.<sup>9</sup> The *Youyi*, as it was commonly known, was a self-contained and segregated community; its facilities included dining rooms, club, bank, chemist, shops, hairdresser, gymnasium, outdoor swimming pool and tennis courts. When Maurice Ciantar arrived in 1965, it housed some 600 foreign experts – a catchall term including not just those specially recruited to serve China’s foreign expert needs but a range of political exiles and would-be revolutionaries from regions including South America and Asia. The foreign experts were driven to and from their place of work – and even back to the *Youyi* for lunch – by car or special coach, and were kept busy in their free time with officially supervised visits and excursions.

8 For details of the foreign experts’ salaries and conditions, see *Guowuyuan waiguo zhuanjia ju ji zhongyang youguan bumen guanyu waiguo zhuanjia wenti de wenjian* 国务院外国专家局及中央有关部门关于外国专家问题的文件 (Documents of the Foreign Experts Bureau of the State Council and Relevant Departments of the Central Government on Foreign Expert Issues).

9 I am using ‘Peking’ rather than ‘Beijing’ when writing about the Mao era as it was the term used by my interviewees and also in the English-language documents of the period.

While the government insisted, probably with some justification, that Europeans (along with other foreigners) needed 'special consideration' (*youdai*) because they were not accustomed to China's poor living conditions, not all of the foreign experts wanted to lead a segregated, expatriate style life. Their efforts to break down the barriers, though, brought them up against a stubborn bureaucracy. Bill and Delia Jenner's perseverance did eventually pay off when they finally received approval, two-thirds of the way through their two-year China sojourn, to move from the Friendship Hotel to the living accommodation attached to Delia's workplace (Jenner 1967, 76). Others were less successful in gaining access to regular Chinese institutions. Italian Communists Marisa Musu and her husband Aldo Poeta, for example, tried in vain to get permission for their children to attend Chinese schools (De Giorgi 2014, 11).

Despite their segregated lifestyle, foreign experts shared with Chinese colleagues the experience of working in the 'politics in command' environment of the Mao era. The text polishers corrected English, French or other translations of official releases about domestic and international developments for publication in the *Peking Review* or *Pékin Information*, before/since 'liberation' stories about the economy, culture, women and children for *China Reconstructs* or *China Pictorial*, and short stories about Communist heroes and Guomindang enemies for the Foreign Language Press. Morris Ciantar could be outspoken about the politicised content of *Pékin Information* and on one occasion refused outright to polish an article, proclaiming that he refused "to serve up rubbish" (1969, 362).

Even some dedicated socialists became frustrated that the quality of their work was being stymied by the stilted political discourse. Working at *China Reconstructs* in the late 1950s, British Communist Nan Green wondered whether the ceaseless before/after Liberation formula might bore and antagonise readers, only to be told: "It is what we *want to say*, comrade" (2004, 180). At Foreign Languages Press in the mid-1960s, Eric Gordon complained to his Chinese colleagues about not being allowed to rewrite the "jargonised, constipated language" which he had assumed would be his job as a professional journalist (1972, 53-4).

Foreign experts teaching language had the advantage of close everyday contact with young Chinese people, though their efforts to produce effective foreign language speakers were affected by the politicised language as well as the PRC's foreign language teaching methodology. Vocabulary was essentially restricted to Maoist discourse, with beginners' texts using examples of happy peasants labouring in the people's communes, earnest factory workers striving to build 'new China', and conscientious students reading the works of Chairman Mao. For more advanced classes, where written materials were selected and approved by a committee that included a Party official, the most contentious issue was whether 'authentic texts', i.e. those published in the country of the target language, should be

used given their 'undesirable' (bourgeois, capitalist, imperialist) content. By the mid-1960s, materials produced in the PRC were dominant, with Western texts largely restricted to a few approved writers like Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. Of even greater concern to some teachers was the fact that the materials had usually been translated from Chinese, not written in the target language; some had already been published in *Peking Review*, its French equivalent *Pékin Information*, or another foreign language magazine.

"The foreign teacher is faced with teaching a bastardised version of his own language", British teacher Diana Lainson, who taught at the Second Foreign Languages Institute in 1964-65, complained in an article following her return to Britain.

It is hardly good English to talk about 'going to the countryside to take an active part in physical labour, going all out faster, better and more economically than ever before to realise the aims of the three red banners and to adhere closely to the thinking of our great and glorious leader'. Yet thousands of sentences like this are produced every day in Peking. (1965, 1)

Even away from the working environment, Maoist politics pervaded everyday life. New arrivals sometimes found themselves targeted by one or more of the long-term residents to participate in political study sessions, though not always with positive results as Bill Jenner recalled over fifty years later: "I think I was written off as a hopeless case within a few months".<sup>10</sup> Although Mao's China was difficult to avoid as a topic of conversation, the foreign experts' political diversity often inhibited rational discussion. Those criticising the PRC found themselves being denounced by some as 'anti-China', while those praising it were labelled as 'pro-China' or even "100 percenters". "There are quite violent quarrels all the time between the anti-Chinese and those who see China in a more realistic light", PRC enthusiast Sofia Knight wrote to her mother in September 1965 (1967, 50).

Tensions only increased following the launch of the Cultural Revolution in mid-1966. When the Government eventually endorsed the participation of foreigners in the movement in January 1967, some of the enthusiasts (including Eric Gordon and his wife Marie) initially became involved with a group calling itself the Bethune-Yan'an Revolutionary Regiment which supported the political rebels among the Friendship Hotel's Chinese staff. They were mostly side-lined, though, when the group was taken over by a few 'radical' long-term residents (Milton, Milton 1976, 256-7). Over the 1967 summer, the atmosphere at the Youyi degenerated into name-calling

10 Communication with Bill Jenner, 17 August 2015.

and mud-slinging, with rivals posting up *dazibao* denouncing one another in vituperative language (Gordon 1972, 101).<sup>11</sup>

Nor were the foreign experts, whatever their political persuasion, immune from becoming targets of the Cultural Revolution itself as the movement became increasingly xenophobic during 1967. Even the process of leaving China when two-year contracts expired was fraught with anxiety, with aggressive customs officers searching every piece of luggage and confiscating anything that looked 'official' or suspicious. When Eric Gordon and his family were leaving Peking in November, Eric tried to hide some 130 pages of typewritten notes (he intended writing a book on the early stages of the Cultural Revolution) in three picture-frames behind photos of Chairman Mao. The outcome was his detention, along with Marie and the couple's ten-year-old son Kim, for twenty-three months at the Xinqiao Hotel. Although the family's experience was not as uncomfortable as that of some of the imprisoned long-term residents, they were confined to one room and Eric faced constant pressure to confess that he was an 'imperialist spy' (Gordon 1971, *passim*). By the time the Gordons were released in October 1969, virtually all of the European foreign experts had already left China and, with the country in turmoil, no replacements were being recruited.

### 3 Students

To the envy of some of their fellow students or graduates, a tiny minority of people learning Chinese in Europe had the opportunity to study in China in the first two decades of the PRC. After examining the nature and dimensions of the small European student presence, this section focuses on official efforts to keep the students apart from Chinese students, the influence of Maoist politics on their everyday lives and studies, and how - despite the limitations imposed on their contacts - they were personal witnesses to the political campaigns of the era.

The admission of European students to the PRC, like that of foreign experts, was subject to political criteria until the mid-1960s. Most arrived in China through arrangements made by friendship or other associations which had national communist party and/or PRC links. In 1957 three Italian graduates (Edoarda Masi, Renata Pisu and Filippo Coccia) were awarded scholarships to study in Peking by the Centro Cina which was connected with the Italian Communist Party. In 1958 the France-China Friendship Association sponsored two graduates (Jacques Pimpaneau and Michel Cartier), and in 1959 Per-Olow Leijon, the son of a journalist on the Swedish Communist newspaper *Ny Dag*, was awarded a scholarship

11 See also Yang to Jenners, 10 September 1967, Gladys Yang Papers.



through the Swedish association. Two other Swedes, Cecilia and Sven Lindqvist, were highly unusual in that, after a lengthy struggle, they managed to get visas to study in China as self-funded 'private' students.

The breakthrough for those without political connections, though, came in 1964 when, following France's recognition of the PRC, the French government negotiated an exchange scheme with China which was keen to send its own language students to France. Under this scheme, twenty students arrived in Peking to study for two years: the forerunner of exchanges in the mid-1970s. A second group arrived in 1965, only to have their sojourn cut short by the early stages of the Cultural Revolution.

Before the Sino-Soviet split, the European and other Western students were vastly outnumbered by those from the Soviet bloc. In 1958 there were reportedly only fifteen Western students (mostly Europeans but including at least two Australians) in Peking - but more than two hundred Soviet and East European students, plus some from Vietnam, Indonesia, India and Arab countries (Goldman 1965, 135). The European students were still in the minority after the withdrawal of Soviet bloc students as China cultivated a number of African and Southeast Asian countries, as well as maintaining good relations with North Korea, Albania and Romania.

Until the early 1960s, the students lived and studied at Peking University (*Beijing daxue*, often known as *Beida*), China's most prestigious tertiary institution. From 1962 most were at the nearby Peking Language Institute (*Beijing yuyan xueyuan*), established to cater mainly for the new wave of African and Asian students. Although the European and other foreign students were less privileged and segregated than the foreign experts, neither factor was absent from their lives. Swedish student Sven Lindqvist might have described his living conditions at Peking University as 'grim', but foreign students still had superior accommodation to Chinese students: usually two to a room (instead of eight or more) on a separate floor of a dormitory building and with periodic access to hot water (1963, 23). They were also allocated their own dining facilities, with tables and chairs instead of low stools and better food than the Chinese students' canteen.

Physical segregation was compounded by official pressure on Chinese students not to mix informally with foreigners, fearing they may be contaminated by non-socialist influences and 'bourgeois' behaviour. European students' personal contacts were restricted compared with those of students in the Soviet Union who, despite the intense Cold War environment, were able to make friends and even have personal relationships with Russian students (Fitzpatrick 2013, *passim*; Walden 1999, 3-24). The barriers were an ongoing frustration, not least because a student's basic *raison d'être* for being in China was to improve his or her language skills and to learn more about the country. They were only partly ameliorated by the official provision of what Italian Edoarda Masi called an 'artificial friend' whose role was to keep a student up-to-date with the latest developments

in 'new China' (1998, 7). Renata Pisu was unimpressed when, having asked for a 'friend' who could help her read classical Chinese, the duly allocated student told her that she knew only modern Chinese and that they would read Chairman Mao's works instead (2004, 73-4).

Living as well as studying in a Chinese institution meant that students were exposed to Maoist politics on a daily basis. The day started with the 6.30 am morning political broadcast relayed over loudspeakers. There were regular encounters with the educational bureaucracy in the form of the Foreign Students Office (*liuxuesheng bangongshe*), often shortened to *liuban*, which was responsible for virtually all aspects of the students' everyday lives: from room and class allocation to issuing meal tickets, ensuring that the rules were obeyed (for example, class attendance and obtaining a medical certificate for any absence), and dealing with complaints. Even fifty years later, Swedish student Per-Olow Leijon had vivid memories of his encounters – and conflicts – with the *liuban* at Beida.<sup>12</sup> According to Polish student René Goldman, who was friendly with some of the Italian students, *liuban* officials “were unable to understand the problems we faced, the habits, values and feelings of young people of such diverse backgrounds, resulting in the relationship being tense and characterised by mistrust and repeated frictions” (1965, 139). From the other side, the *liuban* officials, who were always vulnerable to political criticism as ‘bourgeois intellectuals’, did not have an easy time coping with European students who even in the 1950s were used to more independence than were Chinese students.

Like the foreign experts, students spend their days immersed in the language of Maoism. “Political and linguistic progress should go hand in hand”, Sven Lindqvist commented on his classes (1963, 20). Chinese texts paralleled the English texts being used by foreign language teachers, with a heavy focus on the achievements of ‘new China’. Students who already had a degree in Chinese from a European university moved on to courses, most often in history or literature, taught from the perspective of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought. Like foreign students from other countries, they experienced what René Goldman called the “thorough indoctrination and extreme politicisation of the teaching” (1961, 111). The set expressions of Maoist discourse, together with the controls on personal contact, meant that they got rather less out of their PRC sojourn than they might have done.

Despite official efforts to segregate the students as far as possible, living on a university campus enabled them to have first-hand experience – and in some cases feel the impact – of the Mao era's political campaigns. Beida, in particular, was a major centre of political activism throughout the period. When the first three Italian students arrived in September 1957, the university was in the midst of the anti-Rightist Movement which had put an

12 Interview with Per-Olow Leijon, Paris, 27 March 2008.

abrupt end to the Hundred Flowers Campaign. Teachers and students who had responded to Mao's call to express their views about the Communist Party were now being denounced as rightists. "Our teacher Wang has been suspended on charges of being a *youpai*" (rightist), Renata Pisu wrote in her diary not long after she started classes. "We tried to get in touch with him by going to his house, but his wife told us it would be better not to try to contact him" (2004, 17). According to one report, the authorities partly attributed the high number of 'rightist students' uncovered at Beida to the presence of foreign students from capitalist countries, as well from as Poland and Yugoslavia (Goldman 1961, 110).

Following their arrival in Peking in early 1961, Swedes Cecilia and Sven Lindqvist soon became aware of the drastic food shortages (the 'three hungry years') which followed the Great Leap Forward, even in the nation's capital. "When spring came strange things happened", Cecilia recalled<sup>13</sup> almost fifty years later.

There were students all over the shrubbery, up the trees, out on the branches, as they ripped and tore like goats at the fresh leaves. I complained to my teacher. "They damage the trees", I said. "You must understand", she answered quietly. "They haven't had any fresh greens all winter... none of us has".

Even though foreign students received special treatment - their dining hall still had some meat and vegetables - Cecilia's hair started falling out. "The doctor said I had a grave lack of protein and sent me to the old Rockefeller Hospital [Capital Hospital] east of Wangfujing to get protein injections once a week" (2008 Communication).

By the time the first cohort of French exchange students arrived in late 1964, the Socialist Education Movement was under way, bringing more tensions and culminating in the launching of the Cultural Revolution in May 1966. Once again, Beida - where French student Marianne Bastid was doing postgraduate research - was a major focus of activity, with the denunciation and dismissal of President Lu Ping, classes giving way to revolutionary activism, and scholars coming under assault for alleged bourgeois behaviour and connections. Within weeks, Marianne's research supervisor, Professor Shao Xunzheng, apologised that he could no longer have contact with her, even though they had developed quite close scholarly relations.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Communication with Cecilia Lindqvist, 3 July 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Marianne Bastid had spent her first year in China teaching French as a foreign expert, but obtained one of two research places on the French student exchange in 1965. Interview with Marianne Bastid-Brugiere, Paris, 1 April 2008.

Unlike foreign experts living in China at the time, the European and other foreign students witnessed only the first few weeks of the Cultural Revolution. With university campuses already descending into chaos, all foreign students were informed they had to leave China by 8 July.<sup>15</sup> The first cohort of twenty French exchange students had been able to complete their two years in China but the second group had their studies cut short by a year. And those who were already planning to go to China in September 1966 would have to wait seven years before there was another opportunity to study in the PRC on a government exchange scheme.

#### 4 'Foreign Comrades': the Long-term Residents

In contrast to the PRC's short-term sojourners, the European 'foreign comrades' (*waiguo tongzhi*) or 'international friends' (*guoji youren*) lived in China for all or a large part of the Mao era. Along with a few Americans, they were a tiny group of no more than a score or so people, compared with the thousands of Americans and Europeans who moved to the Soviet Union following the 1917 revolution (Tzouliadis 2008).

The foreign comrades' identities *vis-à-vis* Mao's China were qualitatively different from those of the foreign experts and language students. For the two latter groups, the PRC sojourn was usually limited to around two years, something of an adventure which might or might not be important to their careers or political activities back home. For the long-term residents, Mao's China *was* home: the country in which they brought up families and to which they were committed in the face of political alienation from their former countries which were denounced as lackeys of American imperialism. At the same time, the long-term residents were still 'foreigners' and regarded as such by the Chinese, entailing an ongoing process of identity negotiation. The major themes of this article – privilege/segregation, experience of the extreme 'politics in command environment', and political differences and impacts – each had their distinctive features for the long-term residents.

Labelled as 'Reds' or 'Commos' in their home countries – and denigrated by diplomats in Peking as 'the twilight brigade', 'the misfits' or 'the miscreants' – the long-term residents were actually diverse in their makeup and reasons for being in the PRC. A few, who became known as the 'old-timers', had ventured into Communist-held territory before the CCP victory and stayed on after the establishment of the PRC. They included medics Hans Müller and Richard Frey, both Jewish refugees from Nazism, who arrived at Yan'an in 1939 and 1941 respectively, British couple David and Isabel Crook (Isabel had dual British-Canadian citizenship) who went to a liberated village near

15 Communication with René Flipo, 24 January 2011.

Shijiazhuang in 1947 to research land reform, and Alan Winnington who arrived in Harbin in 1948 to work with the fledgling New China News Agency (Xinhua). Others went to the PRC after the Communist victory. They included Michael Shapiro and Dr Joshua Horn who, like the Crooks and Winnington, were members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

A distinctive group in this community – though sometimes on its margins – was a handful of European women who had married Chinese men studying in Europe during the 1930s or 1940s. Some, like Gladys Yang, were already back in China when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power and decided to stay on. Others, like Dutchwoman Selma Vos and Frenchwoman Denise Lebreton, moved to China with their husbands when the CCP urged patriotic intellectuals living abroad to contribute to the development of ‘new China’ (Peterson 2012). Lebreton later wrote that she had been keen “to help in the building of socialism... I felt that life was just beginning and I would be sustained by the eager belief in the future of justice and progress” (1982, 96).

As foreigners, the long-term residents had similar privileges to those of the foreign experts. There was actually a hierarchy of privilege, based largely on when they first had personal links with the CCP. For example, Hans Müller, Richard Frey and Alan Winnington, who had all lived and worked in Communist-held territory before the establishment of the PRC, were allocated their own substantial houses. Most others lived in complexes attached to their workplace, for example the Foreign Languages Press or the Foreign Languages Institute, though often in accommodation of the type allocated to senior officials rather than to their Chinese colleagues. While only a few lived at the Friendship Hotel, most often when they became ill or elderly, all had access to its superior facilities. Commenting on his family’s life during the food shortages following the Great Leap Forward, David Crook (2004, chapter 11) wrote: “We ‘foreign comrades’ were given special treatment and spared the effects of the shortages from which the Chinese suffered [...] For we could supplement our diet with food bought at the special shop at the Friendship Hotel”. A further marker of their distinctiveness as privileged ‘foreigners’ was their high income (relatively speaking). Following the establishment of the Foreign Experts Bureau in 1955, they were placed on the ‘foreign experts scale’ and had similar salaries to the foreign expert sojourners.<sup>16</sup>

The foreign comrades’ privileges implied a degree a separation, if not segregation, although their long-term residence in the PRC facilitated closer relations with Chinese colleagues than the short-term sojourners normally enjoyed. This did not extend to being included in all of their

<sup>16</sup> Before the establishment of the Bureau, they were remunerated by way of the ‘allowance system’ which provided basic necessities for everyday life and a small amount of pocket money.

colleagues' activities. A *dazibao* (big character poster) written by four American residents in the early phase of the Cultural Revolution revealed dissatisfaction at not being allowed to participate in Maoist-style activities including physical labour, contact with workers and peasants, and class struggle (Chou 2009, 341-3).<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, the everyday lives of the long-term residents were pervaded by Maoist politics even more than those of foreign experts and students. They had not just decided to support Chinese communism rather than their former countries in the Cold War; as *foreign* comrades they were expected to keep demonstrating their commitment, both publicly and internationally. Some became an integral part of the PRC's 'foreign propaganda work' (*duiwai xuanchuan gongzuo*) which aimed to win 'friends' abroad and further the cause of world revolution (Xi 2010, 55-8). Individuals helped to present the PRC's 'smiling face to the world', as Lazarick (2005) described it, writing stories about everyday life in China for foreign language magazines: happy peasants, enthusiastic workers and liberated women. Second and more controversially, they publicly supported the Communist government's rhetoric and actions against their own former countries, from the Korean War to Vietnam, which provoked denunciation as 'Reds' and even as traitors to the 'free world'. In individual articles and signed petitions, they denounced American imperialism and its allies. Alan Winnington and Michael Shapiro, who reported the Korean War from the Communist side and had contact with British POWs in prison camps near the Chinese border, were accused in Britain of treason and had their passports withdrawn.

The long-term residents' native language skills in a foreign language (rather than the professional skills some had in law, economics or anthropology) were also utilised by the PRC Government in developing its foreign propaganda network, which ranged from radio broadcasts and news releases to general magazines.<sup>18</sup> They provided the major expertise throughout the period (supplemented at times by short-term foreign experts) for polishing material that had already been translated into English, French or another language. Michael Shapiro and Alan Winnington polished news releases for the New China News Agency (Xinhua). Some others, including Briton Elsie Fairfax-Cholmeley (together with her husband Israel Epstein, the English-educated son of Russian refugees) worked at *China Reconstructs*. Gladys Yang and Denise Lebreton polished short stories and novels in the English and French sections of Foreign Language

17 Dao-yuan Chou included an English-language version of the *dazibao* in her biography of two of the signatories, American long-term residents Joan Hinton and Sid Engst.

18 The main exception was medical practitioners, who were in short supply in the PRC, including surgeon Joshua Horn, Hans Müller and Richard Frey.

Press. A few (including some of the wives of Chinese men) taught English, most notably David and Isabel Crook who spent their entire PRC careers at the Foreign Languages Institute, the premier tertiary institution for training China's future diplomats and others involved in foreign relations.

While they were publicly professing their loyalty to Mao's China and its policies, as *foreigners* the long-term residents were also negotiating their personal identities *vis-à-vis* the PRC. This was strikingly illustrated in the experiences of the British Communists who formed their own Party group (or cell) and whose members met regularly for political study sessions. David Crook, Alan Winnington and Michael Shapiro, who had all been in China since before or just after the Communist victory, disagreed on the question of their basic identity in relation to Chinese communism and even to China itself. David Crook later wrote:

The root of the differences was: how much of the Thought of Mao Zedong applied to Britain and how far should we go, for instance, in practising criticism and self-criticism and ideological remoulding (which Alan Winnington said reminded him more of Moral Rearmament than Marxism); how much should we try and merge with Chinese society and how much should we retain of our British identity. The chief representative of the "True Born Englishman" was Winnington; the hundred per cent pro-Chinese spokesman was Michael Shapiro. Isabel and I found Winnington intelligent, amusing and professionally accomplished, as a journalist; but politically and ideologically we supported Shapiro. (2004, ch. 11)

One basic identity issue was that of citizenship. Should one become a Chinese citizen or retain the citizenship of a country that the PRC regarded as a bitter enemy in the Cold War confrontation? (Dual citizenship was not an option.) In practice, virtually the only Europeans – indeed the only Westerners – who became Chinese citizens were those who were previously stateless and/or had already undergone a partial identity shift by marrying Chinese people, for example Richard Frey, Hans Müller and Ruth Weiss.<sup>19</sup> Even after living in China for more than forty years, David Crook admitted that his emotional and cultural attachments were still divided between China, Britain and the United States (where he had studied). "I have never wanted to give up my British citizenship" (2004, ch. 11). Others, like Briton Pat Adler (who was married to American 'defector' Solomon Adler), considered their lack of ability to read Chinese and to speak it reasonably fluently – even after living in China for many years – was a major inhibitor

19 American long-term residents, George Hatem, Sidney Shapiro and Grace Liu, who became Chinese citizens, were also married to Chinese but not previously stateless.

to assuming any sort of 'Chinese' identity.<sup>20</sup> And Gladys Yang, who did read and speak Chinese, was not the only one for whom practical considerations played a role: most notably the advantage of having a British or other European passport for the occasional visit to relatives outside China (and possibly as a safety net 'just in case').

It was the issue of political identity, though, that came to the fore when the PRC's relationship with the Soviet Union deteriorated from the late 1950s and developed into an open rift in the early 1960s, undermining the international Communist movement. "It was terrible. We were basically split in two", Isabel Crook told me.<sup>21</sup> "When the British party eventually supported the Soviet Union against China, it put everyone here in a very difficult situation". Alan Winnington, the 'true born Englishman', was already disillusioned with China and the CPGB arranged for his transfer to East Berlin (Winnington 1986, 251). When Nan Green, who was considering staying on in China indefinitely, was asked about her political loyalties, she replied that she "was a member of the British Party and adhered to its 'Line'". Under pressure from some colleagues in China to commit to the PRC, she wrote to the British party asking that it send for her (Green 2004, 211-12).

In contrast Michael Shapiro, the 'hundred per cent Chinese spokesman', fell out completely with the CPGB. His correspondence with its general secretary Willie Gallacher became increasingly tense as he continued to defend the CCP. By July 1963 the relationship had reached breaking point, with Shapiro responding to Gallacher's criticisms in vitriolic language.

No, Willie, there's nothing rotten at this end... You don't have to guess what has happened to me. I'll tell you in a nutshell. I've stuck to Communist principles... [I] have been deeply impressed by the rich store of experience in the Chinese Party which I am convinced could be put to good use in Britain, too, in a hundred and one ways.

He concluded his letter: "With concern as to what has happened to you, one-time disciple of Lenin and comrade-in-arms of Stalin, since the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress".<sup>22</sup>

If the Sino-Soviet split was difficult for the long-term residents, the Cultural Revolution proved traumatic when their status as foreigners came to dominate that of comrades. Initially they were overwhelmingly enthusiastic in supporting what Denise Lebreton called an 'historical opportunity'

20 Interview with Patricia Adler, Beijing, 25 May 2009.

21 Interview with Isabel Crook, Beijing, 29 May 2009.

22 Shapiro to Gallacher, 31 July 1963, Communist Party of Great Britain Archives, CP/IND/GALL/01/06.



and wanted to be involved (1982, 118).<sup>23</sup> In January 1967, when foreigners were finally given the green light to participate, some were in the forefront of forming the Bethune-Yan'an Revolutionary Regiment which supported a range of rebel groups. They were subsequently its most active members, particularly when the leadership was taken over by 'radical elements' who included Michael Shapiro. And they were disappointed when, in January 1968, foreigners were officially informed that they were no longer allowed to participate in the Cultural Revolution.<sup>24</sup>

With the political movement becoming increasingly xenophobic, the earlier distinction between 'foreign comrades' (and thus friends of the Chinese people) and 'imperialist spies' (and thus enemies of the Chinese people) was eroded. Despite their proclaimed loyalty, several of the activists (including David Crook, Michael Shapiro and Elsie Fairfax Cholmeley, as well as her husband Israel Epstein) were arrested in late 1967-early 1968 and spent four years or more in prison (Crook 2004; Epstein 2005, 299-319). Isabel Crook protested her husband's innocence but was herself detained for three years in a room on the Foreign Languages Institute campus (2009 Interview). Even Gladys Yang, who had steered clear of political involvement as far as possible, was detained.

Although the Cultural Revolution was a chastening experience for those who had committed themselves to Communist China during the Cold War confrontation, it did not usually shake their basic political faith. Like the Chinese Communist Party itself, they could rationalise the incarceration of foreigners - and a multitude of other 'ultra-left' and 'ultra-right' actions - as an aberration. "It was not 'the Chinese' but Chinese enemies of China", David Crook responded when friends asked him why he did not leave China after his release from five years' imprisonment (Crook, 2004, ch. 13).

## 5 Conclusion

Living in Mao's China and working or studying in a Chinese institution gave a small number of Europeans a level of personal experience of the PRC in the 1950s and 1960s that was shared neither by other European residents (notably diplomats and correspondents) nor by short-term visitors who were hosted by the PRC as part of its programme of 'cultural diplomacy'. Their experience was characterised by 'privileged segregation' and immersion in the 'politics in command' environment which in some

<sup>23</sup> American George Hatem and New Zealander Rewi Alley, both long-time China residents, disagreed with the majority of the foreign comrades and urged them not to participate.

<sup>24</sup> The activities of 'foreign comrades' in the Cultural Revolution are discussed in detail by Milton and Milton (1976, 212-302), two American foreign experts who personally observed the developments. See also Brady (1996).

cases compromised the effectiveness of their work or studies, as well as affecting intra-group relationships.

Although the three groups examined in this article shared these experiences to varying degrees, there were also differences. Foreign experts and students were always conscious that their sojourn in Mao's China was an interlude of a few years, a sometimes frustrating if highly novel experience at a time when very few Europeans or other Westerners had the opportunity to live in the People's Republic. While the personal identities of these groups were still linked to their home countries, those of the long-term residents involved ongoing negotiation between being a 'comrade' and at the same time a 'foreigner', albeit one who was politically alienated from his or her home country. Within the sojourner community, the students' more difficult material conditions were to some extent compensated by their greater incentive to benefit from the experience in terms of their language skills and academic interests, while at the same time they were the most frustrated at being denied contact with many aspects of everyday Chinese life.<sup>25</sup>

The first two decades of the PRC, which have been the focus of this article, can be seen as the first of two phases of the European (and more broadly the Western) experience in Mao's China. Although the final few years of the Mao era are considered part of the 'Cultural Revolution decade', they were marked by a slightly increased openness to the West. The recruitment of foreign experts was revived and then increased. In 1973 student exchanges were established with most European and other Western countries, with the first intake including thirty French students and more than ten Italians, Germans and Britons. This was all a precursor to the 'open door' from the late 1970s when the number of foreign experts and students increased exponentially, along with the gradual growth of a new business-oriented expatriate community which completely dwarfed what remained of the Mao era's 'foreign comrade' community.

25 In this respect the Chinese language graduates employed as 'foreign experts' were more akin to the students.

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