

Sino-Mexican Encounters Before the ‘Diplomatic Opening’: Exhibition Diplomacy and Grassroots Friendship in the 1960s

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Abstract

During the 1960s, Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) embraced Chinese overtures for a commercial opening as consistent with its anti-imperialist posture, thereby foreshadowing the diplomatic opening to China in 1972. Yet this professed ideological pluralism was eclipsed by an underlying allegiance to the United States’ anti-communist undertaking, as shown by the PRI’s response to Mexican militants who had taken inspiration from Maoist China. This article untangles such tensions from two angles. First, it examines the staging of Communist China’s 1963 Economic and Commercial Exhibition in Mexico City – the first of its kind in the Western Hemisphere. In this context, it traces the grassroots diplomacy and cultural activities of the China-supported Mexican Society of Friendship with People’s China. Acting as pioneering interlocutors between the two nations, its members participated in the Chinese Exhibition and frequently travelled to Beijing. Domestically, they disseminated ideas about socialist developmentalism inspired by the Chinese example, often challenging the PRI’s rhetoric of ‘revolutionary nationalism’. They thus occupied a position that did not fit within the Cold War ideological binary. In a second step, the article shifts attention to the state repression of Maoist insurgents, as incidents of detainment by security forces mounted in 1967 when Mexico’s Cold War escalated. With these anti-establishment sparks ultimately extinguished, the counterinsurgent PRI regime had effectively delayed Mexico’s democratic transition. By analysing these cases altogether, the article frames the visions of transnational leftist groups as counterpoints to the PRI-dominated state-building, while highlighting the tensions between different Sino-Mexican ventures.

In October 1964, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) issued a diplomatic telegram to its embassy in the United Arab Republic, describing the state of its relations with countries in Latin America:

The eleven Latin American countries (except Cuba) have always followed the United States in their attitudes towards the question of our representation, and voted against the restoration of our legitimate seat in the General Assembly last year. . . . In recent years, we have had some friendly exchanges, both civic and official, with Mexico, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay in the areas of economy, trade, culture and education. In Mexico, we have a branch office of *Xinhua*, which was visited by our economic and trade delegation in 1963, and an exhibition was held.¹

This correspondence coincided with China’s efforts to extend its campaign for the ‘China’ seat at the United Nations – then occupied by Taiwan – into Latin America.²

¹ ‘Fu Jian fang guanyu Lamei guojia dui wo xiwei wenti de taidu’ [‘Response to the Cambodian side on the attitudes of Latin American countries towards the issue of our seat’], October 1964, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (hereafter PRC MFA Archives), File No. 113-00391-06.

² In 1961, the General Assembly adopted a resolution determining China’s representation as an ‘Important Question’ that required a two-thirds majority vote.

By 1963, the Mexican government adopted a more exploratory stance, authorizing the Chinese state news agency *Xinhua* to open its Latin American branch in Mexico.³ From that point onwards, *Xinhua* functioned not only as a foreign anti-imperialist voice but also as an intermediary that connected Beijing with Mexican Maoist and friendship groups.⁴ In this period, the diplomatic ice between Mexico and China began to thaw as reflected in the networks sustained by *Xinhua* as well as various grassroots contacts and forms of soft-power engagement, for instance, trade and cultural missions.⁵ These developments were important precursors to Mexico's diplomatic opening to the PRC in 1972.

This article explores early Sino-Mexican encounters by tracing how state and non-state actors in Mexico responded to Chinese communist overtures, thereby adding another 'layer of conflict' to our understanding of Mexico's Cold War.⁶ The discussion unpacks these tensions and complexities from two angles. First, it examines the staging of Beijing's Economic and Commercial Exhibition in Mexico City – the first of its kind in the Western Hemisphere. Welcomed by Mexican officials, the exhibition provided the PRC with the opportunity to showcase its political system through a focus on the economic and cultural spheres. In this context, the article draws attention to the activism of the China-supported Sociedad Mexicana de Amistad con China Popular (Mexican Society of Friendship with People's China) in Mexico City. The society's members became decisive interlocutors between Chinese organizers and the Mexican authorities, as they assisted with the planning and staging of the fair.

Looking beyond a state-centric framework, the analysis then focuses on the Friendship Society's cultural activities and political agency. It posits that pro-China grassroots diplomacy, fuelled by discontent with Mexico's unrevolutionary status quo and by admiration for the Chinese paradigm, contributed to key moments of vitality in Sino-Mexican relations. At the invitation of Beijing, members of the Friendship Society embarked on lengthy cultural pilgrimages to distant China. These experiences encouraged the Mexican visitors to conceive, on their own terms, non-capitalist liberation possibilities. The Mexican state considered the society's lectures and international travel a threat and therefore subjected the society to collective surveillance by the Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (General Directorate of Political and Social Investigations, IPS), one of Mexico's intelligence and security services. Records produced by the IPS as part of such monitoring show the growing attraction that Maoism exercised among domestic leftist groups and the state's superficial tolerance of their activities. Activists in other countries also commented on the course of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI): for example, in a newspaper of the Socialist Workers Party, a Trotskyist organization in the United States, it spoke of 'witch-hunt arrests' and rising numbers of 'political prisoners' in Mexico.⁷

In a second step, this article shifts the discussion to the state repression of China-inspired insurgents, with particular reference to a foiled 'Maoist plot' on 20 July 1967 in Mexico City – an episode that was emblematic of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz's (1964–70) crackdown on communist-linked insurgency. The PRI regime was prepared

³ *Xinhua* is known as the *New China News Agency* in US sources and as 'Sin Jua' in Mexican sources.

⁴ CIA, 'Chinese communist penetration in Latin America' (5 December 1958), *CIA Reading Room*, available via <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP83-00036R000200020031-3.pdf>>; and 'Chinese communism and Latin America' (26 February 1960), available via <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-01445R000100180001-8.pdf>> [last accessed 16 April 2026].

⁵ On 'soft power', see Joseph S. Nye, 'Soft power', *Foreign Policy*, 80 (1990), pp. 153–71.

⁶ Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War: An International History* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), p. 9.

⁷ 'New witch-hunt arrests made by Mexico gov't', *The Militant*, 18 December 1967, available via <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1967/v31n46-dec-18-1967-mil.pdf>> [last accessed 13 April 2026].

to use outright repression against any subversive elements that looked towards the Chinese revolutionary example, even though it drew closer to the PRC in the diplomatic realm. Mexico's engagement with China thus reveals ambivalent features of what some scholars have described as Mexico's *dictablanda* (soft authoritarian) state.⁸

Sino-Mexican friendship in history and historiography

In the 1950s, China adopted a two-pronged approach to cultural diplomacy in the Third World, aiming to win state-level goodwill and thus overcome the West's economic and diplomatic embargoes. First, it used economic and trade relations as 'catalytic' tools; and second, it relied on people's diplomacy to build transnational 'friendship' networks.⁹ As part of this 'trade-catalysing' strategy, the PRC developed a rich tradition of international exhibitions.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Beijing regularly exhibited its industrial and cultural products abroad, seeking to project an image of socialist material abundance and present its vision of socialist internationalism. In this period, China organized reciprocal exhibitions with Japan and the Soviet Union as well as several other countries in Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa. The existing literature has noted Beijing's regular participation in the Leipzig trade fairs in East Germany, where it mounted large-scale displays in the China pavilion. As Jennifer Altehenger argues, Leipzig evolved into 'a different kind of space for the meeting of "East and West"', even becoming a site of 'triangular competition between China, the Soviet Union, and other states'.¹⁰ Fredy González has extended this discussion to the Western Hemisphere by surveying the 1963 Chinese industrial trade exhibition in Mexico City.¹¹ Focusing on diasporic activism and identity, González sees the 1963 fair as a site of proxy rivalry between Beijing and Taipei over political legitimacy. He shows how the PRC's attempts to broadcast socialist economic achievements met with organized resistance from the embassy of the Republic of China (ROC) as well as segments of the Chinese-Mexican community who protested the exhibition as a threat to diasporic loyalty.

It was at the intersection of Cold War 'psychological warfare' and the discourse of peaceful coexistence that Mexico, under President Adolfo López Mateos (1958–64), emerged as the forefront of competing visions of modernity as demonstrated by the staging of foreign exhibitions.¹² Beyond Beijing's initiatives, both capitalist and communist superpowers treated Mexico as a testing ground for cultural diplomacy. In 1963, US Secretary of Commerce Luther Hodges inaugurated a trade exposition in Mexico City, while 'warning that free countries should avoid trade in Communist areas when it served to strengthen the latter strategically'.¹³ Yet such rhetoric coexisted with Mexico's openness to socialist engagement. As early as the winter of 1959, a

⁸ Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith (eds), *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968* (Durham, NC, 2014).

⁹ Citizen or people's diplomacy, also known as 'Renmin waijiao', is a form of cultural diplomacy where individuals carry out diplomatic activities on behalf of their nation. People's diplomacy was practised by Beijing to phase in official diplomacy given the Taiwan barrier, known as 'yi min cu guan'. See Huang Zhiliang, *Xin dalu de zai faxian: Zhou Enlai yu Lading Meizhou [Rediscovery of the New World: Zhou Enlai and Latin America]* (Beijing, 2003), pp. 48–53.

¹⁰ Jennifer Altehenger, 'Industrial and Chinese: Exhibiting Mao's China at the Leipzig trade fairs', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 55/4 (2020), pp. 845–70.

¹¹ Fredy González, *Paisanos Chinos: Transpacific Politics among Chinese Immigrants in Mexico* (Oakland, CA, 2017).

¹² Patrick Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom: The Cultural Cold War in Latin America* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), pp. 11–12.

¹³ 'U.S. trade exhibition is opened in Mexico', *The New York Times*, 9 February 1963.

Soviet trade exhibition relocated from New York to Mexico City. Scholars including Eric Zolov and Vanni Pettinà view the fair as evidence of Mexico's bid to diversify foreign relations and court the Soviet Union as 'a legitimate counterforce' to US dominance.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the CIA's covert exploitation of the exhibition to assess Soviet rocket capabilities revealed underlying ideological tensions. Both scholars concur that Mexico's more important 'Good Neighbour' alliance with the United States overshadowed its symbolic rapprochement with the Soviet Union.

China's growing interest in Latin America coincided with an increasing Soviet presence. Forging trade and cultural relations constituted a salient front of the Chinese communist strategy to establish a diplomatic foothold in regions where political recognition was lacking. While avoiding antagonizing its US ally, the PRI regime embraced the Chinese overtures because they promised economic benefits and a pro-revolutionary image. This Janus-faced policy closely resembled Mexico's approach to Cuba, where revolutionary solidarity abroad was balanced with an anti-communist mentality at home.¹⁵ Arguably, Mexico became a subtle Latin American arena for the 'Shadow Cold War' of Sino-Soviet competition.¹⁶

Building on these insights, this article engages with a wider body of literature on the cultural Cold War in Mexico as refracted through the 1963 exhibition. It reveals the subtle ideological engagement between the hegemonic, capitalist PRI system and pro-China organizations that sought to appropriate the exhibition's political symbolism. Central here is the underexplored role of the Mexican Society of Friendship with People's China, which negotiated and amplified the fair's domestic significance. For Mexican leftist militants, this confirmed China's credibility as a model of revolutionary transformation and an alternative to both Soviet social-imperialism and US imperialism. By highlighting the imprint of local left-wing activism, this article illuminates an angle largely absent from existing accounts that privilege state-to-state diplomacy or diaspora politics.

Another line of literature on Sino-Mexican encounters shifts the lens to non-state actors whose travels and networks represented alternative modes of transpacific exchange outside official channels. Fascination with Maoism and the Chinese Revolution resonated deeply within the Mexican left, inspiring sympathetic intellectuals, artists and professionals to visit Beijing and cultivate personal ties with officials from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).¹⁷ Among the early 'friendly personages' was former president Lázaro Cárdenas, founder of the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (Movement of National Liberation, MLN), whose 1959 journey to China has drawn varied interpretations. Eric Zolov stresses Cárdenas's tendency to view the Chinese Revolution as a mirror of Mexico's own, whereas Patrick Iber emphasizes Cárdenas's recognition of ideological nuances – though both portray him as 'enthusiastic' about state-led development and largely 'oblivious' to China's

¹⁴ On Mexican-Soviet relations, see, for example, "'Luniks and Sputniks in Chapultepec!': The 1959 Soviet Exhibition and peaceful coexistence in Mexico", in Eric Zolov, *The Last Good Neighbor: Mexico in the Global Sixties* (Durham, NC, 2020), p. 56; Vanni Pettinà, '¡Bienvenido Mr. Mikoyán!: Tacos y tractores a la sombra del acercamiento Soviético-Mexicano, 1958–1964', *Historia Mexicana*, 66/4 (2016), pp. 1565–620; Vanni Pettinà, 'Mexican-Soviet encounters in the early 1960s: Tractors of discord', in Thomas C. Field, Stella Krepp and Vanni Pettinà (eds), *Latin America and the Global Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2020), pp. 91–114.

¹⁵ Renata Keller, *Mexico's Cold War: Cuba, the United States and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution* (New York, 2015).

¹⁶ Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015).

¹⁷ This article adopts the term 'Chinese Communist Party' (CCP) in line with established historiographical practice, while acknowledging that the party's official name is the 'Communist Party of China'. Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *Diario de un viaje a la China* (Mexico City, 1950).

Great Leap Forward radicalism.¹⁸ Sun Hongbo, by contrast, has foregrounded the Chinese perspective, showing how CCP officials leveraged Cárdenas's stature to stage a ceremonious 'semi-official' visit that advanced Beijing's project of revolutionary internationalism.¹⁹

Setting aside the influence of politically established *Cardenismo*, the role of grassroots people's diplomacy, particularly that of the Mexican Society of Friendship with People's China, remains underexamined. Founded in 1953 by Heriberto Jara Corona, Diego Rivera and other political and cultural figures, this organization originated from the spirit of the 1952 Asia-Pacific Peace Conference in Beijing.²⁰ Its mission was to advance a transnational project of solidarity and fraternal ties between Mexico and the PRC. To this end, it pursued a three-pronged agenda: (1) disseminating historical, cultural and scientific knowledge about Maoist China while sending cultural materials to Beijing to promote mutual understanding; (2) campaigning for China's entry into the UN, a diplomatic opening and expanded bilateral trade; and (3) reaching out through publications, seminars and art exhibitions while organizing local branches.²¹ Supported by the Chinese government and involving members' regular travel to China, the Friendship Society positioned itself as an intellectually and spiritually transformative voice that could reshape Mexican perceptions of Communist China. Its membership drew from Marxist scientists, artists and intellectuals of diverse social backgrounds, many of whom were leaders of left-wing parties, student groups, the MLN and the Mexican Pro-Peace Committee. Sun has underscored the society's initiatives to forge institutional connections and cultural exchanges with the CCP, especially through the acquisition of Maoist publications such as *Scientia Sinica* and *China Reconstructs*.²² Uriel Velázquez, by contrast, likens the group to a form of underground 'Chinese distribution channel' that nurtured guerrilla activity.²³ Yet both leave out the society's development in the 1960s, including politicized cultural programmes during its most active period.

On the lesser-known 'Maoist plot' of 1967, previous scholars such as Velázquez are more interested in situating the episode within the broader story of the rise and fall of Maoist guerrilla movements in Mexico, the Marxist-Leninist Movement of Mexico (MMLM) in particular.²⁴ This analysis aligns with existing literature in that it likewise interprets the plot as stemming from the radicalization of grassroots Maoist militancy. However, it departs from such work by untangling the plot's connections to the pro-China Friendship Society, the PRI's repressive logic and wider Sino-Mexican encounters. Partly, the episode was facilitated financially and ideologically by the Chinese policy of supporting revolutionary movements abroad, itself shaped by the spread of far-left radicalism during the Cultural Revolution.²⁵

¹⁸ Patrick Iber, 'From peace to national liberation: Mexico and the Tricontinental', in Jeremy Adelman and Gyan Prakash (eds), *Inventing the Third World: In Search of Freedom for the Postwar Global South* (Cambridge, MA, 2022), p. 50; Zolov, *The Last Good Neighbor*, p. 27.

¹⁹ Sun Hongbo, 'Zhong-Mo guanxi (1950–1960): Jiyu Zhongguo waijiao dang'an de fenxi' ['Sino-Mexican relations (1950–1960): An analysis based on Chinese diplomatic archives'], *Lading Meizhou Yanjiu [Journal of Latin American Studies]*, 4 (2013), pp. 58–64.

²⁰ Heriberto Jara was a close friend of Cárdenas and president of the Mexican Pro-Peace Committee. Huang, *Rediscovery of the New World*, p. 59.

²¹ Sun, 'Sino-Mexican relations', p. 60.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 58–64.

²³ Uriel Velázquez Vidal, *El poder viene del fusil: El Partido Revolucionario del Proletariado Mexicano y su legado en el movimiento maoísta, 1969–1979* (Morelos, 2022), p. 42.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Xiong Xianghui, *Wo de qingbao yu waijiao shengya [My Career in Intelligence and Diplomacy]*, (Beijing, 2006), pp. 433–4.

A PRC exhibition in Mexico City

In 1963, the PRC launched a major commercial and cultural exhibition in Mexico City – an event that the *New York Times* sceptically described as ‘a cautious move towards establishing a propaganda center here’.²⁶ The Chinese Economic and Commercial Exhibition, staged by an eleven-member delegation led by Zhang Guangdou (Chang Kuang-tau), brought more than sixty tons of materials and displayed 3680 products.²⁷ Originally scheduled to run from 7 to 29 December 1963, the exposition was later extended to 6 January 1964, with the two-peso entrance fee waived during its final week.²⁸ The event transformed the site of the old San Juan market (also known as Plaza del Buen Tono) on Ernesto Pugibet Street into a 2400-square-metre ‘socialist spectacle’ in Mexico City’s central business district.²⁹

On 7 December, Raúl Salinas Lozano – Mexico’s Minister of Industry and Commerce – presided over the inauguration in front of 500 invited guests.³⁰ Cutting the ribbon, Salinas framed the exhibition as a showcase of Mexico’s efforts ‘to increase trade relations with all countries in the world, regardless of their ideologies’.³¹ His role as a PRI economic technocrat, and his openness to engagement with China, helped create a permissive environment in which sympathy for Maoism could circulate, albeit indirectly. This context is revealing when considered alongside the repute of his sons, Raúl Salinas and his president brother Carlos, who as members of the 1968 generation encountered Maoist ideas and actively engaged with campus politics as young students.³² Yet the later rise to prominence of the Salinas family as architects of the neoliberal PRI ultimately marginalized such radical currents as Maoism in state policy.

At the ceremony, the address by José Luis Ceceña, president of the Mexican Committee for the Promotion of Sino-Mexican Economic Relations, added anti-imperialist tropes to the event. Ceceña suggested that Mexico was determined to dismantle obstacles imposed by foreign economic forces seeking to monopolize Mexico’s economy.³³ Meanwhile, he stressed the state’s role behind this initiative, which was ‘the result of trips abroad by President López Mateos and other Mexican government officials’.³⁴ These speeches captured a fleeting moment of Sino-Mexican alignment, as ideological barriers were temporarily reframed, if not overcome, through a mutual interest in Third World internationalism.

The Chinese Exhibition combined visual and textual materials to project a politicized image of ‘New China’. Through photographic murals, Chinese films and Spanish-language brochures, visitors were exposed to a discourse of socialist modernity as technologically advanced, morally uplifting and culturally rich. The introductory brochure (Figure 1) presented economic development and agrarian reform in terms of Maoist ideological milestones, underlining

²⁶ ‘Mexico City to get Chinese exhibition’, *The New York Times*, 7 December 1963.

²⁷ Zhang Guangdou was a senior official in the CCP’s Foreign Trade Department and served as commercial counsellor at the Chinese Embassy in East Germany. He also led a similar exhibition in Chile in 1964.

²⁸ Sir Peter Garran (Mexico City) to UK Foreign Office, 18 February 1964, in The National Archives of the United Kingdom, London (hereafter TNA), FO 371/174176 (‘Chinese trade exhibition’).

²⁹ ‘López Mateos estuvo en la exposición China’, *Excelsior*, 7 December 1963; ‘Inauguró Salinas Lozano la muestra de China roja’, *Excelsior*, 8 December 1963.

³⁰ ‘Mexico has Peking exhibition’, *The New York Times*, 8 December 1963.

³¹ ‘Moxige gejie zhiming renshi cangan wo zhanlanhui; shengzan woguo jingji jianshe chengjiu’ [‘Mexican notables visit our exhibition; praise the achievements of China’s economic construction’], *Renmin Ribao* [*People’s Daily*], 10 December 1963; Later reference to this newspaper will use the widely known English title.

³² ‘A Mexican on the fast track: Carlos Salinas de Gortari’, *The New York Times*, 5 October 1987.

³³ ‘Woguo jingji he maoyi zhanlanhui zai Moxige kaimu’ [‘Our economic and trade exhibition opens in Mexico’], *People’s Daily*, 9 December 1963.

³⁴ ‘Inauguró Salinas Lozano la muestra de China roja’, *Excelsior*, 8 December 1963.



Figure 1 Front cover of a brochure on the ‘Economic and Commercial Exhibition of the People’s Republic of China’, held in Mexico City in 1963. *Source:* The National Archives, London, FO 371/174176.

three red banners: ‘the construction of Socialism, the Great Leap Forward, and the people’s commune.’³⁵ Exhibits such as operational milling machines, a model of a hydroelectric power station and the Miyun Reservoir project – the most extensive hydraulic facility in North China – collectively demonstrated China’s manufacturing prowess to harness nature for developmental ends.³⁶ The literature section densely featured the works of Mao Zedong. As a whole, the exhibition constructed a carefully curated image of socialist modernity that was simultaneously material, moral and emancipatory. Framed as an appeal to fortify ‘Tricontinental solidarity’, it mobilized culture as a unifying force to legitimize closer trade relations with Mexico and to promote ‘friendship between peoples’.³⁷ In this sense, the trade fair functioned less as a neutral exchange than as an emblematic episode of Cold War cultural diplomacy – a contest for hearts and minds.

The Mexican Society of Friendship with People’s China helped oversee the staging of the 1963 exhibition and ultimately boosted its official standing. When a Chinese trade delegation led by Ji Chaoding arrived in Mexico City in January 1963, the society warmly received it.³⁸ This visit consolidated institutional and personal ties –

³⁵ Brochure ‘Exposición económica y comercial de la República Popular China’ (1963), featured in TNA, FO 371/174176.

³⁶ ‘López Mateos estuvo en la exposición China’, *Excelsior*, 7 December 1963.

³⁷ Brochure ‘Exposición económica y comercial de la República Popular China’, TNA, FO 371/174176.

³⁸ George Ginsburgs and Arthur Stahnke, ‘Communist China’s trade relations with Latin America’, *Asian Survey*, 10/9 (1970), pp. 803–19.

including with Lázaro Cárdenas – that set the stage for the trade fair.³⁹ The Friendship Society also acted as a political intermediary. Its president, Luis Torres Ordoñez, reported approaching Vicente Lombardo Toledano of the Popular Socialist Party (PPS) to ascertain whether President López Mateos would be available to inaugurate the fair. Torres assured members of the PPS and Friendship Society that the president would 'comply with this request'.⁴⁰ Based on these behind-the-scenes arrangements, one can postulate other kinds of involvement by pro-China grassroots actors. They actively pressed for greater state involvement behind the newly prosperous cultural ties. Perhaps the Mexican regime preferred to act through the Friendship Society's semi-private channels to shield itself from ideological positioning.

Accompanied by Zhang Guangdou, Salinas Lozano and a large entourage, President López Mateos indeed toured the exhibition on the eve of its public opening. He spent nearly eighty minutes contemplating the displays, asking numerous questions, drinking jasmine tea and smoking several cigarettes as journalists looked on.⁴¹ Stopping before the façade built on the site of the former San Juan market, he asked with evident curiosity: 'Isn't this a replica of the Imperial Palace in Beijing?' As *Excélsior's* reporting lauded, the Chinese built a façade identical to the palace of their ancient emperors, with the mosaics so successfully imitated that it was difficult to tell they were actually plywood panels.⁴² Inside, the president and his companions praised the delicate displays, such as carpets, dolls, pottery and lacquerware, while Salinas was particularly interested in a tram and a fishing boat.

Significantly, the presidential tour of the Chinese Exhibition once again unveils the important role of local intermediaries. Chinese representatives later invited López Mateos to rest in a lounge furnished with a mixture of Asian and Western styles – a tapestry with Asian motifs, Chinese carpets and Western furniture – where he was served tea, dried fruit and biscuits. In the lounge, Esther Chapa from the Friendship Society appeared 'in an oriental-style gown', prompting López Mateos to joke that 'this is Dr Chapa's happiest day', to which she responded with apparent delight.⁴³ The president added that 'China's progress is evident'. As captured by *Excélsior's* correspondents, such exchanges seemed to convey a harmonious atmosphere, with state diplomacy and grassroots activism converging on a shared cultural front. Summarizing his impression to journalists, López Mateos remarked on 'the remarkable progress made by this formerly down-trodden people'.⁴⁴ Overall, the presidential tour of the fair indicates an official attempt to evoke the spirit of China's anti-imperialist modernization. By strategically embracing it, the Mexican government expressed its preference for engaging China economically without endorsing its ideological project.

Chinese coverage, particularly in the *People's Daily*, amplified the exposition's propagandistic utility and its appeal to the Mexican left. In glowing terms, it reported the attendance of former president Lázaro Cárdenas, Javier Rojo Gómez of

³⁹ Huang, *Rediscovery of the New World*, p. 66; 'Mo qian zongtong yanqing wo jingji maoyi fangwentuan' ['The former president of Mexico hosted a banquet for our economic and trade delegation'], *People's Daily*, 15 January 1963.

⁴⁰ Report by CIA officer in Mexico City, 'Chinese Communist industrial trade fair scheduled to be held in Mexico City, December 1963', available via the Wilson Center Digital Archive, <<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/chinese-communist-industrial-trade-fair-scheduled-be-held-mexico-city-december-1963>> [last accessed 13 April 2016].

⁴¹ 'López Mateos estuvo en la exposición China', *Excélsior*, 7 December 1963.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Garran to UK Foreign Office, 18 February 1964, TNA, FO 371/174176.

the National Peasant Confederation and representatives from business and student circles.⁴⁵ Visitors were said to ‘marvel and linger’ at the displays and extol Chinese achievements as ‘epoch-making miracle[s]’ and ‘proof of pacifism’. In the industrial section, one Mexican entrepreneur was quoted applauding Chinese milling machines and lathes as ‘first-class, precise and durable’, after having ordered sixteen models already.⁴⁶

Mexican coverage, again, largely stripped the event of its ideological colour. Newspapers such as *La Prensa* and *Diario de México* emphasized the event’s commercial implications, with headlines such as ‘Large Sales to China’ and ‘Mexico Conquers a Powerful Market’.⁴⁷ This angle aligned with the PRI’s balancing strategy of diversifying trade relations beyond ideological boundaries, even as political recognition continued to rest with Taiwan. Economic openness to socialist countries was encouraged insofar as it reinforced state autonomy and development, without inspiring domestic revolutionary alternatives.

In contrast to the laudatory and optimistic tone found in Chinese and Mexican coverage, the British Embassy’s impression of the fair was quite the opposite. British observers commented that ‘except for the propaganda section’, the goods on display ‘were unimpressive and of low quality’.⁴⁸ The machinery was ‘workmanlike but roughly finished’, while many consumer and agricultural products appeared ‘shoddy and unimaginative’, with limited prospects in the Mexican market. The embassy further noted that various Mexican government departments ‘were originally opposed to this Exhibition’, reversing their position only after China ‘offered to purchase Mexican cotton and wheat at advantageous prices’.⁴⁹ Trade incentives were key to securing official approval for the exchange of films and performances by a Chinese acrobat troupe. This development contrasted with events just a few years earlier, when Mexico had denied entry to artists from the Peking Opera and Circus, then touring Latin America. Certainly, what was most valuable for China was its success, through a quid-pro-quo for its purchases of Mexican goods, in gaining a channel for advancing its interests, and above all, ‘an acceptability previously lacking in Mexico’.⁵⁰

Undoubtedly, a highlight of Beijing’s trade fair was the twenty-minute meeting at the National Palace between President López Mateos and the head of the Chinese delegation, Zhang Guangdou, accompanied by Secretary General, Xu Shengwu. According to *Xinhua*’s report on 26 December 1963, López Mateos expressed support for expanding bilateral trade partnerships, even suggesting the establishment of permanent Mexican trade missions in China.⁵¹ Two days earlier, Zhang had already met with Díaz Ordaz, former Interior Minister and the PRI’s current presidential candidate.⁵²

The Chinese delegation secured concrete agreements with its access to Mexico’s highest political circles. The *New York Times* and *Excelsior* reported that, right

⁴⁵ ‘Zhongguo zhanlanhui zai Moxige’ [‘Chinese exhibition in Mexico’], *People’s Daily*, 28 December 1963.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ ‘Comercia México con China roja’, *La Prensa*, 7 December 1963; ‘Cuantiosas ventas a la China popular’, *Diario de México*, 7 December 1963.

⁴⁸ Garran to UK Foreign Office, 18 February 1964, TNA, FO 371/174176.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ CIA, ‘The President’s Intelligence Checklist’ (9 December 1963), available via <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005996711.pdf> [last accessed 16 April 2026].

⁵¹ Semi-official political reportage by Diaoyutai Archives Writing Group (ed.), *Diaoyutai dang’an* [*Diaoyutai Archives*] (Beijing, 1998), p. 3071.

⁵² ‘Moxige zongtong jiejian wo zhanlantuan tuanzhang; Mo zongtong houxuanren ye jiejian Zhang Guangdou tuanzhang’ [‘Mexican president receives head of our exhibition delegation; Mexican presidential candidate also meets with Zhang Guangdou’], *People’s Daily*, 28 December 1963.

after the visit to López Mateos, Zhang Guangdou announced the conclusion of a US\$28 million (350 million pesos) contract for the delivery of 200,000 bales of Mexican cotton to Chinese ports in 1964, supplementing an earlier order of 25,000 bales. Zhang proposed further exchange of 'Mexican rice, trucks and other manufactured goods for specialized machinery, chemical products and several types of textile machines made in China'.⁵³ That same year, Mexico drew on its record harvest to finalize a wheat deal that reduced its trade deficit by an additional US\$30 million.⁵⁴ This made Communist China one of Mexico's prime customers for export wheat and cotton. When questioned about these transactions, Mexican officials responded in a robust manner that 'since the U.S. sells wheat and other commodities to communist nations, why shouldn't Mexico deal with whomever it wishes'.⁵⁵

Attracting over 230,000 visitors in one month, the exhibition catalysed the establishment of direct trade relations between Mexico and China and anticipated a marked expansion in reciprocal trade since 1963.⁵⁶ However, the fair's commercial significance should not be overstated. As the *New York Times* clarified, the impact of the Chinese industrial fair could not compare to the record attendance of the US exposition earlier that year, which 'was attended by more than a million people'.⁵⁷ Likewise, Mexico continued to trade with Taiwan, with Communist China accounting for only a minimal share of its all trade in that decade.

Notably, the Chinese Exhibition aroused noticeable speculation in Washington and London about potential changes in the Mexican recognition for the communist regime in Beijing. Such rumours unsettled US and British observers, who closely monitored the situation and quietly exchanged information. As the US State Department speculated, 'the Mexican Government intended shortly to send a delegation to Peking with a view to the establishment of diplomatic relations'. This might have been 'strongly influenced by the French example', as Charles de Gaulle's government announced its intention to recognize Beijing.⁵⁸ However, as the British Embassy suggested, this change in the Mexican attitudes could be traced back to 'the Red Chinese trade exhibition' earlier on that year.⁵⁹ The presence of a trade delegation from Communist China – reaching thirty-five at the time of the exhibition – signalled the CCP's intent to reshape the Mexican perception of China as a viable trading partner, one that could help unlock the hemisphere's developmental potential. The PRI regime apparently welcomed these collaborations on economic grounds. The British Embassy nevertheless assured that if a Mexican delegation was heading to Beijing, it was 'likely to be a trade delegation'.⁶⁰ It was confident that Mexico 'had no intention of recognising Red China' until the latter was admitted to the UN, even though 'there are a few left-wingers around him (Mexican President) who are known to have been pushing for recognition'. This, as the telegram continued to suggest, was because 'Mexico's relations with the United States are too important'.⁶¹

⁵³ 'Red China gives Mexico \$28 million cotton order', *The New York Times*, 27 December 1963; 'Venta de algodón por 350 millones a China popular', *Excelsior*, 27 December 1963.

⁵⁴ 'Mexican exports to Peking rising', *The New York Times*, 29 December 1963.

⁵⁵ CIA, 'Peking has spy base in Mexico' (9 Jul. 1964), available via <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP73-00475R000400130001-9.pdf>> [last accessed 16 April 2026].

⁵⁶ State Council Information Office of the PRC (ed.), *China–Mexico* (Beijing, 2007), p. 52.

⁵⁷ 'Mexican exports to Peking rising', *The New York Times*, 29 December 1963.

⁵⁸ I. J. M. Sutherland (Washington D.C.) to T. C. Barker (Mexico City), 24 January 1964, in TNA, FO 371/174159 ('Mexico–China Relations').

⁵⁹ Sir Peter Garran (Mexico City) to UK Foreign Office, 11 February 1964, TNA, FO 371/174159.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

True, Chinese and Mexican records confirm that on 20 April 1964, a Mexican trade mission of eleven people – the first to officially visit Beijing – arrived under the leadership of Gustavo Solórzano, a senior official of the National Bank of Foreign Trade (Bancomext). Endorsed by the Mexican president, the mission aimed to reduce Mexico's economic dependence on the United States, explore alternative markets for cotton and observe China's socialist construction firsthand.⁶² Yet the outcome remained narrowly economic. The mission culminated in a contract for the shipment of 500,000 tons of Mexican wheat to the Chinese mainland.⁶³

Mexico's ambivalence towards Communist China was made explicit in a trade agreement signed with Taiwan in Mexico City on 26 September that same year. Facilitated by a Chinese Republican trade mission under the lead of Hse Peh-yuan, the agreement granted reciprocal most-favoured-nation treatment.⁶⁴ Press reports estimated that the deal would result in 'three-fold' increase in Taiwan's imports from Mexico.

The Chinese Exhibition also provoked Western anxieties over espionage and political infiltration. On 9 July 1964, a *Scripps-Howard* staff writer in the Washington bureau ran the headline 'Peking Has Spy Base in Mexico', alleging that *Xinhua* – 'the eyes, ears and mouth' of the CCP – was operating as an intelligence hub in Mexico City.⁶⁵ Three trade representatives, described as 'leftovers from a larger group that was here last December to stage an industrial-trade exposition', stayed behind with their *Xinhua* associates, avoiding publicity to create an impression that the mission had fully departed. They allegedly leased a residence in Polanco, converting it into an office. They also 'mix[ed] with Mexican leaders' of the pro-China Friendship Society, which US sources framed as 'the front' for the CCP in Mexico.⁶⁶ Washington was perceptive to fear that *Xinhua*'s activities and the trading programmes were 'merely the prelude to Mexico's recognition of Red China – in line with its "independent" foreign policies'.⁶⁷ Thus, the ostensibly economic and cultural exposition became entangled with Cold War tensions.

The official endorsement of China's 1963 industrial trade fair reflected the PRI regime's revolutionary pragmatism. Engagement with Communist China was framed as compatible with Mexico's own commitment to developmentalism and sovereignty. Beneath the celebratory exhibition surfaces, however, lay more strategic objectives. As González critically argues, 'the exposition satisfied Mexican leftists as well as influential former president Lázaro Cárdenas'.⁶⁸ The present article further highlights the PRI's temporary tolerance of, and concessions to, pro-China leftist activity, most notably through the mediating role of the Friendship Society during the exhibition. Such tolerance exemplified the regime's co-optation strategy central to its longevity in power. At the same time, the government's restraint from deepening relations with Beijing beyond the economic sphere reassured the United States. This reassurance was especially needed given the radicalization of the Cuban Revolution. Thereafter, in March 1963, the United States pledged 'military help to any Latin American nation threatened by a Communist takeover'.⁶⁹

⁶² Semi-official political reportage, in *Diaoyutai Archives*, p. 3071; 'Llegó a Pekín la misión mexicana', *Excelsior*, 21 April 1964.

⁶³ Ginsburgs and Stahnke, 'Communist China's trade relations with Latin America'.

⁶⁴ Sir N. Cheetham (Mexico City) to R. A. Butler of UK Foreign Office, 13 October 1964, in TNA, FO 371/174164 ('Sino-Mexican Trade [Taiwan]').

⁶⁵ CIA, 'Peking has spy base in Mexico'.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ González, *Paisanos Chinos*, p. 137.

⁶⁹ 'U.S. pledges aid against subversion', *The Washington Post*, 15 March 1963.

Indeed, while the PRC's economic overtures appeared to gain some traction in Mexico, attempts to elevate this trade partnership to a formal diplomatic dimension remained fraught with difficulty. PRI officials were unwilling to 'prejudice their increasingly friendly relations with the United States', which backed Taiwan.⁷⁰ Yet despite this generally pro-US orientation, the PRI proved skilful in manoeuvring between the two Chinese regimes to project diplomatic autonomy and maximize economic gains. This balancing act soon faltered. The arrest of nine Chinese trade and news representatives in Brazil on charges of subversion, followed by the unfolding Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–76), heightened Mexican suspicions of Beijing's revolutionary ambitions and strained their budding relationship. As China became more closely associated with the promotion of insurgent movements abroad, ideological concerns again narrowed the prospects for Sino-Mexican détente. Ultimately, the commercial opening epitomized by the Chinese Exhibition did not translate into political recognition until 1971, when Mexico under Luis Echeverría (1970–6) supported Beijing's accession and Taiwan's expulsion at the UN. Even then, entering China's vast market remained the central calculus underpinning Mexico's official turn towards friendship with the PRC.⁷¹

The Mexican Friendship Society, internationalism and cultural diplomacy

If the opening up of Sino-Mexican trade yielded limited political outcomes, China found greater success in the field of people-to-people diplomacy and grassroots friendship. Central to this process was the Mexican Society of Friendship with People's China, which had been established with the blessing of the Chinese government. Despite its well-connected and highly educated leadership, the Friendship Society operated mainly from the 'grassroots' because it relied heavily on the ideological enthusiasm and voluntary participation of loosely organized workers and students to advance pro-China activism. As we have already seen, many of its members also played a part in negotiating the 1963 Chinese Exhibition and had witnessed China's socialist experiences firsthand by visiting the country. On one occasion, Esther Chapa, the Friendship Society's president, 'invited leftist militants to attend' the fair. One of those individuals was Federico Emery Ulloa, who developed sympathy for Maoist ideas and sought further connections with the CCP through travel to China.⁷² Emery later emerged as a founding figure of the MMLM, an armed revolutionary group whose cadres received political and military training in China.⁷³ Acting as a vehicle for both internationalism and cultural diplomacy, the Friendship Society raised awareness of the project of 'New China', thereby contributing to the development of Mexican Maoism.

The 1960s was a time of intellectual invigoration and transition for Mexican Marxists. Inspired by global revolutionary precedents, many began to break with the traditional, state-aligned Mexican Communist Party (PCM) and *Lombardista* PPS, turning instead towards a democratizing project not necessarily compatible with the imposed 'Mexican Revolution'.⁷⁴ Positioned between the Old and New Left, the Friendship Society's activism can be seen as a distinctly pro-China, albeit not explicitly Maoist, current within Mexico's heterogeneous left-wing landscape. The IPS broadly labelled the group '*Comunista*' (Communist) in terms of its

⁷⁰ Garran to UK Foreign Office, 18 February 1964, TNA, FO 371/174176.

⁷¹ 'Mexico hopes for exports to Red China', *The New York Times*, 15 November 1971.

⁷² Velázquez Vidal, *El poder viene del fusil*, p. 43.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Barry Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln, NE, 1992), pp. 225–6.

ideological orientation, though it also consciously distanced itself from Trotskyist elements.⁷⁵ Although society members identified with Mao's China and built close ties with Beijing, they pursued their goals primarily through cultural practices rather than armed insurrection. This 'peaceful soft power' strategy, premised on avoiding direct collision with the PRI state, set it apart from Maoist guerrilla movements operating in Mexico. In this sense, it somewhat fits with a wider trend of 'Left subordination to popular-nationalist ideology' – a problem of the Mexican Marxist left at large.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, what the Friendship Society shared with its more militant guerrilla counterpart was a common political struggle – rooted in an anti-authoritarian internationalism – against the PRI's hegemonic project of capitalist state-building. Through pro-China activism, the society sought to carve out its own political space, at times resisting the PRI's co-optive rhetoric of 'revolutionary nationalism'.

During the 1960s, the Friendship Society was led by two individuals whose trajectories mirrored the wider splintering of the Mexican left. One of them was Dr Esther Chapa Tijerina. Chapa – a medical surgeon, former PCM militant and ardent follower of Maoism – centred her activism on women's rights and Mao Zedong Thought. Her decision to side with Beijing during its discord with Moscow resulted in her expulsion from the PCM. Luis Torres Ordoñez, by contrast, was an economist and former PPS member, who also served as Vice-President of the Council for the Promotion of Sino-Mexican Economic Relations. His political work focused on organizing socialist youth that formed a chapter of Mexico's pro-peace movement.⁷⁷ Despite their differing emphases, both presidents had previously travelled to Beijing and promoted such visits as a means of deepening friendship between the two nations.

The CCP-supported Friendship Society used intellectual influence to appeal to Mexican imaginaries of an anti-imperialist and egalitarian society refracted through the Chinese system. The CIA simplistically interpreted such efforts as a typical infiltration tool designed to progressively 'promote Chinese political, economic and intelligence interests abroad'. As CIA assessors concluded, the Friendship Society, through its 'propaganda and intelligence functions', joined the wider Soviet network of extolling 'peace and friendship between nations (on Communist terms)'.⁷⁸ Whether the society functioned primarily as a genuine cultural forum or as a Maoist propaganda front – reminiscent of the Soviet-sponsored World Peace Council – was, therefore, contested.⁷⁹

Chinese sources painted a hybrid picture regarding the society's nature. Despite its close contacts with the CCP authorities, the Friendship Society did not seem to operate as a loyal extension of Beijing but rather as a relatively autonomous site where competing interpretations of the Maoist revolution could interact. For example, as one of its presidents, Luis Torres sent a telegram to Chairman Liu Shaoqi congratulating China's National Day in October 1965. This gesture captured the attention of the PRC Foreign Ministry, which proceeded to compile an annotated biography of Torres:

⁷⁵ Report by IPS officer in Mexico City (14 May 1966), Secretaría de Gobernación Siglo XX, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (Galería 2), Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN, IPS, Siglo XX), box 1573B, file 6 (Partidos Políticos).

⁷⁶ William A. Booth, 'Hegemonic nationalism, subordinate Marxism: The Mexican left, 1945–7', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 50/1 (2018), pp. 31–58.

⁷⁷ CIA, 'Confederación de Jóvenes Mexicanos' (15 October 1951), available via <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R008800090004-6.pdf>> [last accessed 16 April 2026].

⁷⁸ CIA, 'Soviet-Sponsored Societies of Friendship and Cultural Relations' (October 1957), available via <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-00915R000800190027-4.pdf>> [last accessed 16 April 2026].

⁷⁹ One prominent similarity between the WPC and the Friendship Society was their advocacy of peace, despite supporting nuclear tests conducted by communist powers. Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom*, p. 63.

[Torres] visited China in '64. He was friendly towards us and advocated for the establishment of diplomatic relations, the expansion of trade and cultural exchanges between the two countries. [He] neither supports nor opposes the people's commune. When we held exhibitions in Mexico and when our Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe visited Mexico, he provided significant assistance and recommended many cultural figures to visit China, who behaved in a friendly manner towards us. Following the arrest of our nine representatives in Brazil, the Mexico-China Friendship Association issued a statement expressing its support.⁸⁰

This description revealed the grassroots efforts and a pivotal role of the Friendship Society behind the staging of the 1963 Chinese Exhibition, which is commonly known as a state-level enterprise. Moreover, indications of both Beijing's interest in, and uncertainty about, the political reliability of its Mexican interlocutors surfaced.

This came as Beijing's Foreign Ministry exposed a schism between the two society presidents regarding their ideological leanings and divergent visions for the organization's direction in light of the Sino-Soviet split. While Chapa firmly adhered to the Chinese platform and envisioned the Friendship Society as a main vehicle for nurturing Maoist thoughts and organizing Maoist sympathizers, Torres sought a more politically neutral course:

[Torres] took a 'middle ground' on anti-revisionism, and once prevented Mrs Chapa from selling anti-revisionist pamphlets domestically. During his visit to China in 1964, he advised us not to engage in anti-revisionism within the association, fearing it might cause debates and divisions, arguing that the association was a cultural institution, and engaging in politics was inappropriate.⁸¹

Despite the CIA's communist charge against it, the Mexican society appeared to enjoy a significant degree of freedom from political control. Its leaders defined their own projects rather than simply echoing Beijing's line. Perhaps owing to distinct political ambitions, Esther Chapa led a faction of the Friendship Society composed of all her followers. They operated from her private residence at 475 Palenque Street, Colonia Narvarte, where Maoist propaganda was distributed. Considered more politically radical than Torres, Chapa was dedicated to 'forming a political group to spread communist ideals'.⁸² This split within the society's leadership further suggests the challenges faced by pro-China leftist organizations in navigating ideological fractures and shifting alignments within the Cold War communist camp.

The state's security apparatus kept a vigilant eye on day-to-day operations of this pro-China group. Declassified documentation produced from 1966 to 1967, and sporadically in the 1970s, attests to the scale of official surveillance. The present article focuses on the Friendship Society's relatively active period in the 1960s to show how the association balanced its support for state-level Sino-Mexican contacts with domestic reformist aspirations. While the Diaz Ordaz administration is typically defined by its hardline reputation, its selective tolerance of the society's activism suggests a dualistic strategy of containment. During this period, the state's monitoring of left-wing activity sought to foreclose potential challenges to the establishment without prematurely closing down diplomatic or cultural channels.

For the most part, the Friendship Society was unified around the political project of 'friendship' between the Mexican and Chinese peoples. It pursued this goal through

⁸⁰ 'Dian fu Moxige Zhongguo youxie zhi woguo guoqing hedian de qingshi ji gai xiehui zhuxi jianjie' ['Request for a reply to the congratulatory telegram from the Mexico-China Friendship Association to China on our national day and biographical note on the president of the Association'], 5 October 1965, in PRC MFA Archives, File Number. 117-01220-04.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Report by IPS officer (31 May 1966; 20 July 1966), in AGN, box 1573B, file 6.

a remarkably diverse repertoire of activities. As a predominantly cultural agency, the society regularly organized China-related lectures (*conferencias*) and film screenings at the Ateneo Español on 26 Morelos Street.⁸³ Discussions ranged from workers' issues and resolutions for their emancipation to close readings of Maoist texts. The association also blended commemorative events with political messaging. Annual celebrations of the New Year and Chinese National Day doubled as opportunities for activism. Some took the form of ticketed dinners at the Tampico Restaurant on Balderas Street, priced at 50 pesos.⁸⁴ In parallel, the Friendship Society sought to 'display' China within Mexico. Under Luis Torres, it staged an exhibition on the Chinese economy between late August and early October 1966 at the halls of the Electricians' Union on 45 Antonio Caso.⁸⁵

At the transnational level, the society organized delegations of Mexican labour and professionals to visit the PRC. These journeys brought home uniformly affirmative testimonies about China's revolutionary state-making, communal life and socialist progress, tying in neatly with the society's cultural mission and grassroots diplomacy. In one discussion on socialist medicine in October 1967, members reading a newspaper report about the successful transplantation of a hand to a Mexican worker recalled a similar operation in China. This medical progress was witnessed firsthand by society delegates, who greeted the patient during their visit.⁸⁶ Early in 1966, Esther Chapa had accompanied a group of selected workers to China to observe industrial development. Thirteen participants were designated to 'take a course in Marxism-Leninism for one year'.⁸⁷ Upon her return, Chapa was commissioned to circulate supplied Chinese brochures and literature, including *Beijing Review*. She also distributed Maoist publications and free books to political organizations that followed the Maoist line.⁸⁸ Reportedly, the Friendship Society maintained a bookstore on 14 Enrico Martínez Street, known as 'El Primer Paso'.⁸⁹ More than a cultural outlet, the bookstore served as a site of political outreach connecting the society to wider Maoist networks, including the insurgent MMLM. When Luis Torres presented the society's financial situation, he outlined rent payments of MXN\$1200 per month for thirty months, along with book sales totaling MXN\$15,000. This contributed to an overall income of MXN\$135,200 against expenditures of MXN\$132,465.⁹⁰ These figures suggest the importance of the bookstore as a means of sustaining the organization, both ideologically and materially. Taken together, the Friendship Society's wide-ranging activities reinforced its intermediary role in translating cultural encounters into political activism. In doing so, it helped popularize a collectivist appreciation of Maoist China within Mexican leftist circles.

Throughout, maintaining study groups underpinned the Friendship Society's pro-China activism. The society organized regular lecture programmes, open to all its members, in order for them to 'receive guidance on the way of life of the Chinese people'.⁹¹ These were mostly convened at the society's premises on the first floor of 10 Madrid Street in the Federal District, and were usually scheduled for 7.30 p.m.⁹² During Torres's tenure alone, sixty-six lectures were organized at various schools of

⁸³ Report by IPS officer (12 September 1966), in AGN, IPS, Siglo XX, box 0818, file 3 (Grupos de izquierda).

⁸⁴ Report by IPS officer (28 September 1971), in AGN, IPS, Siglo XX, box 1678A, file 1 (Asuntos Internacionales).

⁸⁵ Report by IPS officer (23 September 1966), in AGN, IPS, Siglo XX, box 0818, file 2 (Grupos de izquierda).

⁸⁶ Report by IPS officer (6 October 1967), in AGN, box 1678A, file 1.

⁸⁷ Report by IPS officer (4 June 1966), in AGN, box 1573B, file 6.

⁸⁸ Velázquez Vidal, *El poder viene del fusil*, p. 43.

⁸⁹ Report by IPS officer (30 May 1966), in AGN, box 1573B, file 6.

⁹⁰ Report by IPS officer (23 September 1966), in AGN, box 0818, file 2.

⁹¹ Report by IPS officer (31 May 1966), in AGN, box 1573B, file 6.

⁹² Ibid.

the Polytechnic and the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), as well as at cultural centres and in the province.⁹³ These talks – predominantly featuring artists, scientists and intellectuals ‘known for their leftist affiliations’ – involved speakers enthusiastically sharing their impressions of visits to Chinese factories, museums, schools and farmland.⁹⁴ The composition of the invited professionals also suggests the resonance of Third World Marxist ideas among segments of the Mexican intelligentsia and artistic circles.

Speakers at the Friendship Society pinpointed their mission as enlisting public support in the Chinese model for social change and as spreading knowledge about China. Attended by audiences of between fifteen and over fifty people, the lectures explored topics such as ‘Trade Unions in People’s China’ (Salvador Avila), ‘Progress of Engineering in China’ (Jorge L. Tamayo) and ‘Impressions of a Trip to China’ (Dr Luis Quintanilla).⁹⁵ These presentations were based on the speakers’ travels to China as professionals in the mid-1960s. Some of these trips had been sponsored by Beijing, at a time when China was still grappling with the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward.

The lectures followed a pattern of narrating the rapid accomplishments of Maoist China, contrasting its perceived productive efficiency with that of capitalist economies, and praising ‘the most advanced techniques’ used in infrastructure projects.⁹⁶ Socialist modernity was manifest in various industrialized aspects pertaining to roads, bridges, railways, hydroelectric dams and sufficient housing. Workers and farmers, socialism’s key drivers, were portrayed as integral to a prosperous economic and social life of that country. Speakers occasionally arrived at rather exaggerated conclusions that ‘in China there is no hunger’ and that ‘every inch of land is cultivated, making the people one of the most highly nourished’.⁹⁷ Such uncritical accounts often omitted the economic turmoil and famine on the ground, triggered by the ideologically driven mass mobilization under Mao’s ambitious venture to rapidly transform Chinese society. Where disruptions were acknowledged, as in Luis Quintanilla’s passing reference to a ‘Cultural Revolution underway’, they were merely described as having ‘sealed’ the PRC during its eminently Marxist-Leninist project.⁹⁸

In July 1966, Esther Chapa delivered an explicitly political lecture on ‘The State and Organization of People’s China’ at UNAM’s National School of Political and Social Sciences. Chapa explained to an audience of around seventy that the PRC ‘is a socialist and not a communist country’.⁹⁹ She recommended two books to the group: ‘The Day of the New China’ and ‘The Chinese Constitution for a Socialist Country’. Recognizing Mao’s support for women’s emancipation within a socialist framework, Chapa stated that ‘women play an important role’ and ‘prostitution disappeared from China’ under the CCP leadership.¹⁰⁰ She ended the lecture by informing that ‘she and a group of friends have intervened with Antonio Carrillo Flores, Secretary

⁹³ Report by IPS officer (23 September 1966), in AGN, box 0818, file 2.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Luis Quintanilla was a retired diplomat who, in 1966, undertook a documented visit to China and North Vietnam, where he met Ho Chi Minh. Report by IPS officer (9 December 1966), in AGN, box 0818, file 3; Report by IPS officer (3 June 1966), in AGN, box 1573B, file 6; Report by IPS officer (14 April 1967), in AGN, box 1678A, file 1.

⁹⁶ Report by IPS officer (3 June 1966), in AGN, box 1573B, file 6.

⁹⁷ Report by IPS officer (9 December 1966), in AGN, box 0818, file 3; Report by IPS officer (14 April 1967), in AGN, box 1678A, file 1.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Report by IPS officer (8 July 1966), in AGN, box 1573B, file 6.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

of Foreign Affairs, to have diplomatic relations with China'.¹⁰¹ Here, pedagogical practices evolved into the advocacy of policy-oriented activism.

The inculcation of a revolutionary identification with Mao's China persisted in various venues and through a range of culturally themed lectures. For example, in August 1966, the director Javier Rojas lectured on 'Theatre in the People's Republic of China' in front of thirty-five attendees.¹⁰² For Rojas, who had spent twenty-five days in China, exposure to Chinese theatre reflected not only citizens' capacity to enjoy cultural prosperity and social welfare – a major concern of Chairman Mao – but also offered a figurative portrayal of a more socially just and inclusive system free from oppression.¹⁰³ He contrasted China's subsidy for artists and its humanism with that of Mexico, where 'theatre can never be brought to the popular masses, because the government does not provide the facilities that exist in China'.¹⁰⁴ During his visit to the Palace Museum Exhibitions in Beijing, Rojas encountered an artistic performance that delivered an anti-imperialist critique of the Vietnam War. In the performance, the artists portrayed puppets controlled by US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara who was blamed for countless Vietnamese deaths. An unidentified person asked about his judgement of the PRC. Rojas replied that he 'felt better than in Mexico' because his position was valued and taken seriously.¹⁰⁵

Other culturally themed lectures explored Marxist motifs in various Chinese artistic expressions and Chinese people's aesthetic sensibilities. Concrete examples included 'Painting in China' (Luis Arenal), 'Music in Ancient China' (Prof Jeronimo Baqueiro Foster) and 'The Techniques of Engraving, Painting and Ivory Engraving' (Adolfo Mexiac).¹⁰⁶ The speakers in this category were all prominent Mexican artists whose artistic careers were closely intertwined with the promotion of communist or leftist causes. The occasional presence of PRI diplomats at these events, such as Ambassador Carlos Zapata Vela's attendance at Baqueiro's lecture, complicates the nature of state-activist relationships. It implies a degree of official curiosity in, and even tacit support for, the Friendship Society's activities. Clearly, the latter could function as an informal cultural back channel for public outreach to China in areas where the PRI had vested interests.

Cultural celebration also worked as political mobilization. To mark the seventeenth anniversary of the CCP's victory in 1949, the Friendship Society staged a well-publicized artistic celebration (Figure 2). Held in the entrance hall of the Mexican electrical workers union, the celebratory gatherings lasted from 22 September to 2 October 1966.¹⁰⁷ On 30 September, Esther Chapa presided over a politicized commemoration at the Ateneo Español. Around ninety attendees were asked to 'stand and listen to the Chinese anthem'.¹⁰⁸ Juan Comas spoke passionately to the group: 'Mao Tse-tung, with great talent, had brought Marxism-Leninism to a completely new stage and to the benefit of the Chinese people'.¹⁰⁹ He added that 'Joseph Stalin had betrayed the doctrines of Karl Marx and that China...is carrying out a cultural revolution and a radical transformation of the education system'. Another speaker

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Report by IPS officer (25 August 1966), in AGN, box 0818, file 3.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ 'Jeronimo Baqueiro Foster' in the AGN record likely refers to the well-known musicologist and composer, Gerónimo Baqueiro Fôster; Report by IPS officer (8 July 1966; 15 July 1966; 22 July 1966), in AGN, box 1573B, file 6.

¹⁰⁷ Poster advertising Friendship Society events, collected by IPS officer (September 1966), in AGN, box 0818, file 2.

¹⁰⁸ Report by IPS officer (30 September 1966), in AGN, box 0818, file 2.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Juan Comas was likely the well-known anthropologist who was an ex-communist.



Figure 2 Poster for an exhibition organized by the Mexican Society of Friendship with People's China. Staged in 1966 to mark the seventeenth anniversary of the PRC, the display featured 'engravings, watercolours, posters and handicrafts by Chinese artists'. *Source:* Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales, box 0818, file 2, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City.

praised Mao's progress in reconstructing the 'villages and cities destroyed by the dictator Chiang Kai-shek and US imperialists'.¹¹⁰ These events hint at how the Friendship Society strategized cultural celebrations to mobilize political support for pro-China agenda, thereby blurring the line between festivity and activism.

In explaining the diplomatic role and future direction of the Friendship Society, Chapa underlined at a July 1966 meeting that the society 'is made up of about 150 people', which was still 'very few'.¹¹¹ In order to 'attract more sympathizers' and 'give greater strength' to this group, they would have to 'give lectures, distribute propaganda and collect signatures to ask the Mexican Government to have relations with the Government of People's China and not with Nationalist China'.¹¹² Chapa went on to say that she had personally delivered to President Díaz Ordaz 'more than 500 signatures' requesting such an opening but had received no reply. This prompted her to turn the case over to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs.¹¹³

The society's activism in promoting Sino-Mexican relations was equally visible in Luis Torres's faction. On 23 September 1966, at a meeting of around forty people at the Ateneo Español, the group read aloud a telegram to be sent to Mao, congratulating him on the seventeenth anniversary of the CCP's victory and reading a petition urging the Mexican government to support the PRC's admission to the UN.¹¹⁴ These negotiating gestures and collective politics indicate that society's activists still believed in the existence of a democratic channel for policy change within the PRI framework, as they looked towards the state to uphold justice.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Report by IPS officer (23 July 1966), in AGN, box 1573B, file 6.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Report by IPS officer (23 September 1966), in AGN, box 0818, file 2.

As it entered the 1970s, the Friendship Society kept operating along the dual aims of promoting Sino-Mexican friendship and ‘world peace’, while refracting domestic problems with reference to Chinese examples. It also formed new cells under the ‘Pro-China Line’ within student circles.¹¹⁵ In 1971, under the new leadership of Juan Larios Tolentino, the society continued its practice of publishing open letters in the press to pressure for diplomatic recognition of the PRC. Crucially, members also asked ‘that the offices of the “Sin-Jua” news agency in Mexico be reopened as a means of communication to facilitate greater understanding between [the two] peoples’.¹¹⁶ This demand alluded to the deterioration of bilateral relations in the late 1960s, when the Mexican government curtailed *Xinhua*’s activity in light of the radicalizing effects of the Cultural Revolution and China’s growing export of revolution.

After 1972, the Friendship Society entered a new phase of activism that, while still subject to PRI surveillance, unfolded within the framework of newly established state-to-state diplomacy between Mexico and the PRC. Accordingly, its focus shifted from lobbying for recognition to serving as a coordinating force for pro-China organizing and the dissemination of Chinese revolutionary thought. The participation of Chinese embassy representatives in society-sponsored events, particularly the Mexico-China Friendship Week in December 1972, signalled deeper entanglements with official PRC patronage.¹¹⁷ Still rooted in Mexico’s pluralist left-wing traditions, the group also proved capable of repurposing the Chinese backing for its own locally grounded project, weaving pro-China activism into broader struggles against state authoritarianism.

Overall, the Friendship Society’s lectures, gatherings and cultural initiatives fostered a sense of transnational socialist fraternity and an enduring ‘China fascination’ among Mexican leftists. This grip was not only linked to shared agrarian dimensions but also affinities in the intellectual, economic, artistic and anti-imperialist spheres. However, such engagement often obscured the socio-economic ramifications of Mao’s continuous revolutions and their ideological spillovers. With a utopian faith in revolution itself, society members often romanticized the Chinese system by perceiving it as modern, efficient as well as scientifically and morally progressive. While the Cultural Revolution apparently paralysed state-level relations, it still took hold among Mexican leftists as a largely uncritical ideological advancement. That many of them travelled to see China precisely during this turbulent period further reveals the durability of ‘grassroots friendship’ as a tool of exerting pressure on the Mexican government. Through travels and sustained contacts with Chinese comrades, pro-China activists refracted back some form of social democratic hope for Mexico – a more participatory and egalitarian trajectory of socialist transition shared by wider Latin American leftist movements.¹¹⁸ They imagined themselves as apostles of socialist freedoms, justice and developmentalism. In this sense, the Friendship Society itself was a carrier of revolutionary culture challenging the PRI’s official paradigm for an ‘orthodox’ way of doing revolution.

The state crackdown on Maoist conspiracy

In the closing years of the outgoing López Mateos administration, which ended in November 1964, the regime showed its readiness to wield coercive power, most

¹¹⁵ Report by IPS officer (6 October 1971), in AGN, box 1678A, file 1.

¹¹⁶ Report by IPS officer (28 September 1971), in *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Report by IPS officer (14 December 1972), in AGN, IPS, Siglo XX, box 1678A, file 3 (Asuntos Internacionales).

¹¹⁸ Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago, IL, 2004), pp. xii, 14.

notoriously in the military ambush of the agrarian leader Rubén Jaramillo – a watershed moment for many leftists in their turn towards armed resistance.¹¹⁹ Under López Mateos's successor Díaz Ordaz, concerns over the 'student problem' and the spectre of communist agitation led to a stepped-up crackdown on communist-related activity. Clandestinely, the government requested to purchase large quantities of military equipment from the United States.¹²⁰ The limits of the PRI's tolerance for revolutionary politics were evident in the wider crackdown following a foiled 'Maoist-oriented plot' in 1967 as discussed below. Those limits became even more visible in 1968, when Díaz Ordaz ordered the Mexican military to take over the University City (Ciudad Universitaria) on the eve of the Olympic Games and, most infamously, led to the brutal suppression of the Tlatelolco massacre.¹²¹ Far from exceptional, these consecutive episodes expose the coercive state-making that underpinned the regime's carefully crafted image of Pax PRIísta.

On 19 July 1967, the Attorney General's Office announced in Mexico City the arrest of thirteen men on charges of involvement in a 'Maoist plot' to overthrow the government. The group – comprising one Salvadorean, one Venezuelan and eleven Mexicans – operated under the banner of the MMLM and was said to be financed by Communist China.¹²² At a press conference, Deputy Attorney General Julio Sánchez Vargas disclosed that the plotters' aim was to implant a 'popular-Socialist' regime in Mexico by unleashing guerrilla movements throughout the country. The episode marked a deterioration in Sino-Mexican relations.

Investigators traced the group's activities to an attempted attack on 3 July, when militants dynamited an army truck carrying troops from the 32nd Battalion near La Unión, Guerrero, for the purpose of securing arms. This provided the first clue to their subversive activities. The Dirección Federal de Seguridad (Federal Security Directorate, DFS) apprehended an individual named Adrián Campos Díaz in Zihuatanejo, who confessed his intention to 'start the war as soon as possible'.¹²³ Following his arrest, the authorities established that two of the agitators had taken refuge in Mexico City, using a Soviet-made Moskvich vehicle to travel around the country.¹²⁴ The next step for the subversives would have been to raid a Bank of Industry and Commerce branch, in order to get funds for weapon purchases. The group evidently possessed a map of the place, along with information about police patrols and employee routines.¹²⁵

According to prosecutors, the detainees aimed to integrate rural and urban guerrillas, for which they had travelled to different parts of Mexico to recruit young people to a 'training camp' in Chiapas. Training was to be conducted by a foreign military instructor, Silvestre Enrique Marengo Martínez – a Salvadoran with guerrilla experience in Cuba and Nicaragua.¹²⁶ He would instruct recruits in guerrilla warfare tactics based on the 'doctrines of Mao Tse-tung'. The group's unfulfilled objective was to rapidly prepare recruits to launch armed attacks in the mountains. Ideally, they would spark 'insurrectionary foci' in multiple states while coordinating 'acts

¹¹⁹ Tanalis Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax PRIísta, 1940–1962* (Durham, NC, 2008), p. 6.

¹²⁰ Extract from CIA current intelligence digest obtained by UK Foreign Office 25 April 1967, in TNA, FCO 7/632 ('Mexico political affairs internal: Communism')

¹²¹ On Mexican student problems and the state's brutal responses, see Jaime M. Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Stanford, CA, 2013).

¹²² 'Mexico to arrest more as plotters', *The New York Times*, 21 July 1967; Report by IPS officer (21 July 1967), in AGN, box 1678A, file 1.

¹²³ Clipping of *Universal* by IPS officer (20 July 1967), in AGN, box 1678A, file 1.

¹²⁴ Clipping of *El Sol de México* (20 July 1967), in *ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

of sabotage and terrorism' in Mexico City.¹²⁷ Plans to set up an additional camp in Guatemala also never materialized.¹²⁸ In the wake of the plot's exposure on 20 July, security agents were quick to conduct intensive investigations across universities and secondary schools in search of 'students who had promised to enroll in guerrilla training centers'.¹²⁹ Sánchez claimed that further arrests were expected since one of the plot's leaders, Javier Fuentes Gutiérrez, had departed for China on 30 June using a false passport.¹³⁰ This reinforced official allegations of foreign contacts.

An estimated thirteen to twenty tons of books, films and printed materials, some on guerrilla tactics, were seized from the detainees. The authorities invoked both their volume and nature to sensationalize the reach and threat of Mexican Maoism, thereby legitimizing systematic repression.¹³¹ The seizure included thousands of propaganda leaflets and large colour portraits of Mao, Stalin, Lenin and Marx, reportedly intended for display in public buildings 'upon the triumph of the movement'.¹³² Also found were the 16 mm rolls of two half-hour films – items that were described as 'real masterpieces for teaching guerrilla tactics', featuring footage from early stages of the guerrilla warfare in Venezuela and Vietnam, with narration in English.¹³³

Of the dispersed propaganda cache, thirteen tons were discovered in Javier Fuentes's private house on 14 Porfirio Díaz Street.¹³⁴ These communist pamphlets had been illegally brought into Mexico from China under the guise of 'cultural printed matter', in diplomatic pouches or as cargo. They were distributed and sold in a few progressive bookstores, most notably 'El Primer Paso' on 14 Enrico Martínez Street, run by the plotters.¹³⁵ Fuentes's bookstore, whose operations evidently overlapped with the cultural networks of Chapa's Friendship Society, was a prime conduit for the circulation of Chinese magazines and Maoist texts within Mexican public spheres.¹³⁶ This convergence underscores the evolving strategies of pro-China activism, which could escalate from cultural endorsement to overt political militancy.

Federal agents stationed at the airport intercepted significant quantities of these subversive materials just before they were about to be distributed nationwide to unleash a guerrilla movement. Acting on those leads, DFS agents detained thirteen individuals and more plotting details surfaced. On 27 July, the fourteenth participant, Roberto Iriarte Jiménez – a second-year philosophy student at UNAM – was sentenced for conspiracy against the government.¹³⁷

The Attorney General's Office publicly identified the PRC as the principal source of financial backer behind the plot, alleging that funds had been channelled through Bian Cheng (Pien Cheng) of *Xinhua* prior to its closure in Mexico.¹³⁸ As Ambassador Huang Zhiliang recalls, Premier Zhou Enlai was irritated upon learning at a 1968 meeting that Bian Cheng had been recalled from Mexico to 'take part in the Cultural Revolution'.¹³⁹ He subsequently ordered all foreign branches to resume their work, though the Mexican government seized the opportunity to close the *Xinhua* office

¹²⁷ Clipping of *Universal* (20 July 1967), in *ibid.*

¹²⁸ 'Mexico plot "backed by China"', *The Times*, 20 July 1967.

¹²⁹ 'Mexico to arrest more as plotters', *The New York Times*, 21 July 1967.

¹³⁰ Clipping of *El Sol de México* (20 July 1967), AGN, box 1678A, file 1.

¹³¹ Clippings of *El Heraldo de México*, *Novedades* (20 July 1967), in *ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Clipping of *Universal* (20 July 1967), in AGN, box 1678A, file 1.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Clipping of *El Heraldo de México*, in *ibid.*

¹³⁶ Velázquez Vidal, *El poder viene del fusil*, pp. 39–40, 50–2.

¹³⁷ Clippings of *El Día*, *Excelsior* (25 July 1967); *Universal*, *Excelsior* (27 July 1967), in AGN, box 1678A, file 1.

¹³⁸ Clipping of *Novedades* (20 July 1967), in *ibid.*

¹³⁹ Huang, *Rediscovery of the New World*, p. 176.

indefinitely. The Cultural Revolution thus, for a while, disrupted China's foreign engagement.

Further disclosures claimed that engineer Javier Fuentes, the mastermind behind the plot and a former leader of the PCM, made frequent trips to Beijing and received £600 (around 21,000 pesos) via various 'packages' a month to fund activities in Mexico.¹⁴⁰ Another underground source quoted an official claim that 'Red China was slipping the 13 [plotters] \$1,600 [pesos] a month to organize "urban and rural guerrillas"'. The Mexican government was said to be 'embarrassed over the Chinese only spending \$1,600 a month to overthrow them'.¹⁴¹

Press coverage in Mexico and the West overwhelmingly framed the episode as a vast communist conspiracy 'backed by China' or 'inspired by Mao Tse-tung'.¹⁴² In doing so, the media assisted the PRI state in curtailing any public sympathy for the accused and their frustrated efforts to 'turn Mexico into a Socialist Republic'. *Excelsior* adopted a more measured tone, deeming the charges brought by the Attorney General's Office as 'somewhat exaggerated, as thirteen individuals could never endanger the regime'.¹⁴³ In contrast, Trotskyist detainee Daniel Camejo Guancho published a sharply critical counter-narrative in *Perspectiva Mundial* (World Perspective). He denounced the arrests as a 'political provocation' emblematic of a broader pattern of repression against independent revolutionary groups. He argued that the detentions, together with the repression of student movements, were unparalleled in the country's recent history. The state apparatus, in his mind, had been 'overridden' by the 'McCarthyist zeal', and the Mexican government itself was accused of being unwilling to confront latent social problems and of being corrupted by 'bourgeois self-interest'.¹⁴⁴

The events surrounding the 1967 'Maoist plot' expose deep contradictions at the core of PRI rule. While the Mexican government was keen to cultivate economic and cultural ties with the PRC, it also readily repressed domestic Maoist insurgents. For Beijing, the tension was equally pronounced. The PRC extended support to both peaceful friendship associations and revolutionary movements, yet these two channels – soft-power cultural diplomacy and armed Maoist militancy – yielded exactly opposite outcomes. Whereas the former facilitated incremental gains in Sino-Mexican relations, the latter provoked a security backlash that deepened PRI anxieties over communist subversion, thereby impairing China's purpose to consolidate a diplomatic foothold in Latin America.

Conclusion: The ideological tensions of Sino-Mexican encounters

When Mexican security forces were hunting down Maoist radicals through nationwide counterinsurgency campaigns, the incoming President Luis Echeverría skilfully camouflaged such backstage violence by pursuing an assertive Third Worldist agenda and openly defying US interests at the UN. In October 1971, he declared that 'the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the People's Republic of China are legally indivisible'.¹⁴⁵ Through its discussion of bilateral exhibition diplomacy and the

¹⁴⁰ 'Mexico plot "backed by China"', *The Times*, 20 July 1967.

¹⁴¹ These comments were from the *Berkeley Barb*, a US underground newspaper, and cited by the US Committee for Justice to Latin American Political Prisoners, in 'McCarthyism, Mexican-style' (1967), available via Marxists Internet Archive, <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/swp-us/ldb/ysa-nec-min/NEC%201967/42-McCarthyism-Mexican-Style-YSA.pdf>> [last accessed 13 April 2026].

¹⁴² Clipping of *Universal* (20 July 1967), in AGN, box 1678A, file 1.

¹⁴³ Clipping of *Excelsior* (20 July 1967), in *ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Copy of 'Perspectiva Mundial' obtained by IPS officer (7 August 1967), in *ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Huang, *Rediscovery of the New World*, p. 177.

activities of the Mexican Society of Friendship with People's China, this article has demonstrated that the Sino-Mexican 'diplomatic shift' of the 1970s was less sudden than it may appear at first sight.

The PRI's Janus-faced approach towards both Communist China and domestic pro-China groups reflected the complex undercurrents of the global Cold War. The 1963 Chinese trade fair in Mexico City offered an early glimpse into the layered tensions underlying the celebratory façade of Sino-Mexican friendship. The foiled 1967 'Maoist plot' further crystalized these contradictions, exposing the PRI's simultaneous aspirations to identify with China's anti-imperialist struggles abroad while inhibiting the spread of Maoist ideology at home.

On one level, shared revolutionary traditions and developmental visions fostered a symbolic solidarity between the two 'revolutionary' regimes. Both grounded their legitimacy in agendas of social justice and decolonization amid growing US imperialism. On another level, Mexico's anti-communist and pro-capitalist lineage ensured that this alignment remained ephemeral. Beneath the much-publicized rhetoric of friendship persisted a deep-seated fear of the so-called 'red virus'. This was shown in the PRI's loyalty to US anti-communism on the ground and Mexico's continued diplomatic recognition of the Nationalist regime in Taiwan – a position it upheld until Sino-US rapprochement in 1972.

Between 1966 and 1967, the Friendship Society became a place of learning for the vanguardist youth by 'making known to the Mexican people the advances of the Chinese people in the agricultural, industrial, social and cultural fields'.¹⁴⁶ It served as a collective expression of a socialist approach to domestic reform, modelled on revolutionary China. Although these grassroots efforts failed to alter the PRI's adherence to the US line on China, they did implant within Mexican political culture a pro-China impulse – a genuine vision of radical internationalism and revolutionary friendship that resonated beyond official policy.

A fair criticism of the Friendship Society – and evidence that, even beyond Chinese patronage, it was a 'controlled' venture – lies in its relatively conciliatory posture towards the PRI regime. This was clear during the 1963 exhibition and in the society's constant dialogue with the Mexican government. By pinning its hope for political change on the existing state framework, the Friendship Society appeared willing to sustain a symbiotic relationship with the Mexican state. This mechanism both preserved the PRI's 'democratic face' and arguably extended the group's longevity compared with other Maoist movements.

While recovering the Mexican state's burgeoning Third Worldist diplomacy of the decade – a top-down project that branded itself as antithetical to the US-led liberal international order, it is equally important to foreground the place of marginalized pro-China voices. These actors occupied an 'in-between' space outside Cold War ideological binaries, representing a form of 'Third Way' politics.¹⁴⁷ Seen from this angle, they can be interpreted as one variety of 'Cold War internationalism', anchored in the grassroots vision of 'a world more equal' – one that pursued social justice and equality through transnational cultural bonds rather than diplomatic posturing.¹⁴⁸ Through travels, gatherings and petitions, the Mexican Friendship Society's 'cultural ambassadors' advocated solidarity with China grounded in a socialist imaginary of revolutionary possibility. Yet, while the Mexican state had tolerated earlier efforts as

¹⁴⁶ Report by IPS officer (16 December 1966), in AGN, box 0818, file 3.

¹⁴⁷ Aldo Marchesi, *Latin America's Radical Left: Rebellion and Cold War in the Global 1960s* (Cambridge, MA, 2017); Field et al., *Latin America and the Global Cold War*, p. 244.

¹⁴⁸ On other forms of Cold War internationalism, see Sandrine Kott, *A World More Equal: An Internationalist Perspective on the Cold War*, trans. Arby Gharibian (New York, 2024).

they took on a diplomatic form, it curtailed and repressed efforts to act on the radical ambitions inherent in such network.

The article also tells an alternative story of Maoism by drawing attention to its 'softer' manifestations and to its capaciousness as a 'globalized' ideological force that Mexican actors adapted to assemble their own projects.¹⁴⁹ The Friendship Society operated as a 'soft power' platform which, despite intersecting with more militant Maoist networks, privileged intellectual influence over revolutionary violence. The case illustrates the diverse, heterogeneous routes through which global Maoism could be harnessed to inform internationalist struggles across the Third World.

¹⁴⁹ Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (London, 2019).