

Revolution from the
margins: Uruguayan New
Left narratives on the
People's Republic of China
(1950s-1960s)

Revolução a partir das
margens: narrativas da Nova
Esquerda uruguaia sobre a
República Popular da China
(1950s-1960s)

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Abstract: This article explores narratives on the People's Republic of China created by intellectuals of the New Left in Uruguay during the 1950s and 1960s. The Chinese Revolution inspired new interest and began a period of exchange of ideas, publications, and people between Latin America and China, especially among leftists. However, historiography mostly focused on the impacts of the Cuban Revolution in the formation of the New Left in Latin America and has so far downplayed the role of Asian and African experiences in this process. The article includes China in the Uruguayan debates and argues that the crisis faced by the country during the period allowed leftists to perceive it as a possible inspiration for the transformation they sought. Furthermore, the crisis in international communism caused by the Sino-Soviet split opened the possibility of China being perceived as an experience distinct from the Soviet Union. This left had an ambiguous relationship with China marked by international and internal factors, and the operation to approximate the two countries was complex. It was viable because leftists interpreted the Chinese Revolution according to categories that were disseminated, such as anti-imperialism, development and Third Position/Third World. **Keywords:** Uruguay; China; cold war; new left; intellectuals.

Resumo: Este artigo explora as narrativas sobre a República Popular da China produzidas por intelectuais da Nova Esquerda uruguaia ao longo das décadas de 1950 e 1960. A Revolução Chinesa criou um interesse pelo país na América Latina e iniciou um período de intenso intercâmbio de ideias, publicações e indivíduos, especialmente àqueles provenientes das esquerdas. Entretanto, a historiografia da Guerra Fria latino-americana focou no impacto da Revolução Cubana na formação da Nova Esquerda na região e, até o momento, diminuiu o papel das experiências na Ásia e África nesse processo. Este artigo inclui a China nos debates uruguaios e argumenta que a crise enfrentada pelo país ao longo dos anos estudados permitiu às esquerdas vislumbrar o país asiático



como uma possível fonte de inspiração para a profunda transformação eu desejavam. Ademais, a crise internacional no comunismo causada pelo Ruptura Sino-Soviética abriu a possibilidade de perceber a China como uma experiência distinta da União Soviética. Isso levou a uma ambígua relação com o processo chinês marcada por fatores internos e externos, tornando complexo o processo de aproximação discursiva e ideológica entre Uruguai e China. Entretanto, este acercamento foi possível porque as esquerdas interpretaram a Revolução Chinesa a partir de categorias bastante disseminadas, como anti-imperialismo, (sub)desenvolvimento e Terceira Posição/Terceiro Mundo. **Palavras-chave:** Uruguai; China; guerra fria; nova esquerda; intelectuais.

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Introduction

This great Asian nation, plunged for so long in obscurity, marginalized from the civilized world, a traditional source of hard currency, prostitutes, coolies, and detectives for Western use, is today the shining center of all gazes, half panicked, half amazed.

Eduardo Galeano (1964).

Jesualdo Sosa, an Uruguayan educator and member of the Communist Party, visited Prague in 1955 to attend the *Spartakiad*, the mass gymnastics event largely associated with the Bolchevists in the Soviet Union, but created by Czech communists in 1921. There, he met several comrades from other countries, including two Chinese, Hwang Yo Mien, a literary critic, and Ho Kin Tshe (He Jingzhi), coauthor of the famous book *The White Haired Girl*. After a few dialogues and pleasantries, the Chinese mentioned that they never met an Uruguayan in their country and promptly invited Sosa to visit China. How could he refuse? After all, as Sosa remarked, “So far, no Uruguayan has reached the great Popular Republic to provide first-hand news. Why would we not bring them?” (SOSA, 1958, p. 10-11).² Four months later he embarked on a long journey to Beijing.

Sosa’s argument of being the first Uruguayan to visit the People’s Republic of China (PRC) might be exaggerated and was undoubtedly intended to capture the attention of his public, but it also highlights the fact that China and Uruguay had distant relations. During the XIX and XX centuries, Uruguay did not receive significant numbers of Chinese immigrants, compared to countries such as Peru, Mexico, or Cuba, and did not have significant economic ties with the Asian country.³ In fact, Uruguay recognized Taiwan as the legitimate government and only established diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1988. However, and more importantly, Sosa’s intention to bring ‘first-hand news’ shows how he perceived the topic to be of significance to his people. The Chinese Revolution inspired new interest in culture and politics and began a new period of exchange of ideas, publications, and people between Latin America and China. Along with other international processes, it would help transform the Uruguayan left.

Nonetheless, this growing relation between Uruguay and China, or between the Uruguayan left and China, during the Cold War, did not capture the

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attention of historians. Most scholars, when analyzing the evolution and formation of the New Left⁴ and its intellectuals in the country, favored internal issues, interregional connections, and solidarity networks (ALDRIGHI, 2001; MARCHESI, 2018; MARKARIAN, 2005). They tended to correctly emphasize the impact of the Cuban Revolution in Uruguay and in the transformation of the left, but the big role of Cuba and (latin)americanist ideas disseminated in Uruguay overshadowed the importance that other experiences in Asia and Africa had in the formation of the repertoire of dissent nationally and in the Southern Cone.⁵

China in particular had an interesting role in that process: while it is risky to affirm that it was crucial to form politically the Uruguayan left, it is impossible to deny that it was present in leftist discussions, materials, and horizon of expectations. Chinese publications circulated in the Uruguayan editorial market and were distributed to militants, especially during the 1960s, pro-Chinese institutions held several activities, and, of course, Uruguayan sympathizers traveled to that country. Although some authors have started to study these travel experiences and the diffusion of Chinese material in Uruguay (DUBINSKY ROVETTA, 2020; TENG 2020; ZHANG, XIE, 2019), the complex role of the Chinese in formation of the Uruguayan new left remains largely unexplored. The small size of the Latin American country and the reduced number of Maoist groups in it possibly contributed to this silence.

This article proposes an exploratory analysis of the narratives on the People's Republic of China created by intellectuals of the New Left in Uruguay. We argue that the crisis the country faced in the 1950s and 1960s allowed leftists to perceive China as a possible inspiration for the transformation they sought. Crisis are not only economic and political experiences, they are also a social representation created by actors that perceive a supposed (or real) social collapse, as well as the decay of their structures of creating sense and meaning in the world (HABERMAS 1988, p. 3-4). They are discourses and ideological constructs (FREEDEN 2017, p. 13) that can be disputed by individuals in order to define what was the order that crumbled and how to solve the problem. As shown by Ximena Espeche (ESPECHE 2016), this crisis was a constant amongst Uruguayan intellectuals. In addition, the crisis in the international communist movement opened up the possibility of China being perceived as an experience that offered solutions different from those of the Soviet Union. This left had an ambiguous and shifting relation with China marked by international and internal factors, and the operation to approximate the two countries was complex, but



through a set of political concepts and vocabulary these intellectuals made it possible, namely underdevelopment, antiimperialism and Third Position/Third World, the latter a concept full of semantic richness (PALIERAKI, 2023) that could be easily appropriated by different groups.

As sources, we use two newspapers important in the intellectual and political formation of the Uruguayan New Left, *Marcha* and *Época*. *Marcha* (1939-1974) was a weekly tabloid that congregated antiimperialist leftists, promoted different forms of continental integration, defended the Cuban Revolution and is known for its adherence to progressive versions of the *tercerismo* (Third Position, as we call it) and for introducing the concept *Third World* in the Southern Cone (ALBURQUERQUE, 2014, p. 149). *Época* (1962-1967) was a collectively owned newspaper published by a federation of leftist groups that sought to bring a solution to the profound political and economic crisis of Uruguay and intended to offer a radical alternative to what they perceived as a dogmatic left. Its experience would later contribute to the formation of the Uruguayan *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front) in 1971, as many of the groups that joined the coalition worked together in the newspaper before. *Marcha*, too, brought to its core the formation and the battles of the *Frente Amplio*. In both publications, it is possible to perceive the increasing interest for other decolonial or revolutionary experiences in regions such as Africa and Asia. China became a constant topic and sometimes a matter of polemics. Therefore, this material offers insight on the imaginary of the Uruguayan left about the Chinese Revolution and how they related to it during their quest to define the place of Uruguay in the world.

We also rely on three travel accounts written by Uruguayan leftists who visited China between 1963 and 1967: *China 1964: crónica de un desafío*, (GALEANO, 1964), *Crónicas Chinas* (BERNHARD, 1964) and *China: el derecho a rebelarse* (ROVETTA, 1968). These texts were initially published in parts in *Marcha* and *Época* and organized as books by small and medium publishers in Uruguay and Argentina a few months after the visits. Travel accounts are valuable documents to discuss matters such as alterity, difference, and culture, but they can also be used to debate political identities and world order narratives in the shifting scenario of post-Second World War. In that sense, they become valuable documents to understand how these individuals represented the Chinese experience and how they positioned themselves in relation to it.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section presents the ambiguous relations of the Uruguayan left with China in the first years of the Revolution,



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the impact of the Sino-Soviet Split in those relations, and the transformation on the lefts that allowed a revaluation of China. First, the Communist Party of Uruguay (*Partido Comunista del Uruguay*, PCU) and other leftist groups situated the revolution of 1949 as a part of the construction of global communism and of the rapid decolonization process in Asia and Africa, praising it for the struggle of the Chinese or criticizing it for following a 'stalinist model'. The destalinization of the Soviet Union and Sino-Soviet Split had a double impact, has it distanced the PCU from its Chinese counterpart and opened the way for other leftists to see it in a more positive light in a moment of profound national crisis marked by a longing for new models, experiences, and solutions. The article then turns to the representations of China among the left in *Marcha* and *Época* during the 1960s and how they sympathized with the Chinese experience for sharing its anti-imperialist and national sovereignty discourse, its successes (or perceived successes) in developing a poor country. By doing so, those leftists managed to situate China in the so-called Third World in accordance with the ever-changing and disputed Uruguayan *terceirismo*. Lastly, we analyze the travel accounts and their main interpretation of the PRC: Guillermo Bernhard (1918-2002) was interested in its economic development, Eduardo Galeano (1940-2015) focused on the conflict with the Soviets and the antiimperialism of a marginal country, and Vicente Rovetta (1925-2018) framed his experience in terms similar to international maoism.

With this, we hope to contribute to the studies of the political culture of the left in Uruguay and the relations between the Latin American left and the Chinese Revolution.

China between the Communist Bloc and decolonization: shifting perceptions on a transforming left

The PCU had a complex and changing relationship with the PRC. Under the guidance of its founder, Eugenio Gómez, the party followed the guidance of the Third International (1919-1943), with some amount of autonomy and freedom after its dissolution during and after the Second World War. It celebrated the victory of its Chinese counterpart in 1949 as a progress of international revolution and a sign of the growth of the communist bloc. Some of its members, such as the mentioned Jesualdo Sosa, received invitations to travel to the country. The increasing disagreement and conflict between the Soviet Union and China would, yet, change that perception.



After the political thaw and the publication of his speech “On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences” in 1956 denouncing the crimes of Stalin, promptly ill-received in China, most Communist parties in Latin America would start to distance themselves from Beijing.⁶ Members perceived as associated with aspects of Stalinism, such as a cult of personality and the supposed disfigurement of collective leadership, were marginalized and, in some cases, expelled from the party, while those who remained loyal to Moscow’s line managed to hold power. Many of those proscribed militants would later create their own groups and parties affiliated with Mao Zedong’s ideals and the Chinese position.

In addition to ideological differences on how to deal with Stalin’s legacy and how to theorize and apply the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, the global strategy and their interpretation of Latin American reality also clashed with Moscow’s new proposal of peaceful co-existence. Beijing insisted on a double approach, proposing the construction of national democratic movement fronts for countries that were considered not ready for an uprising or where power could be attained by legal means, and violent struggle in places where instability created turmoil or military dictatorship curtailed electoral practices and peaceful organization (RATLIFF, 1972, p. 848-849). The success of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 shifted the balance toward the armed option, Chinese political figures praised the Sierra Maestra revolutionaries and insisted that they became an example (ZHOU, 1960, p. 5-6). The emergence of military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, the increasing disenchantment of social transformation through liberal democracy, and the creation of armed groups during the 1960s influenced by the Cuban experience corroborated the Chinese discourse of a continuous revolution and the need for the armed struggle in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, even if they never preached the complete abandonment of pacific paths (RATLIFF, 1972, p. 850-851). This approach contributed to the divide among Latin American communists that, to some extent, agreed with the Soviet proposal of peaceful existence and had to deal with one of the challenges imposed by Cuba, a Latin American revolution that showed it was possible to take power through arms.

This ideological recomposition in the communist field led to the creation of pro-Chinese organizations all over the world, especially after the two communist biggest powers publicly exchanged accusations in 1962 and the Soviets chose to sever the technical assistance provided to their old ally. In South America, Maoist parties were founded in Brazil (*Partido Comunista do*



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Brasil, 1962), Peru (*Partido Comunista Peruano - Marxista-Leninista*, 1964), Ecuador (*Partido Comunista Marxista Leninista del Ecuador*, 1964), Argentina (*Vanguardia Comunista*, 1965), Bolivia (*Partido Comunista de Bolivia - Marxista-Leninista*, 1965), Colombia (*Partido Marxista de Colombia - Marxista-Leninista*, 1965) and Chile (*Partido Comunista Revolucionario*, 1966). The Sino-Soviet Split and, later, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution solidified Maoism as a specific trend in Marxism based on six principles: the mass line, working with the masses and adapting theoretical frames to real conditions, focused mostly on the countryside; consolidation of a united front that contained the majority of the population; adopting the Protracted People's War as a military strategy and the prioritization of the countryside as the ideal scenario for organization and struggle; possible creation of a New Democracy, an intermediate stage without collectivization and the allowance of the development of national capitalism led by the people's representatives in order to break with dependence on foreign capital and overcome "feudalism" internally; the moral imperative of serving the people; the belief in the continuous revolution and that the Soviet Union was a social-imperialist power and the members of the Communist Party were revisionists working to stop world revolution (RUPAR, 2018; URREGO, 2017, p. 114). Maoist parties embraced these lines with more or less creativity and adapted them to their national contexts (ROTHWELL, 2013).

In Uruguay, the attrition caused by Khrushchev's actions and his polemic discourse hit the PCU in late 1955. Rodney Arismendi led the opposition against Eugenio Gómez, one of the party's founders, accusing him of creating personalist leadership and of authoritarian practices. Arismendi headed the party until 1987, under his leadership, the organization pursued a very particular strategy, followed Moscow's advice for a peaceful path to social transformation, but also took into account the national specificities of Uruguay and inserted it into a context of a broader anti-imperialist Latin American revolution. The party then prepared itself for the electoral process and also organized an armed apparatus in case it needed to act to ensure that revolutionary forces could resist possible aggression, an understandable position after the series of coups in Paraguay, Guatemala, Argentina, and Brazil (GARCÉ, 2013, p.12-13; LEIBNER, 2009, p. 82). In that sense, Arismendi and the PCU held a dual strategy that was rather unique in Latin America, they believed that pacific revolution was desirable, but also that armed struggle was the most probable route for the continent. During the 1960s, Arismendi would become the Vice-President of the Latin American Organization of Solidarity (OLAS) and one of



the main intermediates between Cuba and the Soviet Union; his party criticized the guerrillas but supported fighters in need. In the end, Arismendi was far from the dogmatic subservient bureaucrat under Moscow's orders, he advocated for a Latin American revolution and perceived in the Brazilian Communist Party and in China interesting experiences to be considered (LEIBNER, 2009, p. 70).

Nonetheless, this strategy did not deter the division caused by the Chinese-Soviet controversy. Jesualdo Sosa book about his visit to the Asian country, *Conocí China en Otoño*, was published in 1958, but it was not edited by *Ediciones Pueblos Unidos*, the organization's publishing house, suggesting that the party was distancing itself from its Chinese counterpart or had no interest in furthering relations. *Estudios*, the political and theoretical magazine of PCU, started to be published in 1956, shortly after internal reorganization, and rarely tackled Chinese issues. The first issue published two texts by Mao Zedong taken from his Selected Works and translated from the French edition. The articles 'Analysis of the classes in Chinese society' and "How to differentiate the classes in rural areas" were included in a section called 'Marxist dissemination' along with texts by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, which means that the party considered Maoism as a legitimate part of the Marxist tradition and China an important experience in communist history. In 1960 the magazine again published an article comparing China and the Soviet Union, praising its economic advances and stating that both were models of development and organization for communist parties (RODRÍGUEZ, 1960, p. 76-88). From this point on, references to the Chinese almost always criticized their political stance, accusing them of "distorting Marxism-Leninism" in their polemic with the soviets (SUÁREZ, 1964, p. 67-88), or opposing the Cultural Revolution and preaching the unity of the Communist world in order to support Vietnam in their struggle against imperialism (MASSERA, 1967, p. 78-97).

China was an issue that was addressed not only by the fragmenting communist party, but also by other leftist groups that had ambiguous opinions about the country. *Marcha* was known as being the bastion of the Uruguayan *tercerismo* since the end of World War 2, as soon as 1948 the weekly newspaper reiterated the necessity of a Third Position far from fascism, but that could pose an option for millions of individuals that did not want to live under the guidance of the United States or the Soviet Union (TERCERA..., 1948, p. 5). As Germán Alburquerque argues, that meant rejecting both sides equally, although it did not mean not adopting any kind of ideology (ALBURQUERQUE, 2011, p. 247, 249). When Mao was triumphant in 1949 immediately *Marcha* recognized



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the importance of the revolution, stated that it changed international order and delivered a serious blow into Western powers, but it also pointed out the Chinese independence towards the Soviet Union (A.F.S., 1949, p. 8-10; LA MURALLA..., 1949, p. 6). Still, China was soon associated with the Soviet bloc, defined as totalitarian, and Chinese socialism was described as a Stalinist and Mao as Stalin's partner (DE CRISTÓBAL..., 1950, p. 7; MACAO, 1952, p. 6).

The political equidistance based on the conception that both the blocs led by the United States and the Soviet Union posed an imperial threat did not stop this heterodox left from perceiving communist uprisings in the 1950s as signs of a wave of anticolonial struggle that was taking part in Asia and Africa and seemed destined to succeed, especially after the conflict in Korea brought the fear of a new world conflict or nuclear exchange. Even China with its unique government and history was included in this analysis, as *Marcha* editors argued that

The rebellions in Indonesia and Indochina, the uprisings in China, the independence of India, demonstrated that the peoples of Asia took advantage of the defeat of Japan to build their own destiny. In the same way – it is worth digressing – that one hundred and thirty years before the peoples of Latin America took advantage of the fall of the Spanish Empire under the power of the Napoleonic forces for the same purpose (MARCHA 556, 1950, p. 1)

This ambiguity was prompted by both external and internal factors. The collaborators of *Marcha* were interested in the decay of Western empires and the new nations that conquered independence in Africa and Asia, as well as in the antiimperialist movements in Latin America. The Bandung Conference of 1955, for instance, had an interesting repercussion in the weekly newspaper as a new possibility. Waldo Frank, one of *Marcha's* collaborators, hoped that Hispanic America “will hopefully show sympathy for the Conference and celebrate it” and defended that the lack of participation of Latin American countries derived not from geography, but from “the unpleasant fact that many of them reflect in politics and economy the will of Washington and Wall Street, rather than the one of its own people” (FRANK, 1955, p. 1, 3). China, again, *despite* its government was a part of this important movement, its revolution signed the supposed end of European supremacy and with its “admirable harmony between its Confucian past and its industrial-collectivist future, it



may represent the archetype of humanity” (FRANK, 1955, p. 3). The heterodox Uruguayan left that yearned for a third path could relate to those aspirations, as the Bandung Conference was perceived as a larger movement towards autonomy and self-determination,

What Asia ventilates, what is ventilated in the background of the struggles we are witnessing, is not communism or capitalism. [...] What is really important is the simple reality that three fifths of the human race, until now silenced, subdued, obedient to the voice of Europe, speak and move on their own, raising their own aspirations in the world, their will not mediated or at least not dominated by whites (A.F.S., 1955, p. 14).

In Latin America, the Guatemalan Coup against Arbenz Guzmán backed by the CIA in 1954 intensified *Marcha's* argument for an antiimperialist stance and the Cuban process would consolidate the approach. *Marcha* progressively supported the island government as it became more defiant to the United States and radicalized its positions toward a revolutionary Latin-Americanism, rapidly adopting and shaping a version of Third-Worldist discourse and project. Cuba, as scholars have vastly shown, offered a different path to social transformation, one that was seen as less bureaucratic and authoritarian than the Soviet model and closer to the realities of poor countries.⁷

The internal factor was a change in perspective of the Uruguayan left with respect to national identity and the place of the country in the world. In 1955 a steady economic decline hit Uruguay. Dependence on the exportation of wool and meat to a recovering Europe, as well as on foreign investments, and the reduced size of the internal market led the country to constant devaluation of its currency and a decline in quality of life. The government lost its capacity to fully maintain a welfare state that through decades guaranteed Uruguay as one of the most prosperous countries in the Americas. In 1958 the ruling *Partido Colorado* was punished by electors: after 93 years in power, it was overcome by its historical adversary, the *Partido Blanco*.

The *Blancos* furthered austerity programs to sign deals with international financial institutions to balance the structural deficit. This spiral deterioration of the economy created a wave of discontentment, protests, and labor conflicts that were violently repressed by an ever-growing authoritarian state governed both by *Blancos* and, later, by the returning *Colorados*. The inability to solve

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the mounting problems reduced public confidence in the two biggest national parties and in their centrality to political life, and soon new antisystemic groups emerged, such as the *Frente Izquierda de Liberación* (FIDEL, a clear reference to the Cuban Revolution), and even armed revolutionary organizations, like the *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional - Tupamaros* (MLN-T).⁸ The national representation of Uruguay as the “Switzerland of the Americas”, a country marked by high living standards, relative peace, and democratic stability, became more difficult to uphold, and the self-constructed myth of Uruguayan exceptionalism created under the social policies of the *battlismo* began to fade.

In this context, many individuals believed the country was in a profound crisis, and it was urgent to rediscuss its foundations. In 1961 Carlos Quijano wrote a famous editorial, *Qué Hacer? Rebeldes con causa* (What to do? Rebels with a cause) urging politicians, intellectuals and the Uruguayan youth to act, to help the country “find itself” and “heal its soul” while looking for new ideas that could put an end to the ongoing suffering (QUIJANO, 1961, p. 4). As Espeche brilliantly argues, intellectuals started to look for options beyond the democratic liberal model that could make the country “viable”. For many, Uruguay needed to abandon its exceptionalism and integrate with Latin America, and to some, with the Third World in order to achieve real political and economic independence. Espeche calls this debate the “Uruguayan paradox”: becoming Latin American to stop being Latin American, meaning that it had to recognize itself with countries with similar realities, history, and, to some extent, a shared destiny to overcome the problems of underdevelopment, dependency, poverty and inequality associated with Latin America (ESPECHE, 2016).

A controversy permeated the discussion, as famous authors as Carlos Real de Azúa doubted that Uruguay could be completely leveled with Asia, Africa, and even the poorer Latin America, the “rich, tense, hot world of backwardness” (REAL DE AZÚA, 1996, p. 17)⁹ and reinforced the insularity and isolation of their country (VILLAÇA, 2017a, p. 261). On the other hand, a group of leftist intellectuals promptly embarked into a revision of Uruguayan past and in the search for new inspirations and China, in the 1960s, would attract their attention.

It is important to note that this process coincided with incursions of the Chinese into Latin America. China had a limited capacity to sustain a long revolutionary effort in a distant region with unfriendly/hostile governments, heavily under the influence and watch of the United States, or to effectively



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challenge Moscow's hegemony on communist organizations, so instead it relied on people-to-people diplomacy and tried to directly contact sympathetic individuals and smaller organizations. It entailed inviting a high number of people with different positions to visit China, but it also meant sending books, magazines, and films to Latin America. Under authoritarian regimes and within only limited reach, it seemed wise to seek support through cultural initiatives. In a sense, it paid off, as many publications started to pay attention to China, for instance, the Argentinian cultural magazines *Cultura China* (1954-1955), directed by Fina Warschaver, and *Capricornio* (1964-1965), created by Bernardo Kordon.¹⁰ The 1950s and 1960s saw the creation of organizations that helped advertise Chinese culture, the Chinese-Argentinian Friendship Association or the Chilean Chinese Institute of Culture. In Uruguay, intellectuals created the Association for Friendship and Cultural Exchange with China (TENG, 2020, p. 139) and in 1959 they founded the Uruguayan-Chinese Institute of Culture, directed by Rubén Núñez. This institute and the *Ateneo de Montevideo* held several open talks about Chinese culture, politics, and daily life in the country. Many of those activities were advertised in both *Marcha*, specially between 1966 and 1967, and *Época*.

All these new materials and elements became available during the long polemic in the communist world and offered new perspectives on China. In time, parts of the Uruguayan left started to see it as a different model of revolution and one more suited to their reality. Progressively, *Marcha* started to merge its "Third Position" with the "Third World", even before the Cuban Revolution, but especially after it. The Third World started to mean not only nonalignment and independence from the West and the Soviet Bloc, but also peripheral revolution, self-determination was intertwined with anti-imperialism, and sovereignty became associated with social justice and overcoming underdevelopment. This broad conception of the Third World allowed leftists to reevaluate the Chinese experience.

China and the New Left: Anti-imperialism, development, and dogmatism

Two groups were particularly interested in the Chinese process after it started its detachment from the Soviet Union and appeared as a different revolution: a new generation of the *Partido Socialista de Uruguay* (PSU), composed by rising authors Eduardo Galeano, Carlos Machado, and Guillermo Bernhard, and old members of the *PCU* that left the party during the Sino-Soviet Split and formed



new organizations, like the Maoist *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (MIR), or acted as independent militants, case of Vicente Rovetta.

The young intellectuals of the PSU soon acquired positions in *Marcha* and participated in the renovation led by Carlos Quijano and Hugo Alfaro in the early 1960s, which pushed the publication further to the left.¹¹ Cuba, of course, dictated the paths of this steady turn toward revolutionary options, but experiences in Algeria, Palestine, and Vietnam also had a big impact on the definition of this New Left. China, too, was re-evaluated in a positive light. During that decade, new articles about the Chinese experience appeared in *Marcha* and Carlos Machado, Eduardo Galeano, and Guillermo Bernhard wrote books about the country. The last two, as we shall see, received invitations to visit it.

These new contributors were politically formed in deep dialogue with Vivián Trías, a historian and militant of the party, who believed in the importance of anti-imperialist nationalism in the Third World and of strong, charismatic leadership that could rally the masses to defeat the enemy. Mao, for instance, could be perceived as a manifestation of the popular will and a voice of a sector historically marginalized. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Trías already put China as the vanguard of global antiimperialist revolution (MARCHESI; MARKARIAN, 2019, p. 229).

Marcha held ambiguous relations with China during its entire existence, but in the early 1960s it appeared that it was not a part of the Soviet Bloc and it was no longer considered a totalitarian state, but rather a radical anticolonial experience and an agrarian country that sought to industrialize. More importantly, it was a “symbol of the rebellion of the poor” (KAROL, 1963, p. 15) and, therefore, experienced the “sympathy of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America” (CADART, 1963, p. 17).

In an interview with the French liberal politician Mendes France, *Marcha* kept asking about the fractures in international communism and differentiating the positions of the Soviet Union and those of China. In the end, it forced the French ex-minister into a defensive position when asking if China was better suited to support the new independent countries in Africa and Asia (MENDES FRANCE, 1960, p. 1, 10). This growing crisis in the communist world put an end to conceptions of global order of the post-Second World War and created horizons not only for the big powers but also for the new nations, it “opens, in the entire world, a new political debate that transcends borders” (LENOIR, 1961, p. 14). Those views coexisted with skepticism on the harder positions of



the Chinese on certain issues. Already in 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the editors were relieved that peace was maintained and criticized Beijing's warmongering and later, its dogmatism on the interpretation of Marxism-Leninism.

A series of 8 articles published by Carlos María Gutiérrez synthesizes well the positions and doubts present in *Marcha*. The journalist visited China in early 1966 and analyzed the experience of his encounters with authorities, the visits to the popular communes, the very beginning of the Cultural Revolution, and the criticisms of Cuban foreign policy. The communes were described as an instrument of modernization and elevation in living standards in China and were, therefore, valued as an experience that could serve as an inspiration.

Now, the Cultural Revolution was a difficult process for Gutiérrez to understand. It meant reevaluating elements rooted in popular and traditional culture and transforming them into a source of innovation. Intellectuals were a tool for that initiative, they were useless if their work could not be adapted for such a task. In fact, it would be desirable if they ceased to exist and became workers, peasants, or soldiers in order to expurgate their petit-bourgeois origin and better contribute to the Revolution (GUTIÉRREZ, 1966a, p. 20). Furthermore, the purges of the Cultural Revolution only revealed "fanaticism and the decision to not think anything using one's own head", but at the same time, meant "a conviction that I hopelessly try to recover" (GUTIÉRREZ, 1966a, p. 20-21). This debate, however, could have a dual interpretation, as many Latin American intellectuals were discussing the role of art in revolutionary transformations, the nature and limits of intellectual engagement or political commitment, and the relations between intellectuals and the state.¹²

What seemed shocking to him were the Chinese accusations towards Cuba, after the island's government became closer to the Soviets, and their definition of Fidel Castro as "an accomplice of imperialism". To Gutiérrez, those were "reckless words, their dogmatism and inaccuracy were evident to any Latin American" (GUTIÉRREZ, 1966b, p. 11). This shock came because "our revolution [Uruguayan and Latin American] will gravitate toward the centers of power and support that, in the socialist bloc, answers best to our conditions and necessities" and these elements were clearly more similar between China and Latin America, as "there is an evident relation [...] between the pre-revolutionary situation of the Chinese masses and those of the Latin American continent" (GUTIÉRREZ, 1966b, p. 11). In the end, he was disappointed, as "China, with its virtues and debilities, with its distortion of the individual as we know it up to this moment



and its fiery struggle to rescue men from misery and injustice, projects itself on our immediate future” (GUTIÉRREZ, 1966b, p. 11).

The frictions with Cuba, apparently, were decisive for *Marcha's* doubts about China. When the Tricontinental Conference finally took place in Havana in 1966 *Marcha* explored the debates and conflicts with the Chinese, and even if they published notes from pro-Chinese authors, it became clear that Cuba held its ground as a primary source of inspiration, albeit always criticized and readapted (GENEROSO, 2017). Even with questions, the proposals of the conference in Havana sounded more alluring than the dogmatism of Beijing (EN BUSCA..., 1966, p. 5). However, it is important to point out that *Marcha's* position was not homogenous, there was an internal dispute and disagreement on how to interpret the Cuban process, as its director Carlos Quijano defended the electoral path and criticized the increasingly authoritarian turn in the island.

Época, on the other hand, had a more positive view of the Chinese process. It was a space of encounter, discussion, and conflict conformed by a very heterogeneous group of leftists identified with more radical forms of struggle, including the armed option, and leaned towards the liberation struggles in Africa, Asia, and, unsurprisingly, Cuba.¹³ Pro-Chinese individuals found in *Época* a safe haven and an important platform to express their ideas. The publication also advertised the activities of the Uruguayan-Chinese Institute of Culture, the Chinese bulletin *Pekín Informa* and Vicente Rovetta's bookstore, *Nativa Libros*. Although *Época* was not a Maoist publication, its radical identification with the Third World and unyielding anti-imperialist position could allow it to represent China as one of the biggest bastions of resistance to colonialism and imperial aggression.

The Sino-Soviet split again provides a good example. *Época* covered it avidly and published documents, declarations, and criticisms from both sides using material from *Pravda* and *Renmin Ribao*, as well as comments from foreign spectators. According to the editors, it was a “polemic whose silent confrontation matters to the Third World” (MOSCÚ-PEKÍN, 1963, p. 10-11). Here, the editors were interested in the space other marginal countries could occupy in a changing world that no longer was divided in two clear blocs. The polemic confrontation lasted during the entire existence of the newspaper (1962-1967) and *Época* sought to remain more or less impartial to better understand the confrontation, trying to avoid the “confusion [...] of those who simplify everything with labels and see the Chinese - gross contradiction - mere



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stalinists” (MACHADO, 1963b, p. 2).

China was, for them, a country that resembled Latin America and, by extension, Uruguay. The Chinese supposedly had the same concerns as those nations, as they all “can not announce the abundance, that fight against the conditions imposed by underdevelopment and know that their fate is greatly linked to the advances of the revolution on a global scale” (MACHADO, 1963a, p. 4). Unlike the Soviet Union (in the present), it was a poor nation that “to continue its task needs to obtain resources through collective sacrifice, through restriction of consumption” (MACHADO, 1962, p. 3).

Overcoming underdevelopment was a problem that most Latin Americans could relate to after the Second World War, irrespective of their political position. The discussions of the *Comisión Económica para América Latina y Caribe* (CEPAL) and, later, of Dependency Theory were highly popular during the 1960s and proposed different diagnostics and solutions for the problem. In Uruguay, the government created the *Comisión de Inversiones y Desarrollo Económico* (CIDE) to deal with the economic crisis and furthered this debate in the country. Terms and concepts such as “periphery”, “core”, “deterioration of terms of trade”, “enclave” and “dependency” helped shape a world narrative that created a shared space between countries that had few elements in common. The belief in Uruguay not being an exceptional country, but an underdeveloped one (and the efforts to represent it so) made it possible to put it in a similar category as China: when Guillermo Bernhard elaborated a list of developed and underdeveloped nations, the “Communist Countries” of the Soviet Bloc figured as developed, right beside the members of NATO, while Latin America, Africa and Asia, including China, were defined as underdeveloped (BERNHARD, 1963, p. 2). Nevertheless, the Chinese were perceived as making strides against this condition, even after the failures of the Great Leap Forward, because “they achieved a standard of living in the rural sector notoriously higher than that of the poorest half of Latin America” (MACHADO, 1963c, p. 2).

For these reasons, the Chinese way, like the Russian way of 1917, was “the one that all countries of the Third World will follow, one after another” although it did not mean “applying recipes long stored in a freezer nor repeating methods more or less canonical” (MACHADO, 1963b, p. 2). *Época* appeared to be more inclined to the Chinese in their polemic with the Soviets

In the post-war there was no epic story as noble, as magnificent as this [the Chinese Revolution]. And before there was no nation



that had to fight for so long, so desperately, against the imperialist defamations of global capitalism [...]

We have much to learn from China, its proud defense of sovereignty, development, and dignification of work, its depuration and universalization of culture, its consolidation of social justice, its uses of science and technology. (CON LA CHINA..., 1964, p. 5).

Despite all disagreements and critiques of its somewhat dogmatic positions during the discussion, *Época* could rally behind the Chinese because they represented the core of its values: anti-imperialism, self-determination, and social justice. The Uruguayan New Left was able to include China in its repertoire of dissent by selectively appropriating elements that could be used to reflect on their own problems and dilemmas. When the revolution completed 15 years, the editors summed up its importance

[...] many of its actions can be criticized. Nevertheless, there is something that even its fiercest enemies can not question: the Asian giant, its face lifted towards the sun in a quest for its destiny, will not return to the hell that stayed in the past.

[...] With a firm step and in a rapid rhythm, the revolution is providing its seven hundred million men a place that they have traditionally been denied: parks in Shanghai are no longer off-limits for Chinese and dogs.

[...] Beyond all criticism, and not ignoring discrepancies, *Época* salutes it once again. (LA REVOLUCIÓN..., 1964, p.5).

Conflicts and animosities were secondary in the face of the true meaning of the Chinese Revolution and could be put aside to maintain unity, but the Cultural Revolution created a divide that was difficult to surpass. Those less connected to Maoism were shocked by what they heard from Beijing, considering the political purges, the struggle sessions and public humiliations a “shameful inquisition, carried out in terms that expose a medieval and dehumanized conception of Marxism, developed under the influence of the face and the word of Mao Tse Tung, who have invaded every corner of China in a delirious of the cult of personality” (LA EXPLOSIÓN..., 1966, p. 5, 7).

Pro-Chinese individuals and MIR replied on *Época*'s pages arguing that it was too soon to judge the events, but the Cultural Revolution appeared to have



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dissociated a part of the left, furthering Maoism as a specific trend in marxism in Uruguay. *Época* did not survive long after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, it was closed by the Uruguayan state in December 1967, but it is reasonable to imagine that pro-Chinese groups would have collided with the editors, as Maoist organizations refused to join the *Frente Amplio* in 1971, did not take part in elections that year, and created their own publication, *Causa del Pueblo* (1972-1973).

The reevaluation of China by this emerging New Left was a complex process, marked mainly by the longing for new models to overcome the “national crisis”, the longing for an independent path more suited to the Uruguayan reality and the long-existing antiimperialist tradition. It was enough for the Chinese to perceive those leftists as sympathizers or supporters and extend them an invitation to visit the country. Their travel accounts provide interesting insight into how Uruguayans interpreted the ongoing revolution.

Journey to the center of the storm: three travelers, three perspectives on the PRC

Guillermo Bernhard, Eduardo Galeano, and Vicente Rovetta visited China on different occasions. The first two were in the country between September and October 1963. They were part of a group of 16 Latin Americans invited by the Chinese to attend the October commemorations of the 14th anniversary of the Revolution. Rovetta traveled to China twice, in 1966 and 1967, for different purposes, as we shall see.

Visitors entered China through flights from the Soviet Union after a short stay in other countries of the Communist Bloc, the “Northern Line”, or through Pakistan and Myanmar, especially after hostilities between the two Communist major powers increased. Once in China, they were received by guides and translators or by resident Latin Americans, and usually stayed at the Friendship Hotel in Beijing before a tour through the country.

The travelers followed a very tight schedule and a meticulous program imposed by the authorities. In cities, they visited factories, cultural institutions, historical monuments, and attended presentations of theater, dance, or movie presentations. Countryside trips usually took visitors to rural cooperatives and to the Popular Communes. During the late 1960s and early 1970s travelers also observed street demonstrations, marches, or Red Guards meetings during the tumultuous period of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. On

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their course, visitors talked with workers, peasants, factories and commune supervisors, generally chosen by the guide, but often they were also able to select their interlocutor, even if the conversation was mediated by a translator. Occasionally, they would meet Chinese intellectuals, like the famous poet Guo Moruo, or authorities, like Zhou Enlai or even Mao Zedong.

Bernhard and Galeano shared a similar itinerary but showed different interests during their visits. The former was more concerned with the Chinese model of economic development, the presentation of the book already advertised in its first two lines that it would cover “The origin and present situation of the popular communes, the economic structure of China, the old society, the revolution” (BERNHARD, 1964). Galeano was interested in the polemics between the Soviet Union and China and the fractures in the communist world and presented to his readers the questions that guided his work, “What does Mao propose? What are the deep reasons that lead China, the aggressive symbol of the rebellion of the poor, to challenge the Soviet Union?” (GALEANO, 1964, p. 9).

Bernhard’s choice of approach is understandable, he was an agronomist and wrote several books on the Uruguayan meat industry and land reform in Latin America. His entire book is structured on the contrast between the old, poor, exploited China (that he never visited, but knew through books and popular culture) and the new, free, transformed/transforming one, a dichotomy also explored in Chinese rhetoric. He did notice (and praise) other aspects in the country, such as educational campaigns, “WE DID NOT FIND ONE SINGLE ILLITERATE PERSON!” (BERNHARD, 1964, p. 58)¹⁴, but it was truly the agrarian element that attracted his attention.

The agronomist was amazed by what he perceived as “fantastic advances and victories over such a hostile nature” (BERNHARD, 1964, p. 26). According to him, using a Marxist vocabulary and theoretical interpretation of history, the transformations in the countryside started to drive China away from a feudal, backward past: contrary to what his Uruguayan public might expect, in some fields the Chinese presented “advances that are unknown in our country” (BERNHARD, 1964, p. 21).

The popular communes were the basic structure that allowed for such advances. Bernhard thoroughly described their historical evolution, internal organization, and operational aspects after visiting a few of those places and talking to people randomly chosen, whose testimonies were unsurprisingly translated by the guide. The popular communes were a necessity for political and economic development in China (BERNHARD, 1964, p. 62) and even if



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the country remained poor, they were responsible for progresses that would otherwise cost great sacrifices from the State. Other travelers held a similar opinion, as many believed that the popular commune was an instrument of modernization based on traditional techniques and sociability and it was a process constructed from the roots to the top, a popular demand met by authorities (ORTEGA, 2020).

More importantly was that China was, at least in 1963, going through that modernization on its own merit, its “own efforts are considered the most important, and foreign aid is a complement” (BERNHARD, 1964, p. 71). This self-sufficiency was at the core of Latin-American nationalisms that sought to modernize their countries, and in Uruguay it was related to the debates on how to make the country “viable” once again. In the end, Bernhard agreed that they had “brought deep experiences from China, as well as beautiful and fruitful lessons” (BERNHARD, 1964, p. 86).

Eduardo Galeano was not very interested in the advances of the PRC, instead he wanted to understand the Sino-Soviet split by comparing documents published by both nations and talking to Chinese and Russians, and, by extension, to understand the place of China in the world. He was skeptic on accepting both versions, the two sides had their share in hostilities and reasons for their stances,

they [the Chinese] evidently feel the danger that the growing agreements between the great powers could impose a brake on the liberation movements, that the revolt of the subject margins will be sacrificed on the altars of coexistence. You cannot play with matches over barrels of gunpowder, and it seems to me undeniable that revolutionary violence in the rearguard of imperialism challenges the status of co-existence and peaceful emulation with the socialist camp, due to the commitments assumed by the USSR as a country

leader of the labor movement in the world (GALEANO, 1964, p. 90).

In the end, neither convinced Galeano that they were right, that their model was superior, but the journalist showed a slight sympathy for the Chinese.

The Chinese did not want to start a Third World War as many preached. For Galeano, they prioritized another effort, “another challenge that requires putting all their strength in the same direction: the overwhelming task of



building socialism while leaping greatly from backwardness and subjugation towards development and independence” (GALEANO, 1964, p. 82). After all, the task that Latin American countries faced, according to leftists from different spectrums. In that sense, the Chinese could offer some lessons, as for Galeano, “our Revolution is the Revolution from the margins” (GALEANO, 1964, p. 32). The Chinese were its most aggressive symbol and were showing that formal political independence was not enough.

Also, Galeano perceived that the Chinese had problems similar to those of Latin America. He mobilized the vocabulary of developmentalism and the emerging *dependentism* to define the aid relation between China and the Soviet Union

The extensive penetration of Soviet advisers and technicians in work centers and planning offices, and their great influence on the orientation and methods of socialist development in China, made one think, like it or not, of a form of dependency. Although hallowed by invocations to the sacred duties of proletarian internationalism, the authority of Moscow must have made itself felt, and surely has clashed, much more frequently than is supposed, with the nationalist pride of the Chinese. (GALEANO, 1964, p. 138)

Sympathy arose as China could be comparable to Latin America through categories that were very well known and well disseminated in countries such as Uruguay. For instance, when describing the role of Mao Zedong in Chinese society, Galeano related him to the *caudillos*, the charismatic, popular and controversial personal leaderships that existed in Latin America during the XIX and XX centuries. Galeano did not use the term as a synonym of *leader*, he knew the meanings it had in the Southern Cone, especially amongst a New Left that started a process of revaluation of those historical figures. Like the *caudillos*, Mao’s prestige, for Galeano, did not emerge from the hard use of power, he did not inspire obedience, but devotion. Mao “expresses, from the point of view of the people, the revolution: its roots, its development and its triumph.” (GALEANO, 1964, p. 44). He would then compare Mao to other contemporary leaders, all described as *caudillos*

Mao is the *caudillo* of the Chinese revolution, as Lenin was of the Russian and Fidel Castro is of the Cuban; He has been the visible



head of the liberation movement since those days when he had the courage to break with the leadership of the Party in order to impose the strategy that would ultimately lead to victory. He is, indeed, a lucid interpreter of Marxism, who knew how to assimilate the system of ideas to the peculiar conditions of his country, and a guerrilla leader who conquered, arms in hand, the authority that today no one would be able to deny (GALEANO, 1964, p. 34, italics are ours).

The comparison with Fidel Castro is quite interesting, as it shows the plurality of options existent for the Uruguayan left and the connections, both real and symbolic, between those revolutions, perceived as a part of one single struggle with multiple faces. Cuba was one of Galeano's biggest interests and he avidly commented that the Chinese people praised Fidel Castro, that Cuban music was on the radios, and that the Chinese authorities were enraged by Soviet withdrawals during the Missile Crisis. He also wanted to hear the opinion of Chinese authorities on the Cuban process: during an interview with Zhou Enlai Galeano kept pressing him with questions about the possibility of a revolution directed from other groups other than the Communist Party, case of the first phases of the Cuban Revolution, until the Chinese premier agreed that it was indeed doable.

In the end, Cuba was the main reference for Eduardo Galeano. At every opportunity, he would comment about the island presence in China or praise its leaders. As Teng well noted, Galeano's interview with Che Guevara in 1964 was far more friendly than the one with Zhao Enlai, and Galeano showed more doubts in China in 1963 than in Cuba the following year (TENG, 2020, p. 143).

Vicente Rovetta had a different relationship with China compared to his fellow countrymen. A member of the PCU, Rovetta was in contact with Chinese material brought by *Ediciones Pueblos Unidos* and affiliated himself with the *Instituto Cultural Uruguay-China*. When the party supported the Soviets during the Split, Rovetta, on the other hand, sided with Beijing and left the party in June 1963. After the departure, he devoted his energies to the creation of *Nativa Libros*, a bookstore and publishing house that would take charge of distributing Chinese material and texts about the ongoing process (DUBINSKY ROVETTA, 2020, p. 20-21).

Nativa Libros started importing books and magazines such as *Pekín Informa* (Peking Review) and *China Reconstruye* (China Reconstructs), literature used



in the formation of communist cadres. It became an important source of Maoist material during the early 1960s, filling a void left in the Southern Cone by the Sino-Soviet Split because most communist parties presses diminished or altogether stopped publishing Chinese texts, cases of *Editorial Vitória* in Brazil, *Editorial Anteo* in Argentina, and *Ediciones Pueblos Unidos* in Uruguay. Brazilian, Paraguayan, and Argentinian militants often visited Montevideo to acquire this material that was banished or unavailable in their own countries (DUBINSKY ROVETTA, 2020, p. 22-24).

Rovetta's editorial activity attracted the attention of China International Bookstore (CIB), a company supervised by Foreign Language Press and charged with the task of selling Chinese literature to other countries. According to Zhang and Xie, the CIB established a Latin American department in 1957 and in 1961 already sold 568,635 books and 356,560 periodicals in the region (ZHANG; XIE, 2019, p. 210). Rovetta provided the Chinese with an option to continue that initiative after the Split, as he was ideologically closer to Beijing and an experienced publisher. In addition, Uruguay held a strategic position in South America: the country was a democracy until 1973, even if the state became gradually more repressive under the administration of both *Blancos* and *Colorados*, and was relatively more stable than its neighbors, meaning that leftist material could be published with lower risks and distributed to militants in other countries.¹⁵

The owner and editor of *Nativa Libros* did not participate in any other political organization after leaving the Communist Party, but his contacts with the *MIR* allowed him to create bonds with the CIB and gain its trust (ZHANG; XIE, 2019, p. 215-216). Rovetta's successful editorial activity soon granted him the opportunity to travel to China three times, in 1966, 1967 and 1971. After the coup of 1973 his name was included in a list of "subversives". and he left Uruguay for Argentina. *Nativa Libros* continued to function in Buenos Aires, but Rovetta was detained between 1974 and 1975 and finally left for China, where he and his family would live in exile.

The impressions of the first trip were accounted for in 1966 in *Época* in an article about life in the communes, and in 1968 Rovetta wrote an entire book about his two previous visits, *China: el derecho a rebelarse*, published in 1968 in his very editorial house. The purpose was different from that of Galeano and Bernhard, Rovetta met officials from the CIB for a week and discussed Chinese support and partnership, as described in documents of the Shanghai Publication Bureau and CIB (ZHANG; XIE, 2019). These meetings did not figure



in Rovetta's writings, probably for security and strategic reasons. During the second visit, he managed to meet Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, and his stay was announced by *Renmin Ribao*, People's Daily, an important newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party. Rovetta also witnessed the marches and struggles of the Cultural Revolution, but apart from those elements, his visit included similar itineraries and schedules planned for other travelers.

Of the three travelers, Rovetta was the closest to "Maoism". Chapters usually started with a quote from Mao Zedong and Rovetta extensively used a political language very similar to the Chinese. Their enemies, both internal and external, including the PCU, were revisionists who had a "sad role as collaborators of imperialism and reaction!" and Mao Zedong was "the greatest Marxist-Leninist alive" (ROVETTA, 1968, p. 15).

Rovetta's accounts clearly stated China as the most prominent and important communist country, since Beijing is "today the beacon and guide for revolutionary movements born soon after the Second World War" (ROVETTA, 1968, p. 16). Also, there was a sacralizing element in the book, visiting China resembled a pilgrimage to the land of the revolution. The place where the Chinese Communist Party was created, transformed into a museum, became for him a space for contemplation, as "There is an atmosphere of sanctuary here and those of us who had the privilege to read something about the revolutionary history of China necessarily feel very touched" (ROVETTA, 1964, p. 71).

The Chinese teachings, then, were fundamental. The Cultural Revolution was a positive movement that consolidated the dictatorship of the proletariat and vanquished bourgeois revisionism. The violence present in it, according to Rovetta, was minimal. But more importantly, the Chinese showed a path to revolutionary victory: armed struggle. Rovetta was interested in economic development and filled his book with statistics showing the advances in China, but differently from Bernhard and Galeano he seemed more confident that "with a rifle it is possible to take power" (ROVETTA, 1964, p. 93) and that "each day this truth [power through armed struggle] is mastered by the oppressed people and those decided to fight" (ROVETTA, 1964, p. 161).

This conviction about the Chinese Revolution is probably what caught CIB's attention and furthered the partnership. Regardless, Rovetta disagreed with some aspects of CIB's approach. The Chinese wanted him to open a new bookstore and to receive money directly from its agencies, instead of only material to sell. The idea was to turn *Nativa Libros* into a permanent base for distribution of their literature. Rovetta disagreed, as he thought it was too dangerous and



would expose him to persecution in an increasingly authoritarian Uruguay. Additionally, Rovetta desired to maintain a part of his autonomy from Beijing (ZHANG; XIE, 2019, p. 220-221). Nevertheless, that did not hurt his relations with the Chinese. Rovetta kept publishing their books in Montevideo and, later, in Argentina. In 1975, after persecution in both countries, he and his family went into exile in Beijing.

Rovetta's trajectory shows an interesting point on the construction of the New Left in Uruguay: those more aligned with the so-called "Chinese line" had a big degree of independence and agency, they appropriated the Chinese repertoire according to their own beliefs and implemented it according to their contexts. Even Maoists were not fully subjugated to the designs of Beijing, the Chinese could train them, send material, and financial support, but it was up to those Latin Americans to do their revolution.

Conclusion: Paths, possibilities, and dilemmas of the New Left during the Cold War

Months after his trip and at the conclusion of his book, Bernhard could summarize to the Uruguayan public what he understood about China, "We saw a poor country, economically backward, inhabited by a marvelous people that fights and works" (BERNHARD, 1964, p. 86), a nation that still faced severe technological problems, but was on the right path to develop. Its people had a historical responsibility and knew that they would unlikely enjoy the fruits of prosperity, but "They do not care that it is not for them, their sons will enjoy it" (BERNHARD, 1964, p. 86). But more importantly, they "Live in a world that is hard for us, accustomed or resigned to other things, to understand" (BERNHARD, 1964, p. 87). This was, of course, a discourse marked by alterity that delineated cultural differences, but it also pointed out that other ways of being in the world existed and that another world was possible.

This was precisely what the self-proclaimed Uruguayan New Left sought: alternatives for a reality they felt as decaying and a possible solution for the perceived crisis. China was interpreted in various, sometimes contradictory ways, but it had an impact on the formation of identity of the transforming lefts. The repertoire of dissent of those movements was vast and complex and encompassed several references, the perceptions on the Chinese Revolution were multiple and eluded what is commonly reduced to Maoism, even in countries where Maoist groups were scarce.

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Uruguayans interpreted the Chinese experience as an interesting development model, a revolution from the margins, and as an anti-imperialist symbol. To those who were more or less connected to the *terceirismo* it meant a position not subjected to the United States or the Soviets and it was perceived as so: to Alberto Suárez, member of the PCU, Bernard and Galeano not only ignored the problems inherent to the Chinese criticism to the Soviet Union, they used “the Chinese thesis in the hard task of remolding *tercerismo*” and that Vivián Trías used it to “insist in the old opinion of a Latin American revolution with its own strategy” (SUÁREZ, 1964, p. 68-69). It is clear that the group was not perceived as Maoist or entirely pro-China but that it used the Chinese stance to think about their own place in the world.

Nonetheless there was no consensus among this New Left, as we saw that individuals such as Rovetta were more aligned with China (but never under its total control). This reinforces the plurality of the New Left and its definition as a “movement of movements”. There were shifting positions, doubts, and conflicts on how to interpret China and how to deal with its proposals, but China was an important source upon which the transforming left built its revolutionary imaginary, its narratives, and its repertoire of dissent in the moment those groups were looking for alternatives. Undoubtedly, for this New Left, China was a revolution on and of the margins and one of the biggest challenges the poor world could pose to the West and to Moscow, the “red-hot challenge of revolution of the periphery of the world” (GALEANO, 1964, p. 166). Other experiences were more present and representative, such as the Cuban Revolution, but China and other Asian and African processes were also formative of the Latin American left and had a role in constructing a transnational set of practices and imaginaries among radical groups in the so-called Third World.

After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the reforms implemented by Deng Xiaoping, the majority of the revolutionary Latin American left lost its allure for China. Most Maoist groups turned to Albania and Hoxhism, in agreement with its criticism of “revisionism” and of social-imperialism against the new government. Sympathetic individuals also distanced themselves, especially after China invaded Vietnam in 1979, an aggression against a symbol that mobilized Latin American leftists during the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁶ Positive references to China became scarce in Uruguay and other South American sources during the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, with few exceptions, like the Peruvian Sendero Luminoso, even if the group had to refer to



the past, to the Maoist period to build its own political platform. After the end of the military dictatorships and the return to democracy, most leftist groups in the region remained laconic about what China could provide to their countries. It would only return to notoriety when the Asian giant showed its tremendous growth and started challenging western hegemony once again, and when the increasing Chinese economic presence in Latin America could serve to counterbalance the strong, unequal ties with the United States. Yet, this perception, was again under dispute, as some intellectuals (SVAMPA, 2019) criticized the new relations with China as a growing dependence and that it furthered extractivism in the region.

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Notas

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²We are responsible for all translations.

³In March 1889 a boat arrived at Montevideo bringing Fu Yunlong, the first emissary of the Qing Dynasty in Latin America. During his stay, part of a larger expedition in the Americas, he took small notes about the city and was astonished with the high quantity of Italian immigrants, but remarked that there were no Chinese there, differently from what he encountered in Peru and Cuba. (ROVETTA, 2022).

⁴There is controversy on the uses of the term *New Left*. Multifaceted, it is best defined as a "movement of movements that was considerably greater than the sum of its parts" (GOSSE 2005, p. 2). It is usually associated with the loss of antisystemic character of the international communist movement during the 1950s and the need to renew Marxism, especially in face of the contributions made by countries by the so-called Third World (REY TRISTÁN, MARTÍN ÁLVAREZ 2022, p. 3). In Uruguay, its emergence was related to the political and economic crisis started in the 1950s and the questioning of both liberal democracy and the traditional party system as instruments to solve said crisis, which led the left to search for new models. Usually, historiography argues that the New Left in Uruguay was composed by groups such as the *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional*



– *Tupamaros*, the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario* (MIR), the *Partido Comunista Revolucionario del Uruguay* (Maoists), and the *Federación Anarquista Uruguaya* (FAU). However, as opposed to some European cases, the definition of the Uruguayan New Left is blurry, as traditional leftist parties and groups, such as the *Partido Socialista*, the *Partido Comunista*, and several anarchist groups were also involved in the discussion of the *crisis* of the country and proposed alternatives for what they considered old practices (MARKARIAN, 2017; REY TRISTAN, 2006). Groups that opted for more radical approaches, both in counterculture and armed struggle, usually derived from those organizations often maintained contact with them.

⁵Drawing from MARCHESI (2018) and SURI (2003) we define a repertoire of dissent as a set of ideas, representations, and practices formulated and adopted by the various revolutionary groups in Latin America during the Cold War that elaborated disruptive narratives seeking to bring about radical change.

⁶For more information on the Sino-Soviet Split, check Westad (1998) e Lüthi (2008).

⁷*Marcha* was a very plural and heterodox publication, it grouped individuals that were united, perhaps, by the anti-imperial creed of its director, Carlos Quijano. Any attempt to see a unique stance of *Marcha* regarding Americanisms or the Cuban Revolution would be reductive of its long and rich experience (MORAÑA, 2003, p. 11-12; REIS, 2014).

⁸For the Uruguayan participatory (*partidocracia*) check CAETANO (1995).

⁹The original text was written between 1961 and 1963 and published posthumously.

¹⁰For those magazines check Locane; Strabucchi (2020).

¹¹Bernhard and Galeano were both common collaborators in *Marcha* and *Época*. In fact, Galeano worked closely with Carlos Quijano and had a regular role in *Marcha*. Later, in 1963, Quijano suggested Galeano's name to occupy the position of director of *Época*, a job he held for almost two years. Eduardo Galeano was the youngest director of a large newspaper in Uruguay.

¹²For this debate, check Gilman (2012).

¹³The group that composed *Época* had members from the *Partido Socialista de Uruguay* (PSU), the *Federación Anarquista Uruguaya* (FAU), the *Movimiento de Acción Política Uruguayo* (MAPU), *Movimiento Revolucionario Oriental* (MOR) and the maoist *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (MIR). The Communist Party chose not to participate, but one of its groups, *Frente Izquierda de Liberación* (Fidel) was very active on the newspaper. Occasionally members of the *Partido Obrero Revolucionario* (*Trotskista*) also published.

¹⁴Bernhard capitalized the whole sentence.

¹⁵Intelligence services of Czechoslovakia had the same approach. When the Czech agency opened its first station in Montevideo in 1961 it listed the reasons to choose the smallest and less populated country of South America as a base for operations: freedom to carry activities and to publish political material, possibility of expanding said activities to neighboring nations, a strong sympathy for the Cuban Revolution, and the existence of exiled communities of other countries, such as Paraguay and Guatemala, that would allow new political connections (ZOUREK, 2020, p. 4123-4124).

¹⁶For instance, the famous plurinational magazine *Cuadernos del Tercer Mundo/Cadernos*



do Terceiro Mundo clearly stated in 1980 that China now constituted a paradoxical menace to the progressive forces of Asia and of the World (EL TERCER..., 1980, p. 8).

Thiago Henrique Oliveira Prates
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People's Republic of China (1950s-1960s)