

CHINA AND THE IRANIAN LEFT:  
TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS OF SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND IDEOLOGICAL  
EXCHANGE, 1905 - 1979

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# ABSTRACT

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This study surveys the history of Sino-Iranian relations from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the Islamic Republic, focused on the impact of Chinese politics on the Iranian left. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, traditional ties were replaced by new colonial networks of transportation and communication throughout Asia. News of the Iranian constitutional revolution quickly reached China and was debated by constitutionalists and colonialists in the pages of Shanghai-based newspapers. Competition and cooperation between Iran and the Republic of China emerged at the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s. Parallel to these ties, a robust, informal network emerged between the Tudeh Party, Iran's pre-eminent Communist organization, and the Chinese Communist Party after 1949. The success of the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949 helped inspire a more radical, internationalist approach to politics in Iran. Iranian youth increasingly saw themselves as part of a global community of oppressed nations. Many on the left, both secular and Islamic, studied Chinese texts and drew on Maoist theories to analyze Iran and international politics. China directly participated in and encouraged these developments, first by public support for the Tudeh Party, and later with clandestine support for an explicitly Maoist splinter group, the Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh Party.

This approach fills a gap in the existing scholarship of Sino-Iranian relations, which concentrates on elite interactions post-1979, by pushing back the timeline and foregrounding a set of unofficial connections typically relegated to margins of the historiography. It also emphasizes the global origins of the Iranian revolution and the international context in which it developed. The tangled relationship between the Chinese state, the Iranian state, and the Iranian opposition reveals a complex and sometimes controversial historical reality that is often glossed over by modern narratives of perpetual friendship and mutual co-operation. It rests on an analysis of primary sources in Mandarin and Persian, including Chinese media outlets, published interviews and travelogues from Iranians who went to China, Persian periodicals, and oral interviews.

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## Introduction

In the spring of 1910, Chinese constitutionalist Wang Jingwei (1883-1944) wrote effusively of the lessons he had personally derived from the Iranian Constitutional Revolution: “it was the zeal for freedom, equality, and fraternity that aroused the fighting will of the Iranian Constitutionalists, and made them fearless...”<sup>1</sup> Nearly 40 years later, Mehdi Farrokh (1886-1973) witnessed the Communist victory from the Iranian embassy to the Republic of China (ROC) in Nanjing, an event he saw as a threat to international peace and a harbinger of what could happen in Iran. In stark contrast, Reza Radmanesh (1905-1983), one of Iran's most prominent communist politicians, stood before the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1956 and hailed the victory of the Chinese Communist Revolution as a victory for all humanity. A decade later, young Iranian students like Kurosh Lasha'i (1938-2002) and Mohsen Rezvani (1935-) traveled to China for political, ideological, and military training and subsequently tried (and failed) to launch an armed insurrection in the Kurdish countryside. Long before the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Iran established formal relations in 1971, official and unofficial contacts between them were flourishing. In what context did they emerge? What representations of China emerged from these moments of interaction, and what can they tell us about the formation of modern political and social identities in both countries? In short, what did Iranian intellectuals see when they looked towards China, and vice versa?

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<sup>1</sup> Wang, Yidan. “The Iranian Constitutional Revolution as Reported in the Chinese Press”, *Iran's Constitutional Revolution: Popular Politics, Cultural Transformations and Transnational Connections*. Eds H.E. Chehabi and Vanessa Martin. Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, 378



A steady stream of literature chronicling the relationship between China and Iran has surged in recent decades. The majority of these studies have focused on either ancient history or the politics of modern Sino-Iranian relations, usually from a political science perspective. Scholars have comparatively neglected the intervening years between the very ancient and the very modern. The few analyses that do cover events before 1971 are either outdated or cursory, sometimes both. These studies tend to focus on diplomatic relations and questions of policy. They typically deal with themes such as oil politics, economic relations, military cooperation, and the perceived challenge posed by Chinese support for the Islamic Republic to U.S. interests.<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation intervenes in the small but growing discourse on Iran-China relations by shifting focus to social history. It analyzes official ties, visits, and connections, alongside a parallel trajectory of relations far less covered and documented in conventional literature, between certain trends among the Iranian militant left and China at the height of the Cold War. These events are situated in a *longue durée* history of Sino-Iranian relations covering political, economic, and ideological ties between China and Iran from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Drawing on various historical and social science approaches and utilizing Chinese and Iranian primary sources, including newspapers, oral interviews, memoirs, and travelogues, it outlines a narrative of Sino-Iranian interactions from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the Islamic

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<sup>2</sup> For just some examples see: Kumaraswamy, P.R: *China and the Middle East – The Quest for Influence* (1999); Kemp, Geoffrey. *The East Moves West: India, China, and Asia's Growing Presence in the Middle East*. (2012); Green, Nile. “From the Silk Road to the Railroad (and Back): The Means and Meanings of the Iranian Encounter with China”, *Iranian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2013, pp. 165-192; Garver, John W. *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World*. (2006); Azad, Shirzad. *Iran and China: A New Approach to Their Bilateral Relations*. Lexington Books, (2017)

Republic. It fills a gap in the literature by providing a much-needed narrative and analysis of the historical development of modern ties between China and Iran. This approach foregrounds a set of relations that until now was considered mainly background to the larger drama of Sino-Iranian state-to-state interactions.

This study stands out as a first attempt to move Sino-Iranian studies beyond questions of high diplomacy to the dissenting discourses of disenfranchised social classes. Traditionally, the professional study of diplomatic relations has taken a state-centric approach that privileges professional diplomacy, military interactions, and high politics.<sup>3</sup> Social, economic, humanitarian, and cultural connections were given low priority. This dissertation conceptualizes diplomacy as something beyond “state-to-state activity, monopolized by professional, official diplomats.” While not a work of diplomatic history, this analysis integrates the lessons of those debates by analyzing both official and unofficial connections in tandem. It frames Sino-Iranian relations not only as state-to-state interactions post-1971, but also as an expansive set of cultural and social interactions between the two societies throughout the 20th century. It sketches a narrative of Sino-Iranian *interaction* that focuses on identity and the socio-political impact of highly politicized connections between elite and educated Iranians and Chinese citizens.

Through closely examining previously unused or underused sources, it demonstrates that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Iranian and Chinese intellectuals were indirectly connected by the Pan-Asian constitutional movement. New technologies allowed for the rapid exchange of information and led to an interest in each other's

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<sup>3</sup> Murray, Stuart. “Consolidating the Gains Made in Diplomacy Studies: A Taxonomy.” *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (February 2008), pp. 22-39.

recent events and historical experiences. Unofficial connections between the communist Tudeh Party of Iran (Tudeh) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began in the early 1950s. Through this exchange, Maoism, or at least a Maoist-style student radicalism, for a brief moment became the dominant ideological position of leftist Iranian student activists in Europe and the United States in the late 1960s. The international conflict between Soviet and Chinese Marxism left an unmistakable mark on the rhetoric, ideology, and tactics of opposition groups of all stripes, both inside Iran and abroad.

Three major book-length studies have focused explicitly on China and Iran. John Garver's *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World* is the most useful and comprehensive, but it is almost entirely focused on state-to-state interactions post-1971. A.H.H Abidi's 1981 study *China and the Persian Gulf* does contain one chapter that sketches relations from the 1920s to the 1970s, but it is also focused on official interactions and does not make use of Chinese sources. Shirzad Azad's book *Iran and China: A New Approach to Their Bilateral Relations* breaks the mold somewhat by looking at press coverage and popular reactions to growing Sino-Iranian ties in Iran, but primarily over the last thirty years. None of the previous studies have seriously examined the period before the thawing of relations between the PRC and Pahlavi Iran, nor have they taken a close look at the unofficial connections that started during the Constitutional period and flourished in the 1950s and 1960s.

Unofficial connections came to bear on official relations, as Chinese support for Iranian revolutionaries played a role in altering the Iranian government's approach to the People's Republic of China. Shifting the focus to unofficial connections also enables

this study to engage with the intellectual history of both Leftist and Islamist politics. The international ideological disputes between Mao and Khrushchev over Stalin's legacy and the future of Socialism played a vital role in radicalizing young Iranian activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many on the left, both secular and Islamic, studied Chinese texts and drew on Maoist theories to analyze Iran and devise new strategies to overthrow the Iranian monarchy. By the 1970s, both Communist activists and Islamist guerrillas began to engage with Maoist, Cuban, and Vietnamese politics. While some rejected these trends, others went so far as to endorse “Mao Zedong Thought” as their guiding principle. These dissidents were an integral part of a global shift towards radical politics among students and a wave of worldwide student protests in the late 1960s, sometimes called “global 1968.”

The combination of “official” diplomatic with “unofficial” social and cultural connections offers a few immediate scholarly advantages. First, this approach emphasizes the global origins of the Iranian revolution and the international context in which it developed. Traditional studies of modern Iranian history primarily focus on domestic factors, but more recent studies have taken a more transnational approach.<sup>4</sup> By focusing on the international rather than domestic factors that impacted the Iranian opposition, the revolution is demonstrated to be an intensely global affair, with centers of gravity from Berkeley to Beijing.

Second, it intervenes in the literature on Sino-Middle East and Chinese foreign

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<sup>4</sup> For a traditional account, Abrahamian, Ervand. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. (1983) and Keddie, Nikki. *Roots of Revolution* (1981). For more transnational studies, see Matin-Asgari, Afshin. *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity* (2018) and Alvandi, Roham: *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (2014)

policy, which lacks substantive analysis of Sino-Iranian relations from a historical perspective. The focus on social and cultural exchange allows us to ask new questions about the period before official contacts existed. What sorts of interactions persisted in the absence of state-to-state diplomacy? How did those interactions shape the image of China in the Iranian press and vice versa? How did those perceptions influence official and unofficial relations? Finally, it allows Iran and the Middle East to be integrated into the growing literature on Maoism as a global phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> Despite its influence on the international student movement, the literature is mostly silent on Iranian Maoism.

A brief word about sources: one of the reasons that no study has yet examined Sino-Iranian interactions from a social history perspective is the difficulty in accessing sources. The best materials on official interactions are in the diplomatic archives of either country. However, both Iranian and Chinese government archives are notoriously impenetrable to foreign researchers, especially in the current political climate. Travel to either country for academics is becoming more and more difficult. This record is incomplete and biased towards digitized materials; to that end, it has a more comprehensive view of the Chinese press, whose largest periodicals are, for the most part, digitized and easily searchable. Despite these issues, the evidence strongly suggests a rich history of Sino-Iranian interaction throughout the 20th century and Iranian media interest in China after the 1950s.

### Representation, Identity, and the Other in Sino-Iranian Relations

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<sup>5</sup> See Cook, Alexander. *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, Cambridge University Press (2014) and Lovell, Julia. *Maoism: A Global History* (2019)

Identity and international relations are intricately linked. Both historians and students of diplomacy have made this observation.<sup>6</sup> In a dissertation on an exchange of insults between Baltic and Russian diplomats in the 1990s, Wynne Russell explores the links between diplomacy and identity regarding self-representation and the maintenance of social hierarchies. She finds that contrary to what many diplomatic historians expect, identities play an important role in international relations:

Diplomatic exchanges are permeated with debates on the nature or fundamental qualities—one might say the identities—of nations, governments, non-state actors, or indeed any pertinent actor in the global social arena...The international “order” being negotiated through diplomatic exchanges is as much a social order as it is the presence of rules or the absence of war.<sup>7</sup>

There is no reason to limit this insight to official diplomatic relations: Identities are affirmed, contested, and negotiated as much through moments of unofficial contact as they are during official delegations, if not more so. Moments of mutual interaction and representation can be located within a variety of elite and non-elite interactions on either side. In these moments, especially when they represent themselves publicly or promote a particular social movement, citizens assume a role similar to a diplomatic representative and participate in a kind of representation of the self or a broader community, often with reference to a foreign “other.”

If representation is to be the focus of analysis, it is useful to give a precise definition. It is not used strictly in the diplomatic sense, as a diplomat representing a

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<sup>6</sup> Tsygankov, Andrei P. “Self and Other in International Relations Theory: Learning from Russian Civilizational Debates.” *International Studies Review* 10, no. 4 (2008): 762-75; Sharp, Paul. “For Diplomacy: Representation and the Study of International Relations” *International Studies Review* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 33-57

<sup>7</sup> Russel, Wynne Elizabeth. “Identity Diplomacy: A Study in Diplomatic Representation and the Ordering of International Society”. Thesis, PhD, National University of Australia (2003)

nation. Representation is taken more broadly to mean how one nation was *related to* the other by individuals at specific moments of cultural interaction. Using this definition, we achieve two goals: first, it allows for popular articles, unofficial diplomacy, travelogues, and memoirs as primary sources. As most official sources for Sino-Iranian relations remain inaccessible in Iranian and Chinese archives, this is crucial. Second, it highlights questions of identity, self-representation, and otherness, as these issues arise in both official and unofficial points of interactions.

Self-representation and representations of the other have been a perennial topic in the social sciences since at least the days of Edward Said. Debates within the fields of Iranian studies and Chinese studies reflect these concerns. Contestations over identity, representation, and the other have formed a crucial part of the development of each discipline's overall direction over the last few decades.

Within Iranian studies, “the West” looms large as the most prominent cultural “other” against which modern Iran has defined itself, both within the field and historically by Iranian and Western intellectuals. Early writings on Iranian modernity tended to juxtapose “traditional” and “modern” in a way that assumed the superiority, desirability, and modernity of all things Western. Mehrzad Boroujerdi explores how thinking about Europe and European others was a crucial part of the process of “becoming modern” for Iranian intelligentsia and sustained a powerful “nativist” discourse in opposition to it.<sup>8</sup> Boroujerdi, following Said and Foucault, examines “the machinery of representation, of how an other comes to be constituted” and how “the self

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<sup>8</sup> Boroujerdi, Mehrzad. *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism*” Syracuse University Press (1996)

is invariably linked with the other” in European modernity, as an object against which one’s self is invariably defined as superior.<sup>9</sup> Iranians engaged in that same process in their interactions with the West, which led to what Boroujerdi saw as “Orientalism in reverse,” a form of self-Orientalizing and self-othering that produced a problematic but popular nativist ideology.

Through travelogues, Iranians relayed their specific experiences with the West and made comparisons to their own society. Mohammad Reza Ghanoonparvar, Monica Ringer, and Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi have all demonstrated that travelogues “served as the narrative basis for instituting Europe as the cultural *other*” and functioned as a “Persian cultural mirror.”<sup>10</sup> Following Ringer, David Motadel argues that “nineteenth-century travelogues functioned as a vehicle for distinctive constructions of *self-other* dichotomies, and that they reflected Iranian awareness of life and events abroad.”<sup>11</sup> Motadel uses the travel diaries of Naser al-Din Shah (r.1848-1896), written over several European tours, to show how the *Safarnāma*<sup>12</sup> genre “could thereby serve as a unique channel for the conceptualization of an Iranian national self-shaping a sense of a collective Iranian elite identity.”<sup>13</sup> With few exceptions, this body of literature drew exclusively on European examples of an “other,” usually French but occasionally British or German.

Other works have begun to question or complicate this conception of Iranian

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 7

<sup>10</sup> Ghanoonparvar, M. R. *In a Persian Mirror: Images of the West and Westerners in Iranian Fiction*. (2010)

<sup>11</sup> Motadel, David. “The German Other: Nasir al-Din Shah's Perceptions of Difference and Gender during his Visits to Germany, 1873–89”. *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (July 2011), pp. 563-579, 567-568

<sup>12</sup> “Travelogue” in Persian

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 569



identity and the supremacy of the European cultural other. It is now more common to speak of Iranian modernities in the plural rather than a singular modernity, and to deconstruct Eurocentric theories of development, modernity, and identity construction.<sup>14</sup> Titles like “Neither Ākhūnd nor Fukulī” and “Both Eastern and Western” reflect the underlying drive to complicate the binary “East-West” narrative and see beyond the reflection of Europe in the Persian mirror. In these and other works, the field has turned away from Europe as the predominant cultural other and affords greater recognition of Iran’s engagement with a broader cultural world. For example, Afshin Marashi argues that Iran does not fit most European models of national and modern development. Instead of formulating identities along the lines of European philosophers like Habermas, the formation of a public sphere in Iran “enabled a much larger array of cultural possibilities and narrative forms to circulate and contest for hegemony.”<sup>15</sup> Rather than a dichotomy of traditional and modern, Marashi sees “secularized Iranian modernist discourse shar[ing] the same public sphere with the Shi’a religio-political tradition.”<sup>16</sup>

Social science research into Chinese identity has also identified a relationship between Chinese modernity and awareness of a Western “other.” However, more recent Chinese identity studies have been less concerned with a foreign (European) other and more with a domestic (ethnic) other. Chinese identity and ethnicity are notoriously

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<sup>14</sup> Matin, Kamran. Rezaeiyadi, Hamid. “Neither Ākhūnd nor Fukulī: Munāzirah and the Discourse of Iranian Modernity”. *Journal of Iranian Studies*, Volume 49, 2016 - Issue 5, pp. 855-885; Matin-Asgari, Afshin. *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity*. (2018)

<sup>15</sup> Marashi, Afshin. “Paradigms of Iranian Nationalism: History, Theory, and Historiography” in Aghaie, Scot Kamran and Afshin Marashi (Eds). *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*, University of Texas Press, (2014) p 15

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, emphasis in original.

difficult concepts to define but are inextricably linked. China's fifty-five official ethnic minorities (少数民族/*shaoshuminzu*) are considered ethnic others within China, in the same way that Chinese are typically considered ethnic others by societies outside of China. The dominant identity, Han Chinese, is also referred to as a *minzu* (民族) but has a distinctive social status and imagined "big brother-little brother" relationship *vis-à-vis* the others.<sup>17</sup> Thomas Mullaney has argued that Han-ness functions analogously to White-ness, in that it assimilates other groups and acquires color and characteristics by reference to other, usually darker-skinned groups.<sup>18</sup>

But for many years, scholars investigating "Chinese identity" and scholars investigating "ethnicity in China" were having two different discussions. The discussion of Chinese identity was characterized by attempts to delineate the essential features of what it means to be Chinese. The dominant "primordialist" (sometimes called "accretionary") approach was mostly interested in ethnic minorities primarily as "soon-to-be-Hans" that were in the process of assimilation. This propensity to assimilate was seen as a distinctive feature of Chinese identity, despite its apparent parallels to the "civilizing mission" of European colonialism.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, ethnic minorities were being investigated, primarily by anthropologists, as separate parts of the Chinese collective identity. The two fields did not have much to do with one another. Over the

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<sup>17</sup> This Chinese term is usually translated as "ethnicity". In the context of the Chinese state's usage, a *minzu* is an officially recognized group of people, usually conceptualized as having specific racial, lineage, linguistic, or cultural ties. Affiliation with a *minzu* can determine access to certain government social programs designed to help ethnic minorities. The vast majority of Chinese identify as Han, the dominant *minzu*.

<sup>18</sup> Mullaney, Thomas S. (Ed). *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*. University of California Press, Berkeley (2012)

<sup>19</sup> Xu, Jieshun. "Understanding the Snowball Theory of the Han Nationality" in Mullaney (2012)

last two decades, however, there has been a significant shift in how scholars view the relationship between ethnicity and Chinese identity. Instead of a model that considered Chinese and non-Chinese identity as two distinct and separate spheres, the two are seen as mutually influential and interactive.

In the early 1990s, a dialogue began between anthropologists who had been studying *shaoshuminzu* and China scholars who had been studying Han identity. One of the leading voices advocating a new approach from this group was Dru C. Gladney, who specializes in Uyghur Muslim society. Gladney conceptualized minority identity and Han identity as being co-dependent rather than competitive. In his view, “representations of the 'minority' in China reflects the objectivizing of a 'majority' nationality discourse...minority is to majority as female is to male, as 'Third' world is to 'First,'...The politics of representation in China reveals much about the state's project in constructing, in often binary minority/majority terms, an 'imagined' national identity.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, the dominant Chinese identity was constructed in relation to the way non-Han peoples are imagined to behave. Like Mullaney, Gladney borrows from the discourse of Critical Race Theory to describe Han as essentially an “opaque” identity that only attains “color” in relation to other groups, which are identified as having a variety of positive or negative traits based on the self-conception, or attempts to alter the self-conception, of the dominant social group. The Chinese state is deeply involved in constructing both dominant and minority ethnic identities.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gladney, Dru. “Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring majority/minority identities”. *Journal of Asian Studies* 53(1) (February 1994): pp. 92-123, 70-71

<sup>21</sup> Mullaney, Thomas S. *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*. University of California Press, (2011)

While these studies have contributed considerably to our understanding of ethnicity and the relationship between Han and minority identity, they typically only consider ethnic minorities as a reference point for Chinese identity. There may be advantages to considering others beyond the usual minority referents. For example, Elena Barabantseva has successfully applied this lens to the overseas Chinese community, which functions as a kind of unofficial ethnic minority living abroad. Stefan Landsberger has explored depictions of white Europeans in Chinese propaganda.<sup>22</sup> His approach echoes the study of *Safarname* and Iranian modernity in that it examines the construction of identity through reference to a Western other. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the representation of other Asians.

Both Iranian studies and Chinese studies converge on the need for a more thorough exploration of different others. In the case of Iran, the goal is to move past Eurocentric terms of analysis and to examine cultural and social interactions on distinct terms. In the case of China, the field has attempted to move beyond a regional or national framework and explore how Chinese identity is configured globally. Therefore, this dissertation will attempt to read Iranian and Chinese depictions of one another as instances of identity construction that involve inter-Asia, rather than East-West interactions.

### Towards a New Narrative of Sino-Iranian Relations

This dissertation is divided into four chapters, organized chronologically. Chapter 1 will examine the reconstruction of Sino-Iranian relations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Barabantseva, Elena. *Overseas Chinese, Ethnic Minorities and Nationalism: De-Centering Chin* (2011); Landsberger, Stefan. "European Others in Chinese Propaganda" in *Imagining Europe*. P.I.E Peter Lang, Brussels, (2008)

centuries, first along the lines of opposition to European colonialism, and then along its fault-lines and breakage points. It explores the technological innovations, from trains, to steamships, to telegraphs that contributed to the discontinuation and reconstitution of Sino-Iranian relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chinese interest in the Iranian revolution is examined in the context of a global Pan-Asian anti-colonial movement. Chinese elite ideas *about* China were expressed in a new anti-colonial discourse of Sino-Iranian solidarity, which imagined a global community of Asian constitutional states. Chinese and British elites debated the results and merits of Chinese and Iranian constitutionalism in the pages of Shanghai newspapers. As these information networks fell under Chinese control, expressions of support for the Iranian constitutional revolution increased accordingly.

Chapter 2 explores the development of semi-official relations between Iran and the Republic of China, 1920-1941. These relations are presented as “semi-official” because they mainly consisted of *ad hoc* diplomatic representation and were ultimately replaced by official relations with the People’s Republic of China.<sup>23</sup> It will sketch out a narrative of relations between Nationalist China and Pahlavi Iran and analyze the factors behind Sino-Iranian co-operation and competition at the League of Nations in the 1930s. This narrative emphasizes the role of Iranian and Chinese merchant interests in Shanghai, especially tea and silk traders. Unofficial commercial interests played a larger role than previously thought in driving the establishment of the Sino-Persian Treaty of 1920. As Sino-Iranian relations remained primarily confined to mutual admiration and low-level

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<sup>23</sup> Relations with Nationalist Republic of China (ROC) were terminated by Iran in 1971 in favor of relations with the Communist People's Republic of China (PRC).

diplomatic ties, this chapter works to recover how Chinese and Iranians represented relations with another and how these representations reflected their views about themselves. Positive portrayals of Reza Shah as a populist modernizer reflect ideological and political affinities between the two nations, which also contributed to the resumption of diplomatic ties after 400 years.

Chapter 3 surveys the impact of the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949 on official and unofficial Sino-Iranian relations. A robust network of ideological and social exchange existed in the 1950s between Communist China and Iranian Communist organizations like the Tudeh Party. From 1949 to 1959, the success of the CCP influenced both the Iranian state and opposition groups, creating two competing narratives of Chinese history in the Iranian public sphere. For some, China served as a dire warning of what could happen if the Iranian left proliferated unfettered, a tragic cautionary tale about the dangers of Communism. To others, China promised a bright, revolutionary future and provided a model to emulate, an inspiring example of what could be achieved through socialist mobilization. The first attitude, embraced by the Iranian state and its elite supporters, appeared in the pages of cultural magazines like *Ettela'at Haftegi* and in the writings of diplomats like Mehdi Farrokh, whose memoirs have never before been analyzed by scholars. Iranian communists and student activists demonstrated the second through official expressions of solidarity and occasional participation in Chinese international socialist events.

Chapter 4 considers the background, history, and impact of the Iranian Maoist movement, Maoism, and the Sino-Soviet split on Iran's leftist politics. It aims

to construct a general narrative of the Iranian Maoist movement through interviews with former members of the Revolutionary Organization. From their base in Britain and then later Germany, Iranian students used Maoism to overshadow the traditional leadership of the Iranian Left and chart a new, revolutionary path forward that embraced armed struggle and the Chinese position in the Sino-Soviet split. Furthermore, it analyzes the impact of this movement and why China was willing to sponsor it. In short, the Chinese gained a valuable source of information about Iran and a useful propaganda tool. While Maoism echoed throughout the tactics of the Marxist and Muslim opposition and in the cynically borrowed rhetoric of the Iranian state, it was ultimately China's equally cynical and sudden support of the Shah that would seriously undercut the appeal of Maoism in an Iranian context. In this respect, China's attempts to court both the Shah and the Iranian Communist movement reveals an adaptive and highly flexible foreign policy that privileges China's strategic interests and national prestige above all else. The final section argues that this was a conscious effort on the part of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. His efforts to reach out to China directly followed an attempt on his life by a student loosely affiliated with the RO, and were in part an effort to reduce the appeal of Chinese propaganda.

## Chapter 1: The Reconstitution of Sino-Iranian Relations, 1905-1925

China and Iran have historically been indirectly linked through language, trade, and imperial diplomacy.<sup>24</sup> Persian was an important courtly and religious language throughout Asia, and it played a minor role in Chinese politics throughout the medieval and pre-modern periods.<sup>25</sup> Sogdian merchants, musicians, and performers were commonly found at Tang (618-907 CE) courts and are depicted in art.<sup>26</sup> During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368 CE), China and Persia were nominally linked by Mongol rule, and Persian was one of the official administrative languages. A few Persians held important status in China as members of the *semuren*, an administrative class made up of non-Mongol, non-Chinese subjects.<sup>27</sup> Ming (1368-1644 CE) scribes continued translating proclamations into Persian and maintained tributary relations with Persian-speaking polities.<sup>28</sup> Chinese potters crafted blue and white wares specifically designed for the Middle Eastern market, and in Safavid Iran (1501-1736 CE) porcelain was highly valued by elites and those with elite pretensions.<sup>29</sup> Although official contact was rare, there was little distinction on either side between envoys, tributary missions, and

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<sup>24</sup> Balland, Daniel et al. "Chinese-Iranian Relations". *EncyclopediaIranica*. Vol. V, Fasc. 4, pp. 424-448 and Vol. V, Fasc. 5, pp. 449-460.

<sup>25</sup> Green, Nile (ed). "The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca" (2019)

<sup>26</sup> Di Cosmo, Nicola, Michael Maas, and Rong Xinjiang. "Sogdian Merchants and Sogdian Culture on the Silk Road." Cambridge University Press (2018)

<sup>27</sup> Haw, Stephen G. "The Semu Ren in the Yuan Empire" *Ming Qing Yanjiu* XVIII (2014). It is important to note that, according to Haw, the *semuren* are predominantly Turkic, not Persian, and he criticizes a tendency to exaggerate the Persian-ness of the *semuren*.

<sup>28</sup> Ford, Graeme. "The Uses of Persian in Imperial China: The Translation Practices of the Great Ming". in Green (2019)

<sup>29</sup> Rogers, J.M. "Chinese-Iranian Relations iv. The Safavid Period, 1501-1732." *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Vol. V, Fasc. 4, pp. 436-438. (2011) One of the two largest collections of blue-and-white Chinese porcelain in the world is located at the Ardabil Čīnī-kāna (China House), originally donated as a collection of 1,162 pieces by Shah 'Abbās I. Many of these were acquired as diplomatic gifts, both from Chinese envoys and from other heads of state that prized Chinese porcelain. The largest collection is in Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul, Turkey.



independent merchants, all of whom could be seen as representatives of their people.<sup>30</sup>

While these ties were comparatively low-level and should not be exaggerated, they demonstrate the extent to which early Sino-Iranian relations were the result of pre-modern networks of political power and economic exchange.

By the Qing period (1644-1912), connections between Persia and China had become even more limited. The use of Persian as an administrative language and the popularity of Persian texts among the Chinese Muslim community decreased compared to earlier periods.<sup>31</sup> This change was partly due to the elevated political importance of Turkic languages after the conquest of Xinjiang and other Western territories populated by Turkic speaking Muslims in 1755, and in part due to increased links between China and the Arab Middle East through networks of European colonialism.<sup>32</sup> By the early 1900s, traditional ties between China and Iran had lost their earlier significance. At the same time, new forms of political and intellectual contact emerged from a common search for modernity. Once connected by merchant caravans and imperial decrees, it was now European steamships, railroads, and newspapers that created new opportunities for Sino-Iranian connections. Chinese intellectuals, and later Iranian statesmen and dissidents, could now learn about one another and incorporate this knowledge into their own political and social identities. Internationalism was at the heart of a new discourse that compared China to Iran in political terms, leading to significant developments among Iranian leftists in the decades to come. In this way,

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<sup>30</sup> Rogers, J.M. "Chinese-Iranian Relations ii. Islamic Period to the Mongols" *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. V, Fasc. 4, pp.431-434 (2011)

<sup>31</sup> Brophy, David. "A Lingua Franca in Decline? The Place of Persian in Qing China". In Green (2018)

<sup>32</sup> Green, Nile. "From the Silk Road to the Railroad (and Back): The Means and Meanings of the Iranian Encounter with China," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2, (2013), pp. 165-192

Sino-Iranian relations were not so much revived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as reconstituted through modern technological, political, and ideological networks.

This chapter examines the emergence of a new, modern discourse of Sino-Iranian relations, beginning with the reception of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in China. It outlines the decline of traditional ties between China and Iran and the rise of new transportation and industrial technologies that enabled new networks to replace them. The analysis begins with the emergence of their two constitutional revolutions in the context of a global discourse of constitutional reform. Through a close reading of Chinese newspapers and diplomatic gazettes, it traces the start of a discourse of modern Sino-Iranian relations that was inextricably bound up in the history of imperialism and colonialism. As newspapers in Shanghai moved from British to Chinese control, the editorial slant shifted from opposing constitutional rule to supporting it. While Iranians were comparably less aware of Chinese history, they were still connected to an emerging pan-Asian anti-colonial discourse that included Chinese, Indian, Turkish, and Japanese voices. Their frustrations with British colonialism and despotic rule created a common language across Asia that laid the groundwork for later generations to see Sino-Iranian relations as natural and desirable.

### China, Iran, and the Infrastructure of Globalization

While China has a long history of interaction both friendly and fraught with the Persianate world, the modern significance of these ties should not be overemphasized. Although the Silk Road has, in recent years, become what Nile Green calls “an explanatory and emotive paradigm” for all aspects of the Sino-Iranian relationship,

there is little evidence that this history played a substantial role in the modern era.<sup>33</sup> As Green's research has demonstrated, traditional ties between the two empires had lapsed by the 1900s. Persian was rarely spoken among Chinese Muslims, and Persian manuscripts were rapidly being translated into local languages.<sup>34</sup> The use of Persian manuscripts was further marginalized by the spread of the *Han Kitab*, a collection of Chinese Muslim writings that attempts to harmonize Islamic and Confucian thought, and later by 19<sup>th</sup> century Islamic revivalists who championed Arabic texts.<sup>35</sup> David Brophy gives a fairly dim assessment of the status of Persian in the latter days of the Chinese Empire: "For Qing officials, Persian was the language of a set of relatively insignificant tributary polities to the west of Xinjiang...The court had little to no knowledge of Iran as a distinct political actor, nor did it have direct diplomatic contact with Mughal India, and it therefore saw no need to enhance its ability to communicate with the outside world in Persian."<sup>36</sup> Studies such as Green's and Brophy's show the historical discontinuities of Iran-China relations.

Green also notes that the physical infrastructure that connected East Asia and the Middle East had dramatically changed.<sup>37</sup> Both China and Iran underwent profound technological and economic changes at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. New technologies, especially railroads and steamships, had replaced the slow overland routes made possible by the Mongols. Advances in printing allowed Arabic books to reach China and allowed Chinese Muslims to study in Egypt, India, the Ottoman Empire, and other

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<sup>33</sup> Green, Nile (2013), 184

<sup>34</sup> Brophy, 188

<sup>35</sup> Matsumoto, Masumi. "Islamic Reform in Muslim Periodicals." *Etudes Orientales* 21–22 (2004): 88–104.

<sup>36</sup> Brophy, 188

<sup>37</sup> Green (2013), 170

Muslim countries – but critically not in Iran. Unlike other Muslim states, Iran’s ruling Qājār Dynasty (1789-1925) pursued no outreach projects to Chinese Muslims, although Iranian traders flourished throughout coastal southern China and Southeast Asia through their own initiative.<sup>38</sup> Railroads and steamships also brought Chinese Muslims to the Arab Middle East and Arab Muslims to China.<sup>39</sup> These exchanges were not facilitated by economic exchange or motivated by nostalgia for a lost connection, but rather by the emergence of European colonialism and the challenges it posed to Asian societies. In other words, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, connections between Iran and China were mediated not by overland trade networks or shared historical memory, but rather the “industrial infrastructure of European-dominated globalization.”<sup>40</sup>

Among the technological and industrial changes that impacted Sino-Iranian relations, three stand out as the most influential: the development of railroad and steamship networks, the emergence of a print and newspaper culture, and the invention of the telegraph. Railroads and steamships enabled the exchange of people and commercial goods while also directing their flow through European-controlled networks. Newspapers and telegram networks allowed literate elites to follow daily discussions of international news for the first time. These advances created new opportunities for travel and the exchange of information. They also produced networks that were controlled by European colonial powers. In exchange for control over Iranian natural resources and critical infrastructure, Russia and Great Britain were all too

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<sup>38</sup> Roy, Edward Van. *Siamese Melting Pot: Ethnic Minorities in the Making of Bangkok*. ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute (2017)

<sup>39</sup> Green (2013), 172

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 179

happy to provide the capital and expertise necessary for technological development. Iranian and Chinese courts were equally eager to grant extraordinary concessions for cash payments and modern infrastructure. These policies sparked serious opposition from those affected by the economic disruption caused by European intrusion. Nowhere is this dynamic better exemplified than in the story of the trans-Iranian railway.

Railways came late to Iran. There was no construction on a major railway network until 1927, and it was not completed until 1938.<sup>41</sup> This delayed development resulted from Iran's geographic location between the British and Russian Empires, which each sought to connect Iran to their own networks and bypass the other.<sup>42</sup> The first Qājār attempt to build a national railroad came in 1872, in the form of the Reuter Concession. The government sought to grant the right to construct a railway system to German-born entrepreneur Baron Julius de Reuter (1816-1899) of Great Britain. In exchange, he merely asked for the right to nearly all future industrial development, exploitation of natural resources, and financial institutions.<sup>43</sup> Reuter was required only to pay 20% annual income for the railroad system and 15% for the other monopolies granted, as well as a cursory "loan" of 200,000. The concession was so outrageous that Lord Curzon, himself a proponent of British imperialism, called it "the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign

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<sup>41</sup> Patrick Clawson, "Knitting Iran Together: The Land Transport Revolution, 1920–1940," *Iranian Studies* 26 (1993): 235–50.

<sup>42</sup> Koyagi, Mikiya. "The Vernacular Journey: Railway Travelers in Early Pahlavi Iran, 1925-1950". *Int. J. Middle East Stud.* 47 (2015), 745–763, pp. 747-748

<sup>43</sup> Amanat, Abbas. *Iran, A Modern History* (2017), 385-386

hands that has ever been dreamt of.”<sup>44</sup> Nasir al-Din Shah (1831-1896) was forced to cancel the plan due to widespread opposition to avert a palace revolt

In response to this move, members of the Qājār elite attempted to work with religious officials and merchants to agitate for the construction of a railroad without foreign involvement.<sup>45</sup> As Koyagi and others have argued, “the trans-Iranian railway was thus conceived as a countermeasure against imperial railway projects. It was expected to create a Tehran-centered national economy in Iran that fostered domestic circulation of commodities and international trade.”<sup>46</sup> These efforts were frustrated when the Shah signed an agreement with Russia in 1890 that banned further railway construction out of a desire to block the entry of European goods into northern Iran.<sup>47</sup> The ban lasted until 1910 when further construction was frustrated by the outbreak of World War I.<sup>48</sup> The trans-Iranian railroad was but one of many issues that led to Iranian elites’ frustrations with British and Russian politics, which were directly tied to their economic concerns. Abbas Amanat describes the Reuter Concession as “Iran’s first experience with large-scale Western capital [that] bore all the marks of unreserved exploitation.” This experience would leave a lasting negative impression, one that would be shared by China for similar reasons.

The Reuter Concession was part of a larger pattern of capitulations to foreign governments that would leave the Qājār state politically and financially dependent on

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<sup>44</sup> Curzon, George. *Persia and the Persian Question*. (1892) pp. 480

<sup>45</sup> Koyagi, 747

<sup>46</sup> Koyagi, 746

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*

colonial powers. Over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Iran suffered a string of diplomatic and military defeats that resulted in the imposition of humiliating treaties, including the treaties of Golestān (1813), Turkmanchay (1828), and Paris (1857).<sup>49</sup> The resultant loss of territory and sovereignty to the Russian and British Empires led to a severe reduction in Persia's status and prestige internationally.<sup>50</sup> Amanat argues that as Europeans made diplomatic and territorial gains in Iran, they also pursued “interventions in Iran’s domestic affairs and...race[d] to acquire commercial and other advantages, capitulatory rights, and, later, economic concessions. Europe’s condescending attitude, gradually setting in as Iran’s weaknesses on the battlefield became more apparent, served as a cultural backdrop.”<sup>51</sup> This allowed European nations to extract legal and economic concessions from the court that facilitated Iran's economic penetration by European goods.<sup>52</sup> The Qājār court was equally eager for short-term gain and susceptible to the pressure from the Great Powers and their Iranian supporters, and therefore frequently granted or even sought out these concessions.<sup>53</sup>

The loss of territory and sovereignty also spurred members of the Qājār elite to pursue a “defensive modernization” policy. These efforts led to institutions like Dār ul-Funun, the first university in Iran, and other educational, industrial, and military reform attempts.<sup>54</sup> Reformers like Amir Kabir (1807-1852) and Melkum Khan (1834-1908)

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<sup>49</sup> Abrahamian (2008), 36

<sup>50</sup> Abrahamian (2008), 37

<sup>51</sup> Amanat (2017), 276

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>53</sup> Amanat (2017), 412-413

<sup>54</sup> Abrahamian (2008), 38

spent their careers promoting administrative, military, and economic reforms.<sup>55</sup> However, scandals, court inertia, and a lack of finances prevented the reform movement from making significant progress. Naser al-Din Shah executed Amir Kabir due to the opposition generated within the court to his reform measures. Melkum Khan was exiled in 1889 over a scandal involving a lottery concession and spent his later years publishing *Qanun*, a banned magazine that attacked the Iranian government.<sup>56</sup> Despite some successes, these attempts at reform were ultimately insufficient and contributed to the court's perpetually poor finances, which spurred the sale of more concessions.<sup>57</sup>

By the 1890s, a litany of concessions had been granted to foreign governments and individuals to develop natural resources, public utilities, and financial institutions. Rights to Caspian fisheries, mines in Azerbaijan, river navigation, and the right to apply Iranian law to foreign citizens (extraterritoriality) were all signed away.<sup>58</sup> Nationalists criticized the move for selling out Iran's economic sovereignty, and religious officials argued that it was contrary to Islamic property laws.<sup>59</sup> In addition to offending religious and nationalist sensibilities, this also opened up Iranian merchants to competition from foreign goods. Widespread opposition continued to build and periodically exploded into open unrest. The most famous example of this is the 1891

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<sup>55</sup> For more on Amir Kabir see Amanat, Abbas. *Pivot of the Universe : Nasir Al-din Shah Qājār and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896*. Berkeley: University of California Press (1997)

<sup>56</sup> Keddie, Nikki. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. Yale University Press (2006). Khan was eventually reinstated in 1898.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 39

<sup>58</sup> Floor, Willem and Mansoureh Ettehadiéh. "Concessions" *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Vol. VI, Fasc. 2, pp. 119-122 (2011)

<sup>59</sup> Moaddel, Mansoor. "Shi'i Political Discourse and Class Mobilization in the Tobacco Movement of 1890-1892". *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 7, No. 3 pp. 447-468 (1992) 460



Tobacco Concession, which triggered a popular protest movement and substantial urban riots against the concession and European influence in general.<sup>60</sup> One merchant in Tabriz placed an anonymous placard in response to a British notice captured the popular sentiment:

Ulemas [sic] of the town! Law is the law of religion and not the laws of the Europeans!

Woe to those Ulemas who will not co-operate with the nation! Woe to those who will not spend their lives and property! Anyone of the Ulemas who will not agree with the people will lose his life. Woe to anyone who may sell one muskal of Tobacco to the Europeans! Woe to the Europeans who may wish to enforce these customs of the Infidels. We will kill the Europeans first, and then plunder their property...Woe to those who will keep quiet!

Curses on the father of anyone who may destroy this Notice!<sup>61</sup>

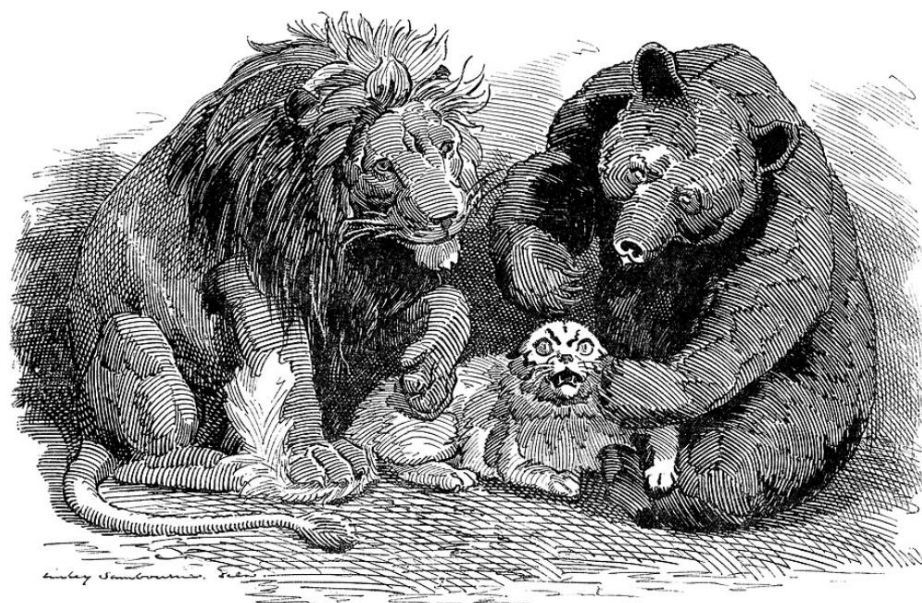
The movement against the Tobacco Concession is widely considered by scholars to be a “dress rehearsal” for the Constitutional Revolution, as it brought together religious, economic, nationalist, and democratic critiques of the government and focused them on a particular issue.<sup>62</sup> This formula would prove equally potent in China, which underwent its own history of capitulation and humiliation.

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>61</sup> Moaddel, 461

<sup>62</sup> Amanat, Abbas. “Constitutional Revolution i. Intellectual background.” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. VI, Fasc. 2, pp. 163-176



THE HARMLESS NECESSARY CAT.

BRITISH LION (to Russian Bear). "LOOK HERE! YOU CAN PLAY WITH HIS HEAD, AND I CAN PLAY WITH HIS TAIL, AND WE CAN BOTH STROKE THE SMALL OF HIS BACK."  
 PERSIAN CAT. "I DON'T REMEMBER HAVING BEEN CONSULTED ABOUT THIS!"

*Fig 1. Edward Linley Sambourne, Punch Magazine, 1907.*

The history of railroad construction in China echoes that of Iran in several ways. The Qing government's desire for a railway network was spurred by their humiliating defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895).<sup>63</sup> Over the next decade, a rail system was developed by British, French, German, and other interests that connected Chinese ports to interior provinces.<sup>64</sup> Like in Iran, the construction of Chinese railroads was "framed by the political and economic motivations of foreign powers," notably those who had received concessions in the form of treaty ports – enclaves where foreign law took precedent over Chinese law and foreigners were granted special rights.<sup>65</sup> In 1911,

<sup>63</sup> Paine, S. C. M. *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895: Perceptions, Power, and Primacy*. Cambridge University Press (2003)

<sup>64</sup> Köll, Elisabeth. *Railroads and the Transformation of China*. Harvard University Press (2019)

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 20

the Qing government moved to nationalize the railroad system under foreign pressure through loans provided by the same European governments.<sup>66</sup> Opposition coalesced under the Railway Protection Movement (*Bǎo lù yùndòng* 保路运动), which objected to state appropriation and concessionary practices.<sup>67</sup> Opponents drew on an anti-colonial discourse which accused the government of selling out Chinese sovereign and economic rights to Western powers. One pamphlet in Sichuan included the following text, which illustrates the local mood:

In Provision One, the Qing Dynasty is borrowing six million pounds sterling from the Four Powers bank consortium, and this money is borrowed for the railway. This is like a farmer writing a borrower's note, taking on debt to mortgage the fields...Provision Nine is truly tragic, reading it brings grief to one's heart, it mortgages 5.2 million in provincial transit duties, with principal and interest to be repaid upon maturity...Open your eyes and screw up your courage, seize our railway and seize the customhouses!<sup>68</sup>

Such sentiments echoed similar voices in Iran. Local officials of various backgrounds led movements to either end, block, or reclaim control from European powers.

Railroad development was accompanied by steamboat technology. Steamship routes between Iran and India were initiated in 1862 as part of a British attempt to organize and control the post system in Iran.<sup>69</sup> These networks remained of marginal importance, as Iran made no serious attempts to develop maritime power. In China, however, extensive networks of rivers were vital to the strategic and economic control

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<sup>66</sup> Shilong, Liu. "Political chess and vernacular discursive strategies: A study of the late Qing Sichuan Railway Protection Movement". *Chinese Studies in History*, Vol 49, Issue 3, pp. 126-141 (2016)

<sup>67</sup> Rankin, Mary Backus. "Nationalistic Contestation and Mobilization Politics: Practice and Rhetoric of Railway Rights Recovery at the End of the Qing." *Modern China*, vol. 28, no. 3, (2002), pp. 315-361

<sup>68</sup> Liu, 129

<sup>69</sup> Sreberny-Mohammadi, Annabelle and 'Alī Mohammadi. "Communications in Persia." *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. VI, Fasc. 1, pp. 89-95 (2011)

of the country. As a result, steamships were a significant preoccupation of Chinese reformers. The China Merchants Steam Navigation Company was founded in 1872 by Qing official Li Hongzhang (1823-1901) to challenge the supremacy of American and European shipping companies. Over the next few decades, it succeeded in out-competing their main competitors and bought out the bankrupt American Shanghai Steam Navigation Company.<sup>70</sup> Although most of the industry remained in Japanese or British hands, the China Merchants Steam Navigation Company became one of China's four largest shipping companies.<sup>71</sup> Li Hongzhang's success was one of the early victories of the Self-Strengthening Movement, which called for national renewal and industrial development.

The Self-Strengthening Movement sought to reform the Qing Dynasty by integrating Western approaches to science, warfare, and government with Chinese imperial traditions. Like Iran, China experienced a decline of international prestige and military power relative to the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>72</sup> Like Iran, China was subject to humiliating demands following a string of military defeat, often referred to as the Unequal Treaties. The first of these was the Treaty of Nanking (1843), imposed upon China by the British after the First Opium War (1839-1842).<sup>73</sup> In addition to monetary concessions, tax exemptions, and extraterritorial rights for British citizens, it also

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<sup>70</sup> Stephen R. Halsey. "Sovereignty, Self-Strengthening, and Steamships in Late Imperial China." *Journal of Asian History*, vol. 48, no. 1, (2014), pp. 81–111

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 81

<sup>72</sup> For an overview of recent scholarship on the Self-Strengthening Movement, see: Chang, Adam. "Reappraising Zhang Zhidong: Forgotten Continuities During China's Self-Strengthening, 1884-1901". *Journal of Chinese Military History* 6.2, 157-192 (2017)

<sup>73</sup> Platt, Stephen R. *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age*. Knopf (2018) See also: Polachek, James M. *The Inner Opium War*. Brill (1991)

demanded four treaty ports and the island of Hong Kong. The treaties of Whampoa (1844) and Aigun (1858) soon followed, which established similar legal rights for the French and the Russian Empires. Soon, Europeans controlled most modern Chinese industries and even oversaw tax collection, ostensibly to ensure repayment of indemnities from the Opium Wars. China was “carved up like a melon” into various spheres of influence, an image that remains a potent memory in Chinese nationalism to this day.<sup>74</sup> Like in Iran, these crises forced the Qing government to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation and make attempts to reform, while simultaneously entangling them in relations with European powers that would make successful reform nearly impossible.

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<sup>74</sup> Gries, Peter Hayes. “Narratives to Live By: The ‘Century of Humiliation’ and Chinese National Identity Today,” in Lionel M. Jensen and Timothy B. Weston, eds., *China's Transformations: The Stories Beyond the Headlines*. Rowman and Littlefield pp. 112–128 (2006), *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*. University of California Press (2004)



Fig 2. A political cartoon by Tse Tsan Tai 謝纘泰 (1872-1937), *The Situation in the Far East* (時局全圖), Hong Kong, July 1899. Different animals and characters represent foreign influence: the Russian Bear, the English Bulldog, the French Frog, the American Eagle, and in Japan, a malevolent Rising Sun.

The development of steamboat technology was a critical component of the Self-Strengthening Movement, as steamboat technology was itself critical to the national humiliations (*guóchǐ* 國恥) of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The British were able to win both Opium Wars with little difficulty because of their naval superiority.<sup>75</sup> In the First Opium War, British steamships attacked Canton from a direction believed impossible

<sup>75</sup> Platt, 140

by the Qing, as they could navigate in exceptionally shallow waters.<sup>76</sup> As a result, early proponents of the movement like Li Hongzhang, Zeng Guofan (1811-1872), and Zuo Zongtong (1812-1885) prioritized military modernization and created arsenals in Nanjing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Fuzhou.<sup>77</sup> Despite having no official government sponsorship, Li Hongzhang took it upon himself to modernize the military units under his control. Later, he used tax revenue under his control to sponsor the famed Beiyang Fleet (北洋舰队), one of four modern navies created by the Qing during the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>78</sup> Despite some successes, in 1895, the much-vaunted fleet was annihilated by the Japanese at the Battle of Weihaiwei. Like the Qājār's "defensive modernization," Chinese Self-Strengthening could not prevent the state's collapse.

Both Chinese and Iranian ambitions for reform were cut short by the pressure of European and Japanese colonialism. Still, their reforms were not without consequence. Both contributed to a discourse of national revival and political reform that laid the groundwork for the constitutional movement. More directly, railroads and steamships would forever change China and Iran's physical and economic realities, just as the circumstance of their emergence would bring about entirely new political dynamics. These new technologies made international travel more accessible than ever, even if they discouraged direct connections between Iran and China.

Still, some people did travel between China and Iran. Iranian and Chinese elites had access to the same European-based global colonial networks. For example,

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>77</sup> Hsu, Immanuel C. Y. "The Rise of Modern China" 5th ed. (1995) pp. 261–94

<sup>78</sup> Wright, R., *The Chinese Steam Navy, 1862–1945* (London, 2001)

newspapers record dozens of Persian ships docking in Shanghai every week by the 1930s.<sup>79</sup> Green points out that “steamship connections were a key factor in enabling Chinese Muslim contact with Egypt, Arabia and India, as well as in enabling increasing numbers of Hui (Chinese Muslims) to perform the hajj.”<sup>80</sup> In 1904 Mehdi Qolī Hedāyat (1864-1955) journeyed to China as part of an international journey and pilgrimage that combined both steamboat and rail travel.<sup>81</sup> He frequently uses Russian, French, and German to communicate with fellow passengers and local officials, stays in hotels staffed by Europeans, and travels along “British-operated boats and Russian-operated trains.”<sup>82</sup> Qolī Hedāyat was an exceptional case, however. There does not seem to have been any significant amount of Sino-Iranian traffic at this time, nor do any of these journeys produce significant travelogues beyond Hedāyat’s. More important to the history of Sino-Iranian relations was the sharing of information and the discourse of solidarity enabled by newspapers and telegraph networks.

#### Communicating Ideas: Newspapers and the Pan-Asian Constitutional Movement

The telegraph created previously impossible connections between Iran, China, and the rest of Asia. Electric telegraphy, which became commercially viable in the 1840s and was widespread by the 1850s, enabled near-instantaneous communications across long distances for the first time in human history.<sup>83</sup> Telegraph networks throughout Asia were shaped by the interplay of foreign ownership, international

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<sup>79</sup> “Weekly Ship Arrivals”, *Shen Bao*, 8/24/1936

<sup>80</sup> Green (2013), 171. Green’s essay gives a full account and analysis of this text.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 173-174

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 179

<sup>83</sup> Wenzlhuemer, Roland. *Connecting the Nineteenth-Century World the Telegraph and Globalization*. Cambridge University Press (2012)



interests, and Chinese politics.<sup>84</sup> British, Russian, and Dutch interests all competed over control of China's telegraphy market.<sup>85</sup> In Iran, the Qājār government undertook the initial construction of a small network of telegraphs. It was not until the Indo-European telegraph line, completed in 1865 by German firm Siemens & Halske and supported by British and Russian capital, that a truly international network was in place.<sup>86</sup> Upon its successful construction, entrepreneur Werner von Siemens remarked: "Shout it from the rooftops [...] that we made it to Teheran in one minute and to Calcutta in 28." Such speed allowed early 20<sup>th</sup>-century newspapers to carry news of revolutions from across Asia, and the world, with little delay. It enabled elites in China and Iran to follow international affairs week to week and month to month. Most of the Chinese newspapers cited in this study reported international news via telegraph cables from Tehran, London, Moscow, or other imperial centers.

In both Iran and China, print culture was intimately tied to the spread of ideas about democracy, nationalism, and constitutional rule.<sup>87</sup> Journalism emerged in Iran in the latter half of the Qājār period and was primarily a state-run enterprise.<sup>88</sup> These publications were mostly concerned with court matters and had a limited audience, as literacy was not widespread.<sup>89</sup> Persian-language newspapers published abroad, like *Qānūn* (London), *Ḥabl al-matīn* (Calcutta), and *Aktar* (Istanbul), were less controlled

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<sup>84</sup> Wei, Shuge. "Circuits of Power: China's Quest for Cable Telegraph Rights, 1912–1945." *Journal of Chinese History*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 113–135 (2019), 113

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 117

<sup>86</sup> Shahvar, Soli. "Telegraph i. First Telegraph Lines in Persia." *EncyclopaediaIranica*. Available online. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/telegraph-i-first-telegraph-lines-in-persia> Accessed 9/25/2020. (2009 )

<sup>87</sup> Vejdani, Farzin. *Making History in Iran : Education, Nationalism, and Print Culture*. Stanford University Press (2014)

<sup>88</sup> Nabavi, Negin. "Journalism 1. Qājār Period". *EncyclopaediaIranica*. Vol. XV, Fasc. 1, pp. 46-54 (2012)

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*

and helped spread support for constitutional rule among educated elites.<sup>90</sup> They also helped inform Iranians of events in the outside world. *Habl al-matīn*, in particular, would often carry news of events in China, although this does not seem to have had a significant effect on its Iranian audience at this time. After the constitutional revolution in 1906, print culture experienced an explosion of popularity in Iran, as newspapers made a conscious effort to appeal to the masses and illiterate people gathered in coffee houses to hear the news read aloud.<sup>91</sup> By 1908, more than 18 newspapers vied for the reading public's attention, and many espoused some form of pro-constitution, revolutionary nationalist politics.

One of the most prominent voices from this time was Iranian intellectual and linguist Ali-Akbar Dehkhodā (1879-1956), who lampooned the government through satirical articles in the liberal revolutionary newspaper *Šūr-e Esrāfīl* (Trumpet of Esrafil) from 1907 to 1909. In one such column, Dehkhodā lists a few sentiments in his signature tongue-in-cheek style that he claims he is *not* expressing:

I'm not saying the Iranian people were once the first nation in the world and today, thanks to the ministrations of these same leaders, it is the disgrace of contemporary civilization.

I'm not saying that the frontiers of Iran once extended from beyond the Great Wall of China to the banks of the river Danube and today, by reason of the efforts of these leaders, if in the length and breadth of Iran two mice have a quarrel, one of them will bump its head against the wall.

I'm not saying that with all these chiefs and bosses all looking after us, only the other day eighteen cities of ours in the Caucasus were bagged by the Russians, and that a few days hence the rest of them will be carved up like sacrificial meat.

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>91</sup> Sīrjānī, 'Alī-Akabr Sa'īdī. "Constitutional Revolution vi. The press." *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. VI, Fasc. 2, pp. 202-212

I'm not saying that for many years Europe has not had to suffer plague or pestilence, while every other year we must bury with our own hands half a million of the working population—that is, of our own young men and women.

I'm not saying that in these past few centuries every state has pulled itself up by its bootstraps, extended its sway over its own territory, established colonies, while we, for all our chiefs and superiors with their protection of our country, have not even been able to protect our own nation.

No, I'm not saying any of this. Because I know that it all goes back to fate and chance. All this was our destiny, all decreed as the fate of us Iranians.<sup>92</sup>

Many constitutionalist papers like this attracted the ire of the government, including

*Šūr-e Esrāfīl*, which was banned in 1909. Its authors were forced into exile in Europe.<sup>93</sup>

*Ḥabl al-matīn*, which had also begun to publish a liberal Tehran daily, was also

suspended four times between 1907 and 1909.<sup>94</sup> This heavy press censorship only

encouraged the popularity of newspapers printed abroad.<sup>95</sup>

Newspapers in China had their origins in the designs of British industrialists and Protestant missionaries.<sup>96</sup> Published in Chinese and English, they allowed the growing Chinese reading public to join a “global public” that exposed them to new ideas, arguments, and events – and not only from the West.<sup>97</sup> Although initially dominated by British and American publishers, numerous Chinese publications emerged over time, from literary magazines to illustrated journals. Especially in Shanghai, print culture became a vibrant and integral part of city life and significantly impacted the

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<sup>92</sup> Dehkhoda, Ali-Akbar, Janet Afary and John R Perry (trans). *Charand-o Parand : Revolutionary Satire From Iran, 1907-1909*. Yale University Press (2016) 248-249

<sup>93</sup> Soroudi, Sorour. “*Šūr-e Esrāfīl*, 1907-08: Social and Political Ideology”. *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 230-248 (1988)

<sup>94</sup> Parvin, Nassereddin. *ḤABL AL-MATIN* EncyclopaediaIranica. Vol. XI, Fasc. 4, pp. 431-434 (2012)

<sup>95</sup> Sīrjānī

<sup>96</sup> Zhang, Xiantao. *The Origins of the Modern Chinese Press : the Influence of the Protestant Missionary Press in Late Qing China*. Routledge (2007)

<sup>97</sup> Wagner, Rudolf G. (ed) *Joining the Global Public : Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870-1910*. State University of New York Press (2007)

development of a modern notion of Chinese identity.<sup>98</sup> Newspapers were also intentionally acquired by Chinese entrepreneurs for the express purpose of supporting national development and reform.<sup>99</sup> Like in Iran, newspapers became an important medium for spreading reformist and revolutionary ideas that supported a constitutional government.<sup>100</sup> These developments set the stage for a new discourse of Sino-Iranian relations based around revolutionary politics. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese intellectuals took a renewed interest in Iran's political situation with the advent of constitutional movements in both countries.

In China, constitutionalism emerged as a response to the Qing government's failures to adapt to European competition. The government's political position became even more precarious at the turn of the century with the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), a massive uprising that required foreign troops to put down. The colonial powers took advantage of the situation to force the Qing government to accept the Boxer Protocol, which demanded 450 million taels of silver (\$333 million) and prohibited the import of arms or arms production materials for two years. As a result, the government belatedly agreed to implement a series of reforms called the New Policies (新政). The first real concessions to the constitutional movement came under Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), who began exploring the idea of a provisional national assembly in 1905. That same year, several other landmark reforms were announced, such as

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<sup>98</sup> Mittler, Barbara. *A Newspaper for China? : Power, Identity, and Change In Shanghai's News Media, 1872-1912*. Harvard University Asia Center (2004)

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>100</sup> For more on Shanghai newspapers during this era, see: Mittler, Barbara. *A Newspaper for China? : Power, Identity, and Change In Shanghai's News Media, 1872-1912*

abolishing the traditional Chinese civil servant examination system, one of the main symbols of traditional authority left in the Empire. Despite these commitments, the assembly did not meet until 1909, a year after her death. In a classic case of “too little, too late,” it did not have time to achieve much before the Xinhai Revolution overthrew the Qing state in 1911.

The revolution itself was both planned and spontaneous. A previously obscure group known as the Revolutionary Alliance (同盟会) attempted to instigate numerous uprisings, but all were either quickly defeated or leaked. The alliance consisted of a loose affiliation of nationalist forces and revolutionary parties. Founded in Tokyo in 1905, it was a merger of multiple revolutionary currents led by prominent republicans like Song Jiaoren (1882-1913), Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), Huang Xing (1874-1916), and Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), among others. When the Wuchang Uprising broke out on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1911, the Revolutionary Alliance had nothing to do with the planning; instead, it grew out of widespread unrest surrounding the Railway Protection Movement. The Revolutionary Alliance seized the moment and, riding on a wave of discontent and enthusiasm for a New China, toppled the Qing government with immense popular support. After the fall of the Qing, the Alliance transformed into a fully-fledged nationalist political party, the *Zhōngguó Guómíndǎng* (中國國民黨, lit. Chinese Nationalist Party), and Sun Yat-sen was elected provisional president of the newly declared Republic of China. Sun's role in this history earned him the title of *guófù* (國父), “Father of the Chinese Nation,” in the traditional historiography,

although he and his group of elite professional revolutionaries were but one of several factors that brought about the fall of the Qing.

This constitutional assembly did not last either, as military strongmen quickly dominated it. Yuan Shikai (1881-1916) briefly resurrected the threat of a return to imperial authority and autocracy when he declared himself the “Grand Constitutional Emperor” in 1916, which only caused opposition to coalesce against him. After only 83 days, he abdicated the throne and died three months later of sickness. This debacle permanently damaged central authority, and the following decade saw the rise of regional powers, which undercut both the influence and the prestige of the fledgling Republic. The Nationalists continued to maintain some authority around Nanjing and claimed to be the rightful Chinese government, but so-called “warlords” amassed power for themselves as provincial leaders. While some enacted reform policies and military modernization that the Central government had been unable to accomplish, others ruled with an iron fist.<sup>101</sup> The decline of central authority continued until the Nationalists launched the Northern Expeditions (1927-1928) under General Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975). Despite its failures, historians consider the constitutional revolution as the beginning of modern China. It heralded the end of the thousands of years of imperial administration and ushered in a new era of political change and economic development.

There were several notable similarities between the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the Xinhai Revolution, which occurred in roughly the same time

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<sup>101</sup> Chan, Anthony B. *Arming the Chinese: The Western Armaments Trade in Warlord China, 1920-1928*. UBC Press (2010)

frame. A weak Qājār monarchy, thoroughly penetrated and exploited by European imperial powers, gave rise to reformist sentiment. Phrases like ‘*adālat* (justice) and *hoqūq-e mellat* (rights of the people) emerged and adapted traditional ideas into a modern political vocabulary.<sup>102</sup> In addition to elite reformers, popular preachers and the bazaari class (merchants and market workers) also called for reform based on material and moral complaints against the encroachment of European economic and cultural influence.<sup>103</sup> While older historiography centered on this unusual alliance of liberals, merchants, and religious leaders, newer works have added an appreciation for the multitude of groups, including women and religious and ethnic minorities, who contributed to the movement.<sup>104</sup> Constitutionalism was supported by an explosion in the output and influence of print culture, much as it was in China.

The move towards constitutionalism in Iran was also spurred by the outbreak of widespread protests against the government. The precipitating event occurred on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1905, when the government-appointed Imam in Tehran attempted to expel a fellow preacher who supported the grievances of local sugar merchants.<sup>105</sup>

Amid a sermon that exhorted the government to follow “the law” (*qānūn*), guards with

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<sup>102</sup> For the best consensus narrative see: Amanat (2017)

<sup>103</sup> Keddie (2006) 58-72

<sup>104</sup> For more on the constitutional revolution and the various groups that contributed to it, see: Ansari, Ali M. *Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906: Narratives of the Enlightenment*. Gingko Library (2016); Katouzian, Homa. “The Revolution for Law: A Chronographic Analysis of the Constitutional Revolution of Iran.” *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 47, no. 5, (2011), pp. 757–777; Bayat, Mangol. *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909*. New York: Oxford University Press, (1991); Martin, Vanessa. *Iran Between Islamic Nationalism and Secularism: the Constitutional Revolution of 1906*. London: I.B. Tauris, (2013); Afary, Janet. *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism*. New York: Columbia University Press, (1996); Berberian, Hourii. *Armenians and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911: “the Love for Freedom Has No Fatherland”*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, (2001)

<sup>105</sup> Amanat (2017), 422

clubs dispersed the crowd and arrested the Imam. The incident sparked protests centered on a shrine south of Tehran that soon spread to Qom and other cities.<sup>106</sup> The idea of *mashrūteh* (a neologism for “constitution” derived from the word for “conditional,” or to place conditions on the power of the sovereign) became a kind of catch-all solution to the many grievances of Iran’s various social classes.<sup>107</sup> On August 10, 1906, the embattled Mozaffar ad-Din Shah had no choice but to agree to convene a parliament (*Majles*) to appease the uprising. Remarkably, the first Majles convened less than two months later on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1906.

The Iranian constitution was painstakingly drawn up and debated, but the fledgling movement soon “ran counter to a royalist front that, backed by imperial Russia, aimed to reassert the power of an autocratic Qājār shah in power and preserve the privileges of the ruling elite.”<sup>108</sup> Disputes between the clergy and supporters of the new constitution over the limits of its authority also spurred a conservative religious backlash. Many of these new opponents had initially supported the constitutionalists, like Sheikh Fazlollāh Nuri (1843-1909).<sup>109</sup> After a failed assassination attempt in February 1908, Mohammad ‘Ali Shah (r.1907-1909), crowned shortly after the constitution was put into effect, took his Russian advisors and royalist supporters’ advice and moved against the Majles with the aid of the Russian Cossacks. Royalists and constitutionalists quickly chose sides, and different causes coalesced around either issue. Unrest in Tabriz spilled over into a civil revolt led by tribal leaders like Sattar

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid* 423

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid* 442-443

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 422

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid* 448



Khān (1866-1914) and Bāqer Khān (1870-1916), and the Russian government, fearful of a revival of revolutionary politics in the Caucasus, occupied the city in 1909.

A faction of the Bakhtiyari tribe of central and southwestern Iran came to their rescue; led by ‘Ali-Qoli Khan Sardar As’ad (1856-1917), a hastily-raised army captured Tehran on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1909. The victors deposed Mohammad ‘Ali Shah in favor of his 11-year-old son, Ahmad Shah Qājār. These events were closely followed in the international press, especially in Britain, where there was some public sympathy for the constitutionalists. The second *Majles* was challenged by factionalism, hostile foreign powers, and all the financial and political problems of the Qājār state. Russia engineered a conflict over the confirmation of American financial advisor Morgan Shuster, and in “a rare expression of international bullying” occupied nearly all of northern Iran in 1912. A third attempt to convene parliament was made in 1915, but it quickly dissolved due to a lack of support. The outbreak of World War I and persistent civil disorder in the following years made the constitutional government question mostly moot. When state authority was restored under Reza Khan (r. 1925-41) in the 1920s, he substantially curtailed the power of the *Majles*. Despite its failures, the constitutional movement succeeded in altering Iran's social and political fabric and paving the way for later reforms and modernization efforts.<sup>110</sup>

These two revolutions were part of a global trend of revolutionary politics that swept the globe at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the early 1900s, there were anti-colonial constitutional movements in Japan, Turkey, Mexico, Egypt, India, Vietnam,

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 498

Indonesia, and beyond. Mishra Pankaj has argued that modern Asia's political elites were united by a shared experience of domination by the West.<sup>111</sup> These men “traveled and wrote prolifically, restlessly assessing their own and other societies, pondering the corruption of power, the decay of community, the loss of political legitimacy and the temptations of the West. Their passionate enquiries appear in retrospect as a single thread, weaving seemingly disparate events and regions into a single web of meaning.”<sup>112</sup> Although they lived in different societies, sometimes oceans apart, the new networks of European globalization described earlier in this chapter enabled them to inhabit a single imagined world of colonized people.

From the Indian Mutiny to the revolutions in Persia and Turkey and the Russo-Japanese War, the elites of early modern Asia were deeply emotionally invested in the fate of constitutional movements worldwide. Pankaj’s study provides ample evidence of this imagined interconnectedness. For him, a decisive moment is the Japanese victory over Russia in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War. The significance of this victory lay in the identities of the combatants: “For the first time since the Middle Ages, a non-European country had vanquished a European power in a major war; and the news careened around a world that Western imperialists – and the invention of the telegraph – had closely knit together.”<sup>113</sup> In Persian, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Indian newspapers, the Japanese victory and its implications were hotly debated.<sup>114</sup> There is no shortage of familiar faces professing admiration for one another in painstakingly

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<sup>111</sup> See also:

<sup>112</sup> Pankaj 16

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 7

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 8

excavated sources:

Lord Curzon...feared that ‘the reverberations of that victory have gone like a thunderclap through the whispering galleries of the East’ ... Mohandas Gandhi (1869 – 1948), who predicted ‘so far and wide have the roots of Japanese victory spread that we cannot now visualize all the fruit it will put forth’...In Damascus, Mustafa Kemal, a young Ottoman soldier later known as Atatürk (1881 – 1938), was ecstatic... Reading the newspapers in his provincial town, the sixteen-year-old Jawaharlal Nehru (1889 – 1964), later India’s first prime minister, had excitedly followed the early stages of Japan’s war with Russia, fantasizing about his own role in ‘Indian freedom and Asiatic freedom from the thrall of Europe’...Newborn babies in Indian villages were named after Japanese admirals...In the United States, the African-American leader W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) spoke of a worldwide eruption of ‘colored pride’...<sup>115</sup>

The impact of the Japanese victory was especially strong in China. Mao Zedong (1893-1976), then a schoolboy, later said, “At that time, I knew and felt the beauty of Japan, and felt something of her pride...”<sup>116</sup> Sun-Yatsen was traveling back to China via the Suez Canal in Egypt when the news broke, and Arab dock workers who mistook him for Japanese offered their congratulations.<sup>117</sup> Later, he wrote of the Japanese victory:

Men thought and believed that European civilization was a progressive one – in science, industry, manufacture, and armament – and that Asia had nothing to compare with it. Consequently, they assumed that Asia could never resist Europe, that European oppression could never be shaken off. Such was the idea prevailing thirty years ago.<sup>118</sup>

All around the world, Asian commentators were reading their struggles through the lens of the experience of other Asians. Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838-1897), a radical anti-colonial Muslim thinker whose journey of dissent took him from India, Iran, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire, wrote of the Muslim condition in 1896:

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 7-8

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 11

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, 7

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 12

What an affliction! What kind of situation is this? What kind of adversity is this? England has occupied Egypt, the Sudan and the great Indian Peninsula which are large parts of the Islamic states; the French have taken possession of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria; the Netherlands have become a despotic ruler of Java and the Oceanic islands; Russia has captured West Turkistan, the large cities of Transoxiana, Caucasia and Daghestan; China has taken East Turkistan. Not more than a few Islamic countries, which are also in great danger, have remained independent.<sup>119</sup>

Throughout Asia, intellectuals were exchanging ideas and information. Often indirectly, they learned of each other through newspapers and filtered the global through the lens of their own experiences. They were connected through a discourse of anti-colonial revolution and followed an international narrative of events hotly debated in periodicals from Syria to Shanghai. Given this context, it is hardly surprising that commentators in China took notice when the Iranian constitutional revolution broke out.

#### The Iranian Constitutional Revolution in the English-language Chinese press

British missionaries, diplomats, and other elites in Shanghai were among the first to draw comparisons between modern Iran and China, but they came to decidedly negative conclusions. They wrote about these issues in English-language newspapers that catered to expatriates and cosmopolitan Chinese elites. The first article about Persia was published in 1873 in the *North China Herald*, the most influential English-language newspaper in China of its time.<sup>120</sup> Entitled “Persia and Its Future,” it was a reprint from *The Friend of India* (1835-1876), another British newspaper published in Calcutta, and gave an overview of the contemporary situation from the view of British

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<sup>119</sup> Pankaj, Mishra. *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia*. Picador (2013) 138

<sup>120</sup> “Persia And It’s Future.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), Aug 09, 1873, pp. 116

imperialism. The context of the article was Naser al-Din Shah's 1873 trip to London, part of a widely publicized European tour.<sup>121</sup> Over several months, the Shah visited Moscow, Berlin, Brussels, London, Paris, Geneva, Vienna, Bologna, Corfu, Istanbul, and other European cities. The article reacts to the Shah's arrival in London. It begins with a scathing assessment of the pomp and circumstance surrounding the event and of the Shah himself:

The Shah of Persia has been received in Europe with the magnificence that might have been expected, however disproportionate to his own merits and those of his dynasty... Russia and England are the two Powers that have drawn to the West the first ruler of Persia who has ever cared, or dared, to leave his troubled kingdom for so long a period as four months. But for his faith in the telegraph even Nuseer-ood Deen would not have done so.<sup>122</sup>

Naser al-Din Shah's trip was a tangible expression of the new dynamics enabled by the European infrastructure of globalization, whether tangibly (the Shah primarily traveled by steamship and by rail) or practically/emotionally, as the telegraph enabled Naser al-Din Shah to stay informed about the state of his Kingdom despite his long absence.

These new dynamics engendered strong reactions from Europeans like the author here, who spends the bulk of the article criticizing the state of Persian administration: "...Nuseer-od-Deen is the worst type of Asiatic despots...The path of Persia has been year by year downward..." This criticism was not disinterested, but rather part of an official discourse that justified the exploitation of Asian countries by framing European influence as a cure for the woes of Asia:

Happy Shah, to be thus competed for by the two great Powers who dominate

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<sup>121</sup> Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh. *Safarnāme-ye Nāṣer Al-din Shāh*. [Tehrān: Sāzmān-e Enteshārāt-e Andīshe, 1343.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*

Asia, and to be pressed to take as much English money as he chooses from a market mad for new investments at good interest! [...] If good government is combined with Western capital and enterprise, there is no limit to the future of Persia...our great “buffer” policy makes the independent Powers on and near our frontier strong at once for internal development and to resist external aggression.<sup>123</sup>

Iran’s value is directly tied to its wealth of natural resources and to British ambitions to create a railroad network: “This Resht and Bushire railway once made, the future of Persia...promises to be somewhat more worthy of its past than it has been for some centuries.” This colonial discourse, which views Asian countries through the lens of their usefulness to the imperial project, underpins nearly every article featured in the English-language Chinese press.

In August of 1889, an article titled “Progress in Persia” reviewed a piece published in the *Asiatic Quarterly Review* earlier that summer by Sinologist Demetrius Boulger. Boulger supported the ongoing reform measures in Iran, which in the author's view was a waste of time, as the country was about to be swallowed up by England or Russia as a matter of “manifest destiny.”<sup>124</sup> With regard to China, the author took issue with Boulger’s descriptions of ongoing negotiations over the 1889 bank concession. In addition to praising the Shah for his “shrewd discretion” in retaining control over future mining discoveries, Boulger implied that “projects in that part of Persia...could in an emergency be brought within the range of our protecting influence.” The author believes that such an admission damages British interests:

...Is not an article of this kind calculated to make the Chinese think they are

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<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>124</sup> “Progress in Persia.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), Aug 24, 1889

quite right in refusing foreigners concessions for railways, etc., when they see what the granting of such concessions is expected to involve in Persia? It is very well to say that China is not Persia, or Turkey, or Egypt, but Peking may perhaps think that it is wise to be on the safe side, and keep foreign concessionaires out as much as possible.<sup>125</sup>

Articles like this reveal the conscious manipulations of information that authors of the English-language Chinese press engaged in to advance their interests.

In addition to writing about Iran *in* China, the North China Herald editors also compared Iran *to* China. The author of “Progress in Persia” remarked that “Like all the rest of Asia - we must except China till the audience question is settled - Persia has at least accepted the inevitable in the shape of European influence...” Another article bluntly states that communications in Iran “are even worse than in China.”<sup>126</sup> This sort of unfavorable comparison became increasingly common over the decades. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1897, the paper published an article titled “Three Empires” that negatively compared Persia to China in a variety of ways:

We who live in China do not as a rule feel that we have any special interest in the dominions of Muzaffir-id-Din, the Shah of Persia. To us that country seems what the late Thomas Taylor Meadows used to call ‘ten-thousand-miles-off.’ ...Yet there is a good deal about Persia that suggests China...We are fond of remarking that the political state of China is far from satisfactory. But in Persia things are definitely worse...Corruption, lying, and thieving all prevail to an extent unheard-of even in China, where all things are done in accordance with Li, or Reason...Let us in China rejoice that our troubles...are confined to getting [stamps] with too little gum-arabic on their backs.<sup>127</sup>

These frequent pot-shots likely amused disgruntled foreign office workers and merchants who liked to complain of conditions in China. They also reflect European

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>126</sup> “The Position in Persia.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), Oct 28, 1910

<sup>127</sup> “Three Empires.” (1897, Dec 17). *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941)

stereotypes about the Orient, which seemed to assign the Middle East and Muslim countries with lower prestige and assumed “civilizational level” than China, whose historical power and culture seemed to command a comparatively higher assessment.

In comparing China to Iran, articles before the constitutional revolution reflected British anxieties about Russian expansion and the “Great Game.” “Three Empires” goes on to argue that Iran was suffering severe political and economic woes due to corruption, incompetence, “ecclesiastical tyranny [of] the Mahomedan religion,” and the weakness of the Shah.<sup>128</sup> “As a result, Russia waits on the border for an opportunity to “restore order” with the Tsar’s Cossacks...At the other end of the Asiatic continent is China. She is not yet reduced to the straits of Persia, which seems liable at any time to extinction. All that even now prevents it is Great Britain.” Articles like this, which targeted the empire's diplomatic elite, were designed to convince other Europeans to support anti-Russian politics and increased intervention in Chinese affairs. On February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1900, another piece warned of “A Lesson From Persia” on the danger of Russian expansion in China:

Those who fondly believe that the practical annexation of Northern China by Russia should not be opposed by Englishmen...are urged to read an article headed “Russian Expansion and British Trade in Persia,” which appeared in the London Times...Our attention is especially drawn to Persia now because Russia is not unnaturally taking full advantage of our preoccupation in South Africa to expand in Persia and China.<sup>129</sup>

It describes how Russia leveraged its influence over Iranian economic policy to destroy

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<sup>128</sup> The paper describes Naser al Din Shah, his father, as “one of those curious products which results from the violent impact of the West on the East. He was a highly educated and widely traveled Barbarian.”

<sup>129</sup> “A Lesson From Persia.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), Feb 07, 1900



British economic penetration of northern Iran nearly. These concerns were also directly related to the spread of rail technology: “What, as we see, has been done in Persia will undoubtedly be attempted, when the Trans-Siberian railway is completed, in China.” Again, we see China compared to Iran to persuade European elites to support specific anti-Russian policies.

The constitutional revolution in Iran generated many articles between 1906 and 1913. The first mention was on September 21st, 1906, less than two weeks after the passage of a law governing the elections on September 9<sup>th</sup>.<sup>130</sup> It ties the emergence of the constitutional revolution to the global international upheavals of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: “The recent victory of Japan over Russia not only led to significant change...in the Far East generally, but also affected the whole aspect of diplomatic relations in Europe...and has culminated in the grant of a measure of constitutional government [in Persia].” While nominally supportive of constitutional rule as a general concept, the author remarks that “it remains to be seen whether the Persian “Constitution” is actually to be the forerunner of reforms...but at least the manner in which the popular demands have been met has an appearance of genuineness which is lacking in China's attitude towards reform.” While discussing limitations on voting rights, he also comments that “it may be doubted whether a wider representation was called for at this stage. Popular representation of a kind has been obtained and without unnecessary delay.” The author seems skeptical that real constitutional rule being implemented in either China or Iran any time soon.

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<sup>130</sup> “A Constitution for Persia.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), Sep 21, 1906

The most common types of comparisons between China and Iran were related to the Iranian constitutional revolution. These were typically negative, with the chaotic situation in Iran used to justify skepticism of parliamentary rule in China. For example, an editorial published in 193 entitled “Persia and China” opined that “extraordinary similarities” existed between the problems facing both countries, namely “the maintenance of sovereignty and independence” after the advent of Republicanism.<sup>131</sup> “In Persia the substitution of the rule of an inept and incapable Parliament...has resulted in a state of affairs strikingly similar to that existing in China to-day...in neither case does the practical authority of the central Government extend to any great distance from the capital.” The author concludes that the experience of China and Persia, compared to British rule in India, demonstrates the impossibility of an efficient government in Asia that does not rely on “personal authority” and “adequate force.” For him, it brought about “doubts as to the practical value of Republicanism...” in countries that did not have a “long experience with it.”

Many articles provided updates on revolutionary events in Iran, including the abolition of the first parliament, the uprisings in Tabriz, the march on Tehran, the restoration of the constitution, and the subsequent occupation of Iran by Russia.<sup>132</sup>

With titles like “Civil War in Persia,” “The Problem of Persia,” and “The Disorders in

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<sup>131</sup> “Persia and China.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, Mar 29, 1913.

<sup>132</sup> “The Outlook in Persia.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, Oct 11, 1907; “Civil War in Persia.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, Dec 26, 1908; Notes & Comments: A Case for the Invention of Daylight in Persia.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, Jan 09, 1909; “The Problem of Persia.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, May 15, 1909; “The Disorders of Persia.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, Jul 10, 1909; “The Position in Persia.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, Oct 28, 1910; “Moslems of China and the Holy War.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, May 29, 1915

Persia,” these articles express pessimism about the possibility of constitutional rule in Iran; a convenient position to take, as it justified the policies of British imperialism despite frequent protest by the Chinese. The publication of *The Persian Revolution* (1910) by British orientalist Edward Browne (1862-1926) helped create support for the constitutionalists as representatives of the Iranian nation and modernity in Asia, an enthusiasm that was reflected in some of the later articles.<sup>133</sup> Nevertheless, this support did not translate to the British government, which made no moves to support the *Majles*, and did little to convince British elites of the value of constitutionalism in Asia.

The diplomatic press expressed a European colonial view and reproduced colonialist arguments about China, Iran, and constitutionalism. Authors like Lord Curzon and other Orientalist intellectuals laid the groundwork for official justification of colonial policy through an interpretive lens that denied the political agency and intellectual ability of Asians. They argued that a genuinely democratic system was not fit for Persia or China and that attempts to establish one would only lead to disorder and foreign domination. This editorial slant was a consequence of the networks of information that connected Iran to China.<sup>134</sup> Paradoxically, these dour articles served as an important source of information about the Iranian situation for early Chinese constitutionalists, many of whom were educated elites who could read European newspapers. Unlike the British authors of the *North China Herald*, however, Chinese

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<sup>133</sup> Afshin, Matin-Asgari (2018), 39

<sup>134</sup> Modern authors of Sino-Iranian studies should take note, as many still tend to approach the relationship from a perspective that is mainly concerned with maintaining Western hegemon

authors would have an entirely different view of the Iranian constitutional revolution, influenced by their own recent historical experiences.

### The Iranian Constitutional Revolution in the Chinese Press

Chinese constitutionalists read events in Persia through the prism of their own political movement. Yidan Wang has reviewed the attitude of Chinese intellectuals towards the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in three influential magazines from the period: *Dongfang Zazhi* (Eastern Miscellany), *Zhengyi Tongbao* (the Journal of Politics and Art), and *Minbao* (People's Report), the latter of which was the official journal of Sun Yat-sen.<sup>135</sup> He finds that Chinese authors were extremely sympathetic towards the constitutional movement and projected their own hopes for China onto the Iranian situation. One author perceived attempts to educate the young Ahmad Shah with a “progressive and extensive [education], instead of a limited and traditional stick-in-the-mud one” as indicative of the “progressive education policy of the new constitutional government.”<sup>136</sup> His analysis reflected the widespread concern in China with reforming the education system, which was based on learning Confucian classics to pass the traditional civil servant examination. The Qing court had only recently attempted to incorporate more practical courses in science, military affairs, and modern politics. Europe remained an essential source of articles and arguments, but these were also deployed in ways that furthered the anti-imperial cause; for example, in 1912, Qian Zhixiu translated an article by Edward Browne that blamed Russian and

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<sup>135</sup> Wang 377

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid* 373

British aggression for the failure of the constitutional movement.<sup>137</sup>

These early narratives of Sino-Iranian solidarity reflect a growing tradition of internationalism and Pan-Asianism in Chinese political discourse. More and more, Chinese intellectuals were comparing the situation in China to other Asian countries. Sun Yat-sen himself took Iran into account in his understanding of Pan-Asian solidarity. In a speech at the Kobe Women's College on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1924 before the Kobe Chamber of Commerce, Dr. Sun laid out his vision for what he calls “the doctrine of Pan-Asianism.”<sup>138</sup> Drawing on Japanese discourses, he sketches out a historical narrative centered on the subjugation of Asian peoples to European colonial states. The crucial question for Sun was how to stand up to Europe; his answer was military power. For this reason, Sun views Iran as one of multiple countries to be admired and emulated: “at present, Persia, Afghanistan, and Arabia are also striving hard to adopt European culture and improve their armaments.” He integrates Iran, the Arab world, and the rest of Asia into a single political order based on resistance to European domination. What is most striking is that these foreign “others” (Arabs and Persians) are configured as part of the same in-group as the Chinese, one defined by experience with colonization.

Despite this interest, Chinese knowledge about Iran was still minimal. The same authors who claimed to be inspired by the Iranian example praised the Shah’s reliance on foreign advisors, a perennial complaint of Iranian constitutionalists. There was little

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid* 374

<sup>138</sup> “The Text of Dr. Sun's Pan-Asianism Speech.” *The China Weekly Review (1923-1950)*, Oct 05, 1940, pp. 149.

understanding of the constitutional revolution beyond the barest outline of its events. It was more the promise, the idea of a successful constitutional movement in Iran that was important and inspiring, rather than the specific politics of its advocates. The words of Wang Jingwei, a faithful and enthusiastic follower of Sun Yat-sen, demonstrate the essential point of Sino-Iranian solidarity for Chinese constitutionalists: “Enthusiasm for revolution is found today everywhere in the world...Now is the time for us to show determination and to rouse ourselves...this is what the Persian Revolution has taught us.”<sup>139</sup>

In addition to magazines, Chinese newspapers also published articles with news and opinions about Iran. Usually owned and operated by foreigners, at the turn of the 20th century the Chinese press fell into the hands of politicians and literati that espoused constitutionalism. As the press came under the control of Chinese entrepreneurs, the tone of the coverage began to shift. One of the first modern Chinese newspapers, *Shen Bao*, was created and managed by British industrialist Ernest Major (1841-1908) in 1872.<sup>140</sup> It published some very brief news reports on events in Iran as soon as it was established, usually from a perspective sympathetic to British concerns; the constitution was only mentioned in passing in articles that emphasized the internal disorder it had created.<sup>141</sup> Overall, it had a conservative, pro-government perspective. In 1907, *Shen Bao* was sold to Chinese entrepreneur Zhang Jian (1853-1926), a

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid* pp. 378

<sup>140</sup> Roberta Wue, “The Profits of Philanthropy: Relief Aid, Shenbao, and the Art World in Later 19th-century Shanghai,” *Late Imperial China*, vol. 25, (June 2004), pp. 187-211

<sup>141</sup> “Recent News of Persian Chaos(波斯國亂事近聞)” *Shen Bao 1872-1949* [Shanghai] July 28, 1906.

Chinese “official-entrepreneur” sympathetic to the constitutional movement.<sup>142</sup> Shortly thereafter, the paper began to publish articles in favor of constitutionalism in both China and Iran.<sup>143</sup> *Shen Bao* reached a circulation of 30,000 copies a day at its peak and ensured that at least some literate Chinese could follow international news very closely.<sup>144</sup>

The first article *Shen Bao* published about Iran was an upbeat assessment of the Reuter concession, one year after it was founded and still under British control. “It is advisable to use the power of neighboring countries. How can we stand on our own without exercising power?”<sup>145</sup> The author also echoed British arguments against Russian involvement in Iran and accused the Tsar of “strangling Persia.”<sup>146</sup> Despite the paper’s silence on British imperialism, coverage of Iran at *Shen Bao* was notably more positive than the *North China Herald*. For example, Nasser al-Din Shah’s European tour was discussed in a completely different tone than in the *North China Herald*. One article enthusiastically describes the steamship ceremony surrounding the Shah’s arrival at the dock:

Several ships all raised the flag of the Persian King and crossed the sea...The first group of ships sailed slowly into two rows and greeted a total of twenty ships. They were all solid and protected by thick iron...The sound of the cannon is as loud as thunder, and the flames flash like electricity...All the equipment is

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<sup>142</sup> Wright, Mary Clabaugh. *China in Revolution: The First Phase, 1900-1913* (Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 157. 10

<sup>143</sup> “Persian Autocracy (波斯土專制)” *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] December 19, 1907.

<sup>144</sup> 21,000 of these were circulated outside of Shanghai, giving the paper quite an extensive reach for the time.

<sup>145</sup> “On the Agreement between the Persian King and the Englishman Luoda”

(論波斯國王與英人羅大立約興各利事). *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] August 09, 1873

<sup>146</sup> “On the fact that the Russians have not yet achieved their ambitions in China” (XXX) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1899

shaken...The smoke gradually dissipates, and the sailors are all ants climbing up the masts...The spectators all crowd around the train to compete with each other to see the emperor take to his car...I have never seen so many ships in my life.

While British observers fill their descriptions with sardonic humor and veiled insults, this Chinese traveler seems to have genuine enthusiasm for the idea of the Shah “learning from the West” and bringing that learning back to Iran. One Chinese author connected the Shah’s trip to what he desired for his own country:

Of the countries of the world, none are more powerful than Britain. Of the capitals of the world, none are richer than London...the people's minds and talents are all used to make superior machinery and equipment...Japan admires its prosperity and strength, and now follows [Western] laws...The Persian Shah now has seen a country of laws. If everything can be done properly after returning to Iran, it will be prosperous...Today, the land of the capital of China is so withered...Opening to the world as soon as possible can remedy this pitiful situation.

When the Iranian constitutional movement broke out in 1906, *Shen Bao* was still in a state of transition. Some articles referred to non-specific “Persian chaos” during the unrest of 1905, and the constitution itself merited only a quick mention in the international news section on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1906.<sup>147</sup> On October 11<sup>th</sup>, the paper informed readers that “The King of Persia...approved the constitution and reform efforts in the hope that the state will one day be improved. The people of Persia and the capital celebrated together.”<sup>148</sup> A few weeks later, an editorial declared that “there will be one more constitutional state in the world...Even if some of my colleagues regret it there is nothing to be done.”<sup>149</sup> Towards the end of the year, there was a flurry of reports on the ill health of Mozaffer ad-Din Shah, and even an erroneous early report of his death, later

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<sup>147</sup> “Persian Constitution”. (波斯立憲) ) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1906.

<sup>148</sup> “The Persian King’s Decree to Establish the Constitution” (波斯國王降旨立憲) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1906

<sup>149</sup> “Regarding the Constitutional Decree” (對於立憲) ) *Shen Bao*, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1906



retracted. Continued reports were made of the unrest, but outright support for the Iranian constitution was still limited.<sup>150</sup>

By 1907, the paper was entirely under Chinese ownership and began publishing articles by prominent Chinese constitutionalists.<sup>151</sup> Over the next few years, *Shen Bao* published dozens of articles covering the chaotic events of the second half of the constitutional revolution, often in short bulletins without much detail. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1907, one such bulletin directly linked “chaos in Tabriz” to “the people ask[ing] the King to approve the constitution.”<sup>152</sup> More forceful statements came as royalists and constitutionalists clashed throughout 1907. In an article titled “Persian Autocracy,” one author wrote that “the King of Persia once more attempted his arbitrary policy, but was blocked.”<sup>153</sup> On August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1908, riots were reported in the capital where “hundreds of people, including Persian merchants, demanded the parliament be opened quickly.”<sup>154</sup> The constitutionalist forces were sometimes referred to as the Constitutionalist Party” (*Lìxiàndǎng* 立憲黨) but more often as the “Nationalist Party” (*Guómíndǎng* 國民黨) or the “Revolutionary Party” (*Gémìngdǎng* 革命黨). The royalists were called the “Conservative Party” (*Shǒujiùdǎng* 守舊黨), a reference to the “conservative faction”

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<sup>150</sup> “Memorial of the Death of the Persian King” (記波斯王崩逝) *Shen Bao*, January 11th, 1907; “The Emperor of Persia is Sick” (波斯國皇患病) *Shen Bao*, November 18th, 1906; “The Emperor of Persia is seriously ill” (波斯國皇病重) *Shen Bao*, December 13th, 1906; “The Disease of the Emperor of Persia” (波斯國皇之病勢) *Shen Bao*, December 18th, 1906; “Persian monarch in critical condition” (波斯國君病危) *Shen Bao*, December 25th, 1906; “The new King of Persia ascends” (波斯新君登位) *Shen Bao*, January 22nd, 1907

<sup>151</sup> Mittler (2004) 87

<sup>152</sup> “The Persian People Look Forward to the Constitution” (波斯人民切盼憲法) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1907

<sup>153</sup> “Persian Autocracy”

<sup>154</sup> “Persian Constitutional Party” (波斯立憲黨) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1908

(*shǒujiùpài* 守旧派) of the Qing court, those hated traditional officials who had opposed reform during the previous century.<sup>155</sup> In turn-of-the-century Shanghai, where support for nationalism and constitutional reform was high, it was clear which side *Shen Bao* supported.

*Shen Bao* also became more vocal in its criticism of colonialism after 1907, and began to filter news about Iran through the prism of Chinese experiences with British imperialism. Russian involvement had been decried since the paper was founded, per its British owners' interests, and this trend continued during the constitutional revolution.<sup>156</sup> Once ownership had passed into the hands of Chinese nationals, criticizing British policy became a major preoccupation of the paper, especially when writing about Iran. For example, *Shen Bao* reacted negatively to the presence of British troops in Iran and increasingly described both Russian and British policy as “interference.”<sup>157</sup> An article titled “Negotiations between the strong and the weak” described how Britain exercised its influence to prevent Iran from raising taxes on British goods.<sup>158</sup> This perspective was not limited to contemporary events. In 1917, a retrospective article on the Reuter Concession referred to it as “the theft of Persia” and compared it to “Lü Buwei’s

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<sup>155</sup> “Demands of the Persian Revolutionary Party” (波斯革命黨之要求) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] September 2nd, 1908; “Persian Nationalist Party (Guomindang) Besieged The Capital” 波斯國民黨圍攻京城 May 14th, 1909; “Persian Conservative Party gains power” (波斯守舊黨得勢) June 28th, 1908.

<sup>156</sup> “Russian interference in Persian internal affairs” (俄國干涉波斯內政) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] November 19th, 1909; “Russian excuses not to withdraw Persian troops” (俄國藉口不撤波斯駐兵) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] November 3rd, 1910

<sup>157</sup> “British soldiers land in Persia”, (英兵在波斯登岸) *Shen Bao* November 2, 1910; “Britain and Russia will interfere in Persia” (英俄將次干涉波斯) *Shen Bao*, March 13th, 1909

<sup>158</sup> “Negotiations Between Strong Countries and Weak Countries” (強國與弱國之交涉) January 26th, 1911.

conspiracy,” a historical reference to a famous scheming merchant.<sup>159</sup> These expressions of support were linked to China’s own frustrations with British colonial impositions.

While coverage of the constitutional revolution was supportive, it was not always optimistic. Unlike Wang Jingwei and the writers who contributed to *Minbao* and *Dongfang Zazhi*, the editorial staff of *Shen Bao* was more reserved and less exuberant over the Iranian revolution. Excitement for the prospect of another Asian revolution was tempered by widespread reports of political violence, political turmoil, and the involvement of the Russian army. Occasional reports of laws passed by the *Majles* were drastically outnumbered by reports on Iran's unstable political situation. Phrases like “Persian Chaos” (*Bōsī luànshì* 波斯亂事), “Persian Riots” (*Bōsī sāoluàn* 波斯騷亂) “Persian Crisis” (*Bōsī wéijí* 波斯危急), and “Persian Internal Strife” (*Bōsī nèihòng* 波斯內訌) were common, especially during the unrest in Tabriz in the summer of 1908.<sup>160</sup> This was amplified by the continued use of European sources of information on Iran, usually through telegraph cables or translated articles. Incidents of violence or theft against embassy staff or British officials by “Persian bandits” underscored the reports of

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<sup>159</sup> Lü Buwei (291–235 BCE) was best known for his manipulation of the line of succession of the state of Qin, through wealth accumulated as a merchant. He is considered a villain in traditional historiography, in part because merchants were accorded a low status in the pre-modern Chinese political order, and in part because his ambitions indirectly led to the rise of Qin Shi Huang (259-210 BCE), the first Emperor of China, who was seen as a tyrant. See: Knoblock, John and Jeffrey Riegel. *The Annals of Lü Buwei: A Complete Translation and Study*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2000.

<sup>160</sup> For example, “Persian Chaos is on the rise” (波斯亂事復熾). *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1908; “Critical Persian Situation/Persian Crisis” (波斯時局之危急) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1910; “Persian internal strife continues”(波斯內訌不息) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1909

disorder, starvation, and suffering.<sup>161</sup> While Chinese authors did not directly criticize the constitutionalists, Chinese readers were likely left with the impression that the constitutional movement had led to instability and outside interference.

An unusually long editorial in 1908 explores to the reason for *Shen Bao*'s reticence to sing the praises of Iranian constitutionalism. In an essay on countries that have recently seen political turmoil, the author concludes that “political competition” (*zhèngzhì jìngzhēng* 政治競爭) is “the reason why our country’s politics has been underdeveloped for thousands of years.”<sup>162</sup> He briefly surveys recent events, including the constitutional revolution in Persia, the unrest that preceded the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the 1908 Lisbon regicide, and the political upheavals in Russia, India, and Italy. These events were presented as a cautionary tale for China’s budding reformists:

In the Persian capital Tehran, the Revolutionary Party and the Conservative Party clashed. After a few days of fighting, homes were destroyed, factories were looted, and many nobles had been captured. The chaos led to the Persian King being re-instated. This is also proof of political competition...Just look at the history of this month and the political turmoil in various countries. Those who want to advance politically are rarely able to escape their station...<sup>163</sup>wfig

Iran was presented as a revolutionary movement that had led to a negative outcome, however justified the cause of political advancement might be. Commentators emphasized that chaos could derail a political movement and invite foreign intervention, and the implication was that Chinese factions must work closely together and avoid the

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<sup>161</sup> “Persian Barbarians Attack British Representative” (波斯蠻民攻擊英員) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] April 20th, 1910

<sup>162</sup> “On the Fierce Political Competition among Countries in Recent Years” (論各國近日政治競爭之劇烈) July 2nd, 1908

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*

kind of turmoil that followed other revolutions.

Despite this pessimism, the Iranian revolution was presented as part of a larger story of reform and constitutionalism in Asia. In August 1908, the Chinese government published the “Constitutional Outline,” which sketched out the first practical steps towards a constitution since the beginning of the “New Policies.” One month later, an excerpt was published from a study that considered constitutional politics in China, Turkey, Persia, Egypt, and Morocco. The author lauded China's progress towards a constitutional assembly and hailed 1908 as “the most prosperous year of constitutional politics.”<sup>164</sup> The dramatic clash between the Shah and the *Majles* on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1908 was the focus of his analysis, which emphasized the continuation of the constitutional struggle despite severe setbacks:

Although Persia has a formal parliament, the Persian King is accustomed to tyranny and relies on the Russian Cossack soldiers to oppress the people. This year the Persian King clashed with the parliament. In the main artillery bombardment killed fifty members of the People's Party and led to martial law...the King has issued an edict pledging to obey the constitution and reconvene the parliament in three months...<sup>165</sup>

The piece linked constitutional reform to military progress and industrialization. The author estimates that “in the future, the development of the national power of the five nations will be much better than before the constitution was established” and goes on to present statistics that demonstrate the growth of military and economic power in the five

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<sup>164</sup> “Five constitutional states this year” (今年之五立憲國) *Shen Bao*, September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1908

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*

nations.<sup>166</sup> He conveys a conviction that constitutional reform will eventually lead to improvement, regardless of its difficulties. Articles like this help demonstrate the diversity of opinions about the Iranian constitutional revolution that was put forth in the Chinese press, even among its supporters.

Within a few years of the 1911 Xinhai revolution, constitutionalism was facing serious challenges in both countries. Chinese interest in Iran dwindled after the Iranian parliament was again suspended on December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1911. By the middle of the decade, most reports were focused on events related to World War I (1914-1918), or other concerns like opium smuggling. Official contacts between the Iranian and Chinese governments would not emerge until the 1920s.

### Conclusions

While Sino-Persian relations are often depicted as the resumption of ancient ties that date back to the Silk Road, this chapter ends in agreement with Nile Green that modern Sino-Persian connections are largely divorced from their original Silk Road context, which had lapsed almost entirely by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the early to mid-1900s, Sino-Iranian connections were not so much re-established as reconstituted against the backdrop of a vastly changed political and social situation. The decay of traditional economic and political ties between China and Iran was hastened by 20<sup>th</sup>-century European globalization. From steamships to railroads, to newspapers and telegraphs, European capital sought to create an interconnected flow of goods and

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<sup>166</sup> He insists, of course, that “the national power of the four countries will be below that of China”.

information, although this was neither altruistic nor without a heavy price. The concessions extracted by Britain, Russia, and other colonial powers helped spur a generation of Asian elites who rejected those unequal arrangements and strove to overcome Europe by assimilating the best of what it had to offer into their own cultures. For many, constitutionalism and participatory democracy offered the key to national renewal. New patterns of Sino-Iranian interaction emerged along the lines of inter-Asian solidarity and support for political revolution.

Chinese journalists and British civil servants in Shanghai took a special interest in Iran. In the pages of formerly-British periodicals and newly established cultural magazines, the latest information was transferred through telegraphs and disseminated to the growing Chinese reading public. This exchange demonstrates how, in the context of a newly connected global Asia, Chinese intellectuals were keenly engaged with the outside world. They saw their own identity, history, and future reflected in the experiences of Iran. This was a new dynamic of Sino-Iranian relations that arose independent of the Silk Road or any other traditional patterns of exchange, one based on the *idea* of Sino-Iranian connections and an internationalist, anti-colonialist reading of both Chinese and Iranian history.

Imagined connections between Iran and China emerged among Chinese elites and European colonial administrators in China. These discourses did not draw on Silk Road narratives, but rather the political reality of European domination from which they emerged. The discourse of ancient civilizations was not key at this point, though it would become important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Chinese intellectuals rediscovered

Iran, their interpretations reflected their domestic concerns and demands for the future. They incorporated the Iranian experience into a grand narrative of global or Pan-Asian interconnectivity. This new narrative emerged from the same networks it would aim to dismantle, from British or Russian news sources and in newspapers owned or formerly owned by foreigners.<sup>167</sup> By contrast, Iranian constitutionalists were likely aware of events in China, but had less reason to promote a pan-Asian approach to politics, and were therefore comparatively less interested.

One noticeable omission is a discussion on the reception of Chinese constitutionalism and Chinese history in Iran. Iranian elites certainly had the opportunity to be aware of events in China. Abdul Hairi has demonstrated that the Iranian constitutional movement should be considered “an extension of a widespread constitutional development then taking place in many parts of the world.” He argues that this awareness of the Ottoman, Egyptian, Japanese, Indian, and Chinese experiences made constitution a logical choice for Iranian politicians.<sup>168</sup> Iranians certainly followed events like the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War, and were part of the same global Asian networks of information that included the likes of Sun Yat-sen, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, and Liang Qichao. Some even traveled to China, including Mehdi Qolī Hedāyat, and Amīn al-Sulṭān, who visited with six companions in 1903.<sup>169</sup> Moḥammad-‘Alī Sayyāḥ (d. 1925), a liberal constitutionalist, also visited

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<sup>167</sup> Green

<sup>168</sup> Hairi, Abdul. *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran A Study of the Role Played by the Persian Residents of Iraq in Iranian Politics*. E. J. Brill (1977) 23-24

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*



China, although he did not leave a record of his travels.<sup>170</sup> Iranian Constitutional-era papers carried small articles about events in China, including the Calcutta-based *Habl al-matīn*, which had a regular section that summarized news from China and Europe.

Therefore, the absence of Iranian voices in this chapter does not reflect a lack of such sources in the record, but rather the inaccessibility of that record to the author of this study at present. There appears to have been substantially more awareness of the Iranian constitutional revolution in China than the Chinese revolution in Iran, in part because the most dramatic successes of the Chinese movement occurred in 1911, years after after the Iranian constitutionalists had already faltered. By contrast, the major dramas of the Iranian revolution unfolded while the Chinese revolution was still nascent and in search of inspiration. The Japanese constitutional revolution was much more closely followed by Iranians, in part because it occurred *before* their movement, and in part because of the dramatic successes of the Japanese in the years that followed. Travelogues like Hedāyat's do not appear to have been readily available in later years, even to diplomats working in China. However, without a more thorough review of the record, it cannot be conclusively said that Iranians had no interest in China's early republican history. Rather than provide an incomplete analysis based on a preliminary reading, the addition of an Iranian perspective to the current story will remain for a future study.

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<sup>170</sup> Although Sayyāh did not write about his experiences in China, Hairi points out that his memoirs refer to a trip there. In *The Travel Diaries of Hajj Sayyāh*, he writes: (translation from Abdul Hairi) "I applied for an American passport only to facilitate my trip to Japan and China. Since I had done services to America, of which I have written in detail in my *Memoirs Concerning Abroad*, I obtained an [American] passport and a recommendation for the Chinese Plenipotentiary." Muḥammad 'Alī Sayyāḥ, *Khāṭirāt-i Ḥājj Sayyāḥ, yā, Dawrah-i khawf va vaḥsha*. Tehran (1967), 433

## Chapter 2: Iran-Republic of China Relations: 1920-1949

When discussing modern China's international relations, it becomes necessary after a point to specify “which China.” Over the last century, two separate governments have made competing claims to be the sole legitimate representative governing body of China, regardless of who controls the territory. Before the Chinese Civil War (1927-1949), the Guomindang government was recognized internationally as the sole government of China. Following the victory of the Chinese Community Party (CCP) in 1949 and the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the remaining Nationalist forces were forced to flee to the island of Taiwan. To this day, both nations claim to be the official representatives of “China,” although international opinion has mostly deferred to the reality of the PRC’s territorial control. One result of this diplomatic headache is that while Iran did not have diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China, it *did* have a long-standing relationship with the Republic of China, which blurred the lines between official and unofficial relations.

Diplomacy between Iran and Nationalist China began with the signing of the Sino-Iranian Treaty of 1920, an event carefully analyzed by Li-chiao Chen.<sup>171</sup> He argues that the treaty was part of China and Iran attempts at “strengthening themselves and their search for independence and integrity after the First World War” and their opposition to extraterritoriality in international affairs.<sup>172</sup> While Chen’s article provides valuable context, it is limited by an incomplete view of the whole of Sino-Iranian

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<sup>171</sup> Li-Chiao Chen. “The Signing of the Sino-Iranian Treaty of 1920” *Iranian Studies*, 52:5-6, 991-1008 (2019)

<sup>172</sup> Chen

relations. For example, Chen erroneously claims that “only a draft and not a formal treaty was signed” and that “the two Asian countries had no official contact, such as a consulate or a legation...until 1942.”<sup>173</sup> This is an understandable oversight, as no study of this period exists in the literature. The Iran-ROC connection has been largely overlooked in favor of later connections with the PRC. This chapter instead presents Iran-Republic of China relations as part of the overall story of Sino-Iranian interaction. It aims to fill a gap in the literature by sketching out a narrative of the Republic of China’s relations with the Iran between 1920 and 1949.

The Sino-Iranian Treaty was officially ratified in 1922, and an official consulate was established in Shanghai in 1934.<sup>174</sup> These events took place against the backdrop of Sino-Iranian cooperation and competition at the League of Nations. Both China and Iran sought to improve their international prestige by participating in the institutions of European diplomacy. Chinese merchants and Iranian traders in Shanghai took advantage of this impulse to push their own economic interests. They petitioned for a Sino-Iranian trade agreement that would enable the revival of direct silk and tea trade between the two nations, which led Iran to dispatch a mission to establish an East Asian trade organization in Shanghai. An official trade agreement was never signed, but this period left a lasting positive impression of Nationalist China on the Iranian state. Furthermore, it highlights the fascinating story of Iranian merchant interests in Nationalist Shanghai, which played a more significant role in driving forward Sino-Iranian relations than previously believed.

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<sup>173</sup> Chen 991, 1005

<sup>174</sup> “First persian consulate will be opened soon.” (1934, May 22). *The China Press* (1925-1938)

## Performative Diplomacy

Before 1949, international opinion was mostly in agreement that the Nationalist Republic of China, led by General Chiang Kai-Shek, was China's legitimate government, although large swaths remained under local rule. After dominating his rivals, Chiang's Nationalist Party, the Guomindang, emerged as the country's main political organization. Chiang soon faced opposition from a wide array of social groups, including the nascent Chinese Communist Party, which had been formed under Soviet tutelage on July 23rd, 1921. Conflict between the two culminated in a wave of bloody repressions at the hands of the Nationalists, followed by a protracted civil war that began in 1927 and continued intermittently until 1949. Over time, the Communists eventually reversed the tide against the better armed, better funded, and internationally recognized Nationalist government. In May of 1949, after Nanjing surrendered to the CCP, Chiang declared martial law, and the Republican army and administration fled the mainland to Taiwan.

On October 1st, 1949, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party officially declared the creation of the People's Republic of China. In the eyes of the international community, the Republic of China was still seen as China's legitimate government, but the country was unquestionably under the control of the CCP. The PRC spent the next several decades advocating that nations switch recognition from the ROC to themselves, a policy that achieved considerable success with the Republic of China's expulsion from the United Nations in 1971. By that time, most of the world had accepted the situation and formally recognized the People's Republic. Today, both

governments lay claim to the entirety of the nation, including Taiwan, and consider the other to be illegitimate. Therefore “China” can refer to the PRC, the ROC, or the socio-cultural entity rather than the state itself. For the present chapter, the use of “China” denotes the Nationalist government, and the Communist government will be distinguished as the PRC, CCP, or the People’s Republic of China.

Official contacts between the Iran and the Republic of China came into being as both states underwent profound political and social upheavals in the late 1910s and early 1920s that left them under the control of military modernizers. Iran found itself under foreign occupation, split between Great Britain and Tsarist Russia. At the same time, Bolshevism became an increasingly powerful force in Iran, especially in provinces close to the Soviet border and largely non-Persian populations. After the outbreak of the Russian Revolution, the nascent Soviet Union supported several democratic and leftist social movements within Iran, including the Jangali movement and the Persian Soviet Socialist Republic, also called the Soviet Republic of Gilan.<sup>175</sup> In the ensuing political struggle, Reza Khan, an ambitious and rapidly rising military officer, was able to consolidate power by brutally crushing democratic experiments in the provinces. His rise was facilitated by a political elite that had largely abandoned the project of liberal democracy for an “illiberal nationalism” that drew on the rhetoric of cultural renewal that was sweeping across Asia.<sup>176</sup> He crowned

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<sup>175</sup> [For an overview of this history and of Soviet support for Iranian constitutionalism and democratic movements, see Matin-Asgari (2018), 15-43

<sup>176</sup> Matin-Asgari (2018), 79-80

himself “Reza Shah Pahlavi” in 1926 and declared the beginning of a new dynasty.<sup>177</sup>

Historians have disagreed in their assessment of Reza Shah and the impact of his period of rule. While some have seen him as a modernizer and reformer, others have argued that he was primarily driven by a desire to “expand his control by expanding his state’s power into all sectors of the country - into its polity, economy, society, and ideology.”<sup>178</sup> Much of his expansion of state power was centered around state bureaucracy and the military. Between 1925 and 1941, the military tripled in size, and the state bureaucracy had grown from nearly non-existent to employing over 90,000 people.<sup>179</sup> Reza Shah himself put on a military persona and often appeared publicly in his general’s uniform. He centralized economic and political power in a personal patronage network and transformed the *Majles* into a virtually meaningless institution. His government laid railroads, built factories, and set up electrical grids. The education system was transformed along Western lines, expanded, and standardized. A secular judicial system replaced the traditional religious courts. Edicts were issued that attempted to ban various forms of Islamic and “traditional” attire.<sup>180</sup> Under his rule, the state sought to directly influence the daily lives of Iranian citizens in unprecedented ways. To promote national unity, he embraced an ethnic nationalist reading of Iranian history that relied heavily on visions of ancient Aryan glory. In short, the Iranian state extended its reach into new realms previously untouched by the Qājārs.

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<sup>177</sup> “Shah” is the Iranian word for “King”.

<sup>178</sup> Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* 72

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid* 67

<sup>180</sup> Curtis, Glenn E. and Eric Hooglund (2008). *Iran: A Country Study* (2008) 28, 116–117  
Katouzian, Homa. *State and Society in Iran: The Eclipse of the Qājārs and the Emergence of the Pahlavis*, (2006) 33–34, 335–336

The role of Reza Shah in Iran is often compared to that of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) in neighboring Turkey, but an equally useful comparison can be made to China's Chiang Kai-Shek, who became the official leader of the Republic of China in 1928. Like Reza Shah, Chiang took power when the central government had largely collapsed and was challenged by local military powers. Like Reza Shah, "Generalissimo" Chiang Kai-Shek cultivated a military image and leaned heavily on the military to support his rule, especially once the Japanese invasion began in 1931. Despite the challenges brought by the war, Chiang's government still made substantial efforts to modernize the country's political, transportation, military, and economic systems. Chiang also attempted to promote nationalist sentiment and ideological unity through appeals to the ancient past, using a social and cultural reform movement based on neo-Confucian and Christian morality. Like Reza Shah, Chiang remains a controversial figure among both the public and historians. The Republic of China under the Guomindang was undoubtedly an authoritarian one-party state, and Chiang brooked no challenges to his rule. The point to bear in mind is that there was a marked similarity in the political and ideological approaches of both the Republic of China and Iran, which encouraged co-operation and friendly relations between the two.

Foreign policy is often related to domestic pressures and state ideology, and a common approach to politics can sometimes translate into a compatible approach to international relations. There was a desire among both Iranian and Chinese elites to restore some measure of prestige to the country in the eyes of the international

community. External aggression and foreign concessions had badly damaged Iranian prestige by the early 1920s. To this end, Iranian officials sought out alliances with a “third power” in the West to counterbalance their two main rivals, Britain and Russia. They also concluded agreements with Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan that enhanced their international standing. These alliances often had little practical or long-term significance, but they allowed Iran to be seen acting independently and on its own terms.<sup>181</sup>

The pressure to establish official relations and conduct independent diplomacy with as many states as possible was also present in China. Diplomatic defeats after the Opium Wars and World War I formed an integral part of the “national humiliation” narrative. In the words of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, China’s government sought “the status of absolute independence and equality in the family of nations.” Chiang’s overriding foreign policy concern was Japanese aggression, but minor relations were established with other countries to advance the image of a new China conducting its affairs on equal footing with the world.<sup>182</sup> Sino-Iranian relations in this era should be understood in the context of this goal, which was both personal and political to many Iranian and Chinese intellectuals.

Iran’s early relationship with Turkey serves as a clear example of this dynamic in the history of modern Iranian diplomacy. In his essay “Performing the Nation: The Shah's official state visit to Kemalist Turkey, June to July 1934,” Afshin

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<sup>181</sup> Saikal, A. (1991). Iranian Foreign Policy, 1921–1979. In P. Avery, G. Hambly, & C. Melville (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of Iran* vol. 7 (*The Cambridge History of Iran*, pp. 426-456)

<sup>182</sup> Wu, C. C. “Foreign Relations of the Chinese Nationalist Government.” *Foreign Affairs* 6, no. 4 (1928): 668-70



Marashi describes the pomp and circumstance surrounding Reza Khan's widely publicized trip to Ankara in the summer of 1934. Crowds poured into streets decorated with nationalist symbols, enthusiastically waving flags and taking part in the performance of the nation. Marashi succinctly describes the international context in which this event occurred:

The elaborate and public nature of the welcoming ceremony at the Ankara train station reflected the new political climate of the emerging inter-war Middle Eastern state system. In the aftermath of the First World War, the Wilsonian doctrines of national sovereignty and international diplomacy had produced an increasingly formalised international system of nation-states. The demise of the Ottoman, Habsburg and Romanov empires— and the establishment of the League of Nations— led to the century's first springtime of nations and the emergence of a wave of new states seeking recognition within the new international order.<sup>183</sup>

More than the norms of international diplomacy, this reflected how Asian elites viewed the world and their rightful place in it. There was an underlying belief in a "political metaphysic" that presumed an international community of equal partners, from which the non-West had been excluded.<sup>184</sup> In forging new relations with one another, Asian elites sought to resist this pattern and assert their independence. Conducting interstate relations under the rules of Western diplomacy was a way to rectify the humiliations of the colonial era and assert themselves on an international stage as modern societies.

At the same time, these moments of engagement were not only for the eyes of the West. Domestic audiences were also an important target of the performance of nationhood. Diplomatic visits, especially at such a high level, were important because

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<sup>183</sup> Marashi, 103

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, 105

they “worked to publicise the adoption of the new Wilsonian model of national politics by the two emerging states” and to “circulate a new set of national symbols with which to define themselves, their relationship to each other, and their place in the world.”<sup>185</sup> Encounters with the Chinese “other” provided the opportunity to present a representation of China that served to bolster the Iranian nationalist narratives. Moments of official representation, sometimes published in newspapers for public consumption, allowed for the performance of diplomatic ceremonies that reflected the military and modernizing ideology of both states. While China was not nearly as important to Iran as Turkey and therefore less widely publicized, official Sino-Iranian relations can also be understood through this lens. Due to the lack of significant economic, cultural, or strategic ties, early official interactions were partly performative, driven by the desire for prestige, and mediated by Chinese and Iranian notions of political and cultural identity. In the Republic of China, as it was with Turkey, this was enhanced by the fact that the two states shared a common nationalist-modernization ideology.

#### Sino-Iranian Co-operation and Competition, 1920-1941

As Li-Chiao Chen has argued, the end of World War I created new opportunities for both China and Iran to reverse some of the misfortunes it had suffered at the hands of European powers. Taiwanese scholar Chi-Hua Tang refers to the Chinese government's efforts to abrogate or otherwise cancel the Unequal Treaties and their humiliating terms as “Treaty Revision Diplomacy.”<sup>186</sup> Chief

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<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 105

<sup>186</sup> Chen 994; Tang, Chi-Hua. *Treaty Revision Campaign of the Beijing Government, 1912–1928: Out of the Shadow of the “Abrogation of Unequal Treaties.”* Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2010.

among these terms was the right of extraterritoriality, a perennial concern of Iranian and Chinese nationalists.<sup>187</sup> China had unsuccessfully attempted to cancel extraterritorial rights for most European countries when it entered World War I and was in the process of trying to regain control of the Shandong Peninsula, which had been ceded to Japan without Chinese consent at the Treaty of Paris. Iran had also canceled its extraterritorial rights with Russia, now the Soviet Union, after the Russian Revolution toppled the imperial state.<sup>188</sup> The Anglo-Iranian Agreement of 1919 tried to renegotiate Iran's relationship with Britain along more independent lines, but it was never ratified due to public opposition to British and Russian interference.<sup>189</sup> By early 1920, both China and Iran were new members of the League of Nations and were actively searching for a way to bolster their prestige in the context of these ongoing struggles.

In March, 1920, Chinese and Iranian representatives met for the first time in Rome.<sup>190</sup> The initiative was taken by Isaac Khan, the Iranian minister in Italy, who had been instructed to pursue a friendship treaty with China by the Iranian government.<sup>191</sup> Chinese minister Wang Kuang-Chi welcomed the development, saying "China and Iran were ancient civilized countries, but all encountered serious

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<sup>187</sup> Extraterritoriality refers to the legal right of the citizens of one country to follow the laws of their host country, even when in foreign lands. Extraterritorial rights were often used by British and Russian citizens in China and Iran to avoid punishment for crimes committed on foreign soil. For more on this topic, see Kayaoglu, Turan. *Legal Imperialism : Sovereignty and Extraterritoriality in Japan, the Ottoman Empire, and China*. Cambridge University Press (2010); Cassel, Pär Kristoffer. *Grounds of Judgment : Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan*, Oxford University Press (2012)

<sup>188</sup> Chen 995

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid* 999-1000

<sup>190</sup> Chen 1001

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*

challenges from foreign powers now,” and the Chinese Foreign Ministry wrote that “Iran has been a friend of business since the Tang dynasty, and now has the same ambition as ours.”<sup>192</sup> The most important feature of the treaty was that it stipulated that all citizens “will be subject to the local laws, and all judicial matters arising from disputes, crimes, etc. will be settled before the local tribunals of Persia or China, respectively.”<sup>193</sup> For China, it was only the second “equal treaty” (to borrow Chen’s phrase) to be signed without an extraterritoriality agreement, after the Sino-Bolivian Friendship Treaty that preceded it in 1919.<sup>194</sup> The treaty was ratified on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1922.<sup>195</sup> Chinese newspapers emphasized the significance of concluding the treaty without extraterritoriality.<sup>196</sup>

For the next twelve years, there would not be any substantial development in Sino-Iranian relations; ambassadors were not exchanged and no further diplomatic communication was attempted. This is possibly due to the changing priorities of the Iranian state under Reza Shah, who came to power over this period and had many competing foreign policy and developmental priorities. Relations with China, a low priority to begin with, likely fell by the wayside. Despite this lull, the press continued to follow Iranian affairs. Amanat notes that during this period “the political climate noticeably shifted in favor of Reza Khan,” in part because of his use of political

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid* 1002

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>195</sup> “The Sino-Persian Agreement has been exchanged” (中波通好條約已互換) *Shen Bao*, 1872-1949[Shanghai] February 25th, 1922

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid*

intimidation and hired thugs to oppress his opponents.<sup>197</sup> *Shen Bao* noted Reza Shah's rise to power, which was inaccurately portrayed as a reaction to popular demand. A *Shen Bao* report alludes to "opposition from religious leaders and the people" to establishing a republic.<sup>198</sup> Another describes an incident at the *Majles* in on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1924 as the result of popular pressure:

The Persian King has long been in Europe, which has led to a movement to reform the Persian Republic. The conservatives have become more entrenched in parliament. Some support a republic, but there are still many people who support the Shah. Opponents of the Republicans crowded into congress and the police could not control them. Members of Congress who advocated for a republic were beaten...<sup>199</sup>

Praise for Reza Shah was the norm, usually presented as analogous to China's national heroes or other nationalist strongmen. A later article gives a retrospective of the Shah's life that cast him as the founder of a republic and a nationalist modernizer, a kind of a combination between Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek:

He ordered the former King of Persia to go abroad, and planned to change Persia into a Republic, with himself as the president. Later, due to the fact that...the Persian people were not very satisfied with the Republican system, Reza Khan was formally appointed as the hereditary Shah. He reorganized the army, defeated the bandits and rebellious Turkish chieftains, and enacted a new constitution...Women do not wear veils, schools have been set up, streets are opened, new homes are built, public health is protected...the biggest achievement is the construction of a railway...Among the countries of the Near East, Reza Shah's position is only matched by Kemal of Turkey...the motherland has achieve a strong position thanks to the Iranian founder Reza Shah, and it shines brightly in the deserts of the East.<sup>200</sup>

This hagiographic portrayal of Reza Shah is indicative of the ideological affinities

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<sup>197</sup> Amanat, 556

<sup>198</sup> "Young Lord of Persia." (波斯之幼主) *Shen Bao*, 1872-1949 [Shanghai] March 25th, 1924

<sup>199</sup> "Persian State System" (波斯之國體爭) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] March 23rd, 1924.

<sup>200</sup> "Musings on Iran" (伊朗瑣譚) *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai] June 23rd, 1942.

between Nationalist China and Pahlavi Iran that facilitated good relations between both states.

By the late 1920s, China and Iran found themselves in competition over a position of influence in the League of Nations. League leadership comprised fourteen council seats, five of which were permanent - held by Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and Germany - and the rest distributed among various European and South American states. Only one seat was reserved for Asia, and competition frequently fell between China, Iran, and later Turkey.<sup>201</sup> For example, China occupied the seat in 1928, but it was forced to vacate because Persia was gathering support to mount a challenge. Persia issued an apology to the Chinese state and expressed hopes that it would “not harm friendly relations between China and Persia.”<sup>202</sup> In 1930, China was prevented from occupying another seat available on the principle that “Asia should have one non-permanent seat at a time,” and Iran’s term was not yet up.<sup>203</sup> The next year, Iran was the one forced to step down in favor of China.<sup>204</sup> When this term expired in 1934, Iran first put itself forth as a candidate to challenge the Chinese and then later withdrew in favor of Turkey, which had a better chance of winning. The *North China Herald* observed that “Persia's withdrawal in favour of Turkey increases the opposition to China's chance of retaining the seat.”<sup>205</sup> Iran sent its first ambassador to

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<sup>201</sup> “China and the League.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), Sep 12, 1934

<sup>202</sup> “China Seen from London: Britain A Supporter of China’s Claim on League.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), Oct 06, 1928

<sup>203</sup> “China at Geneva.” *The China Weekly Review* (1923-1950), Oct 25, 1930

<sup>204</sup> “China to Obtain a Seat on the League Council.” *The China Weekly Review* (1923-1950), Jun 20, 1931

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid*

China at the height of this diplomatic rivalry.<sup>206</sup>

China and Iran's interactions at the League of Nations often surrounded a critical international issue for both nations: the opium trade. Despite being illegal, opium was the main commodity traded between China and Iran in the early 1900s. This trade was the legacy of British imperial networks and continued well into the 1940s. Ram Regavim has completed a detailed study of the Iranian opium industry and its relationship to China during this period.<sup>207</sup> According to Regavim, after the rise of Reza Khan, the Iranian opium industry was mostly tolerated and eventually became a government monopoly.<sup>208</sup> In 1923, the *North China Herald* reported that 12,642 pounds of opium had been officially imported into China from Iran, according to statistics provided by Arthur Millspaugh, the American adviser in charge of Iranian finances.<sup>209</sup> In 1925, the Advisory Council of the League of Nations Opium Commission declared that "Persia has already this year exported 460 tons of illicit opium, most of which is supposed to have been smuggled into China."<sup>210</sup> Opium itself had been derisively called "Persian Dirt" (波斯土) in the Chinese press since the 1870s. Curbing this trade was exceedingly difficult, as the Iranian government had little incentive to end one of the most important revenue sources for its military and industrializing policies.<sup>211</sup> A League of Nations commission in the 1920s found no evidence that the Iranian government was making any serious attempt to

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<sup>206</sup> "China and Persia as Rivals at Geneva." *The China Weekly Review* (1923-1950), Sep 01, 1934

<sup>207</sup> Regavim, Ram B. "The most Sovereign of Masters: The History of Opium in Modern Iran, 1850–1955" University of Pennsylvania, Ann Arbor, (2012)

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>209</sup> "The Production and Export of Opium." *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, Mar 24, 1923

<sup>210</sup> "Persia Exports 460 Tons of Opium this Year; mostly to China, Claim." *The China Press (1925-1938)*, Sep 02, 1925 29

<sup>211</sup> Regavim, 182

curb opium cultivation or smoking.

Ending the opium trade ranked as a main objective for China's Republican government and for Chinese intellectuals, who viewed it as part of a long history of humiliation. In the nineteenth century, Britain had forced the militarily weak Qing state to accept a legal opium trade in two Opium Wars, which exacerbated a severe social problem and created a deep and lasting sense of injustice. By the 1900s, efforts to ban the trade had become increasingly transnational, and Chinese activists recognized that "China alone cannot hope to cope with the problem of narcotic drugs; permanent success in our war with opium requires effective cooperation between all the opium-producing and drug -manufacturing countries."<sup>212</sup> The First International Opium Convention was held in Shanghai as early as 1912, and the League of Nations established the League's Advisory Committee on Traffic in Opium in 1921. However, Iran was not particularly keen to cooperate; Iranian participation in these institutions was mainly to stave off regulation, and later to ensure that the lucrative opium industry was replaced with funding for development projects. EROC delegates took part in these organizations as well, and disputes between the two sides over opium production played out in an international arena.

Iran's unwillingness to modify its position on the opium issue was evident even when ostensibly participating in organizations dedicated to curbing its spread. On May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1936, the ROC delegate to the League Advisory Committee in Geneva raised the

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<sup>212</sup> "An Open Letter to Alfred S.K. Sze on Opium Suppression in China by National Anti-Opium Association." *The China Press* (1925- 1938), May 19, 1929



opium issue to his Iranian counterpart. He demanded an explanation of why quantities of opium had been shipped to China without import certificates, which were used to verify the opium was used for medical purposes. The Iranian delegate replied that “his Government was not a signatory to The Hague and Geneva Conventions” and that “certain regions of China” might have escaped Chinese regulatory control and failed to inspect the certificates. When pressed for which regions he specifically had in mind, the representative was forced to admit that “Chinese ships called at times at Iranian ports, presenting alleged import certificates which the Government of Iran was not checking up.”<sup>213</sup> While this somewhat tense exchange shows that opium could cause friction between the two countries, such conflict occurred against a backdrop of steadily increasing relations. It seems likely that both the opium trade and the competition between China and Iran at the League of Nations were a factor in the ROC's decision to pursue closer ties to further influence the Iranian government. Most importantly, both states were seen on the international stage conducting their own affairs, in diplomatic arenas previously reserved for Western nations.

### Shanghai Diplomacy

The first Iranian diplomatic representative in modern China was Mirza Hossein Khan Keyostevan, who arrived in Shanghai on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1934.<sup>214</sup> Keyostevan had joined the Iranian Foreign Service in 1916, and was consul in

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<sup>213</sup> “China Questions Opium Exports from Persia.” *The China Press* (1925-1938), May 27, 1936

<sup>214</sup> “Relations Resumed After 1300 Years.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941)

Karachi, India before his appointment in Shanghai.<sup>215</sup> Prior to his arrival, unofficial relations had been maintained by the owner of a large Iranian shipping company operating in Shanghai called Nemazee & Co. The appointment attracted international attention because of the supposed resumption of ties after 1300 years. Time Magazine wrote “The proudest of Persians last week was Hossein Khan Keyostevan...he had just received orders to go next month to Shanghai and open a Persian consulate, thus becoming the first man in 1,300 years to establish official diplomatic relations between Persia and China.”<sup>216</sup> This was actually inaccurate, as China had last had diplomatic contact with Safavid Iran (1501-1736) less than 400 years ago.<sup>217</sup> The Chinese press reported this fact correctly. The new embassy was located at No. 5, Lane 591, Jing'an Temple, near the Italian consulate.<sup>218</sup>

### Fig 3

Key Ostovan quickly immersed himself in Shanghai diplomatic circles. He had frequent meetings with the mayor and with members of the Foreign Ministry in Nanjing.<sup>219</sup> A common sight at art exhibitions, cocktail parties, and other prominent social events, he was often surrounded by other diplomats and foreign representatives that undoubtedly made for an impressive statement of the growing

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<sup>215</sup> “First Persian Consulate Will be Opened Soon.” *The China Press* (1925-1938), May 22, 1934

<sup>216</sup> “International: After 1,300 Years” *Time Magazine*. March 12, 1934

<sup>217</sup> “The Consul General of Persia arrived in Shanghai yesterday afternoon”. *Shen Bao 1872-1949 [Shanghai]*, (波斯總領事昨午到滬) May 08, 1934.

<sup>218</sup> The English language press gives the location as “Bubbling Well Road”, which today has been renamed “Nanjing West Road”

<sup>219</sup> New Persian Consular Speaks (波斯新領談話). *Shen Bao 1872-1949 [Shanghai]*, May 09, 1934

international prestige of modern China.<sup>220</sup> He also attended public memorials and other rituals of statesmanship, including a visit to the mausoleum of Sun Yat-sen and a memorial for King George V.<sup>221</sup> He was frequently depicted in the press, in both photographs and cartoons. The presence of Key Ostovan and other diplomats in Shanghai allowed the Chinese state to act out nationalist rituals with international actors. It served a function beyond the importance of the relationship itself – which in this case was not particularly important – for the propaganda and identity building efforts of the state among its own elites.



Some of the very many official representatives of several nations who attended Tuesday's (Jan. 28) memorial service. From right, Key Ostovan, Iranian Consul, Mr. I. I. Spilvanek, Soviet Consul-General, Dr. Jean Kryszinski, Mr. Paul Scheel, Danish Consul-General, Mr. N. Aall, Norwegian Chargé d'Affaires, Mr. J. Delvaux de Fenille, Belgian Consul-General, and M. J. Brionval, French Consul.

Fig 3.

<sup>220</sup> Shanghai News: Art Treasures of Ancient China Collection Destined for London on Show Here: Three Weeks Exhibition. (1935, Apr 10). *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941); "Cocktail Party At Cuban Legation: General Martel Host to Large Number of Guests Yesterday." *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), Apr 24, 1935; "Preview Exhibition Attracts Many." *The China Press* (1925-1938), Jun 24, 1936

<sup>221</sup> "Iranian Consul-General Sees Foreign Minister" *The China Press* (1925-1938), Sep 30, 1936



"N.-C. Herald" Photo.  
Mr. Key **Ostovan**

Fig 4.



Fig 5. A portrait of the Iranian consular by Sapajou, a Russian cartoonist based

*in Shanghai. Sketched on the occasion of his arrival in China.* <sup>222</sup>

Overall, there was little pressing need for Sino-Iranian cooperation, as both countries were quite remote and had only cursory economic and cultural ties. According to official publications, Reza Khan pursued ties with China out of a desire to raise Iran's profile internationally and to protect the interests of Iranian merchants.<sup>223</sup> Shanghai had long been home to a small community of Iranian traders. However, the trade level was relatively low and primarily consisted of cotton, wool, dates, cigarettes, dried fruits, alcoholic beverages, chemical reagents like ferric acid, and wheat flour.<sup>224</sup> Iran primarily imported tea, silk, and other luxury items from China.<sup>225</sup> Furthermore, although exact figures are difficult to confirm, statistics from the Chinese press suggest that there were only a few Iranian households in Shanghai in the 1930s; in 1934, only two households consisting of five men and five women each were officially recorded.<sup>226</sup> News articles alluded to the fact that “the number of overseas Chinese doing direct business in Persia is very small, just like the overseas Chinese in Persia,” and that “the number of overseas Chinese in Persia is not very large, about 100 people.”<sup>227</sup> In an article in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advisor*, Key Ostovan claimed that “there are more than 2,000 Persians in China, most of them being centered in Chinese Turkestan. In Shanghai,

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<sup>222</sup> “Editorial Cartoon 4 -- no Title.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), Aug 01, 1934. For more on Sapajou, see: Djordjevic, Nenad (ed). *Sapajou: The Collected Early Works of Old Shanghai's Greatest Cartoonist - The Early Years*. Earnshaw Books (2010)

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>224</sup> Abidi 29-30

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>226</sup> “Municipal Public Security Bureau announced yesterday: Statistics of Foreigners in October” (市公安局昨發表十月份外僑統計). December 19th, 1935

<sup>227</sup> “Formally Establish Relations” (定期正式成立). *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai], May 21st, 1934.

however, there are only about 100.”<sup>228</sup> European globalization had effectively disconnected China and Iran from each other and circumvented their traditional economic ties.

Still, the Iranian government was keen to increase business ties with China. Ostovan spoke of increasing trade ties and the need to conduct business “directly” between China and Iran from his first day in Shanghai.<sup>229</sup> Commerce between the two nations had become indirect with the rise of railroads and steamships, which had routed Chinese and Iranian imports and exports through third parties like India and Russia.<sup>230</sup> This was particularly the case with tea, one of the most important globally traded commodities in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century world.<sup>231</sup> An article memorializing the death of a pioneering Iranian tea trader in Shanghai, Mr. H. M. H. Nemazee, explains how Iranians like himself played a key role in the tea trade in Shanghai:

Mr. Nemazee was formerly head of the firm of H. M. H Nemazee & Sons, which he founded in 1893. Prior to that date, green tea was shipped overland by camel caravans through India and Afghanistan to the markets of Central Asia. Coming to Shanghai for the autumn races, Mr. Nemazee soon came to the conclusion that if the tea were packed in cases and shipped by way of the Black Sea, it would arrive in better condition...His commercial activities covered a wide field, and extended to the control of a large fleet of fourteen steamers plying between the

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<sup>228</sup> “Iran’s Rise to Power Under New Emperor.” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advisor* (1835-1946) [Singapore] November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1936

<sup>229</sup> “The Consul General of Persia arrived in Shanghai yesterday afternoon” *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai], May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1934.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>231</sup> See Saberi, Helen. *Tea: A Global History*. Reaktion Books, (2010); Mair, Victor H., and Erling Hoh. *The True History of Tea*. Thames & Hudson (2009); Benn, James A. *Tea In China : a Religious and Cultural History*. University of Hawai’i Press (2015); Evans, John C. *Tea In China : the History of China's National Drink*. Greenwood Press, (1992) For primary sources, see Torgashev, Boris Pavlovich. *China as a Tea Producer*. Shanghai Commercial Press, 1926 and Chu, T. H. *Tea Trade In Central China*. China institute of Pacific Relations (1936)

China coast and Arabia.<sup>232</sup>

A 1910 report indicates that the bulk of tea shipments that year were going through Russia, specifically to Batumi in present-day Georgia, which suggests that they were bound for Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and western Russian markets.<sup>233</sup> Nemazee is listed as the second-largest exporter to Batoum, with 45,012 half-chests of tea shipped that year.<sup>234</sup> A 1913 report similarly indicated that “tea now ranks as an import of first importance in Persia.”<sup>235</sup> Iranians like Nemazee played a key role in re-routing exports bound for Central Asia and the Middle East through European intermediaries.

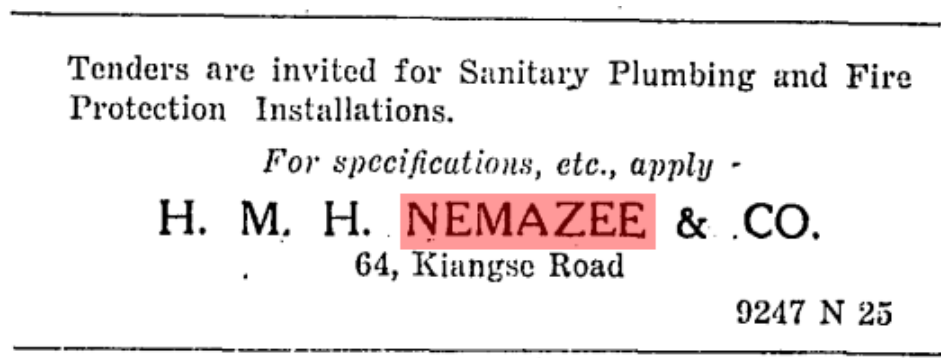


Fig 6. An advertisement for Nemazee & Co in *The China Press*, a British periodical.<sup>236</sup>

Both the Chinese and Iranian governments had reasons to promote the tea trade and made efforts to do so, and these efforts were not always complimentary. The Iranian state had acquired a monopoly on the sale, importation, export, and storage of tea and

<sup>232</sup> “Mr. H. M. H. Nemazee.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), Aug 28, 1935

<sup>233</sup> Wade, H. T. “THE TEA SEASON, 1910.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), Apr 29, 1911

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>235</sup> Wade, H. T. “THE TEA SEASON OF 1913: HOW CHINA IS BEING OUSTED SOME WAYS OF MEETING COMPEITION.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), May 02, 1914

<sup>236</sup> “Classified Ad 1 -- no Title.” *The China Press* (1925-1938), Nov 25, 1929

sugar in 1925.<sup>237</sup> In 1930, Iran employed six Chinese experts to advise the government on tea plantation development, which led to the creation of a tea drying facility in Lahjan in 1936.<sup>238</sup> Ironically, this damaged Chinese tea producers at a time when Chinese exports to Russia were already falling. An article in *The China Press* describes the competition between China and Iran over Russian markets:

Persia has employed six Chinese experts to advise the Minister of Agriculture in the matter of planting... Persia is exceptionally well situated to supply Muscovite needs and there appears to be no reason, climatic or other, why tea culture should not be equally as successful in Persia as in Assam. Existing extensions of the Russian railway system will bring the consumer into close contact with Persian plantations and one further blow will be dealt to China's diminishing export of a staple, in the production of which this country led the world until a half a century ago.<sup>239</sup>

China was equally facing competition from Britain, whose re-export of Indian tea to Russia cut into a sizable portion of the Chinese tea trade.<sup>240</sup> Consequently, Chinese tea producers had strong motivation to conclude a trade agreement that would enable Chinese goods, especially tea, to supply Iran directly rather than through Russian, Indian, or British intermediaries. Opening markets in Iran directly to Chinese goods would offset some of the recent losses caused by Iranian competition.

Unofficial Sino-Iranian networks were directly involved in pushing for improved trade relations. After the arrival of an official Iranian representative, merchant organizations in Shanghai took the initiative to advocate for a Sino-Iranian trade agreement. Between 1934 and 1936, the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce

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<sup>237</sup> "Tea Monopoly is Granted in Persia." *The China Press* (1925-1938), Jun 02, 1925

<sup>238</sup> Abidi 30

<sup>239</sup> "Persia Planting Tea." *The China Press* (1925-1938), Sep 11, 1930.

<sup>240</sup> Wade, H. T. "THE TEA SEASON OF 1913: HOW CHINA IS BEING OUSTED SOME WAYS OF MEETING COMPEITION."



received no less than three letters from a consortium of Chinese and Persian merchants based in Fujian. The first was sent on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1934, three months after Key Ostovan's arrival:

The Shanghai Chamber of Commerce reported yesterday that the Ministry of Industry of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Nanjing received a letter from the Yangzhuang Tea Association (*Yangzhuang chaye gonghui* 洋莊茶業公會) on the 15th of this month. According to this letter from the Persian merchants, Persia imports 12 to 15 million pounds of black tea every year, about 200,000 to 250,000 boxes, all from India, Ceylon, Java, and Taiwan. In the past, Persia imported mostly Chinese tea, but since the establishment of a monopoly, Chinese tea has disappeared from the Persian market...the reason is that China has not concluded a trade agreement with the country.<sup>241</sup>

The letter claimed that representatives from the tea trade had been one of the reasons the Chinese government had reached out to Iran in the first place, but that the government had inexplicably stopped. It also proposed that the government offer Persia a contract to purchase tea at a minimal tax and a most-favored-nation clause to ensure that other countries did not outbid China. The association felt that China had to make the first move, as the market for Iranian products in China was relatively small, so Iran had less motivation to conclude a deal. "After signing this agreement, there will be more of Persia in China."<sup>242</sup>

When a few months had passed without an agreement, a representative of the Yangzhuang Tea Association sent another letter on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1934. This one urged the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce to use its influence and pressure the government to conclude a deal:

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<sup>241</sup> "City Chamber of Commerce: Please Conclude a Contract with Persia"  
(市商會電外部請與波斯締訂商約) *Shen Bao*, June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1934

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid*

It has been a long time since the start of negotiations between the two sides on the Sino-Persian trade agreement regarding the export of tea...If no agreement is made, the national tea industry will be restricted...it will be difficult to develop...For this reason, I have sent a letter to the City Chamber of Commerce, urging you to petition the Ministry of Foreign Affairs...If there is a delay in the agreement, then Chinese tea markets may make the same mistake as the Treaty of Tianjin [when China ceded trading rights to France and effectively ended its influence in Vietnam].<sup>243</sup>

The repeated requests show the importance of this issue to the local Chinese and Iranian merchant community. The specter of diplomatic disasters like the Unequal Treaties was invoked in Sino-Iranian relations to promote a defensive trade agreement that would help Chinese merchants regain some ground lost to colonial competitors.

Tea traders were not the only industry interested in a Sino-Iranian trade deal. On November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1934, a third letter reached the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce, this time from the Silk Industry Association:

Regarding the Sino-Iranian trade agreement, which the government has not yet brought up...In Persia, in addition to Chinese tea, Chinese silk is also a bulk export product. Since the country concluded an unequal tariff treaty, both silk and tea have disappeared in Persia...After several negotiations, a satisfactory result has not yet been obtained...our pain is the same as the tea industry...It seems there is no hope of success at the present.<sup>244</sup>

An update on negotiations was published a month later by a newspaper in Nanjing, which claimed the two sides were close to an agreement. The treaty was framed as a way to rescue the embattled silk and tea industries in Shanghai: “the Shanghai silk and tea industry was hit by overseas trade...Please quickly conclude the Sino-Persian

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<sup>243</sup> “Call for a Sino-Iranian Agreement: Protect a Corner of the Tea Market”

(催訂中波商約保持華茶一隅之銷路) *Shen Bao*, August 31, 1934

<sup>244</sup> “Call for a Sino-Iranian Export Agreement: Regarding the Need to Protect Silk and Tea Exports”

(催訂中波商約事關綢茶外銷亟應設法挽救). *Shen Bao*, November 10, 1934

trade treaty to provide relief.”<sup>245</sup> However, four months later, that relief had still not arrived, and it seems the Iranian government did not respond to the Chinese draft proposal.<sup>246</sup>

While an official agreement was never concluded, the advocacy surrounding it did lead towards greater Sino-Iranian cooperation. The Iranian government eventually dispatched personnel to Shanghai to set up a Far East Trade Bureau to improve Iran’s foreign trade ties throughout Asia. The Consulate was also upgraded to a Consulate General office in 1936, which coincided with a flurry of visits from “Iranian guests” and meetings with the Iranian ambassador widely publicized in *Shen Bao* and other dailies.<sup>247</sup> It is unknown what delayed the Sino-Iranian trade deal in the years that followed. It was possibly opposed by Iran’s growing national industry of tea merchants, who would have no reason to welcome Chinese competition. However, the question was rendered moot just a few years after; World War I broke out in 1939, and Iran was occupied by Britain and Russia in 1941. In the years that followed, the question of a trade deal would fall by the wayside and Sino-Iranian ties would once again become indirect. Iranian interests in China were managed in part by foreign intermediaries: first the Netherlands in 1941, and later Turkey, reflecting the low level of priority given to this relationship. An official embassy would not be established until after the war, in 1944, first in Chongqing and then later moved to Nanjing. These events were covered in the Chinese, Iranian, and international press,

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<sup>245</sup> “Sino-Persian Treaty are Mutual Consultation” (中波訂約在相互磋商中). *Shen Bao*. January 6, 1935.

<sup>246</sup> “Sino-Persian Negotiations” (中波議訂商約) *Shen Bao*, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1935

<sup>247</sup> “Iranian Office in Shanghai Upgraded (伊朗駐滬領署昇格)”, *Shen Bao* 1872-1949 [Shanghai], March 4 1936,

but only with passing interest.<sup>248</sup>

## Conclusions

From the 1920s until the early 1950s, Iranian state ties to Nationalist China were relatively weak. They were driven by two factors: a desire for international prestige and the demands of Chinese and Iranian merchants in Shanghai. Iran and the Republic of China competed in international markets and political organizations, and each had divergent priorities on issues like opium and the tea trade. However, the two states had complementary ideological orientations and historical outlooks, especially when it came to Western imperialism. At the behest of Chinese merchants and in search of diplomatic victories following the Treaty of Paris, China reached out to Iran and attempted to conclude a trade agreement. Iran responded by signing the Sino-Persian Treaty of 1920 and establishing unofficial representation in Shanghai in 1934. It was generally disinterested in opening Iran to Chinese goods, especially tea and silk, as a nascent national Iranian industry stood ready to compete with Chinese producers. Connections in trade, state visits, and other official interactions served the additional purpose of legitimizing both of these rapidly modernizing Asian states' independence and authority and were facilitated by a similar ideological and political orientation.

While Sino-Iranian relations in this period were not substantial, they offer a fascinating window into Iranian merchant communities' activities in Shanghai and the international community of diplomats that closely supported them. Although small, the Persians of Shanghai and Hong Kong seems to have held a substantial amount of

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<sup>248</sup> Garver, 304

political and economic influence relative to their size in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China. Additional research is necessary into the history of this poorly studied diaspora community. The figure of Key Ostovan, an important constitutionalist figure and ally of Mohammad Mosaddeq (1882-1967), is similarly unknown in Iranian Studies. Minor political relationships can take on a new significance from local actors' perspective and their attempts to resist the challenges of a global economic system dominated by Europe. It seems to have been local economic concerns that initially drove Nationalist China to make contact with Iran. In Fujian, tea and silk producers advocated for their own economic interests and sought to open up the Iranian market to Chinese goods. Traditional diplomatic analysis privileges questions of international diplomacy and influence, and while the pursuit of prestige and an end to extraterritoriality play an important role, such analyses overlook the influence of non-state actors.

The day to day activities of seemingly insignificant diplomats and international high society figures can play a role in constructing state identity and elite propaganda. Key Ostovan and other diplomats performed for other elites the desired image of the Chinese nation's international character by their presence at memorials and public events. At the same time, a positive appraisal of Reza Shah emerged in the Chinese press, which whitewashed his autocratic methods and emphasized his role as a national founder and modernist strongman, a role analogous to China's own Chiang Kai-shek. On his way back to Iran after serving two years in China, Key Ostovan expressed an analogous opinion of Chiang Kai-shek, whom he called "a very strong-minded man and

a great patriot, who is working only for peace and prosperity.”<sup>249</sup> In Iran, these portrayals were matched by a growing discourse that lionized Chiang and Nationalist China, especially after their defeat by the Communists in 1949.

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<sup>249</sup> “Iran’s Rise to Power Under New Emperor.”

### **Chapter 3 - Competing Visions of China - Sino-Iranian Relations, 1949-1959**

This chapter will compare the impact of the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949 on official and unofficial Sino-Iranian relations. It will chart the emergence of two competing visions of China, one espoused by the state, the other by its communist opposition. Unofficial ties developed between the Chinese Communist Party and the Iranian Tudeh Party, primarily through networks of student activists from Iran that visited China for international conferences. Official ties between Iran and the Republic of China persisted through the 1950s and were increasingly visible to Iranian elites. This period also saw a substantial travelogue from an Iranian diplomat and an increase in stories about China and Chinese history in newspapers and cultural magazines. In comparing these different media, it is clear that at least two ideas about China, seemingly at odds, were being proposed in Iran: one which saw China as a positive model for the future and one which saw China as a negative example to avoid. Simultaneously, in China, a positive view of the Iranian people was being promoted alongside a highly negative view of the Iranian government. How can we make sense of these competing representations, and what can they tell us about either society's history?

#### **China as a Threat: The Specter of a Chinese Communist Revolution in Iran**

Sino-Iranian relations and events in China received significantly more attention in the Iranian press starting in the 1950s. This change was precipitated by the victory of the CCP in October of 1949, which raised global alarms about the seemingly irresistible

expansion of Communism.<sup>250</sup> The United States had been supporting Chiang Kai-shek, but this support could not reverse the tide of events on the mainland. The question of how China was “lost” by the West became a serious preoccupation for Western politicians and the American voting public. So great was the concern that it led historian Robert Newman to remark that “[t]o many Americans, the atheists defeated the Christians in 1949.”<sup>251</sup> This event set off a wave of anti-communist sentiment and was one of the events that set the tone of the Cold War as an ideological conflict.

Iranian politicians shared American sentiments about the Chinese Revolution because of their political connections with American politicians and shared sources of information. The government of Reza Shah was anti-communist both on ideological and practical grounds. Following Mohammad Reza Shah’s accession to the throne in 1941, the monarchy’s weakness allowed political parties and open politics to re-emerge. Among the many political movements of this period, the Tudeh Party was the only one that developed a base among the masses and was highly successful in organizing oil refinery workers.<sup>252</sup> The Tudeh also had a phenomenally successful social program that included outreach at various levels, from labor unions to media publications to social outreach. The party flexed its muscle in 1951, when it organized massive strikes and protests that paralyzed the oil industry and sent the Iranian parliament into a panic about the growing power of Marxism in Iran.<sup>253</sup> Soviet support for opponents of the Shah and the self-evident strength of the Tudeh Party served to increase the

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<sup>250</sup> For a full account of how this event reverberated throughout the American psyche, see: Newman, Robert P. *Owen Lattimore and the “Loss” of China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (1992)

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid*, 200

<sup>252</sup> Abrahamian, Ervand. *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge University Press (2018) 107-113

<sup>253</sup> Abrahamian (1983) 226



government's hostility towards all things Marxist.

At the same time, the United States had begun to view affairs in the Middle East through a Cold War lens and sought allies to block any attempts at Soviet expansion in the region. In 1953, the U.S. and the U.K sponsored a coup d'état against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, who had initiated a plan to nationalize the oil industry with massive popular support. The coup solidified the role of the United States as reliable partners for the Pahlavi government in the years that followed. In 1955, Iran joined the U.S.-sponsored Baghdad Pact alongside Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, and the U.K in an effort designed to contain the USSR. By then, the Shah had established a close relationship with the United States by portraying himself as a deterrent to the spread of Soviet influence.

All of this contributed to a state-sponsored image of China that was heavily influenced by Western scholarship and American politics, although not all of it was explicitly political. Some of the most extensive articles about China can be found in the pages of the popular periodical *Eṭṭelā 'āt-e māhāna* (Ettela'at Monthly), a monthly magazine associated with the oldest running Persian daily, *Eṭṭelā 'āt*. Ettela'at Monthly ran from March 1948 to March 1959, and targeted educated Iranians with an interest in international affairs and world cultures. Published in a bilingual edition until 1951, it typically carried longer articles on history, culture, and international affairs. It was filled with articles on Greek philosophy, French literature, and the habits and customs of people from around the world. Often, articles were translations of foreign works or

carried citations for French, English, and German studies.<sup>254</sup>

The most common articles about China explored particular facets of Chinese history or related popular Chinese myths, stories, and historical (or quasi-historical) episodes. One such article was published in the 1955 Farvardin edition of *Ettela'at Monthly*.<sup>255</sup> Entitled “The Power of Love Created the Greatest Line of Defense”,<sup>256</sup> it recounts the legends surrounding the first Chinese Emperor, Qin Shi Huang, including legendary tales of how he constructed the Great Wall and the harsh methods he used to consolidate his power in China. The article gives the usual statistics about the wall’s length and the erroneous claim that it is the only artificial structure that could be seen from the moon by the naked eye, likely drawn from sources in foreign periodicals.

It also presents the story in a way that reflects the anxieties of the Iranian state and the priorities of contemporary development discourse. Iranian officials were fearful that the country would once again collapse into civil war, possibly through the instigation of outside forces, and sought centralization and industrial development as a solution. It is therefore unsurprising that the author defends reports that Qin Shi Huang worked over 5 million men to death, as it was to “prevent the invasion of northern barbarians” and “bring all Chinese soil under the banner of a single government and restore the greatness and power of the dynastic monarchs.” This discourse was likely attractive to the state, as it bolstered the Iranian government’s arguments about the

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<sup>254</sup> *Encyclopedia Iranica*, “EṬṬELĀ’ĀT” January 20, 2012

<sup>255</sup> Farvardin is the first month in the Iranian Solar Hijri calendar, roughly corresponding to March 21st – April 20th of the Gregorian calendar.

<sup>256</sup> *bozorgtarin khatt-e ā’iā niru-ye e’sheq be-vojud āvard*. *Ettela’at Mahane*, (1333 Farvardin/1955 March), 32-34. The title is a reference to the story of Lady Meng Jiang, who famously wept at the site where her husband died to build the wall.

necessity of the monarchy in the face of challenges to central authority.

Articles like this explored different aspects of Chinese culture but still echoed Western concerns. They often highlighted the perceived backwardness and inferiority of China vis-à-vis Iranian civilization. The same article goes on to decry the practice of foot binding, which was often described as “torture”:

Dear reader, you have probably heard that the biggest disadvantage for a Chinese woman is to have large feet. The feet of Chinese women are so small that they may be smaller than those of a five or six-year-old child. In Chinese families until recently, when a girl came of age, she immediately had her legs put in special restraints that prevented her from developing...This bizarre, torturous fashion has tormented Chinese women for twenty-two centuries...”<sup>257</sup>

This discourse echoed both Chinese and Western concerns with the practice of foot binding, but notably has the effect of “othering” Chinese people by highlighting a cultural practice that seems barbarous to Iranian and Western audiences. Other articles were translations drawn from the Western press; for example, one piece discussing the famous opera *Turandot* by Giacomo Puccini, set in China, was taken from an unnamed European magazine.<sup>258</sup> This piece uses a Persian font that mimics the brush strokes of Chinese characters, a common visual trope in Western media about Asia until recently.

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<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>258</sup>“Puchini’s Opera” Ettela’at Mahane, (1334 Ordibehesht / 1956 April)



Fig 7. “Asian” style type on an article about Giacomo Puccini's “Turandot”

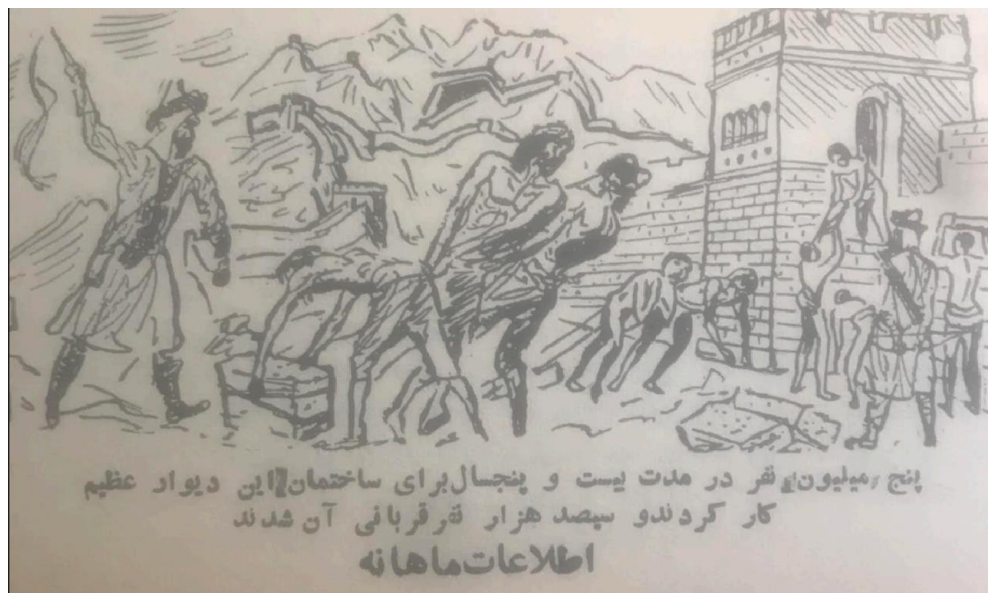
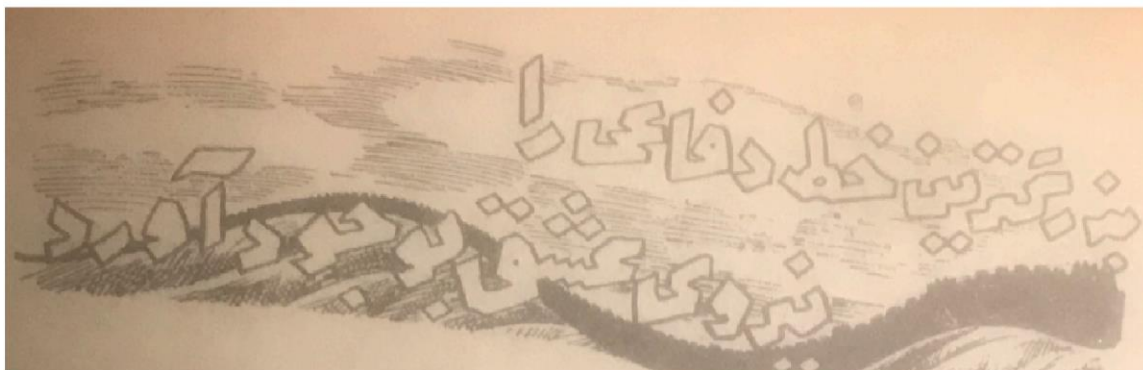


Fig 8. Cartoon depicting construction of the Great Wall

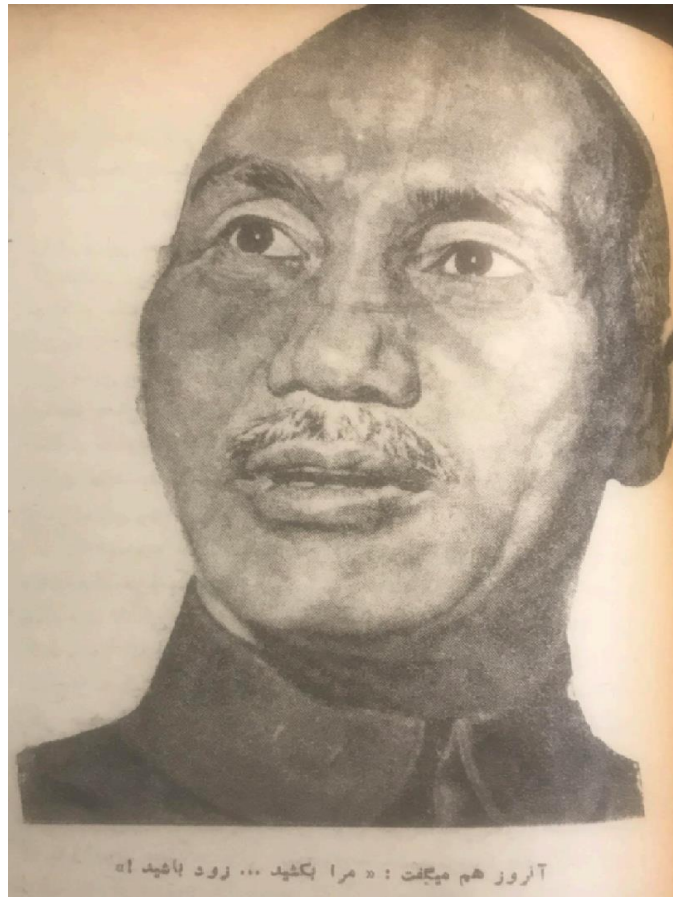


*Fig 9. Title and Illustration of an Article on the Great Wall*

Some authors took a decidedly political tone. In a three-page article published in 1955, an unnamed author describes recent events of Chinese history. Titled “From Loving the Maxim Gun to the Hatred of Karl Marx’s Thoughts,” it is fiercely anti-Communist and pro-Nationalist. “Like the melted black material that flows down from the mountain of fire, the volcano engulfs the surrounding plains...the Chinese Communists attacked Mukden...”<sup>259</sup> It echoes the debates about “Who Lost China” that were prominent in Western scholarship and the American political scene. The author blames the defeat on a lack of American support: “Chiang sent his wife to America to ask the American government for help...If he could have resisted until US help arrives, many lives would have be saved...If America did not help, the great gap between [the Nationalists and the Communists] then must inevitably fall and Communist domination was assured...”

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<sup>259</sup> “From the love of the Maxim Gun to the Hatred of Karl Marx’s Thoughts” *Ettela’at Mahane* (1334 Ordibehesht / 1956 April)



*Fig 10. An image of Chiang Kai-shek in Ettela'at*

### Mehdi Farrokh's Travels in China

One of the most interesting sources is the testament of Mehdi Farrokh (1886-1973), an Iranian statesman and diplomat best known for his political memoirs and writings on the history of Afghanistan.<sup>260</sup> Farrokh was a long-serving statesman whose

<sup>260</sup> Farrokh, Mehdi. *خاطرات سیاسی فرخ* [Political Memoirs of Farrokh] Tehran: Amir Kabir Publications (1968)

Farrokh, Mehdi. *تاریخ مختصر افغانستان* [A Concise History of Afghanistan] Tabriz (1937)

tenure had begun during the Constitutional Era when he fought under Sattar Khan against the Qājārs and their Russian allies.<sup>261</sup> Throughout his career, he held a variety of posts, from senator governor-general to ambassador. In the 1920s, he served as ambassador to Afghanistan during political instability, an experience that informed his writing. In July of 1948, Farrokh was assigned as the Iranian ambassador to the Nationalist government in Nanjing.<sup>262</sup> Shortly after his arrival, the Nationalists were driven out of their capital by the resurgent Communist forces, which Farrokh witnessed personally. Upon his return, he wrote an account of his travels titled *One Year in the Heavenly Country of China*, in which he described his mission to Nanjing, his political views on the situation, and the history and culture of China as he saw it. This volume, which has previously been overlooked by scholars of Iranian and Chinese diplomatic history, provides insight into elite Iranian attitudes towards China during the 1950s.

Farrokh wrote his memoir for two reasons. It began when, upon his return to Iran in 1949, Farrokh was urged by the Iranian minister of foreign affairs, Ali Asghar Hekmat (1892-1980), to present his experiences in China to members of the foreign ministry. Hekmat also insisted that Farrokh publish his findings for the public, because there was no reliable source of information available in print in Iran on “a country as large as China” or Iran's relationship with it.<sup>263</sup> The book is therefore an attempt to develop and improve Iranian knowledge of China, its politics and its people.<sup>264</sup> Farrokh was also going through political problems related to a textbook on Afghanistan that he published

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<sup>261</sup> Farrokh, Kaveh. “Backgrounds and Ancestry” <http://kavehfarrokh.com/about/background-ancestry/>. Accessed July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020

<sup>262</sup> Farrokh, Mehdi. یک سال در کشور آسمانی چین [One Year in the Heavenly Country of China]. (1952), 2

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid*, 1

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid*

in 1952. This publication embarrassed and exposed Afghan officials involved in a 1929 coup d'etat, and the Afghan mission to Iran successfully lobbied to have all copies of his book removed from circulation. This public defeat may have motivated him to make a new contribution to avoid damage to his reputation. Regardless, given the highly publicized nature of this conflict at the time *One Year* was published and Farrokh's high profile in the Foreign Service, it is likely that many Iranian diplomats and government officials would have come across it. Therefore, it can be said that this travelogue helped to produce and propagate ideas about China among the political elite.

Farrokh's journey to China began in September of 1948. After an evening with the Chinese Ambassador in Tehran and a lesson on the proper use of chopsticks, Farrokh traveled to Abadan and sailed out of the Shatt al-Arab on a British vessel headed east. The boat stopped in Kuwait, Bahrain and briefly at Karachi to allow Farrokh to have a tooth extracted. Their final destination was Mumbai, where they met with foreign officials and the Taj Mahal as they awaited a barge that would take them to Hong Kong. Farrokh describes both ships as luxurious and decadent. They included a pool, movie theater, stores and barber shops, medical facilities, and a dining area. By utilizing the networks of European colonialism, Farrokh and other wealthy Iranians and Indians could travel to China in an extraordinarily comfortable fashion. The barge took a roundabout trip through Colombo, Calcutta, Indonesia, Malaysia, Penang, and Singapore before it finally stopped at Hong Kong. From there, Farrokh and his companion, a secretary named Maryam, traveled to Shanghai by plane. Upon entering China, he felt inspired by the beauty of the scenery to compose a poem:

*Greetings, O beautiful country of China,*



*O light of the East upon Earth  
 Hundreds of blessings (of peace) be upon you and your leader  
 From the king and the kingdom of Annam<sup>265</sup>  
 Heavenly country with splendor and pomp  
 Millionaires among people with wealth and gold  
 The land of industry and history of the world  
 Who dares to raise a hand upon you in violence?<sup>266</sup>*

Farrokh's time in Shanghai and Hong Kong provides a window into the little-known community of Iranians that prospered in Shanghai during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He met several other Iranians en route to China. In Singapore, an Iranian general and his family boarded the barge, and in Hong Kong they were joined by a Mr. Mehdi Namāzi, the current owner of Nemazee & Co. A wealthy philanthropist who had constructed schools and hospitals back home in his native Shiraz, Namāzi owned a home in Hong Kong that was attended by butlers, in addition to a home in Shanghai that shocked the consular officers with its splendor. Namāzi had also sponsored community infrastructure for the Iranian community in Shanghai, including a prayer house (خانه نمازی). Farrokh held Namazi to be a man “full of patriotism and goodness, like all Shirazis” and his success made him feel proud of his people's prosperity even in this faraway place.<sup>267</sup> Farrokh spent much of his time in Shanghai, and later at the embassy in Nanking, with members of the tight-knit local Persian community. He describes with affectionate detail the various parties held by what he called the “Iranian colony” at the embassy, including a wedding for one of the staff members.

<sup>265</sup> Annam was a traditional name for Indochina and the southernmost province of imperial China. Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists' base of power was in the south, which may explain this reference.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid*, 12. The Persian text of the poem is as follows:

ای چراغ شرق در روی زمین	السلام ای کشور زیبای چین
باد از شاهنشاه ملک انام	بر تو و بر پیشوایت صد سلام
میلیونر ز افراد هم از مال و زر	آسمانی کشور با محدو فر
دست کی یازد کسی بر تو بقهر الغ	سر زمین صنعت و تاریخ دهر

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid*, 11, 13



*Fig 11. The “Iranian colony” in Shanghai*



*Fig 12. Parsa's wedding at the embassy in Nanjing*

Farrokh's work is part travelogue, part textbook, and much of it is devoted to descriptions of the history, politics, and culture of modern China. The information he presents is rudimentary and mostly correct, with some notable exceptions that reflect

cultural biases.<sup>268</sup> He covers topics like language, currency, history, government, food, religion, topography, and population. Recent events are told from a Nationalist perspective, and the historical sections primarily rehearse the story of China's exploitation by British, Russian, and Japanese imperialism. He was particularly fascinated with China's attitude towards religion, which he noted was considerably more flexible than Iranian attitudes, and conversion was easy and not uncommon.<sup>269</sup> He considered "lack of religion" among one of the weak points holding the Chinese nation back, which he believed led to moral lapses that drove drug use, poverty, and government corruption.<sup>270</sup> Despite this apparent irreligiousness, Farrokh has nothing but praise for Chinese civilization and culture and China's achievements in technology and industry. "The Chinese people are known for their extraordinary intelligence in industry...Many inventions in human history originate from China."<sup>271</sup> He attributes this to "Confucius philosophy [which has] had a strange effect on the spirit and blood of the Chinese people." These sections reflect Farrokh's ambition for his work to function as a primary source of knowledge about China for the general public, and his discussion of Islam in China also helped spread knowledge of the Chinese Muslim community in Iran.

Farrokh associates the modern sights he sees in China with the influence of the West, for good and for ill. He described both Shanghai and Hong Kong as beautiful, modern cities and praised their industrial development and infrastructure.<sup>272</sup> Shanghai is "very European and very modern," a change he attributes to its bustling trade with the

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<sup>268</sup> For example, Farrokh erroneously claims that there are "no Jews in China, as the Chinese are too good at economics to need them". *Ibid*, 32

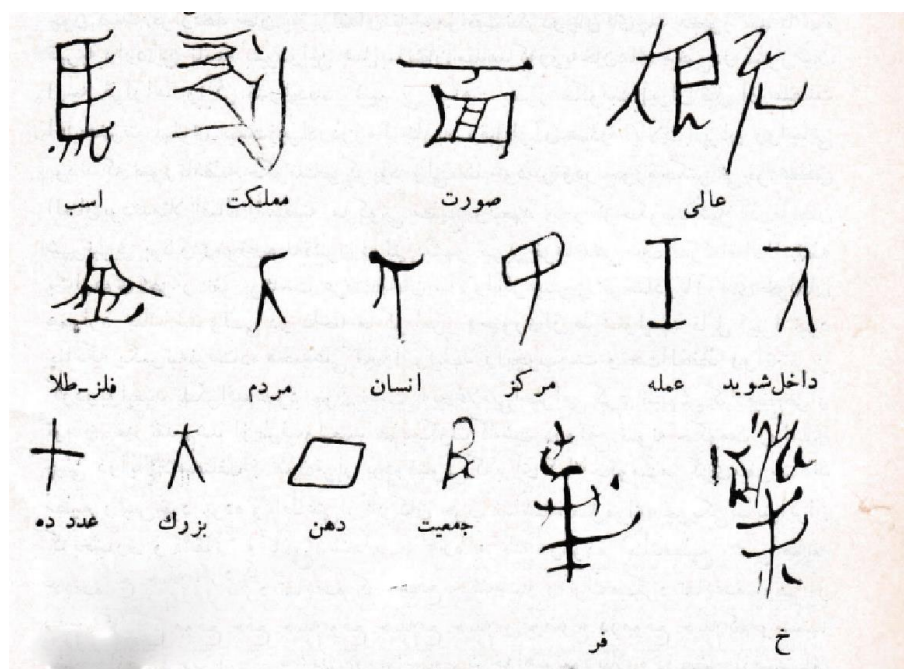
<sup>269</sup> *Ibid*, 37

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid*, 39

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid*, 38

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid* 7, 13

outside world.<sup>273</sup> He credits the British with the development of Hong Kong, although he cautions that they have set up a free trade zone that is highly beneficial to themselves in the process.<sup>274</sup> Despite his admiration for their technological achievements, he is highly critical of the role of foreigners in his summaries of recent Chinese history. He argues that “British imperialism led the Chinese to throw themselves into the arms of the Russians, only to discover they are also imperialists.”<sup>275</sup> These attitudes reflected the priorities of the Iranian state in the 1950s and Farrokh's position as a nationalist who spent much of his career opposing British and Russian imperial designs in Iran.



*Fig 13. Illustrations from a section on Chinese characters and their meanings*

Farrokh's interpretation of what he saw in China was colored by his own experience and understanding of Iranian history. Regarding China's experience with

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid*, 14

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid*, 11

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid*, 34

imperialism, he wrote that “the Chinese government and nation were suffering the same pain as Iran” and compared Chiang's campaign against his military rivals to Reza Khan's campaign against the tribal leaders resisted his authority at the beginning of his reign.<sup>276</sup> He repeatedly drew parallels between Chiang Kai-shek and Reza Shah: “If Reza Pahlavi was the founder of the Iranian nation, it must be acknowledged that General Chiang Kai-shek was the founder of China.”<sup>277</sup> Farrokh depicted Chiang as a patriotic strong-man, a lone figure standing alone against a relentless series of threats, from Japanese invaders to Russian imperialism and Communist infiltration. He depicted Chiang's downfall was the result of foreign interference and treasonous detractors:

The greatest service that Chiang Kai-shek rendered his homeland was to thwart the Japanese plan. China had no weapons, ammunition, or personnel, but with the tireless efforts of Chiang Kai-shek, they resisted for eight years against a strong government like Japan and the treacherous provocations of the communists, and freed the country from the clutches of the Japanese. To achieve this goal required a degree of sacrifice, hardship, and tolerance in the face of all misery. He proved himself and stood alone. Unfortunately, at such times the British and others were selling weapons to the Japanese.<sup>278</sup>

According to Farrokh, the Nationalist government's ultimate downfall after World War II was the fault of the Americans. It was up to the United States to strengthen the Nationalists against the Soviets and their allies in the CCP, something they failed to do. “The mistake of the Americans led to the fall of the Nationalist government...but how expensive this mistake is unclear, because at the time I was writing this book, the Americans had given thousands of lives in the Korean War.” By evoking the “Who Lost China” narrative, Farrokh was also indirectly making a case for American involvement in

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<sup>276</sup> *Ibid*, 23

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid*, 31

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid*, 86

Iran, as some Iranian statesmen saw America as a third party that Britain and the Soviet Union could be played against, as well as a potential ally against populist and leftist opposition movements. While America may have made a mistake, the solution was to rectify it and support Nationalist China to the hilt. The 1953 American-and-British-backed coup d'etat would cement the alliance between U.S. and Iranian interests against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, the same year the book was published.

Farrokh viewed the Chinese experience as a severe warning for Iran about what the future might hold. He draws this comparison directly in a summary of recent Chinese history:

From the beginning of the Sun Yat-sen uprising, China, like Iran, has been plagued by the plans of great statesmen...internal revolutions sponsored by foreigners, and greed. The greedy generals of China have taken the lead and prevented the progress of the country...The ominous plans of Moscow that follow Peter the Great's promises are set...The Muslim nations of the world should be united against these children of misery and bloodshed. May the Almighty save us from this dreadful abyss.<sup>279</sup>

Deeply affected by the violence that he saw when the communists entered Nanjing in April, he recalled cannon fire, gun battles in the streets, and numerous acts of looting and violence.<sup>280</sup> This experience seemed to convince him that the threat of communist chaos was a real one that could also spread to Iran. In correspondence with another diplomat who has asked his opinion on China's situation and its relevance, Farrokh links China's fate and the fortunes of international communism with Iran and its domestic situation. Throughout the letter, Farrokh argues that the fall of the Nationalists represents a threat to

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<sup>279</sup> *Ibid*, 26

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid*, 56-57

democracy everywhere, including Iran, and issues a stark warning about Iran's domestic situation:

My friend, now by reading my letter you will understand why I took the time to answer your questions...Note also that your country, Iran, is in danger from the Soviet Union and the Fifth Column of the Russians, who are called Tudeh and support peace and anti-colonialism, etc. in your country...The religion of Islam does not agree with the Communists in any way, just as the Muslim parts of China have not surrendered to this dangerous ideology so far.

The official image of China emerged as a negative model of a country that, through internal weakness and foreign perfidy, had suffered the unenviable fate of falling to a Communist revolution. He interprets events in China through his own political and personal experience and his understanding of Iranian history. His book helped to popularize a particular elite-driven narrative of the Chinese revolution that echoed the arguments of Western politicians and academics, along with articles in the popular press. However, this was not the only vision of China that was articulated in Iran. The success of the Chinese revolution may have struck the fear of a communist revolution into the hearts of Iranian officials, but the Iranian opposition had a different reaction entirely.

#### The Tudeh Party and the Communist Party of China, 1949-1959

While ties with the exiled Republican government in Taiwan would persist, by the next decade, they were overshadowed by the development of new international connections and unofficial ties between Iranian activists and the newly declared People's Republic of China. In the preceding decades, Sino-Iranian connections were mediated by European-dominated networks. Chinese intellectuals familiar with Iran's situation imagined the country as a potential revolutionary model and drew on the Iranian experience as part of a larger story of Asian resistance to colonialism. As the

second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began, significant historical developments caused the emergence of new areas of interaction and communication. The victory of the Chinese Communist Revolution on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1949, had an enormous impact on intellectuals worldwide.

As Chinese intellectuals had begun to do earlier in the century, some Iranian activists began to view China as part of a shared process of anti-colonial revolution. Simultaneously, the official Chinese press was pushing a parallel narrative that placed China at the center of a global revolutionary process. Despite the lack of official connections, unofficial Sino-Iranian ties existed in the 1950s and 1960s between the Tudeh Party and the CCP. International conferences allowed Iranian leftists to visit China and see the impressive changes the country was undergoing. The messages of solidarity and unity they sent reflected growing concern among Chinese and Iranian activists with oppression globally. Ties with Iranian communist organizations were established and provided a new conduit for both people and information to reach China from Iran. In the Chinese press, articles about Iran stressed Pan-Asian, anti-imperial, and internationalist notions of solidarity. These ties also played a role in China's internal propaganda, and especially in state attempts to fashion a modern Chinese identity, by providing material to promote the idea of a globally active and internationally prestigious New China.

These new developments formed a part of the expansion of inter-Asian/Third World connections during the Cold War. As the Cold War's political center of gravity migrated to the Third World, competition over Germany gave way to decolonization and



superpower competition over the “neutral zone” of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.<sup>281</sup> During this period, China was active in constructing political and social networks that paralleled Western-dominated global organizations like the UN. Events like the Bandung Conference of 1955 and groups like the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) disrupted the international order and helped thrust issues like racism and human rights onto the global agenda.<sup>282</sup> Others, like the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY), and the International Union of Students (IUS), were based in the West, but nonetheless served as a platform in which non-Western parties had a growing voice.<sup>283</sup> Although this Afro-Asian solidarity moment is often viewed pessimistically, it was part of the emergence of a modern discourse of global international relations and the concept of the Third World, and therefore represents an important episode in the history of transnational politics and the Cold War.<sup>284</sup> Furthermore, it provided the first opportunity for direct interaction between the modern Chinese state and numerous non-Western countries, including Iran. Before establishing official connections, Sino-Iranian relations were part

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<sup>281</sup> For a survey of this history, see: Westad, Odd Arne. *The Global Cold War : Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 2

<sup>282</sup> Neuhauser, Charles. *Third World Politics: China and the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization, 1957–1967*. 1st ed., vol. 27, Harvard University Asia Center, 1968; Shimazu, Naoko. “Diplomacy as Theatre: Staging the Bandung Conference of 1955.” *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2014, pp. 225–252

<sup>283</sup> Kotek, Joel. *Students and the Cold War*. London: Macmillan Press, (1996).  
Burkett, Jodi. “The National Union of Students and transnational solidarity, 1958–1968”. *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* vol. 21, no.4, pp. 539–555.

Armstrong, Elisabeth. “Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women’s Movement in Asia and the Women’s International Democratic Federation.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. vol. 41, no. 2, (2016) pp. 305–331.

<sup>284</sup> Acharya, Amitav. “Studying the Bandung Conference from a Global IR Perspective.” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* vol. 70, no. 4, Aug. 2016, pp. 342–357; Nopper, Tamara. “The Illusion of Afro-Asian Solidarity?: Situating the 1955 Bandung Conference.” *African American Intellectual History Society*, 30 (June 2015) [www.aaihs.org/the-illusion-of-afro-asian-solidarity-situating-the-1955-bandung-conference/](http://www.aaihs.org/the-illusion-of-afro-asian-solidarity-situating-the-1955-bandung-conference/).

of a process of international Third World solidarity, exchange, and debate. These unofficial connections highlight the emergence of new discourses of identity that drew on internationalism, anti-colonialism, and solidarity among Asian countries.

### Sino-Iranian Connections in Propaganda

Unofficial Sino-Iranian connections informed Chinese propaganda during the 1950s. Chinese press reports emphasized the underdevelopment of the Iranian economy and the poverty of its people, especially women and children, which was primarily blamed on U.S. imperialism. Reporters stressed Chinese support for the Iranian people and condemned Iran's "reactionary" ruling elite. These articles appeared primarily for domestic consumption and were closely related to China's internal policy initiatives, which promoted industrial development and equality between genders. From 1949 to 1959, the Chinese press published over a hundred articles dealing with Iran's recent history, its current political situation, and what the proper Chinese attitude towards it should be. A review of just some of the article titles is instructive: "U.S. Imperialism Instigated the Iranian People to Kill Each Other," "The Anti-Imperialist Struggle of the Iranian People," "Iranian People's Group Protests Bloody Suppression of Iranian Government," "Support the Iranian People in their Struggle against British-American Imperialism," and "The Dangerous Steps of the Iranian Government."<sup>285</sup> Iranian participation in the U.S.-backed Baghdad Pact (later called CENTO), an alliance which the Chinese saw as an attempt to encircle and contain the Soviet Union and the People's Republic, was also strongly condemned. John Garver has claimed that Chinese

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<sup>285</sup> See "Newspaper Articles" section of the bibliography for exact dates of publication and Chinese titles.

propaganda towards Iran was generally more anti-U.S. than it was anti-Iran, but while criticism of the United States did dominate, the Iranian government was by no means spared. A close review of the material shows that the government itself was frequently criticized as “bloody” and “reactionary.”<sup>286</sup>

Other authors made their point not through fiery op-eds, but through political cartoons, which usually depicted America engaged in underhanded attempts to undercut Britain's position by taking over its exploitative relationship with Iranian oil companies. Many of these were simply republished cartoons with Chinese subtitles, usually sourced from Soviet newspapers. There is at least one example of a cartoon drawn by a well-known Chinese artist, Sun Shunchao, better known by his *nom de plume*, Fang Cheng (1918-2018). Like many of his generation, Fang Cheng was educated in both Chinese and Western style and was involved in political activism early as a student at Wuhan University. In later years, he recalled learning many songs in Chinese, English, and Russian as a child, reflecting the international nature of his education.<sup>287</sup> Although he was initially known for works that satirized society, after the foundation of the PRC, he shifted his attention to lampooning international affairs and Western imperialism. In the piece depicted below, Fang Cheng is criticizing American offers to “mediate” a dispute between the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) and the U.K.

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<sup>286</sup> Garver, 32

<sup>287</sup> International Journal of Comic Art Blog: “Reminiscences: Fang Cheng, Sudhir Tailing, and Barry Linton.” John A. Lent. Accessed Mar 6th, 2020 <http://ijoca.blogspot.com/2018/12/reminiscences-fang-cheng-sudhir-tailing.html>



「公平合理」的調解 方 成作  
美國爲了加緊奪取對伊朗石油的控制權，排擠英國的地位，表示願意貸款一億美元，作爲伊朗對英國的「賠償」，企圖利用對伊朗的貸款關係，壟斷伊朗的石油。

Fig 14. A political cartoon by Chinese artist Fang Cheng. Uncle Sam replaces a poster entitled “American Monopoly” over one that says “British Monopoly” on a barrel of “Iranian Oil.” A brush labeled “Mediate the British-Iranian Dispute”, is being dipped in a bucket of paste: “American Loans to Iran.” Behind, a grumpy Mr. Britain watches with disdain.

Chinese support for Iran was also connected to relations between the People's

Republic and the Hui (Chinese Muslim) community. The CCP's relationship with Islam is complicated and fraught. Especially in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, there was significant concern about the possibility of a separatist movement in Xinjiang and a general lack of support for the officially atheist government on the part of Chinese Muslims. Muhammad Ma Jian (1906-1978), a prominent member of this community and famed for his widely-used Chinese translation of the Quran, was the source for several op-eds on Iran's situation, emphasizing the persecution of Muslims by imperialism.<sup>288</sup> One 1952 article, entitled “American Invaders are the Enemies of Islam All Over the World,” cites American activities in Iran and Egypt to level a critique of the United States that draws on Islamic history.<sup>289</sup> It exhorts Muslims “all over the world” to unite with peace loving governments and people to oppose US imperialism. As the target audience was Chinese readers, the implication was clear: by opposing the US, China is a defender of Islam and deserves Chinese Muslims' support.

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<sup>288</sup> Ma Jian, “The Vigorous Development of the National Liberation Movement in the Middle” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing], November 19, 1951

<sup>289</sup> Ma Jian, “American Invaders are the Enemies of Islam All Over the World” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing], May 16, 1952



*Fig 15. Originally printed in the Soviet “Journal of Literature” on July 14<sup>th</sup> and republished in China in 1951, this cartoon depicts the Iranian people driving off two “vultures” that represent foreign oil companies.*

In short, Iran was an important topic in Chinese propaganda and served a variety of purposes. The CCP, which had placed industrialization and gender equality at the center of their early revolutionary agenda, was implicitly inviting comparison to China when it emphasized the lack of economic development and low status of Iranian women. By identifying a common enemy and declaring support for Iranian oil nationalization, the Chinese revolution was further globalized and moved towards a discourse that placed it at the pinnacle of a new kind of international solidarity. While it is exceedingly difficult to measure what kind of an impact this had on the reading public, at least one reader, a student named Lin Cong, felt compelled to send a letter entitled “Be concerned about the struggle of the people of Iran and Egypt,” which was published in the *Renmin Ribao* in 1951:

After reading the editorial in *Renmin Ribao* on October 31 entitled 'The Just Struggle of the Egyptian and Iranian People', I was deeply moved...[Before] I only saw news of their struggles as ordinary international news. Even if I read it, I

felt that it was something that concerned people in other countries. I am in this wonderful school, and it isn't much to do with me, so why bother? However, after reading the editorial of your newspaper, I learned that the movement for the independence of the Iranian and Egyptian people is part of the struggle of the people of the world against imperialism. Therefore, they are not alone...This made me feel that I can't just immerse myself in books and not ask about world events. I am a young student of New China. I should have a high degree of internationalism and be concerned about the struggles of oppressed people. We Chinese people are closely related to their struggle, and we must support them.

Dongbei University of Finance and Economics Corporate Finance Department,  
Lin Cong

Genuine or not, letters such as this demonstrate the message the CCP was trying to send, as well as the vision of Chinese identity that was growing out of new discourses of international, Sino-Iranian, and Sino-Arab solidarity. Chinese students were encouraged through official media to adopt an internationalist approach to politics and encouraged to feel solidarity with the countries of the Middle East. While it cannot be said from this one example how effective this was, it demonstrates one of the many ways Iran and the Middle East were represented in state propaganda. This phenomenon was not limited to the Chinese side; Iranian activists and students were also coming to see the world in internationalist terms, with China playing a significant role in their imaginings.

#### Unofficial Tudeh-CCP Connections

On October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1949, the Tudeh Central Committee sent a telegram to Beijing, conveying its congratulations on their victory. “The Central Committee of the Tudeh Party believes that this victory is the greatest victory yet for mankind in its struggle for

self-liberation.”<sup>290</sup> On November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1949, the official CCP newspaper, *Renmin Ribao* (*Renmin Ribao*) published messages received from the Tudeh Party, translated somewhat inaccurately as the “Workers Party.”<sup>291</sup> The Democratic Women's Association (*yilang minzhu funu xiehui* 伊朗民主妇女协会), presumably referring to Tudeh's women's organization, expressed that “with great joy, we have heard the news from the People's Republic of China. We Iranian women believe your victory is also our victory. Dear sisters, from your victory we have derived much support for our continued fight against domestic reactionaries and British and American imperialism.” The message from the Tudeh youth wing echoed similar sentiments: “Undoubtedly, the great and historic victory of the Chinese people will play a major role in the struggle for lasting peace all over the world, and in the cause of liberation of all oppressed nations.” Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976) personally sent a reply on November 19<sup>th</sup>, thanking the Tudeh Party for its congratulatory message and paying tribute to “the struggle of the Tudeh Party and the Iranian people against imperialism and internal reactionaries.”<sup>292</sup>

One month later, Iraj Eskandari (1908-1985), a prominent Tudeh leader and one of its founding members, sent a personal reply that was published in *Renmin Ribao*, which more accurately translated the Tudeh Party as *yilang qunzhong dang*, or “Iranian Masses Party.” In it, he wrote:

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<sup>290</sup> “Iranian Workers Party Central Committee Send Congratulations on the Establishment of New China (伊朗劳动党中央电贺新中国成立)” *Guangming Ribao* (1949-) [Beijing] November 17, 1949

<sup>291</sup> “The Iranian Worker's Party and Women's Youth Group Send Congratulations on the Birth of New China (伊朗劳动党及妇女青年团体电贺新中国诞生)”, *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing], November 11, 1949

<sup>292</sup> “Chairman Mao Thanked the Iranian Workers Party for their Congratulations (毛主席复电 – 感谢伊朗劳动党祝贺)” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing], November 20, 1949



At the time when the new government of the People's Republic of China was established, the Central Committee of the Tudeh Party expressed its brotherly respect to you. The victory won by the Chinese people under your leadership against domestic reaction and foreign imperialism is of historic significance, especially for the oppressed people in Asia. The Iranian people truly see their own liberation from foreign imperialism and the exploitation of feudal merchants in the victory of the Chinese revolution. The feudal merchants, in order to protect their privilege, effectively oppressed our workers and peasants and, like the KMT traitors, allowed Iran to be plundered by foreign trusts. They violated the will of the Iranian people and turned our country into a base for British and American aggression against the great socialist country and Iran's true friend, the Soviet Union.

[...]

Long live the great Chinese people and their great Communist Party! Long live comrade Mao Zedong and the People's Republic of China and its great leader!

Iranian Tudeh Party Central Committee, Eraj Iskandari<sup>293</sup>

This kind of lavish praise was to be expected among fraternal Communist parties, but there is little reason to doubt that the example of the CCP was genuinely inspiring to Iranian activists. Articles with a similar degree of exuberance were published in the legal Tudeh newspaper *Besou-ye Ayandeh (Towards the Future)*, which was frequently mentioned as a source by the Chinese press over the next few years and which periodically published articles calling for the Iranian government to recognize the PRC.<sup>294</sup> More importantly, it reflects the direct and enthusiastic lines of communication established between the two parties. While there was little Tudeh could do to assist the CCP practically, they provided what diplomatic and moral support that they could. On

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<sup>293</sup> “The Chairman of the Central Committee of the Iranian Tudeh (Mass) Party Pays Tribute to Mao Zedong (伊朗群众党中央委员会 电毛主席致敬) *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing], December 11, 1949

<sup>294</sup> “Iranian Newspapers Urge their Government to Recognize Our True Capital / 伊朗报纸促其政府与我建立邦交的真正首都” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing], October 25, 1949  
“‘Bisu Ayangdi Newspaper’ Pointed Out that Current Tension if the Result of UK-US Colonial Policy / 比苏·阿扬第报指出目前紧张局势是美英殖民政策的结果” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing], September 22, 1950

the Iranian side, the Tudeh Party publicly adopted a stance in favor of recognition of the PRC. In May 1951, in an open letter to then-Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq published in *Besou-ye Ayandeh*, the Tudeh urged Mosaddeq to “recognize the People's Government of China which is the base of liberty and peace in Asia.”<sup>295</sup> Another letter published in July 1953 chastised Mosaddeq for signing an agreement that barred Iran from exporting strategic goods to the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the PRC.<sup>296</sup> When the Korean War broke out in 1950, and the Iranian government supported the United States, the Tudeh Party circulated petitions and put on anti-war demonstrations in the capital.

This support went beyond expressions of solidarity and spilled ink. The Tudeh Party also led left-leaning Iranians in protests that explicitly took pro-Chinese stances. For example, *Guangming Daily* reported that a large rally against the Korean War was held in Tehran on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1950. The rally was organized by the Women's wing of the Tudeh Party and included signs like “Long live the Korean people's freedom!” and “Long live the women's democratic movement!”<sup>297</sup> One Chinese report based on the Tudeh Party's information claimed that Iranian activists had collected 195,700 signatures ahead of an international conference on the Korean War, including 170 judges, 138 doctors, 121 lawyers, 13 lawmakers, and 10 “famous provincial priests.”<sup>298</sup> While these numbers may be inflated, it likely reflects genuine support for the Chinese position in the

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<sup>295</sup> Chaquerie, Cosroe. *The Left in Iran 1941-1957, Revolutionary History Vol 10, Number 3*. Socialist Platform LTD, Merlin Press. London, 2011, pp. 460

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid*, 482

<sup>297</sup> “Iranian Women and Children Demonstrate Peacefully/伊朗妇女儿童和平大示威” *Guangming Ribao* (1949-) [Beijing] March 19, 1951

<sup>298</sup> “Defending the Peace Front (在保卫和平阵线上)” *Guangming Ribao* (1949-) [Beijing] October 21, 1950.

Korean War among educated, left-leaning Iranians.

On the Chinese side, relations with Tudeh provided a source for domestic propaganda and information about Iran. The Tudeh seems to have provided the CCP with either copies or select translations of its newspapers, especially *Besou-ye Ayande*, giving China a way to assess events in Iran without relying on European or Soviet news sources. Of course, many stories were still based on translations of Soviet TASS news bulletins, but the Chinese press also began to adopt positions supportive of the Tudeh Party. This extended beyond general assessments about the political situation to areas of specific concern to the Iranian communists. For example, while China supported Iran's oil nationalization efforts in 1953, they echoed the Tudeh's cautious stance towards Mosaddeq, who was the popular face of the nationalization effort but did not have the support of Tudeh. Instead, they emphasized the importance of strikes led by Tudeh-affiliated unions, and Mosaddeq's role was hardly commented on; some articles even chastised the Prime Minister for his pro-US stance.<sup>299</sup>

Articles written by Tudeh activists in foreign periodicals were also translated and published. On March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1952, violent clashes between the police and Tudeh activists on their way to “participate in a demonstration against the US imperialists' bacterial warfare in North Korea and China” were covered extensively in the Chinese press, in spite of it being a rather minor incident.<sup>300</sup> Later, in 1956, when the Iranian government was cracking down on Tudeh leaders, the execution of senior member Khosrow Roozbeh

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<sup>299</sup> “Prime Minister of Iran Accepts US 'Aid' (就伊朗首相摩萨台接受美国”援助”一事)” *Guangming Ribao* (1949-) [Beijing] May 26, 1952

<sup>300</sup> “Iran's Military and Police Slaughter Young People and Cause Great Anger (伊朗军警残杀青年引起人民极大愤怒)” *Guangming Ribao* (1949-) [Beijing] April 11, 1952

(1915-1958) was widely publicized, something that the Tudeh leadership strove to bring to international attention.<sup>301</sup> In general, the Chinese press from 1949 to 1959 was filled with stories of government violence and execution of activists, mostly related to the Tudeh Party, and drawing on statistics and names provided by the party.

The highest point of CCP-Tudeh relations came in 1956, when Tudeh Central Committee Chairman Reza Radmanesh (1905-1983) and future Chairman Nouredin Kianouri (1905-1999) visited China as part of an official delegation to the 8<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress.<sup>302</sup> The delegates arrived in Beijing on September 16<sup>th</sup>, and participated in a tour of the Chenguang Agricultural Production Cooperative in Luyuan Township and a sightseeing tour of Beijing, including the famous Niujie Mosque. On September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1958, Radmanesh gave a speech at the CCP Congress, extending his congratulations to China for the advancements it had seen over the last eight years. “All people who have suffered from foreign aggression and their own reactionaries can learn from the Chinese people's victorious example...Our national liberation movement in Iran draws strength from studying extensively the theory of the Chinese revolution.”<sup>303</sup> He compared the bloody suppression of the CCP at the hands of Chiang Kai-shek in 1927 to the recent attacks that the Iranian government had carried out on the Tudeh Party, and criticized the Iranian government's preference for Chiang Kai-shek, who he claimed was “generally

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<sup>301</sup> “Save the Life of Roozbeh! (援救鲁兹贝赫的生命!)” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing], May 7, 1958  
“A Butcher's Knife Cannot Scare the People! The Iranian Government Murders Roozbeh  
(屠刀吓不倒人民 伊朗政府杀害鲁兹贝赫)” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing], May 13, 1958

<sup>302</sup> “Representatives of Communist Workers Parties in Various Countries Invited to Attend the Eighth National Congress of the CCP (应邀参加中国共产党第八次全国代表大会  
各国共产党工人党代表到北京)” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing] September 15, 1956

<sup>303</sup> “Message from Comrade Radmanesh, Leader of the Tudeh Party Delegation  
(伊朗人民党代表团团长拉德马内什同志致词)” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing] September 21, 1956



## International Conferences and Sino-Iranian Solidarity

In the 1950s, another new arena of Sino-Iranian exchange opened up in the form of international conferences. China hosted several large-scale international conferences in the 1950s and 1960s that were attended by Iranian delegates. Although it can be difficult to tell the exact number, at least a few dozen Iranian students were invited to China to be given the grand tour and sent home with a glowing report of Chinese industrial progress and ideological strength. These delegates, often student activists linked with Tudeh or other leftist networks, were widely quoted in the Chinese press, where they expressed solidarity and admiration for the People's Republic. Reports of their activities were used to portray China as supportive of revolution in the colonized world and as a model for how that could be achieved. China was soon depicting itself as the leader of a global community of Asian, African, and Latin American people who shared a history of oppression and humiliation by European colonial powers. Of course, the reality was that Chinese interests set the agenda at these conferences; Middle Eastern, African, and Latin American representatives played a ceremonial and supporting role. At the same time, it provided real and otherwise rare opportunities for activists to visit China and gain first-hand knowledge about its circumstances, even if filtered through official programming.

China had several reasons to support and participate in these international networks. Almost immediately after it was established, the PRC found itself frozen out of the United Nations in favor of delegates from Taiwan. They faced a hostile United States and were badly in need of diplomatic support. At the same time, the United Nations was

dominated by Western powers and generally unresponsive to the colonized world's demands. The need for friends and allies was matched by the CCP's desire to promote a patriotic, modern vision of Chinese identity that would mobilize the population. All of these needs were served by promoting international conferences and Afro-Asian solidarity, in which Sino- Persian relations played a significant, though typical role.

One of the first major conferences held in Beijing was the Asian Women's Conference. It was held in December 1949 and sponsored by the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), the All-China Women's Democratic Federation, and the Women's Self Defense Committee (*Mahila Atma Rakshi Samiti*, or MARS) from West Bengal, India. This conference was a precursor to the Bandung Conference of 1955.<sup>306</sup> According to scholar Elisabeth Armstrong, the Asian Women's Conference "mark[ed] a new beginning in confronting relations of feminist imperialism and creating new terms for solidarity."<sup>307</sup> Conference participants "honed a solidarity of commonality for women's shared human rights...[and] made visible new subjects for organizing, peasant women...as well as the rural sites of their struggles."<sup>308</sup> Because Chinese archival records for the Beijing conference are inaccessible, it has been studied through the lens of its Indian participants. However, an analysis of the Chinese press shows that Iran was one of the three main areas of focus of the conference, alongside India and Vietnam.

The conference opened on December 10<sup>th</sup> and concluded on December 19<sup>th</sup>.

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<sup>306</sup> Armstrong, 305

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid*

Despite the name, it included delegates from all over the world.<sup>309</sup> However, the conference's purpose was to highlight the plight of Iranian, Indian, and Vietnamese women, and so delegates from these countries led the proceedings and received the most attention and coverage in the Chinese press. Several news bulletins were run about the Iranian and Indian delegates, and copies of their reports and speeches appeared in most major newspapers. A special Xinhua radio broadcast was made by the Iranian representative, Mahin Baluch<sup>310</sup> on December 2<sup>nd</sup> on the situation of Iranian women. Both her remarks at the conference and her report on Iranian women were published in full.<sup>311</sup>

At the conference itself, Mahin Baluch gave a speech on the plight of Iranian women and a general address on the 12<sup>th</sup>. She spoke extensively about Iran's political situation, the situation of Iranian women, and the history of her organization. As a leftist affiliated with the Tudeh Party, her comments touched on the same themes of solidarity, anti-imperialism, and enthusiasm for the Chinese experience:

Chinese sisters, your struggle and your success...have brought infinite help to our common struggle...For centuries, women and mothers in Iran have lived in distress, and were enslaved by a feudal and exploitative system. This system has been further strengthened by the imperialist support of Iran's oil and natural resources. The struggle of Iranian women is to liberate them from feudal exploitation on the one hand, and to oppose British and American colonialists and strive for national independence on the other.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> “Asian Women's Conference to Open Today (亚洲妇代会定今日开幕)” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing] December 10, 1949 “The Asian Women's Conference Adopted a Resolution on the Activities of the WIDF to Assist Women's Groups in Asian Countries (亚洲妇女代表会议通过关于国际民主妇联援助亚洲国家的妇女团体之活动的决议)” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing] December 19, 1949

<sup>310</sup> Listed in the Chinese press as 玛辛·法洛琪/ *Mǎxīn Fǎluòqí*.

<sup>311</sup> “Xinhua Radio Tonight(新华电台今晚要目)” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing] December 2, 1949

<sup>312</sup> “Iranian Representative Mahin Baluch Speaks at Asian Women's Congress(伊朗代表玛辛·法洛琪在亚洲妇代会发言)” *Guangming Ribao* (1949-) [Beijing] December 12, 1949



In addition to publishing her speeches, Baluch also was separately interviewed by the *Shanghai Daily*. In an article which described her as “a beautiful young yellow-haired girl who attends this conference full of enthusiasm and hope,” she describes a very bleak situation for Iranian women: “The hard-earned income of the worker is not sufficient to sustain his family. Therefore, his wife and children have to...sell their labors in order to make ends meet...Their status is very low. They are not treated like people.”<sup>313</sup> According to the interviewer, “Mahin said: when she saw Chinese women, she remembered the Iranian women who were deeply oppressed...[but] the liberation of the Chinese people and Chinese women has added a new force to the world peace camp. The reactionary forces in the world are approaching the end of their lives. The future...will also be bright.”

Baluch's comments are fairly typical of Iranian students who visited China in this period. Several other conferences brought Iranian activists to Beijing. Iranian student delegates participated in the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) conference at Qiqihar City in September 1950,<sup>314</sup> the International Union of Students (IUS) Conference at Beijing in May 1951,<sup>315</sup> the Asia and Pacific Rim Peace Conference in

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<sup>313</sup> “Iranian Representative Baluch Talks about Iranian Women's

Struggle(伊朗代表法洛琪谈伊朗妇女斗争)” *Guangming Ribao* (1949-) [Beijing] December 12, 1949

<sup>314</sup> “More than 50,000 people rally to welcome the WFDY delegates in Qiqihar

City(欢迎世界青联代表团齐市五万余人大集会)” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing] September 14, 1950

<sup>315</sup> “The IUS Executive Board Meeting Concluded Successfully and Passed Three Resolutions on the Colonial Student

Movement; Issued a Statement Against the United States to Rearm Japan (国际学联执委会会议胜利闭幕通过关于殖民地学生运动等三项决议 并发表声明反对美国重新武装日本)” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing] May 3, 1951

October 1952,<sup>316</sup> and the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) Conference in June 1956.<sup>317</sup> Some of these conferences were accompanied by separate special events designed to showcase China's internationalist spirit and often played on communist and religious sentiment. To give just one example, the Asia and Pacific Rim Peace Conference featured both speeches from Tudeh affiliated activists and a prayer ceremony for peace in Korea jointly held by Chinese Muslims and foreign Muslim delegates. This event was attended by several Iranian journalists, among other guests.<sup>318</sup> In 1954, the CCP established the Asian Student Nursing Home to facilitate the training of student doctors from all over the world. Young representatives from Iran and several other countries were invited to attend the opening ceremony.<sup>319</sup> These events projected the image of a strong, independent China with innumerable foreign allies.

The significance of these conferences to the CCP domestic agenda can be seen in an op-ed published in the *Renmin Ribao* on January 31, 1950 entitled “Beijing – Famed Capital of the Democratic Camp.”<sup>320</sup> The author draws a direct connection between Chinese liberation, world revolution, and the recent flurry of conference activity. “Since the liberation, Beijing has not only become the capital of the Chinese revolution, but has

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<sup>316</sup> “Representatives from Chile and Other Countries Attending the Asia and Pacific Rim Peace Conference Arrived in Beijing (出席亚洲及太平洋区域和平会议智利等国一部分代表抵达北京) *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing] September 30, 1952

<sup>317</sup> Neuhauser

<sup>318</sup> “Muslims and Peace Representatives Attend Gathering in Beijing and Pray for Peace (和平代表中的伊斯兰教徒在京参加聚礼并为和平祈祷) *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing] October 8, 1952

<sup>319</sup> “Participating in the Opening Ceremony of the Asian Student Nursing Home, Student Representatives from Different Countries Arrive in Beijing One by One (参加亚洲学生疗养院开院典礼各国学生代表陆续到达北京) *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing] November 22, 1954

<sup>320</sup> “Beijing – Capital of the Democratic Camp (北京——民主阵营的名都)” *Renmin Ribao* (1946-) [Beijing] January 31, 1950

also become an important bastion of the world revolution, especially the Asian revolutionary movement.” The Asian and Australian Trade Union Conference was hailed as “unprecedented in the history of Asia...the liberation of Beijing enabled this conference to proceed smoothly. The victory of the Chinese revolution enabled the Asian-Australian Workers Movement to have a center of solidarity.” The Asian Women's Conference “strengthened the solidarity of Asian countries and women around the world, and has provided them with a profound education on internationalism.” Articles like this one served to advance the notion that China was at the center of a community of revolutionary and potentially revolutionary countries that stood in opposition to US-backed governments and international organizations.

These conferences served as an important setting in which Iranians could learn about China, at a time when there was a great deal of interest among Iranian intellectuals in the Chinese revolutionary experience. The situation was very different from the early 1900s when no analogous networks existed for Chinese students. These efforts appear to have translated into genuine enthusiasm for the CCP and its policies and ideology. In 1952, in an interview with Xinhua, a group of Iranian trade union delegates claimed that they had learned so much about land reform, education, youth training, child care, worker welfare, and other topics that they could not even begin to talk about their general impressions, or they would take up more time than they had. “We will do our utmost to make the Iranian people understand what the people of China have achieved...[and] to disseminate our impressions to the Iranian people with articles, pamphlets, and

conferences.”<sup>321</sup> While these efforts may have bypassed the majority of Iranian people, who were mostly illiterate at the time, they were influential among leftists and student networks, which would lead to an explosion of interest in Maoist politics in the 1960s.

## Conclusions

The 1950s saw significant changes in the character and size of the networks of Sino-Iranian relations. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, unofficial connections rapidly grew, despite Iran's official support for Taiwan. The Chinese press published extensive propaganda about the Iranian situation, while relations with the Tudeh Party were established and expanded, providing new sources of propaganda, international solidarity, and information about Iran. As a result of the expansion of international solidarity conferences, a small number of Iranian students – perhaps no more than two or three dozen, perhaps more – traveled to China and were impressed by what they saw. Like Chinese students in an earlier era, Iranian students were inspired by the Chinese revolution's example and sought to emulate it. Both Chinese students and Iranian students existed in an environment that stressed a common international struggle in which the fates of Iran and China were permanently linked. Rarely was the Silk Road or ancient history mentioned.

This chapter demonstrates the importance of approaching Sino-Iranian relations from a broader perspective. Contacts that may have seemed unimportant or ephemeral can instead be seen as part of a transnational process of identity formation and solidarity

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<sup>321</sup> “Iranian Trade Union Representative Conveys Impressions of Visit to People's China (伊朗工会代表发表访问中国人民中国的观感) *Guangming Ribao* (1949-) [Shanghai] May 30, 1952

building centered on inter-Asian connections, rather than East-West. Most studies on the creation of a modern national identity in Iran or China have focused on how these identities were fashioned in reference to the West. Studying Sino-Iranian relations from the perspective of identity, propaganda, and international history reveals how Third World connections also played an important role, especially in the post-World War II era. Sino-Iranian relations in the 1950s reflected and contributed to the self-fashioning of Iranian elites and Iranian leftists by providing a non-Western mirror for contemplation. They were part of a growing trend towards internationalism and radical politics that had been intensifying since the beginning of the century.

Unofficial Sino-Iranian connections were limited mainly to leftist circles and official state propaganda and did not significantly impact Iran or China beyond that. While aspects of this story are told through official propaganda whose influence is difficult to measure, it nevertheless demonstrates the degree to which Iran and China were connected at a time when official ties were non-existent. Even if we do not take each pronouncement of solidarity at face value, they can be taken as representative of an attempt to build a new, modern discourse of anti-imperialism, international solidarity, and self-identity. Furthermore, they form the foundation for critical developments in the next decade among leftist Iranian student activists. The appeal of Maoism and the global student movement of the 1960s were important factors in the coming battle over Iran's future.

## Chapter 4 - Iranian Maoism in the 1960s and 1970s: Causes and Consequences

In 1965, a leftist Iranian student movement based in Europe declared its support for Mao Zedong and his theories of Communist revolution. Calling themselves the Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh Party (*Sāzmān-e Enghelābi-ye Hezb-e Tūde*), they were animated by the belief that “Comrade Mao has evolved Marxism, [and] we must solve issues from the point of view of Mao Zedong Thought.”<sup>322</sup> They began circulating Persian translations of the works of Mao Zedong and other militant texts among Iranian students abroad. In pamphlets and periodicals, they extolled the virtues of *andishe-ye māu se dūn*, or Mao Zedong Thought.<sup>323</sup> These Maoists were an offshoot of the Tudeh Party (*Hezb-e Tūde*), the primary Communist organization in Iran, and were bitterly opposed to the Tudeh leadership.<sup>324</sup> In the view of the Revolutionary Organization (RO), the Tudeh were ineffective, disconnected from the situation in Iran, and excessively under the influence of the Soviet Union. Over the next decade, the RO would repeatedly return to China for military and ideological training, become involved in Chinese propaganda efforts, and play a role in radicalizing the Confederation of Iranian Students - National Union (CIS-NU). By 1969, the entire Secretariat of the CIS-NU and most of the leaders of the Organization of Iranian Students in the United States

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<sup>322</sup> Showkat, Hamid. *Negahi az darun be jonbesh-e chap-e Iran: guftegu ba Mohsen Rezvani*, 364

<sup>323</sup> The somewhat peculiar formula “Mao Zedong Thought” is the literal translation of the Chinese name for what is called Maoism in the West: Máo Zédōng sīxiǎng/毛泽东思想.

<sup>324</sup> The term “Maoist” is used for convenience, but the party itself used the formula “Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.” Many Iranian groups were inspired by or studied works of the Chinese Revolution, but for the purposes of this paper, only parties that endorsed Mao Zedong Thought as a guiding principle are considered Maoist.

(ISAUS) were Maoists.<sup>325</sup> By the end of the decade, the RO had “carried away a significant portion of the [Tudeh] party's supporters in the West, perhaps 90 percent.”<sup>326</sup>

This Maoist “high tide” was not to last. By 1971, many Iranian leftists began to turn against China as a revolutionary model, partly because Beijing had begun openly supporting the Iranian government. Furthermore, the RO was unable to establish a presence in Iran, nor was it able to instigate a guerilla uprising based on the principle of *mobārez-e mosalahāneh*, or armed struggle. Although some Iranian guerilla organizations continued to endorse aspects of Maoist theory or practice even after the death of Mao Zedong, they were all ultimately crushed by government reprisals.<sup>327</sup> Others continued to operate overseas or merge with the U.S. Communist movement, but they never again gained any significant influence.<sup>328</sup>

Scholarly attitudes towards Iranian Maoism have been characterized by a narrative of failure. In fact, this type of narrative is typical of studies of the Iranian Left. One can easily detect this from the titles alone, from Maziar Behrooz’s classic *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Iranian Left*, to Ali Mirsepassi’s chapter “The Tragedy of the Iranian Left.” Matin-Asgari’s brief account of Iranian Maoism concludes that although the RO influenced the Left, the organization ultimately suffered from a lack of

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<sup>325</sup> Matin-Asgari, Afshin. *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah* (2002), 98, 106

<sup>326</sup> Nouredin Kianouri quoted in Behrooz, Mahiar. *Rebels With a Cause: The Failure of the Iranian Left*, I.B Taurus 2nd Ed, (2000) 20

<sup>327</sup> Ḥaqšenās, Torāb. “Communism In Persia after 1953 *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Vol. VI, Fasc. 1, 105-112

<sup>328</sup> Mirsepassi, Ali, “The Tragedy of the Iranian Left” in *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran*.

Website of the Communist Party of Iran - Marxist-Leninist-Maoist (CPI-MLM)  
<http://cpimlm.com/aboutusf.php?Id=1>

direction and theoretical incoherence that led to serious strategic blunders.<sup>329</sup> Whether failure or tragedy, the lines of inquiry into the Maoist movement have been limited to inquiries concerned with its ultimate failure to take power.

Furthermore, while well known to scholars of the Iranian left, Iranian Maoism is relatively unknown outside the discipline. Within the small body of literature on Sino-Iranian relations, the direct connection between the RO and China is mentioned only in passing and often downplayed. Hafizullah Emadi inaccurately claims that the Chinese provided no financial support and makes no mention of either the ideological and military training that was provided by China.<sup>330</sup> Matin-Asgari reviews the history of Iranian Maoism briefly and does not consider these ties to have been especially significant.<sup>331</sup> More recent works begin with Sino-Iranian rapprochement in the 1970s and make no mention of the episode.<sup>332</sup> It is also mostly absent from the historiography of China's foreign policy during the Cold War.<sup>333</sup>

This chapter aspires to write a new narrative of Iranian Maoism. It is admittedly a partial account in that it focuses primarily on the RO, which was not the only Maoist organization, but which was the only one with direct ties to China.<sup>334</sup> It will put the story

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<sup>329</sup> Matin-Asgari, Afshin. "Iranian Maoism: Searching for a Third World Revolutionary Model" MERIP Issue 270, Vol 44, Spring 2014.

<sup>330</sup> Hafizullah, Emadi. "China's Ideological Influence and Trade Relations with Iran, 1960-1990". 148-149

<sup>331</sup> Matin-Asgari 2014

<sup>332</sup> Garver, John. *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World*, University of Washington Press, (2004); Azad, Shirzad. *Iran and China: A New Approach to Their Bilateral Relations*. Lexington Books, 2017.

<sup>333</sup> For a general overview, see Garver 2016

<sup>334</sup> Haqšenās. In addition to the RO, there was the rival Marxist-Leninist Storm Organization (*Sazman-e Marksist-Leninist Tufan*) and the splinter group Cadres (*Kadr-ha*), as well as later Maoist organizations like the Union of Iranian Communists (*Ittihad-e Komunisti*), which later merged with Kurdish Maoists to form



of the RO in conversation with recent works of Chinese and Sino-Iranian history and explore its participants' motives and impact on the Iranian opposition and the course of Sino-Iranian rapprochement. What value did Iranian students in exile see in Maoism, and what did they take from their experiences in China? Why did the Chinese cultivate this relationship, and what impact did it have on their concurrent attempts to woo the Iranian government?

The RO cadres found in China a useful set of rhetorical tools to criticize the inertia of the Soviet-aligned Tudeh and gain influence among the increasingly radical Iranian student population abroad. Furthermore, their relationship with the Chinese government, while limited in scope, was significant in that it provided the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with useful tools for internal and external propaganda at a low political and financial cost. Finally, although the discovery of this relationship by SAVAK<sup>335</sup> initially hardened the Shah's attitude towards China, it may have helped convince him to consider closer relations with the CCP to weaken the appeal of armed struggle and political violence in the student movement.

### Historical Background of the Iranian Maoist Movement

The popularity of Maoism among Iranian students was primarily related to three historical contexts: the decline of the traditional Iranian Left post-1953, the reconstitution of the student movement as a radical opposition movement in the 1960s, and the growing

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the Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (*Sazman-e enqelabi-ye zamakhtshian kurdestan-e Iran*). Maoism was also studied by a variety of guerilla organizations, although they were not Maoist.

<sup>335</sup> The Iranian secret police under the Shah.

rift between China and the Soviet Union, known as the Sino-Soviet split.<sup>336</sup> It was reinforced by a global environment in which internationalism and Maoism were increasingly “in vogue” among student radicals in the U.S. and Europe, as well as among Third World revolutionaries. This was part of a broader rejection of the dominant Marxist currents, which emphasized a peaceful transition to socialism.

As mentioned earlier, the Iranian Left has a considerable history dating back to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911. Communist politics influenced and connected various social currents, including nationalist agitators, disaffected oil workers, dissident tribal leaders, and ethnic autonomy movements. In later years, Marxism became a potent force among secular student radicals and a growing number of religious lay intellectuals.<sup>337</sup> In general, Marxist-Leninist ideas and organized Communist parties have had an impressive impact on the social, cultural, intellectual, and political life of many Iranians for close to a century.<sup>338</sup> In the 1940s, the influence of the Left in Iran reached its peak. The Tudeh party emerged as the most politically influential Communist organization in the country and as the only political party with significant influence among the workers of multiple critical industries.<sup>339</sup> It also had a large following among the intellectual elite, particularly university students, starting in the 1940s.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> This chapter is especially indebted to Matin-Asgari’s work in *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, which point to the same factors.

<sup>337</sup> For a general overview, see Cronin, Stephanie (ed), *Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran: New Perspectives on the Iranian Left*. RoutledgeCurzon, 2013.

<sup>338</sup> Halliday in Cronin, “The Iranian Left in International Perspective”, 33-34

<sup>339</sup> Abrahamian, Ervand. *A History of Modern Iran*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>340</sup> Matin-Asgari (2018) 153. See also, Matin-Asgari, Afshin. سازمان دانشجویان دانشگاه تهران.

One of the most striking aspects of the history of the Iranian Left is the degree to which it was connected to international currents, especially in the Soviet Union.<sup>341</sup> The first Iranian Communist Party was founded in 1920 and grew out of the mobilization of Iranian and Azeri workers in Baku as the Russian Empire collapsed. The Tudeh party was founded with Soviet guidance and maintained strong political and ideological links to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).<sup>342</sup> Iranian Communists have sometimes been portrayed as tools of Soviet policy, but this is more caricature than empirically supported. Matin-Asgari has argued the Tudeh was successful largely because of its organization, comprehensive agenda of social reforms, and support for modern party politics and trade unions.<sup>343</sup> In many cases, Tudeh comrades resisted directives from Moscow and had a significant degree of freedom to pursue their own policies. Whatever the extent of Soviet influence, it is true that the Iranian Left was “particularly affected by external ideological context, that of the international socialist and communist movements.”<sup>344</sup> For this reason, when internal opposition to the traditional Iranian Left emerged, it often took aim at the Soviet Union.

The Tudeh suffered a serious blow to its credibility in 1945-1946 when it backed Soviet-sponsored separatist movements in Kurdistan and Azerbaijan and supported Soviet demands for an oil concession.<sup>345</sup> While the leadership privately protested to Soviet officials, it was clear the Tudeh was expected to fall in line, and the party publicly

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<sup>341</sup> Halliday

<sup>342</sup> Chaqueri, Cosroe. “Did the Soviets play a role in founding the Tudeh party in Iran?” *Cahiers du Monde Russe Année*, 40-3, 497-528 (1999)

<sup>343</sup> Matin-Asgari (2018), 150

<sup>344</sup> Halliday 21

<sup>345</sup> Abrahamian 111

defended these actions to the detriment of its popular image. In 1947, prominent party member Khalil Maleki broke away from the Tudeh. He argued that the Tudeh leadership saw everything through the prism of U.S.-Soviet conflict and refused to analyze the local situation accurately as a result.<sup>346</sup> Maleki later wrote that the Tudeh Party should have learned from the example of Mao Zedong and resisted Soviet pressure to endorse policies that were not suitable to the local situation; if they had not supported the secessionist or the oil concession, they might have been able to do what China had done.<sup>347</sup> This may have been the first positive mention of Maoism in Iran. Opposition to the Soviet Union and appeals to the Chinese experience would become popular themes of the new Left that emerged in the 1960s among Iranian students in the West, with Maleki as an active participant.

Despite this, the main factor in the decline of the Tudeh as a political power was not internal opposition but government oppression. In the period of military consolidation following the U.S.-sponsored 1953 royalist coup against populist Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, the organization was almost completely destroyed. Nearly all of its leadership was executed, arrested, or driven into exile.<sup>348</sup> Although the Tudeh remained culturally and intellectually influential among the Iranian Left, it could not function as an effective opposition party. The same was true of the National Front, the party of Mohammad Mosaddeq, which was outlawed and decimated by internal strife and

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<sup>346</sup> Y. Shahibzadeh, *Marxism and Left Wing Politics in Europe and Iran*, (2019), 112

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid*, 115

<sup>348</sup> Abrahamian 112

oppression. The various student organizations in Iran were also brutally beaten into silence. From 1953 to 1960, open opposition in the country was largely non-existent.<sup>349</sup>

In the absence of meaningful opposition at home, Iranian students in Europe and North America began to organize themselves. By the late 1950s, there were new Leftist, Muslim, and Nationalist student networks growing in Britain, France, Western Germany, and the United States, although they were careful to remain at least nominally apolitical. Opposition at home began to quietly revive in 1960 under the National Front II (NF II), a loosely affiliated cross-section of different opposition groups. This revival galvanized the student movement in Europe, the United States, and Iran and led to a flurry of activity that ended in the formation of the Confederation of Iranian Students - National Union (CIS-NU) in April of the same year. Based in Europe, the CIS-NU had the endorsement of the leading U.S. and Tehran-based student organizations that claimed to represent all Iranian students. Soon after, it began to take a militant tone and make more serious demands of the Iranian government. It also staged protests against the Shah when he traveled abroad, which irritated him terribly and eroded his credibility in the eyes of the West. By the early 1960s, the center of active opposition had shifted from Iran to the dissident student population in Europe and the United States.<sup>350</sup>

At the same time, two related developments were unfolding on the international scene: the Sino-Soviet split and the rise of both militant student activism and popular Maoism in the West. China and the Soviet Union had maintained a close alliance since

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<sup>349</sup> Matin-Asgari (2002) 26-29

<sup>350</sup> Matin-Asgari (2002); Shannon, Matthew K. "An Augury of Revolution: The Iranian Student Movement and American Foreign Policy." Masters Thesis, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, 2004: <http://dl.uncw.edu/Etd/2009-1/shannonm/matthewshannon.pdf>

the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949, but this partnership began to fray in the late 1950s. Ideological disagreements arose over Mao's economic policy and his bellicose stance towards the West, and also over Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and policy of "peaceful coexistence" with imperialism. Starting in 1959, Mao actively pursued an ideological clash, criticizing the Soviets publicly and privately. The main thrust of these criticisms was that the Soviet Union was guilty of moving away from the original principles of Marxism by preaching peace with capitalist countries, which they called "Soviet revisionism." Border clashes throughout the 1960s saw Sino-Soviet relations plunge to new lows.<sup>351</sup>

Mao linked these ideological disputes to his domestic enemies and used the opportunity to push a radical alternative to Soviet policy internationally. Where the Soviet Union advocated caution and economic development, the Chinese advocated armed struggle, anti-imperialism, and independent nationalism as the correct path towards world revolution. China was increasingly associated with its vocal support for revolutionary struggles around the world and its advocacy for a militant approach to politics. Over time, this strategy became more about countering Soviet influence than supporting revolutionary movements, but the Chinese did well in the propaganda war and forced the Soviets to adopt a more militant policy in response.<sup>352</sup>

As part of this strategy, the CCP actively recruited Communist dissidents who were willing to endorse their agenda in the Sino-Soviet split. To this end, they translated

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<sup>351</sup> Lüthi, Lorenz. *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*. Princeton University Press, (2008); See also: Friedman, Jeremy. *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World*. University of North Carolina, 2015

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid*

Maoist materials and information about the Chinese position into a wide array of languages and distributed them globally.<sup>353</sup> This effort made the “Little Red Book” one of the most printed books of the 1960s and 70s, with official editions in three dozen languages.<sup>354</sup> By the mid-1960s, Maoism was popular among student groups and Third World radicals, from Berkeley to Beijing. This attraction reflected the international trend toward student radicalism and militant political organization in the 1960s, culminating in the international protests that rocked the world in 1968.<sup>355</sup> Iranian students were not only active participants in this movement but were “the vanguard of the student movement that occurred across the globe in the 1960s.”<sup>356</sup> Against this backdrop, Iranian Maoism would emerge as a cascading current in the student movement.

#### The Revolutionary Organization and the Student Movement

“The first thing I want to tell you is that we never use the term ‘Maoist.’ Later, people opposed to us called us Maoists, but we never used it.”<sup>357</sup> These are the words of Mohsen Rezvani, leader of the Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh Party (RO), in an interview in May 2018. They preferred “Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought” to describe their particular orientation, which followed the nomenclature of the CCP. This was not coincidental, as the RO was formed out of direct contacts between the CCP and activists within the CIS-NU. These student agitators traveled to China for the first time in

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<sup>353</sup> For an overview of this effort and how it affected leftists around the world, see Cook (2014)

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii

<sup>355</sup> Suri, Jeremy. *Global Revolutions of 1968*. W.W. Norton, 2006.

<sup>356</sup> Shannon, 14

<sup>357</sup> Mohsen Rezvani, interview with the author, April 14, 2018

1963, and they returned several times over the next two decades. Rezvani remains a self-proclaimed Maoist to this day: a testament to the impact these trips had on him.<sup>358</sup>

The RO originated in the British student movement centered at Manchester University. Activist students had been organized there since the late 1950s after successfully ousting the conservative leadership of the embassy-affiliated Society of Iranian Students in England (*Anjoman-e dāneshjuyān-e Irāni dar Engelestān*).<sup>359</sup> Among them were Tudeh activists Parviz Nikkhah and Mohsen Rezvani, who were active in the European student movement and opposed to the current Tudeh leadership.<sup>360</sup> Their early opposition centered on strategy rather than ideological issues; the question of Chinese politics did not exist yet. Instead, they criticized the Central Committee for remaining in exile, although, as they would later find out, to return was no easy task. The Central Committee had also criticized itself, which was an important factor in convincing the younger generation to turn against them. Rezvani would later reflect that, at the time, “we didn’t have a good weapon” to attack the Central Committee directly.<sup>361</sup> They found this weapon in the form of Mao Zedong Thought.

The formation of the RO as a Maoist faction was instigated by contact between Parviz Nikkhah and the Chinese Student Association in Bucharest. In 1963, Nikkhah had been sent to a meeting of the International Union of Students (IUS) in Romania. Here, he came into contact with members of the Chinese Communist Youth League. Nikkhah learned that they were looking to establish contacts with Iranian students, and when he

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<sup>358</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>359</sup> Matin-Asgari (2002), 30

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>361</sup> Mohsen Rezvani, interview April 14th, 2018



explained to them that he was a member of the Tudeh Party but opposed to the Central Committee, they invited him to visit their contacts with the CCP at the Chinese Embassy in London, one of the few places in Europe where China had diplomatic representation. Nikkhah brought this information to Rezvani, and together they made contact with CCP representatives at the embassy and were invited to visit China directly.<sup>362</sup>

At the time, there were no direct flights to Beijing, so Rezvani and a few other students took a roundabout route from London to Paris to Rangoon, capital of Burma (present-day Myanmar). Rezvani recalls with some humor a story that is revealing of the students' position vis-a-vis the CCP. To their surprise, when they arrived in Rangoon, they were greeted by a stylish limousine and a motorcycle escort. At the hotel, located in a large and richly decorated building, their hosts gave a warm and enthusiastic welcome to their "guests from Tehran." The next day, they boarded a flight for southern China alongside the delegation from Albania. The Albanians complained to them that they had been treated very poorly, had been given scanty accommodations, and had been packed tightly into a low quality hotel. This was unusual because Albania was at that time the only Western country allied with the Chinese in the Sino-Soviet split, and was considered to be an important ally. It was then that both groups realized that the two delegations had accidentally been switched; their hosts had confused the delegates from the Iranian capital "Tehran" with the delegates from "Tirana," the capital of Albania.<sup>363</sup> In fact, the CCP did not consider the Iranian students to be of particular importance, but rather

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<sup>362</sup> Showkat, *A View on the Left in Iran: Conversations with Mohsen Rezvani*. 66

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid*, 67

invited them as a part of a larger strategy of engaging with dissident student groups to gain support for its ideological war against the Soviets.

After a night spent at a peasant commune, the delegation flew to Beijing and met once again with representatives of the Communist Youth League. It quickly became clear that the Chinese had substantial information about Iran. In addition to meeting with Nikkhah, they had also been in contact with Fereydoun Keshavarz, a former Tudeh party leader who had broken away in 1958. At the same meeting, they met with representatives from the Central Committee, who told them that the CCP once had a relationship with the Tudeh party, but that the Tudeh comrades had left when Khrushchev ordered the withdrawal of all Soviet experts from China.<sup>364</sup> In total, 19 Tudeh experts left the country in solidarity with the Soviet Union's decision.<sup>365</sup> The situation had left the Persian section of the CCP's international radio program, which the CCP considered an important part of both international and domestic propaganda efforts, unable to function.<sup>366</sup>

The RO students were most impressed with the organization of the CCP. Their itinerary was meticulously planned out, sometimes to a greater degree than the Iranians would have liked. The Chinese took great pains to keep them on a tightly controlled schedule and out of contact with the general population. At their initial hotel in Beijing, they were told not to speak to anyone in the city. The Iranians promptly ignored this directive, and when it became known that they were chatting with locals, their hosts admonished them and changed their hotel. Rezvani also notes that he and others were

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<sup>364</sup> *Ibid* 68, Showkat, Hamid. *Negahi az darun be jonbesh-e chap-e Iran: goftegu ba Kurosh Lasha'i* 51

<sup>365</sup> Rezvani, interview April 14, 2018

<sup>366</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Mohsen Rezvani* 70

struck by the lack of opposition newspapers and the degree to which the Chinese relied on asking “higher up” comrades to decide things rather than participating in discussion and debate. However, these events did not seem to sour their overall impression of the country, and they left more determined than ever to learn from the experiences of China.<sup>367</sup>

In a series of meetings, the students responded positively to the CCP’s overtures and spoke of their differences with the Tudeh Party and their commitment to advancing the cause of the revolution. They requested ideological and military training and were willing to send delegations to China for this purpose. In return, the students offered to send comrades to assist with radio broadcasts and with translating Mao’s works into Persian. The CCP delegation received this suggestion warmly but stressed that the Chinese experience was relevant only to China. The purpose of ideological education was to teach the method of adapting Marxist thought to the specific situation of Iran.<sup>368</sup>

The idea of adapting Marxism to a particular set of circumstances, rather than trying to reproduce the experiences of another country, would remain an important theme throughout the RO’s relationship with the CCP. Rezvani, Tehrani, Lasha’i, and Kashkuli all agree that the Chinese made this point constantly.<sup>369</sup> Rezvani recalls having this impressed upon him by none other than Chairman Mao himself. When meeting with the RO delegates and other foreign visitors on a subsequent trip, Mao asked Rezvani what he

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<sup>367</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Mohsen Rezvani*, 68

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid* 69

<sup>369</sup> This narrative is based on published interviews with four members of the RO by Hamid Showkat. In addition to *goftegu ba Mohsen Rezvani* and *goftegu ba Kurosh Lasha’i*, see *Negahi az darun be jonbesh-e chap-e Iran: goftegu ba Mehdi Khanbaba Tehrani* and *Negahi az darun be jonbesh-e chap-e Iran: goftegu ba Iraj Kashkuli*.

was doing in China via a translator. “I replied: ‘I am here to study your thought and the experiences of China.’ ‘*Bu hao!*’ he said.<sup>370</sup> I can still hear it in my ears.’ Mao said that when the Chinese returned from the Soviet Union, they made many mistakes, and it was only after they stopped trying to copy the Soviet models that they achieved success.<sup>371</sup>

Also impressed upon the Iranian delegation, time and again, were the CCP’s grievances against the Soviet Union. It was clear that the Chinese were anxious for the Iranians to adopt their view of events. Iraj Kashkuli, who was sent to China on a later delegation for military training, recalls how this was the only way the Chinese tried to influence them directly. “They were sensitive only to the global situation and focused on criticizing Soviet politics. From the point of view of the Chinese, [the Soviets] had revised the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism and violated its revolutionary principles.”<sup>372</sup> The CCP even revealed unflattering information about China in an effort to sway their guests. Rezvani recounts that a CCP official blamed recent famines on the withdrawal of Soviet experts.<sup>373</sup>

In addition to ideological and military training, the Chinese also agreed to provide modest financial support, although the exact amount is disputed by different sources.<sup>374</sup> Cash was received at the Chinese embassy in London and collected by Rezvani directly.<sup>375</sup> He confirms the Chinese paid for flights, accommodations, and salaries for

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<sup>370</sup> Chinese negative interjection, equivalent to “No!” or “No good!”

<sup>371</sup> Rezvani, interview April 14th, 2018

<sup>372</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Iraj Kashkuli*, 38

<sup>373</sup> Rezvani, interview April 14th, 2018

<sup>374</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Kurosh Lasha’i*, 85-86. Tehrani and Kashkuli claim a lump sum of \$20,000 or more per year, but Lasha’i considers this exaggerated and claims that only Rezvani knew the true figure

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid*

the Radio Peking staff, as well as other expenses related to visiting China.<sup>376</sup> An individual trip for multiple cadres might cost upwards of \$14,000 dollars, so the financial support was considerable. However, the CCP repeatedly expressed that they were only willing to pay for individual expenses, as their own experience with the Soviet Union had proven that unrestricted support could lead to unhealthy dependencies.<sup>377</sup> The more likely reason, however, is that the CCP was not genuinely supportive of armed revolution in Iran. This stands in contrast to its support for Palestinian revolutionaries and the People's Front for the Liberation of the Arab Gulf (PFLOAG), which consisted primarily of Soviet-made small arms in addition to militant ideology.<sup>378</sup>

The Chinese made it clear they were primarily interested in the Iranian radicals as a strategic asset for their propaganda war with the Soviet Union. To this end, the RO would go on to condemn the Soviet Union in its official publications and encourage the growing anti-Soviet attitude in the CIS-NU.<sup>379</sup> Along the same lines, the future leaders of the RO sought ideological support for their break with the Tudeh Central Committee, as well as the prestige to be gained from affiliation with China and its revolutionary agenda. They also sought military training to facilitate their planned return to Iran. China, in spite of their public support for armed struggle, was more interested in both reducing Soviet influence in Iran and bolstering their own propaganda efforts rather than funding revolutionary violence.

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<sup>376</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Mohsen Rezvani*, 123-124

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>378</sup> Craig Harris, Lillian. "China's Relationship with the PLO" *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn, 1977), pp. 123-154; Calabrese, J. (1990). "From Flyswatters to Silkworms: The Evolution of China's Role in West Asia. *Asian Survey*. **30**. p. 867.

<sup>379</sup> Matin-Asgari (2002), 108

The Iranian delegation returned to Europe and set about laying the groundwork for a return to Iran to assess the political situation. In April 1964, they met with Mehdi Khanbaba Tehrani and other young Tudeh members and sympathizers in an unofficial “preparatory conference” held in Munich.<sup>380</sup> There, they laid out their critique of the Tudeh party as a revisionist organization with an anti-revolutionary agenda and linked the Tudeh’s inactivity to Khrushchev’s policy of peaceful coexistence. Rezvani offered to use his contacts with the Chinese in the service of this new organization, which remained underground for its first year. At this point, it was still unclear whether the organization was going to be separate from the Tudeh party or a faction within it, but all agreed it was necessary to engage in an ideological struggle with the Tudeh leadership and relocate the organization to Iran.<sup>381</sup>

In December 1965, the Revolutionary Organization was brought into official existence at a conference in Tirana, Albania. Its first Secretariat included Mohsen Rezvani, Bizhan Hekmat, Kurosh Lasha’i, and Bizhan Chehrazi.<sup>382</sup> Initially, they focused their activities on exploring the experiences of other countries in search of a model for revolution in Iran, especially Cuba, Algeria, and China. Rezvani was sent to Algeria to meet Fereydoun Keshavarz through his Chinese contacts.<sup>383</sup> Later, Rezvani and Iraj Kashkuli were also sent to Cuba, although they found the Cubans to be overly militaristic.<sup>384</sup> This was part of a general search for an appropriate model for revolution that ended with a full endorsement of the Chinese approach. Parviz Nikkhah had

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<sup>380</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Kurosh Lasha’i*, 48

<sup>381</sup> Matin-Asgari p 81-82

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>383</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Mohsen Rezvani*, 71

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid*

previously gone to Iran to survey the political situation.<sup>385</sup> Early RO activities also included the dissemination of pamphlets on Mao Zedong Thought and world revolution, as well as translations of the works of Lenin and Mao. By 1966, the RO began to publish a newspaper called *Tudeh* (Masses) that endorsed a Maoist reading of the situation in Iran.<sup>386</sup> They took the position that the Shah's reforms had been ineffective and endorsed the Maoist position that Iran was a "semi-feudal, semi-colonial" country. Revolution was to begin among the peasants, as it did in China.<sup>387</sup>

Returning to Iran was the main obsession of the RO activists, and the decision to do so would have serious consequences for the RO and the CIS-NU as a whole. In April of 1965, an assassination attempt was carried out against the Shah. Although the attempt failed and the perpetrator had only tenuous connections to the Nikkhah Group organizing within Iran, SAVAK used this incident as an excuse to arrest the entire cell. Led by the RO faction, the CIS-NU responded to the arrest of the Nikkah Group with a massive publicity campaign against the Shah. This resulted in the commutation of Nikkhah's sentence from death to life imprisonment. The episode was an important moment in the history of the CIS-NU, which provided the organization with its first significant victory in a direct confrontation with the Shah's government, and the Shah with his first setback at the hands of a Maoist-oriented student groups.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Kurosh Lasha'i* 46-50

<sup>386</sup> *Pish besu-ye vahdat-e osuli-ye marksist-leninistha* (The Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh Party of Iran Abroad, 1969, 39

<sup>387</sup> Haqšenās

<sup>388</sup> Matin-Asgari 86-89

In 1965, Iraj Kashkuli, Bizhan Hekmat, Siavush Parsanezhad, Kurosh Lasha'i and several others were sent to Beijing for military and ideological training. The flight took them from Geneva to Karachi, and from there to Dhaka, and on to Beijing. From there, they traveled south to attend a four-to-six month program at Nanjing University.<sup>389</sup> The curriculum included the experiences of the Chinese revolution, Mao's theories on guerilla warfare, and practical military lessons. From time to time, these students were integrated into Chinese army units and taught survival and basic military skills, such as the use of mines and small arms. Lessons were taught in Chinese with interpretation provided by two translators from Nanjing University. Both were young Chinese Communists who had learned Persian not by choice but rather based upon the needs of the CCP. Their Persian was reportedly very good, if somewhat formal.

As before, the students' movement and contact were strictly controlled. When they were not attending classes, RO cadres were housed in comfortable villas for foreign guests on the outskirts of Beijing, away from residential areas. The compounds were fenced and guarded, and contact with the local Chinese or even other student groups was prevented. However, the group would occasionally catch glimpses of other delegations and noted the presence of many Africans and Europeans in a similar arrangement. Classes were isolated to contain only the five or so RO students in attendance, separate from other groups studying there. The Iranians even took their meals separately from the Chinese, who ate meager portions of cabbage and rice that were unappetizing by Iranian standards. The only time the students were afforded contact with the population was

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<sup>389</sup> The following section is taken from Showkat, *goftegu ba Iraj Kashkuli* 35-40 and *goftegu ba Kurosh Lasha'i* 50-57



when they spent a week living and working at an agricultural commune. However, considering the reports that the communes' residents sang universal praises of the CCP, it is likely these trips were tightly choreographed.

Kurosh Lasha'i and Iraj Kashkuli also encountered the Chinese obsession with adaptability that Rezvani described on his earlier trip. Kashkuli noted that "[t]he remarkable thing was the Chinese professors always said the same thing before the lessons: Comrades, this is the experience of the Chinese revolution and should not be copied...You must identify the special conditions in your country and align Marxism with the Iranian situation."<sup>390</sup> In a letter to Rezvani, Kashkuli writes that the teacher encouraged them to "try to match the issues with the specific circumstances...and conditions in Iran."<sup>391</sup> Kashkuli and Lasha'i had the opportunity to do so when they returned from China later that year and were sent to Iran to make contact with the revolutionary movement in Kurdistan. However, they soon learned that military training and practical experience are considerably different things. Their efforts were largely unsuccessful, and a year later, they had narrowly escaped with their lives as the movement was crushed by government forces. Lasha'i was arrested and eventually recanted his political views publicly and endorsed the Shah, and served the regime in relatively important positions.<sup>392</sup> Lasha'i and other ex-Maoists played an important role in building bridges between the Shah and Maoism.

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<sup>390</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Iraj Kashkuli* 37

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid*, 341

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid*, 86

While the political lessons taught by the Chinese were influential on the RO activists, the military training did not yield any substantial results within Iran. It is also worth noting that the Chinese provided no practical support in terms of the logistics of launching armed struggle in Iran. The RO cadres attempted to bring the issue of the Kurdish separatist movement in Iran to their attention, but the CCP refused on the grounds that this would constitute “interfering in the affairs of another sovereign nation” (though they were already doing just that by supporting the RO). The CCP’s refusal was despite the fact that the Kurdish movement was the only actual armed struggle ongoing in Iran at the time. This suggests that the Chinese were not particularly interested in launching an actual armed struggle in Iran, or that they did not believe the conditions were right at this time. In the end, the RO was much more enamored with China than China was with it.

### The RO and Chinese Propaganda

In addition to military training, RO activists were sent to China to assist with its Radio Peking broadcast.<sup>393</sup> The Radio Peking program was the CCP’s official Cold War propaganda broadcast operation, comparable to Radio Free Europe or Radio Moscow, albeit with a smaller audience.<sup>394</sup> It had commenced broadcasting in Persian on October 15th, 1957, with the help of Tudeh experts, but the production of new programs became difficult once they departed. By 1963, Radio Peking did not seem to be broadcasting in

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<sup>393</sup> This operation was overseen by Mehdi Khanbaba Tehrani. For a full account of his tenure at Radio Peking, see Showkat, Hamid. *Negahi az darun be jonbesh-e chap-e Iran, goftegu ba Mehdi Khanbaba Tehrani*

<sup>394</sup> For an overview of the history of Radio Peking and its foreign language broadcast activities, see Çağdaş Üngör’s 2009 dissertation “Reaching the Distant Comrade: Chinese Communist Propaganda Abroad (1949-1976).”

Persian at all.<sup>395</sup> Although the Persian component of Chinese radio broadcasts had a demonstrably minuscule audience, the CCP remained committed to broadcasting in a variety of languages.<sup>396</sup> It was important to the party planners that China appeared to be engaged in global activism, and a wide-ranging, comprehensive international propaganda program was part of that exercise.

The RO students were not simply passive objects, however, and had their own agenda for Radio Peking. Tehrani wanted to turn the station into a platform to broadcast propaganda against the Shah. However, the Chinese programmers insisted on sticking to more mundane programs about agricultural statistics and the Chinese view on world affairs. Tehrani's requests to broadcast anti-Shah materials were met with a flat refusal without explanation. They were told that this was the policy of "higher-up" comrades. Without any real leverage against the CCP, Tehrani and the rest of the RO was forced to quietly accept the situation.<sup>397</sup>

Outside of Radio Peking, the RO played an important role in China's domestic propaganda. Their visits to factories, communes, and centers of science were likely as much to showcase China's international connections to the population as they were to acquaint the Iranians with China. In addition, the Chinese press published a number of articles on the "Iranian Revolutionaries" beginning in 1964. Chinese official newspapers had a longstanding interest in Iran and events in the Middle East. They published

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<sup>395</sup> Üngör 311

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid*, 294. Radio Peking never got more than a handful of letters from listeners, while other programs received hundreds of letters. A US internal report also concluded that Radio Peking had next to no influence on Iranians.

<sup>397</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Mehdi Khanbaba Tehrani* 116, Rezvani, interview April 14th, 2018

hundreds of articles that closely followed Iranian politics over the course of the preceding decade and centered a number of propaganda campaigns on Iran. These campaigns often stressed opposition to the United States and global imperialism.<sup>398</sup> Now, propaganda about Iran was increasingly centered on the Sino-Soviet split.

From 1964 to 1970, the RO was mentioned dozens of times in the pages of *Renmin Ribao*. Their first mention came during their initial visit in October 1963. An article on a trade exhibition in Shanghai reported the presence of an “Iranian friend” who praised the revolutionary spirit of the event organizers.<sup>399</sup> Another article that same day praised the revolutionary history of Iran, China, and Turkey as the “highest peak” in the history of Asian revolutionary movements.<sup>400</sup> In 1966, a number of articles were published that covered the proceedings of the Afro-Asian Writers Bureau. The organization had earlier that year split into pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese factions, and China tried to convene an “emergency meeting” of African and Asian writers to rival the Soviet-sponsored Afro-Asian Writers Bureau Conference.<sup>401</sup> The RO sent Mehdi Khanbaba Tehrani as a delegate. During the conference, Tehrani was repeatedly quoted in the Chinese press by his codename in Iran, “Comrade Ramin” (*Laming* 拉明).<sup>402</sup> He spoke in support of the emergency meeting of African and Asian writers and condemned the Soviet-supported conference in Cairo. He was quoted saying, “the path of violent revolution is the only way for the liberation of the Iranian people. Only the raging fires of

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<sup>398</sup> Garver (2004) 35-36

<sup>399</sup> *Renmin Ribao* 10-15-1963, “上海”南京路上好八连事迹展览”结束 成千上万人受到教育，许多人用实际行动学习好八连”

<sup>400</sup> *Renmin Ribao* 10-15-1963, “被压迫民族的革命是世界风暴的新源泉”

<sup>401</sup> *Renmin Ribao*, 6-21-1963, “出席亚非作家紧急会议的各国代表严厉谴责开罗分裂会议”

<sup>402</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Mohsen Rezvani*, 302

a People's War can burn away the decaying chains of slavery.”<sup>403</sup>. The press also publicized meetings between delegates at the conference - including “Laming” - with Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, Lin Biao, Kang Sheng, Chen Boda, and Mao Zedong.<sup>404</sup>

In 1966, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) as a means to reassert control over the party and push back against ideological currents he opposed. He did this through mass mobilization of his supporters, especially students. These appeals targeted the CCP itself, and students were encouraged to “bombard the headquarters” and rebel against any party member or authority figure who opposed Mao. Eventually, this devolved into witch hunts, often to root out anyone with allegedly “bourgeois” habits or mentalities, but was used more often to target personal and political enemies. The resulting period became known for its ideological excesses, striking propaganda campaigns, and the societal chaos it unleashed.

Although it remained intensely anti-Soviet, the focus of China's propaganda efforts shifted to portraying Mao as the sage-like leader of a global revolutionary movement.<sup>405</sup> References to “Iranian radicals” (*Yilang geming zhe* 伊朗革命者) reading the works of Mao Zedong and following his example were made several times in late 1960s. In October 1966, a translation of a letter from an anonymous Iranian student, no doubt an RO cadre, was published, praising Mao's little red book: “I am studying

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<sup>403</sup> *Renmin Ribao* 1-16-1967, “在京的二十个亚非国家和地区的革命作家记者等发表声明”, *Renmin Ribao* 7-02-1967, “伊朗代表拉明的发言”

<sup>404</sup> *Renmin Ribao* 6-09-1967, “毛主席林彪同志接见各国作家和朋友 周恩来陈伯达康生江青等同志参加接见”

<sup>405</sup> Mittler, Barbara. *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*. Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2016

chemistry [in my home country]. Learning chemistry can't save the nation, [but] reading the works of Mao Zedong can.”<sup>406</sup> A 1967 article titled “People of the World all Love to Read Mao’s Book” related how the author had encountered an Iranian in the Beijing airport who spoke enthusiastically about his meeting with Mao.<sup>407</sup> Others discussed the “serious study” of Mao Zedong Thought by American and Iranian students and touted the RO’s publication of Maoist texts in Persian and articles in support of the Maoist line.<sup>408</sup> On July 21st, 1967, *Renmin Ribao* featured a conversation that ostensibly occurred between Tehrani and Chinese writer Jin Jingmai, author of the novel “The Song of Ouyang Hai.” Tehrani is said to have praised the vigor of the youthful swimmers, calling them “Ouyang Hai style youth; you should sing their praises.” He attributes this spirit to the education of Chairman Mao. Impressed by the Chinese dedication to mass education, Tehrani reportedly shouted, “Long Live Mao Zedong!”

Whether these articles represent genuine conversations, letters and convictions or not, they are indicative of the way in which the relationship with the RO’s presence in China was mobilized in the service of domestic propaganda.<sup>409</sup> While the Iranians were not the center of any particular propaganda campaigns, they portrayed China’s foreign supporters as diverse and numerous. China was depicted as an active proponent of world revolution and potential leader of the global socialist movement. The presence of Iranian and other international revolutionaries in China could be mobilized in the press to

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<sup>406</sup> *Renmin Ribao* 10-15-1966, “读毛主席的书才能够救国”

<sup>407</sup> *Renmin Ribao* 1-13-1967, “世界人民都爱读毛主席的书

<sup>408</sup> *Renmin Ribao* 10-26-1967 “伊朗革命者发表文章 热烈欢呼我国出版波斯文<<毛泽东军事文选>>”

<sup>409</sup> It seems likely that at the least, the statements of support are reflective of actual statements made at the time, as they are not substantially different from the RO’s own pronouncements in their publications.

demonstrate the universal appeal of Mao Zedong's ideas as well as the experience of the Chinese revolution. Although Tehrani attempted to push the Chinese on their reluctance to take a stronger stance against the Iranian government, this proved ultimately futile. The RO had to be content to play a part in China's propaganda effort without being able to substantially influence it.

As the Cultural Revolution intensified, its propaganda had a major impact on the RO. Some of its members were greatly affected by the time they spent in Cultural Revolution China, such as Majid Zarbaksh and Ali Shams. Shams became particularly known for "waving around his little red book" and leading the party members in self-criticism sessions, in which some members broke down in tears for alleged bourgeois crimes.<sup>410</sup> Lasha'i said of this time that when it came to Maoist dogma, "we became more Catholic than the Pope."<sup>411</sup> While previously, the RO had looked to Maoism as a model for making violent revolution, for some, it now meant the pursuit of an intellectual and spiritual renewal centered around purging oneself of bourgeois thoughts and actions. This new approach was somewhat off-putting for the leadership, which found the self-criticism sessions to be overly dramatic and were often themselves the targets of accusations of bourgeois thought. Rezvani perceived this as a challenge to the leadership, organized by those he suspected of having revisionist tendencies, and who were taking advantage of other overly-zealous members.<sup>412</sup> Other cadres, like Tehrani, were

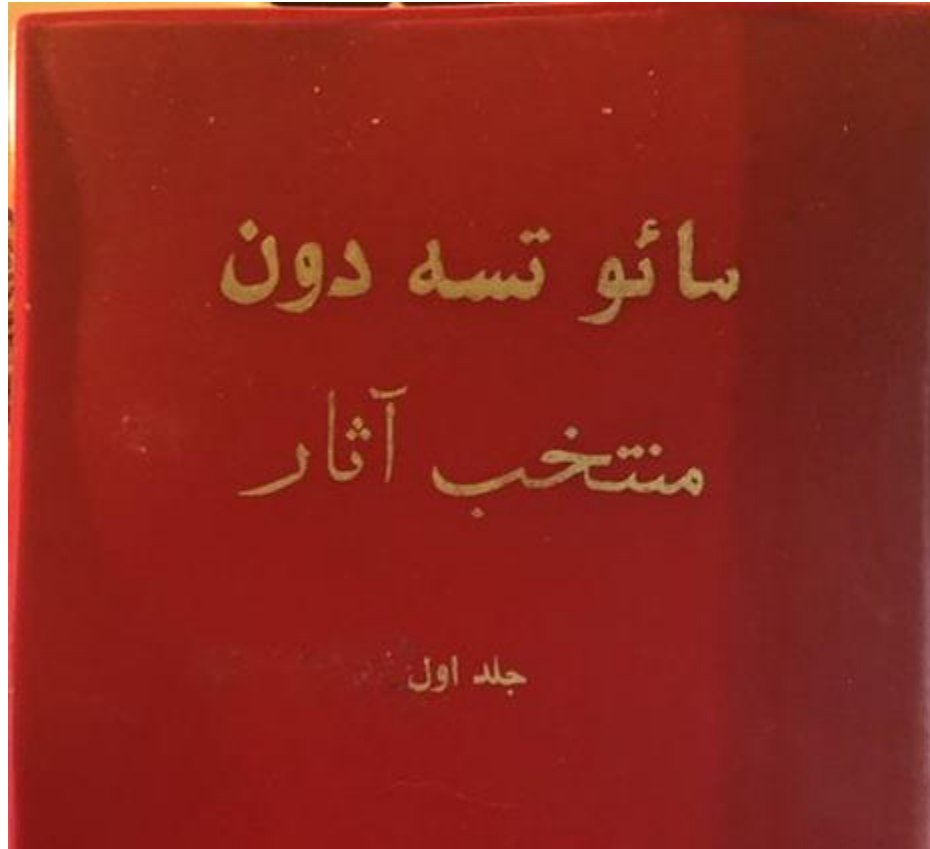
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<sup>410</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Mohsen Rezvani* 149-151, *goftegu ba Kurosh Lasha'i* 81

<sup>411</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Kurosh Lasha'i* 56

<sup>412</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Mohsen Rezvani* 149-151

disillusioned by what they saw in China during the Cultural Revolution, and came to question the wisdom of following the Chinese line.<sup>413</sup>



*Fig 17. “The Collected Works of Mao Zedong, Vol 1” Persian edition. Published in Beijing, 1969.*

By 1969, these underlying internal tensions spilled into the open when some members, including Tehrani, left to form the splinter group “Cadres” (*Kadr-ha*). In 1965, shortly after the formation of the RO, the Marxist-Leninist Storm Organization (*Sāzmān-e Mārksīst-Lenīnist-e tūfān*) was also created as a rival Maoist party. Its leaders, Ġolām-Ḥosayn Forūtan, Aḥmad Qāsemī, and ‘Abbās Saḡā’ī were expelled Tudeh members who

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<sup>413</sup> Mehdi Khanbaba Tehrani, interview with BBC Persian, April 1, 2009



followed the Chinese party line and were later associated with Albania in their opposition to both China and the Soviet Union.<sup>414</sup> They also published polemical articles attacking the RO into the late 1960s. While Maoist parties and sympathizers maintained a strong presence in the CIS-NU, especially in the United States, the RO itself was isolated and under attack by both Nationalist and smaller Maoist factions by the 1970s.<sup>415</sup>

The remaining RO activists responded to the challenge of the Cadres and the Tufan by doubling down on their convictions. They began a new publication called Red Star (*Setāreh-ye Sorkh*) in 1970 which displayed a noticeably more dogmatic approach to Maoism.<sup>416</sup> At the same time, the Shah had steadily been improving his ties to China, which led to official diplomatic relations in the early 1970s. Furthermore, the RO seemingly failed to heed the warning that Mao himself allegedly gave to Rezvani, and disputed the reports of their own members that had gone to Iran. These reports indicated that the White Revolution had caused substantial change in the Iranian economic situation, and conditions were not good for rural revolution. The RO, following Mao's idea that it was no longer possible for capitalism to develop in the Third World, maintained their assessment that Iran was a "semi-feudal" country rather than one transitioning to a capitalist economy.

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<sup>414</sup> Ḥaqšenās

<sup>415</sup> Matin-asfari (2002) 138-140

<sup>416</sup> *Haft sal setareh-ye sorkh (1349-1356)*, Roma : *Sazman-e Enqelabi-ye Hezb-e Tude-ye Iran*, 1356 (1977)

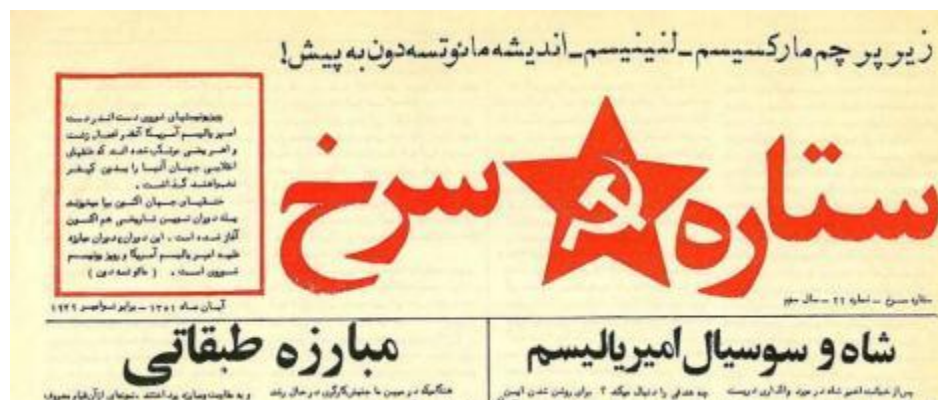


Fig 18. An issue of *Setāreh-ye Sorkh*. Above the title, the phrase “Raise the flag of Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought” is written.

Criticized for its dogmatic approach and its support of China during this period, and suffering from the general “confusion and disarray” that characterized global Maoist politics in the mid-1970s, the RO was now in decline.<sup>417</sup> While it did not endorse China’s pro-Tehran policy, it did not criticize China outright. Furthermore, its attempts to set up bases in Iran had failed, and several of its members had been involved in highly public defections and were now working for the Shah's government.<sup>418</sup> These factors led to a steady decline in the popularity of Maoist factions within the student movement.<sup>419</sup> Throughout the early 1970s, the National Front factions led a campaign against their RO rivals in a bid to gain greater control over the student union. Eventually, the organization was expelled from the CIS-NU, leaving it isolated and ineffective thereafter.<sup>420</sup>

### The Impact of Iranian Maoism

<sup>417</sup> Matin-Asgari (2014)

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>419</sup> Matin-asfari (2002) 140

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid*, 146

Although the RO and the Iranian Maoist movement only lasted about a decade, they left an unmistakable imprint on the tactics, rhetoric, and ideology of both the Iranian opposition and the Iranian state. First, under the leadership of Maoist student groups like the RO, the CIS-NU engaged in some of its most radical and direct opposition to the Shah and embraced a number of explicitly Maoist positions. Through newspapers, pamphlets, and other publications, their ideological position endorsing the Chinese line won over the majority of Iranian student leftists during this period. Second, the radicalization of the student movement directly contributed to the CIS-NU's support of guerilla organizations that launched an armed conflict within Iran. This support amplified the impact of the guerilla movement by making it an international issue and keeping it in the public eye, as well as by galvanizing the opposition both inside and outside of the country through highly visible expressions of solidarity. Third, the popularity of radical politics led both conservative Islamic and royalist factions to borrow from the rhetorical style and content of Maoism, and several ex-Maoists played a key role in the Shah's White Revolution and the development of the ideology of the Rastakhiz (Resurrection) Party. This abortive attempt at turning Iran into a one-party state borrowed freely from Leftist and Maoist ideological trends and elevated the Shah to a Sage-King figure who would lead the Iranian people on the path to their own unique revolution.

Afshin Matin-Asgari has analyzed the Maoist movement in a short article and explored the history of the CIS-NU and its radicalization in *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*. The CIS-NU grew out of a coalition of various ideological and political organizations popular with Iranian students, such as the National Front, Tudeh, and Third

Force. It came to prominence as student opposition was revived following the collapse of domestic opposition at the end of the 1950s.<sup>421</sup> In 1960, the Confederation of Iranian Students (CIS) emerged in Europe, while the Iranian Students' Association in the United States (ISAUS) was overtaken by radicals who drove out the conservative leadership.<sup>422</sup> In 1962, these two organizations unified to create the Confederation of Iranian Students – National Union (CIS-NU) and received the endorsement of the newly established Organization of Tehran University Students (OTUS), making it the sole organization that unified student opposition abroad and student opposition in Iran.<sup>423</sup> Its ranks included communist members of the Tudeh, nationalist members of Second National Front, and a growing Islamist faction.<sup>424</sup>

The CIS-NU was cautious at first. In 1962, it largely used nationalist rhetoric and called for liberalism, democracy, and the rule of law. They did not explicitly call for the removal of the Shah, only for him to “reign and not rule” in accordance with Constitutional law.<sup>425</sup> However, attitudes quickly changed after violence broke out at Tehran University in June 1963, which saw Khomeini arrested and hundreds (possibly thousands) of protesters killed.<sup>426</sup> This began a fundamental change in the opposition, which moved to openly confront the Shah on his trips abroad. In January 1964, the CIS-NU adopted a resolution that stated that “the shah speaks the language of bullets, one

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<sup>421</sup> Matin-Asgari, Afshin. *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*. (2002), 10

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid*, 11

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>425</sup> Matin-Asgari (2002), 58

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid*, 67

must speak to him in his own language.”<sup>427</sup> This was the crucial precipitating event that sent Iranian activists on a path towards endorsing the radical politics of armed struggle. It is important to recognize that it was domestic developments that sent shockwaves throughout the community abroad and led to the appeal and ultimate adoption of Maoist politics, not the other way around. Maoism did not radicalize Iranian students through its inherent appeal or rhetorical power, but it did play a key part in their journey towards a more radical approach to politics.

By 1965, the RO had emerged and split from the Tudeh leadership. As a minority faction in the CIS-NU, it “led the Confederation to a new phase of radicalism and expansion as an upsurge of international student militancy began in 1967.”<sup>428</sup> It also sent members back to Iran who were arrested and tried in connection with an attempt to assassinate the Shah, which led to “a direct confrontation between the CISNU and the Iranian government, pushing the Confederation to take more radical positions.” By 1968, the CIS-NU had joined the global student movement and participated in a variety of anti-colonial, anti-war, and anti-Shah activities. They declared the Confederation an “anti-imperialist, democratic, and popular” organization and elected more and more Maoist members to the leadership.<sup>429</sup> By 1969, the Maoists had come to dominate the organization and control over 2/3rds of its voting membership.<sup>430</sup> The ISAUS experienced a similar evolution and took a pro-Chinese stance in its newspapers and

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<sup>427</sup> *Ibid*, 62

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid*, 78

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid*, 104

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid*, 106

publications by 1969.<sup>431</sup> By 1971, the CIS-NU had openly declared that the Soviet Union was pursuing an “anti-people” foreign policy. The Confederation experienced incredible growth during this period; from 1969 to 1971 alone, its annual budget grew from 12,000 German marks per year to over 135,000 marks per year from 2000 official members.<sup>432</sup>

When the guerrilla movement against the Shah was launched with the Siahkal incident of February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1971, the Maoist factions within the student movement were at the peak of their influence.<sup>433</sup> After years of agitating for violent resistance, there was little question of whether the Confederation would support the militants. From 1972 to 1975, the CIS-NU engaged in a highly public campaign to support students arrested in connection with violent anti-regime activities.<sup>434</sup> Through hunger strikes, newspaper campaigns, and public demonstrations, their involvement brought unwelcome attention to the Shah's use of naked political violence and led to a campaign against Iran for human rights violations from a number of international organizations.<sup>435</sup> By 1974, they were openly calling for the overthrow of the Shah, and the American and European media had become increasingly hostile towards his repressive policies.<sup>436</sup> The “bad press” subsequently led the Carter administration to pressure the Shah to liberalize the political system, which contributed to his eventual downfall.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> *Ibid*, 98

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid*, 106, 126

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid*, 126

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid*, 130-133

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid*, 133

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid*, 134-140

<sup>437</sup> Abrahamian (2008), 152

The guerrilla movement itself was also deeply affected by Maoist politics and related theories of armed struggle. As part of the same intellectual, social, and political milieu as the student movement, both the Islamic and Marxist oriented guerrillas engaged with Maoism and read Maoist texts in their search for a model of militant revolution. As Matin-Asgari notes, “Guerrilla theorists, whether Muslim or Marxist, argued that armed action was the only viable option left...Their literature was also attentive to and even preoccupied with contemporary revolutionary theory and practice in Latin America, Algeria, Palestine, China, and Vietnam.”<sup>438</sup> The two most prominent militant organizations were the Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas (OIPFG), sometimes called the Fadaiyan,<sup>439</sup> and the People's Mujahedin of Iran (PMOI)<sup>440</sup>, both of which grew out of clandestine groups that studied revolutionary theory, including the works of Mao, Regis Debray, Che Guevara, and Liu Shaoqi.<sup>441</sup> While Maoism was not uniquely influential on the opposition within the country any more than it was on the opposition abroad, it was part of a larger engagement with “Third World” militant movements and reflective of a turn in the 1960s towards radical politics in the wake of brutal repression.

Although neither group explicitly endorsed the Chinese line, their engagement with Maoist politics and theories can be clearly seen from their publications. One Fadaiyan theorist wrote, “the revolutionary intellectuals greet the revolutionary trend of

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<sup>438</sup> Matin-Asgari, Afshin. *Both Eastern And Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity*. (2018), 216-217

<sup>439</sup> سازمان چریک‌های فدایی خلق ایران *Sāzmān-e čerikhā-ye Fadā'i-e khalq-e Irān*

<sup>440</sup> سازمان مجاهدین خلق ایران *sāzmān-e mojāhedīn-e khalq-e īrān*

<sup>441</sup> Ḥaqšenās, Torāb. “Communism In Persia after 1953”

Marxism-Leninism based on the ideas of Comrade Mao.”<sup>442</sup> Another leftist theorist, Mostafa Sho'aiyan, was critical of what he saw of the Fadaiyan's uncritical acceptance of both Soviet and Chinese foreign policy.<sup>443</sup> Bizhan Jazani, one of the founders of Fadaiyan and its main theoretical architect, engaged with the history of the Chinese revolution in the pamphlets and essays he penned from a cell in one of the Shah's prisons. He positively appraises China's communist movement as a revolution that had “triumphed” and established a “People's democracy” and occasionally refers to the Kuomintang, the Korean War, and other events in Chinese history in his analysis of Iranian society and global capitalism.<sup>444</sup> Jazani also echoed Mao and European Marxists' assessment of the revolutionary character of the peasants, which the Tudeh Party (and Soviet communism) traditionally eschewed in favor of industrial workers. Although he was unsure of how to successfully mobilize the peasant population, Jazani judged that after the Shah's land reforms, “the rural areas have been shaken out of their slumber and the peasant who had for centuries accepted the landlord's yoke with equanimity has learned that such slavery is unjust.”<sup>445</sup> He argued that the Shah's reforms had created new pressures and forms of exploitation on the farmers and *khosh-nashin* (landless peasants), and that this had a positive effect on their class consciousness.<sup>446</sup> Here, Jazani pivots away from Maoist thought on the subject, which proposes that revolution must begin in the countryside, to instead focus on the possibilities of an urban-based guerilla campaign:

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<sup>442</sup> Ahmadzadeh, Massoud, “Mobarezeh-ye mosalahaneh, ham strategi ham taktik”, quoted in Shahibzadeh, Yadullah. *Marxism and Left Wing Politics in Europe and Iran*. (2018), 148

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid*, 159

<sup>444</sup> Jazani, Bizhan. “Land Reform in Modern Iran” in *Capitalism and Revolution in Iran* (1980), 72, 116

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid*, 102

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid*



Will this pressure force the farmers into submission and surrender? Or will they...turn to the revolutionary movement? Obviously, without the necessary consciousness and vanguard movements, it would be futile to expect the farms – dispersed as they are – to move toward collective action and effective protest. No doubt we will have to wait for dispersed and localized protests to come to the surface...At the present time, however, there are only two ways in which the farmers...can be mobilized and their consciousness raised. First, it is necessary to establish armed struggle in the rural areas which in the initial stages will have to lean heavily on progressive forces in the urban areas. Such a struggle will accentuate rural problems and raise the consciousness of the rural masses in a practical way...Second, political and economic movements by the urban masses will influence the farmers...Our answer to the problem is clear...to increase the consciousness of the farmers and then mobilize them.<sup>447</sup>

Jazani's attention to the rural population and plans to lead it in revolt shares some parallels with Mao's famous "*Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*," written in 1927.<sup>448</sup> Both made extensive attempts to analyze and examine the rural population based on direct experiences, though they drew different conclusions according to the local situation. Mao argues that after seeing firsthand the successes of the peasant associations and their actions against the landlords, the CCP must orient its policies towards supporting them. While Mao determined that the Chinese peasants soon "will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back," Jazani freely admitted that "although our knowledge of the economic processes in the rural areas during recent years is quite considerable, we have unfortunately no comprehensive data about the effect of these processes, and resulting contradictions, on the psychology of the rural strata."<sup>449</sup> Though he predicted an increase in the revolutionary sentiment of the peasantry, he did not witness revolutionary action on the part of the farmers against the landowning class and

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<sup>447</sup> Jazani, 102

<sup>448</sup> Zedong, Mao. "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan" (1927)

<sup>449</sup> Jazani, 102, 139

thus did not attribute to them a highly revolutionary character. However, he and Mao were in agreement about the proper method necessary to draw such conclusions. According to Elizabeth Perry, with regards to public opinion, Mao's position was “without investigation, no one has the right to speak.”<sup>450</sup> Similarly, Jazani writes that “[t]o assess the peasants' true state of mind and outlook, one has to get in direct touch with this class and its day-to-day existence. And unfortunately that has not been possible for the present writer to do.”<sup>451</sup>

Despite his engagement with Maoist literature, Jazani was by no means a Maoist, and in fact advised Iranians to stay neutral in the Sino-Soviet split. In an essay titled “Land Reform in Modern Iran,” he criticized the Iranian Maoist movement for its attempts to “have a hand in events from afar and whose knowledge of the country is about the same as their knowledge of Burma and Nepal.”<sup>452</sup> Jazani argued they had:

...pledged themselves to a dogma – although this of course they attempt to conceal. They feel obligated to assess the system in Iran as semi-feudal and semi-colonial, simply because Mao Tse-Tung in one of his books dating back a few decades classified societies in three groups: socialist, capitalist and semi-feudal/semi-colonial. Now we ask these comrades: what was the system of government in China after the revolution? Into which group do Vietnam and Cuba fit today? Which classification embraces the prevailing systems in Egypt, Algeria and Syria? Thus we can clearly see that reality does not fit into this formula.<sup>453</sup>

Jazani was also critical of Chinese foreign policy, especially its relationship with the Shah:

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<sup>450</sup> Perry, Elizabeth J. “Cultural Governance in Contemporary China:”Re-Orienting” Party Propaganda”, in Shue, Vivienne and Patricia M. Thornton (ed.), *To Govern China: Evolving Practices of Power* (2017), 39

<sup>451</sup> Jazani, 132

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid*, 49

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid*

[China's engagement with the Shah] enable[s] the regime to use the political prestige of China...to deceive progressive forces at home. At the same time the regime relieves itself of possible political and propaganda pressures which might otherwise be brought. This influences internal conditions...[and] helps the regime withstand moral pressure in the region from international public opinion."<sup>454</sup>

He charges the socialist states, including China, with using relations with Iran to expand their own economies at the expense of the Iranian opposition. Jazani calls on them to refuse to engage with friendly relations with the Shah and to put pressure on the regime internationally.<sup>455</sup>

Ironically, Jazani's critical analysis and creative application of Marxist theory to the Iranian situation resembles the path laid out by Mao Zedong and the Chinese Revolution. Mao's greatest contribution to the history of Marxism was adapting Soviet Marxism to the Chinese situation, adding in important elements – like the theory of armed struggle and his approach to rural revolution - that would go on to become major intellectual and political trends in the 1960s. The CCP was also very vocal that fraternal parties should avoid over-reliance on China, as China's over-reliance on the Soviet Union had been to its detriment. At the very least, it should be appreciated that Jazani echoes the advice that was supposedly given to Mohsen Rezvani by Mao himself when they met; they must apply the *lessons* of other revolutions to their own situation and not try to reproduce the Chinese experience wholesale. Like Mao, Jazani urged Leftists to:

...characterize correctly the realities of our society which is in the process of movement and growth. For this task, creative Marxism-Leninism will be our guide...obstinately advocating this or that formula devised by a revolutionary leader in a particular historical period for a particular concrete situation will not

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<sup>454</sup> *Ibid*, 94

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid*, 96

only fail to help us find our own way, but will mean that we fail to be good protagonists of proletarian ideology.<sup>456</sup>

The People's Mujahedin of Iran incorporated Maoist texts in their theoretical development and search for a model for revolution. This engagement with Maoism has led some earlier scholars to erroneously attribute Maoism as the primary ideological force of the movement and that the movement only adopted a Muslim orientation later.<sup>457</sup> Abrahamian argues instead that the organization was always Muslim in orientation, and that a major split occurred in 1975, when some members left to form the “Marxist Mujahedin” and explicitly endorsed Maoist theory.<sup>458</sup> They were particularly influenced by Mao's essay “On Contradictions,” which they adopted as their primary “handbook” of revolution.<sup>459</sup> Massoud Rajavi, the long-time leader of the People's Mujahedin, encouraged a cult of personality similar to the one that surrounded Mao and other charismatic leaders prior to his disappearance in 2003. Slogans coined by Mao and the CCP were sometimes found on Mujahedin pamphlets. In other words, while they did not openly endorse Maoism, Maoist texts formed an important part of their thinking about resistance and revolution.

### China's Motivations and Agenda

In spite of its vocal support for violent revolution, China declined to provide either material support for armed struggle or rhetorical support for the Kurdish movement. The CCP also refused the RO's pleas for a more relevant and opposition-

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<sup>456</sup> Jazani, 50

<sup>457</sup> Abrahamian, Ervand. *The Iranian Mojahedin* (1989), 2

<sup>458</sup> Abrahamian (1989), 146

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid*, 156, 163

based approach to Radio Peking's Persian service. The primary reason for this stance was that at the same time as they were supporting the RO, the CCP was also trying to establish friendly relations with Tehran. While willing to endorse the Iranian revolutionaries to a point, Beijing was careful to do nothing that might harm a future partnership with the Shah. Both relationships advanced the goal of countering the Soviets; the RO successfully reduced the influence of the Tudeh and advocated the Chinese line internationally, while good relations with Iran would provide a check on Soviet influence there.

China had long articulated an interest in pursuing friendly relations with the Shah's government. This was first expressed as an official policy in the 1955 Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference at Bandung. There, Zhou Enlai struck a moderate, diplomatic tone and proposed that there was no need for conflict between China and the Asian states which aligned themselves with the United States.<sup>460</sup> According to preparatory documents for the conference, Chinese policy was to attempt to "influence" Iran, although no specific goal was developed.<sup>461</sup> Their primary concern at that time, while they were still a Soviet ally, was that Iran did not act as a "spring-board of anti-Soviet aggression."<sup>462</sup> Iran ignored Zhou's conciliatory tone, and their representative only made vague statements warning the Chinese against trying to solve the Taiwan issue by force.<sup>463</sup> This was because the Iranians had been cultivating ties with the Taiwanese, who had an unofficial

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<sup>460</sup> Abidi, 85

<sup>461</sup> "Report by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, 'Some Existing Issues in and Suggestions for the Asia-Africa Conference,'" 1955

<sup>462</sup> "Report from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, 'Comments on the Asian-African Conference from the Participating Countries After the Conference,'" May 10, 1955

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid*

embassy in Iran as early as 1955.<sup>464</sup> Beijing was aware of this embassy and was also eager to check the growing influence of the “Chiang bandits.”<sup>465</sup>

Iran cemented its rejection of China’s offers of friendship first by joining the U.S.-led Baghdad Pact in 1956 and then by establishing official relations with Taiwan in 1957. This did not stop the CCP from reaching out again in 1958 to propose a new trade agreement.<sup>466</sup> This proposal was ignored. Relations remained cool until 1965 when China renewed its efforts by sending a radio message to the Iranian Prime Minister while in-flight over the country. News of the message was published in the Chinese press.<sup>467</sup> This time, the Iranians responded favorably. An informal trade agreement was signed in 1966, and official ties were established in 1971 after a long period of quiet courtship, during which time Iran publicly defied the United States on the issue of Taiwan’s membership in the UN.<sup>468</sup> Iranian newspapers also began to write positively about China for the first time since 1949. The Iranian newspaper *Ayandegan* put Iranian support for China at the UN in terms of defiance of U.S. hegemony:

...the first time that the UN has stood up to a Big Power which has not only been a major fulcrum, but also one which has always imposed its will on the international body. Undoubtedly, without American consent, China would not have entered the UN...The U.S. is not happy with Taiwan’s ouster, but at least it can now breathe a sigh of relief. America’s efforts to improve relations with Peking on the one hand and maintain good relations with Formosa [Taiwan] on

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<sup>464</sup> “Report from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, ‘Existence of Diplomatic Relations Between Afro-Asian Conference Participant Countries and the Jiang Bandits,’” February 01, 1955

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>466</sup> Garver (2004), 305

<sup>467</sup> People’s Daily, 3-25-1965, “周总理赴罗途中致电伊朗首相”

<sup>468</sup> Abidi 39-76

the other have created a strong contradiction in American foreign policy. But, now it can overcome this contradiction.<sup>469</sup>

The shift in tone was indicative of just how much the political and ideological environment had changed since the 1950s, and the popularity of the anti-imperial, anti-American rhetoric the Shah had partially embraced.

The most public signs of a thaw in relations came with two highly publicized visits to China by members of the Shah's family: Queen Farah Diba Pahlavi, the Shah's wife, and Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, his twin sister. Both women were deeply involved in courtly politics and public engagement, but were not technically officials nor did they hold any post in government. This allowed the two women to pitch their visits as only quasi-official, as the question of relations with China had to be delicately balanced against the demands of the Soviet Union. The Chinese did not seem to mind that the Shah himself was not visiting, and were happy for any opportunity to reduce their diplomatic isolation and rub shoulders with the allies of their rivals. Ashraf was also chosen in part because of her pre-existing friendship with Zhou Enlai, which was facilitated by Pakistan some time in the early 1960s. She writes about this friendship in her memoir *Faces in a Mirror*:

[Zulfiqar Ali] Bhutto's lasting gift to me was the chance to meet Zhou Enlai. For years I had believed that one cannot ignore a country as populous as China...Bhutto knew of my eagerness to meet Zhou Enlai. So he made arrangements for such a meeting in Pakistan's embassy in Indonesia. This meeting led to my first trip to China. In my initial encounter with Zhou Enlai, I was quite impressed by his calm voice, and delicate, if not feminine, demeanor. In our conversations, he spoke of his country's traditions and customs. Despite his calm appearance, Zhou Enlai had succeeded to retain his leadership position by thwarting the plots of his political rivals. He was also given the nickname of

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<sup>469</sup> Abidi, 98

“pou-ta-ou-vang” meaning a doll who bounces back every time it is tossed around. Despite their reputation for being secretive and mysterious, I found Zhou Enlai and other Chinese to be frank and plain-spoken, unlike the Russians who use too many words to define a single point. In a word, the Chinese tell you exactly what they want and expect others to do the same. After returning to Iran, I told my brother that: “One cannot ignore a country of 800 million people by pretending that Taiwan has replaced China.” He agreed with me, yet Iran’s diplomatic relations with China were not resumed until 1965.<sup>470</sup>

Ashraf Pahlavi arrived in Beijing on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1971. Although Zhou Enlai repeatedly brought up political issues in his welcoming speech, Ashraf pitched her visit as a “voyage of personal discovery” and a chance to renew her friendship with Zhou. Never drawn into any political awkward comment or discussion, she skillfully struck a balance between personal and political rhetoric:

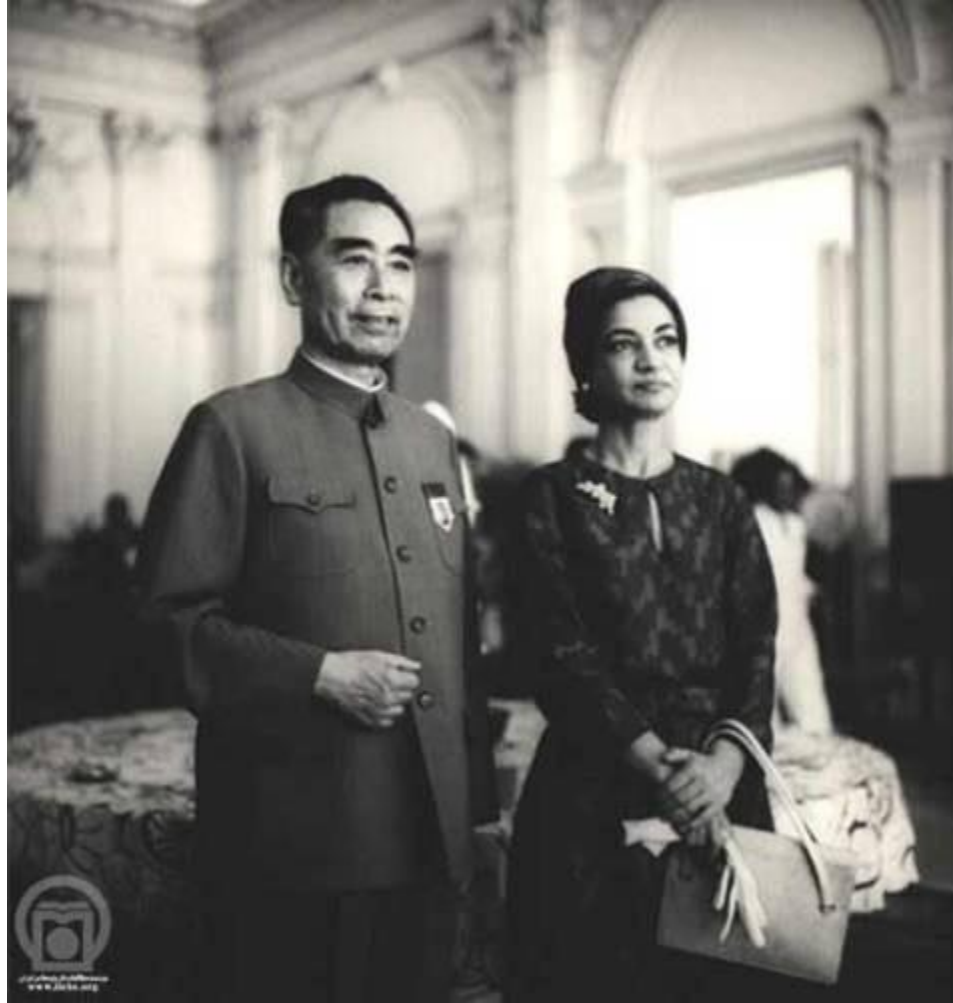
Your invitation...has meant the fulfillment of an adolescent dream, namely, to visit your magnificent country and learn first the more or its unique culture and fascinating people. I come to China...on a voyage of personal discovery. My remarks are therefore, brief and should be regarded as non-political. But for the benefit of those who invariably attribute any political innuendo to any move, let me say this. My brother and sovereign, the Shahanshah of Iran, has always maintained that in this world of boundless diversity, co-existence and co-operation...between countries with differing socio-political systems is perfectly possible. I believe my presence here amongst you bears testimony to the validity of this dictum...I know that, through this unpretentious visit, we already have taken the first step in that direction.<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> H.I.H. Princess Ashraf Pahlavi. *Faces in a Mirror: Memoirs from Exile*. MW Books (1980)

<sup>471</sup> Abidi, 59





*Fig 19. Princess Ashraf and Zhou Enlai, April 1971*



*Fig 20. Ashraf met with a variety of CCP officials over her six-day visit, although neither she nor Queen Farah were received by Mao Zedong.*

Queen Farah's visit was the first official visit following the normalization of diplomatic relations, but it had much in common with Ashraf's. First, although the queen was accompanied by Prime Minister Amir-Abbas Hoveyda, she was conspicuously *not* accompanied by her husband, who was in the Soviet Union at the time. The significance would not have been lost on the Chinese, and yet they did not seem to take it as a snub. On the contrary, Queen Farah received a lavish welcome and was doted on by her guests for ten days in September 1972. At a lavish reception at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, Zhou praised the Shah and the Iranian people at length:

Under the leadership of His Imperial Majesty Pahlavi, the Shahanshah of Iran, the government and people of Iran have achieved success in safeguarding state sovereignty, protecting national resources, developing national culture, and

building their country... Friendly contacts and traditional friendship between the Chinese and Iranian people date back to ancient times. The world-famous 'SilkRoad' opened more than 2000 years ago...However, owing to sabotage and obstruction by imperialism, the friendly ties...were interrupted for a period of time. Today we are glad to see that the traditional friendship between the Chinese and Iranian peoples have resumed on the basis of principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference, equality, mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence.<sup>472</sup>

In response, Queen Farah praised “your remarkable achievements, inspired by the thoughts and teachings of Chairman Mao” and expressed an interest in “in a closer association with the great new society that is being built under the wise leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong” on behalf of her husband.<sup>473</sup> Her praise for Mao Zedong Thought was yet another sign of the popularity of leftist rhetoric and the Shah’s strategy of borrowing revolutionary concepts and rhetoric.



*Fig 21. Queen Farah and Zhou Enlai, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1972*

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<sup>472</sup> *Ibid*, 106

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid*



*Fig 22. Queen Farah stayed in the country for ten days and was given a lavish welcome.*

Zhou's language is strikingly similar to the rhetoric of modern Sino-Iranian relations. The image of a leader of communist China praising an autocratic monarchy was as puzzling in 1971 as it is today. However, when placed in the context of China's foreign policy in the 1970s, it is not so difficult to understand. After the Sino-Soviet Border Conflict of 1969, Mao had become convinced the Soviet Union was an imminent political and military threat. At the same time, Zhou had pursued good relations with Iran since the early 1950s, to tempt them away from the American and Taiwanese sphere of influence. As Mohammad Reza Pahlavi pursued his independent foreign policy in the 1960s, he began to broaden his base of international support and reached out to China and the Soviet Union simultaneously. At that point, China was happy to engage with Iran, just as it had with the United States under Richard Nixon, as part of a strategy to counter the perceived threat of the Soviet Union.

Soon after, China dropped all public mention of the RO and “Iranian Revolutionaries.” While China had continued to promote its support for Iranian Maoism through 1971, once relations were normalized these groups were never mentioned again. The RO did push back against these policies, but it was unaware that the CCP was growing closer to Tehran until Princess Ashraf’s public visit.<sup>474</sup> Many of their members ultimately accepted the situation. Rezvani defends the CCP’s choice to establish ties with Iran because he understood it as a strategic consideration.<sup>475</sup> Kashkuli complains that Tehrani should have acted as an employee of Radio Peking and been satisfied instead of demanding anti-Shah content, although the interviewer correctly counters that this avoids addressing China’s claim to be a revolutionary state.<sup>476</sup> One can detect a hint of bitterness beneath these explanations. The RO could do little to influence its patron. “We often talked about mutual support, but this was a kind of *ta ‘ārof*.<sup>477</sup> We had nothing to offer them”.<sup>478</sup> Ties with the RO were therefore desirable in part because of their low cost. The organization was influential in the CIS-NU and willing to send delegations that were useful for propaganda purposes, but was not powerful enough to make any demands of the Chinese or initiate an armed struggle. The relationship could be maintained without drawing China into direct conflict with the Iranian government.

Interestingly, the CCP and the Iranian Maoists maintained a personal relationship even after China endorsed the Shah. Rezvani and others would continue to visit as

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<sup>474</sup> Garver (2004) 306

<sup>475</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Mohsen Rezvani*, 120

<sup>476</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Iraj Kashkuli*, 112

<sup>477</sup> Persian phrase that roughly means “politeness” and connotes social niceties.

<sup>478</sup> Rezvani, interview, April 14th, 2018

official delegates as late as 1982, but they attended no more training groups.<sup>479</sup> He recounts how on the eve of the Islamic Revolution, the CCP invited him and other Iranian leftists to discuss the ongoing unrest in Iran. While the RO expressed support of Khomeini and Islam as a potentially progressive and revolutionary force, the CCP remained fundamentally skeptical of the idea of revolutionary religion.<sup>480</sup> Rezvani later recalled that ironically, the Chinese had been correct to be suspicious, and they had made the wrong call despite being closer to the situation, as Khomeini turned against the left and initiated a bloody repression only a few years later.

### The RO and the Shah

Iranian radicals both inside and outside of Iran engaged with Maoism as they criticized, adopted, and rejected its premises. This popularity did not go unnoticed by other forces within the opposition, both secular and religious. The topic of cross-fertilization between Islamic and Leftist thought in Iran during the 1960s is itself worthy of a separate thesis and cannot be adequately covered here. Suffice to say, there was a substantial genuine engagement between Muslim and Marxist ideology, and many Iranians did not consider the two to be mutually exclusive identities. Some, notably Ali Shari'ati, explicitly developed a theory of social revolution based in Islamic thought that replicated and made compulsive many of the arguments of socialist thinkers.<sup>481</sup> Shari'ati was also notably influenced by French thinkers like Massignon and Badiou, who were themselves influenced by Maoist thought, and his thinking reflects a general (if cursory)

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<sup>479</sup> Rezvani, interview, April 14th, 2018

<sup>480</sup> Showkat, *goftegu ba Mohsen Rezvani*

<sup>481</sup> For an overview of Shariati's thought, see Rahnameh, Ali, *An Islamic utopian : a political biography of Ali Shari'ati* (1988)

engagement with popular currents of contemporaneous Marxist and Third World political thought.<sup>482</sup> However, it would be difficult to argue that this represented a genuine engagement with Maoism, beyond a general familiarity with the debates surrounding it. Shari'ati's public lectures became more radical over time, especially following the appearance of the guerrilla movement, which blended Marxist and Muslim language and ideology freely.<sup>483</sup> Shari'ati's ideas became synonymous with the People's Mujahedin organization and became so popular that, as Abrahamian puts it, “Shari’ati has gone down in history as the main ideologue of the Iranian Revolution...Shari'ati's works...differed from their own only on minor points...the ideology of the Mujahedin, consequently, spread inside and outside Iran mainly through Shari'ati”<sup>484</sup>

The popularity of radical discourse, whether Muslim, Marxist, or increasingly a fusion between the two, was spreading among both secular students and seminarians, as well as the middle-class bazaari merchants. This did not go unnoticed by more conservative Islamic voices, such as Khomeini, who began using phrases like *mostazafin* (the oppressed) in his sermons, and railed against imperialism and social inequality. This shrewd “project of plagiarizing from the left, to buttress right-wing hegemony” took place throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and culminated in the language of the Islamic Revolution, as well as some of its later rhetorical flourishes, such as the 1980 Iranian Cultural Revolution.<sup>485</sup> This project was important to the ultimate victory of the conservative factions and the emergence of Iran as an Islamic Republic, as it successfully

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<sup>482</sup> Matin-Asgari (2018), 211. See also Shahibzadeh, Yadullah. *Marxism and Left Wing Politics in Europe and Iran*. (2018)

<sup>483</sup> Matin-Asgari (2018), 214

<sup>484</sup> Abrahamian (1989), 103-104

<sup>485</sup> *Enqelābe Farhangi* انقلاب فرهنگی

convinced many Leftist organizations that otherwise might have been hostile to a conservative religious revolutionary to get behind Khomeini as the leader of the Iranian revolution.

The Shah's regime engaged in a similar project of plagiarism and co-opting popular leftist ideas to put them in the service of dictatorship. In the 1960s, the Shah began to engage in what Matin-Asgari calls “authenticity politics,” in response to popular discourse that sought to defend Iranian culture against the “technological, economic and cultural domination of 'the West.’”<sup>486</sup> The state became more and more involved in the production of an intellectual culture explicitly cultivated to counter the influence of the opposition, which included the creation of organizations such as the High Council of Culture and the Arts that employed former Marxist and Maoists in key positions.<sup>487</sup> In 1965, the Center for the Intellectual Cultivation of Children and Adolescents was established to cultivate a new generation of intellectual and artistic talent, and its publication wing was run by Firuz Shirvanlu, a Marxist former member of the CIS-NU who was arrested (and later pardoned) with Parviz Nikkhah as part of the assassination attempt on the Shah.<sup>488</sup> During Shirvanlu's tenure, the Center published a variety of leftist literature and translations, including Samad Behrangi's famous radical children's book *Little Black Fish*.<sup>489</sup> The National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) organization was especially dominated by ex-Marxists, including several Maoists like Parviz Nikkhah and

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<sup>486</sup> Matin-Asgari (2018), 192

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid*, 193

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid*, 196

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid*



Firuz Fuladi.<sup>490</sup> Nikkhah and another ex-Marxist, Mahmud Jafarian, “became top propagandists for strategic policy lines laid down by the Shah” and oversaw a number of publications and broadcasts that wrapped “monarchist propaganda in a pseudo-Marxist language.” This language only increased as the Shah warmed up to China in the 1970s, and some Iranian Maoist groups repeated the propagandists' claims that the Shah was “an anti-imperialist leader defiant of both superpowers,” to the detriment of their credibility with the opposition.<sup>491</sup>

Former Maoists were not only the most attractive prospective propagandists for the royal media in the 1960s, but were also key to the Shah's attempt to establish single-party rule in the 1970s. The *Rastakhiz* (Resurrection) Party was announced in 1975, and attempted to institutionalize the idea that the Shah was a divine leader of a uniquely Iranian anti-imperial revolution.<sup>492</sup> It adopted both the rhetoric and organizational principles of communist parties and was largely run by ex-communists. Former Maoists and RO members, including Nikkhah, Fuladi, and Kurosh Lasha'i occupied key positions.<sup>493</sup> Lasha'i in particular was directly involved in formulating the Shah's “neither Eastern, nor Western” foreign policy, which included improved relations with China.<sup>494</sup> As noted before, this pattern of defections was one of the factors that damaged the prestige of the Maoist movement abroad. Ultimately, the attempt to launch the Rastakhiz Party was aborted, but its makeup shows the extensive influence ex-Maoist propagandists

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<sup>490</sup> *Ibid*, 197

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid*, 198

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid*, 234

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid*, 235

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid*

came to have over the Resurrection Party and the resultant impact on the propaganda and rhetoric of the Shah's "revolutionary" regime.

The Shah was aware of the connection between China and the CIS-NU leadership. The 1965 assassination attempt was blamed on pro-Chinese elements by SAVAK, although there is evidence that they knew that the connection was tenuous. The attack was used as an excuse to arrest the entire cell and to initiate a campaign of infiltration and demoralization against the pro-Chinese student factions and against the CIS-NU as a whole.<sup>495</sup> In a letter from Tehran on October 22nd, 1966, U.S. Ambassador to Iran Armin Meyer describes the SAVAK's new attitude towards the Chinese communists:

Savak is showing interest in long-term threat posed by the Chinese Communists. The latter have not been able to form any organization within Iran, but have been successful in their propaganda activities among Iranian students in Europe. An increasing number...have begun to show Communist Chinese sympathies and some of them apparently have even visited China. The Chinese have flooded Europe with publications which are having an effect on Iranian students some of whom can be expected to return to Iran and to attempt to conduct subversive activities. Savak believes that students returning...will have to be checked very carefully lest the Chinese Communists get a foothold in Iran. Although Savak believes that the pro-Soviet group now dominates the Tudeh party, it feels that the Chinese Communists, considering that they have been laboring under the double disadvantage of being newer in the field than the Soviets and of having no official representation in Iran, have done very well to date.<sup>496</sup>

The Shah also publicly declared that the failed assassin was directly connected to the Nikkhah Group. In an interview with *Le Monde*, the Shah claimed to have received a full confession from Nikkhah and his associate Mansuri: "He looked me right in the eyes

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<sup>495</sup> Milani, Abbas. *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979* (Vol 1), Syracuse University Press (2008) 256

<sup>496</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXII, Iran, Document 178, p 323

and told me ‘Yes, we encouraged Shamsabadi to make the attempt on your life, since we are pro-Chinese communists and seek to overthrow the regime’”.<sup>497</sup> While the Shah likely knew this was just a convenient fabrication, based on his subsequent behavior, it also seems that he took the underlying threat of Chinese infiltration seriously, and sought to use this occasion to bury those who he feared might also try an assassination attempt in the future. This would have important repercussions both for his views on China and his ultimate decision to pursue a closer relationship with Beijing.

The Shah had never been particularly friendly towards China. As a staunch anti-Communist, he claimed Iran had no interest in China’s “ant-like” society.<sup>498</sup> As early as 1963, he had written a letter to US President Lyndon B. Johnson that argued in favor of peaceful relations with the Soviet Union in the face of “Chinese peril to universal peace.”<sup>499</sup> Shortly after the assassination attempt, the Shah raised the issue with U.S. officials. “The Shah said that he had evidence that the recent attempt on his life was planned by students recently returned from England...Ambassador Holmes pointed out that there are indications of Chinese Communist influence among the students in Iran.”<sup>500</sup> From 1965 to 1966, the Shah became increasingly vocal about the threat of Chinese infiltration and ideological warfare. He accused the CCP of not being “peace-minded” and called them “fanatical ideologues” pushing a “policy of belligerence” in meetings with U.S. officials.<sup>501</sup> He encouraged the U.S. to hold fast and act aggressively in Vietnam to counter Chinese influence there. He claimed that if the Chinese were not

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<sup>497</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>498</sup> Garver (2004), 48

<sup>499</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXII, Iran Document 2

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid*, Document 86, 153

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid*, 163, 334

stopped there, they would overrun Indonesia and Southeast Asia.<sup>502</sup> Notably, these fears did not center on military concerns but the potential impact of Chinese propaganda.

The Shah expressed concern about Pakistan's close relationship with China and the risk posed by "trainees being supplied with ChiCom propaganda" in the Pakistani army.<sup>503</sup> He offered to help "persuade Ayub of Pakistan to be careful in his dealings with Communist China," and later reported that "he had spoken "very firmly" to Ayub about [his] overdependence on Communist China. He...told [him] that the best friend of the Paks is the US and he warned against a Pak relationship with Russia, as well as Communist China."<sup>504</sup> He also criticized the U.S. for driving Pakistan into the arms of the Chinese by providing insufficient military aid, likely to subtly suggest that they not be stingy with him.<sup>505</sup> In this way, he continued to frame his concerns over China in ways that would allow him to appear useful or send the right message. His work on Pakistan was particularly appreciated by the U.S.<sup>506</sup>

The Americans had doubts that the level of Chinese infiltration of the student movement was particularly high. A 1970 CIA study *Student Unrest Abroad* found the effectiveness of Maoist publications inside Iran "has been undercut by rapid economic and social development" and questioned whether the 20 students arrested in Tehran in February 1968 were actually pro-Chinese.<sup>507</sup> From the view of U.S. administrators, it

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<sup>502</sup> *Ibid*, 168

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid* 410, 540

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid*, 150, 426

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid* 327

<sup>506</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXII, Iran Document 182

<sup>507</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–4, Documents on Iran and Iraq, 1969–1972 Document 84, 7

seemed the Shah had either overestimated the danger of Chinese infiltration, or otherwise was exaggerating it to justify his oppression of the student movement. Others within the government found his fears more credible. In 1972, a report was prepared that discussed the possibility that the Shah might be assassinated by groups claiming to be “Marxist, Marxist-Leninist, or Maoist.” “Though rightly deemed no immediate threat to the general security...these groups still pose a threat greatly in excess of their numbers...To a young dissident with the anarchistic outlook of the “New Left,” the level of disruption and uncertainty that the killing of the Shah would generate represents a positive gain.”<sup>508</sup> It is likely that the Shah, who had already survived multiple assassination attempts, shared this assessment.

The Shah’s apparent increased anxiety about China came at the same time that Chinese officials began making friendly overtures to Iran once again. Several international factors contributed to his decision to accept. First, after years of being closely allied with the West, the Shah made a point to develop an “independent foreign policy” after the White Revolution of 1963. This mostly consisted of attempts to improve relations with the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc while maintaining good relations with the United States<sup>509</sup> Improving relations with China could be seen as part of this overall strategy. Second, in 1964, China exploded a nuclear bomb and was recognized by France and the UK, which made the CCP a major player in world politics.<sup>510</sup> Third, the support provided to Pakistan by the CCP helped convince the Shah that “the Chinese are

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<sup>508</sup> *Ibid* Document 203, 4

<sup>509</sup> Alvandi, Roham. “The Shah's détente with Khrushchev: Iran's 1962 missile base pledge to the Soviet Union.” *Cold War History*, Volume 14, 2014, Issue 3. 423-444

<sup>510</sup> Abidi, 88

reliable friends.”<sup>511</sup> Finally, the massacre of Communist forces and supporters in Indonesia from 1965-1966 convinced the Shah that it was no longer so urgent to aggressively oppose China to prevent the spread of Communism in Asia.<sup>512</sup>

Both Chinese support for the RO and the impact of Maoism on the student movement ironically contributed to the Shah’s decision to pursue closer ties with Beijing. He did this in order to “take wind out of the sails of his detractors,” who were now largely pro-Chinese.<sup>513</sup> When discussing Sino-Iranian rapprochement China’s support for revolutionary movements, the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) is cited as the main area where the Shah was concerned about Chinese influence, and thus he sought to cut it off. However, China did not begin to support these uprisings until 1968, and the Shah had made his intentions toward China clear by 1965. Therefore, it seems most likely that in this earlier period, it was Chinese support for Iranian revolutionaries and their influence among his opponents that was on his mind. By drawing closer to China, he hoped to reduce the appeal of Chinese propaganda to radical students. His heightened fear of Chinese infiltration led him to both oppose Chinese influence directly (as in Pakistan) and later to try to reduce it through diplomatic means. In fact, it had exactly this effect, and Chinese support for the Shah was an important factor in the decline of the appeal of Maoism. In spite of this success, the revolutionary djinn could not be put back into the bottle, and it did little to curb the appeal of armed struggle. By this time, violent resistance was supported by a newly reorganized National

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<sup>511</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–4, Documents on Iran and Iraq, 1969–1972 Document 201, 2

<sup>512</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXII, Iran Document 181, 331

<sup>513</sup> Abidi 52, see also Hafizullah, who makes the same assessment.

Front that included left-wing factions, and activity was being carried out by militants who were inspired not only by Mao, Che Guevara, and Regis Debrey, but by Islam as well.

### Conclusions

The popularity of Maoism was linked to the collapse of the traditional Iranian opposition groups in the wake of severe government repression, which led to a search for a new way forward among leftists and liberals. In contrast to the dominant Soviet theory of peaceful coexistence, China endorsed armed struggle against capitalism and supported contemporary militant movements. Against this backdrop, Iranian students in Europe established a limited partnership with the CCP in 1964 to pursue their own revolutionary goals and gather supporters. Wielding Mao Zedong Thought as a weapon to critique the central committee of the Tudeh Party, and later their own members, the RO and other Maoist factions became an important force in the early student movement. The Chinese sought a replacement for Radio Peking experts and to bolster their image as a supporter of revolutionary groups without damaging the possibility of drawing closer to the Shah. To that end, China provided military training but did little else to support the RO agenda. This episode convinced the Shah of the danger of Chinese ideological influence and may have contributed to his decision to open up lines of communication with the CCP.

While previous studies have focused on an explanation for the failures of Maoism, this work has presented an alternate narrative of Sino-Iranian relations and the history of the Iranian Left in which Maoism plays a significant role. This case shows the degree to which Iranian history was connected to both the international situation and the

global history of the Cold War. Although the RO never achieved political success, they contributed to the spread of a sprawling social movement that captured the imagination of the majority of Iranian students abroad. Steeped in Maoist rhetoric and a revolutionary approach to politics, they sought to recast the Iranian revolution as part of a global history that was connected to China, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Many aspects of this history remain unexplored. In particular, the experiences of the many other small groups of students who traveled to China to study are almost unknown. These experiences, though seemingly ephemeral, retain their historical value and deserve to be examined more closely. Such accounts can help us to see threads of connection between societies that are often obscured by nationalist narratives or overlooked in favor of questions deemed to be of greater importance. It is the hope of the author of the present study that it will inspire additional research into the experiences of other overlooked radical groups, in order to deepen our understanding of the international left and the radical student politics that animated so many in the middle decades of the Cold War.



## **Conclusion: Historicizing Sino-Iranian Relations**

When Chinese and Iranian intellectuals first re-discovered one another at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was in the context of a shared discourse of Pan-Asian constitutionalism and illiberal nationalism. Early contacts between the two culminated in cordial official relations between the Iran and Republic of China in the context of their shared approach to domestic and international politics. Official declarations of goodwill between the two enhanced the global prestige of the two states as they sought to resist the imperial designs of Western powers and shape international politics in a beneficial direction. These expressions were tempered by clashes in the international arena over the production and sale of opium, which the Iranian government tacitly supported in the face of Chinese opposition.

Relations between Chiang's China and Pahlavi Iran steadily improved throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and peaked following the Communist takeover of China in 1949. At this time, two increasingly divergent narratives about China and its relevance to Iran began to take hold. In magazines and travelogues, official state discourse painted the “loss of China” as a strategic blunder caused by American refusal to support the Nationalists. Chiang was painted as a Chinese Reza Khan, and attempts to court American support and to disparage leftist opposition groups were filtered through the story of China's great misfortune. At the same time, the Tudeh Party was developing a counter-narrative that saw China as a proverbial city on a hill and the revolution as a massive achievement that inspired oppressed workers around the world. Several Tudeh leaders and a small number of student activists visited China throughout the 1950s to

express solidarity and support for the CCP and its project of rural revolution. The PRC took a keen interest in events in Iran, which it extensively covered in the pages of official newspapers. For China, Iran stood out as a quintessential victim of Western imperialism – another great civilization humiliated by the West, and therefore a potential ally in the global struggle against imperialism.

The 1950s witnessed the development of unofficial connections between the Tudeh Party and the CCP, as the Iranian government refused to recognize the People's Republic of China in favor of maintaining its relationship with the now-tiny Republic of China. The proliferation of information about China brought issues like Chinese Muslims and the modern history of China to the attention of the Iranian reading public for the first time. The highly-publicized presence of Iranian students in China and repeated references to the trials, exploitation, and past glories of Iran as one of the most significant Asian civilizations likewise had a similar effect on China. Ideological sympathies and synergies were beginning to stir, both through expressions of solidarity and through dissident members of the Tudeh Party, who began to critique its policies with reference to the example of China. While these unofficial connections were mostly limited to leftist circles, they laid the groundwork for important ties between China and Iranian Maoist groups in the 1960s.

A decade later, changes in the domestic and international environment set the stage for a new phase of unofficial relations. In Iran, opposition within the country was violently dismantled by an increasingly authoritarian Pahlavi state, which shifted the center of gravity of resistance to the student population abroad. Young Tudehis were

looking for a way to break through the intellectual and theoretical stagnation that they felt was rampant within the Party, and they found it in the ideological arguments of Maoism. By the 1960s, Maoism had become more and more associated with armed struggle and violent resistance to oppression. The Sino-Soviet split drew a line in the sand between the Soviet Union's "peaceful co-existence" under Khrushchev and Mao's proclamation that "all imperialists are paper tigers." All over the world, young people and Leftist movements were radicalizing and connecting with one another, an experience that culminated in the global revolts of 1968.

Maoism became a force in Iranian opposition politics abroad with the foundation of the Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh Party in 1965. The RO and other Maoist became a major faction within the Confederation of Iranian Students National Union and the Iranian Students Association in the United States, and supported some of their most dramatic and confrontational moments with the Shah in the early 1970s. At the same time, Marxist and Muslim students in Iran were affected by both the student movement and international leftist debates, especially at University of Tehran. Small underground networks of radicalized students read and debated the military tactics and Marxist theories of Mao, Liu Shaoqi, Che Guevara, Regis Debray, and other radical thinkers, often freely mingling Muslim and Marxist ideological concepts. Although they were not Maoist, the guerrilla movement that launched in the 1970s within Iran was still impacted by these debates. Radical Third World politics were so popular among the Iranian opposition during this time that the state strategically borrowed the rhetoric and formulas of the radical left.

China took note of this development and was directly involved in supporting it, although this support likely did little to enhance its appeal or ability to spread. The CCP sponsored the RO to visit China for military and ideological training several times, and even hired several members to work as translators for Radio Peking's Persian programming. Although significant ties did not develop, this was mostly due to the fact that China continued to court the Iranian state in secret and refused to commit any actual military equipment or direct assistance to active Kurdish revolts, despite the repeated requests of the RO. Despite this, China touted its relationship with the RO in its internal propaganda as part of a vision of Third World solidarity, albeit a hierarchical one with China at the head. While initially, the prestige of official Chinese support was a boon to the RO, it eventually became a liability when China established diplomatic relations with Iran in 1971 and threw their support behind the Shah. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that Iran's sudden positive response to China's friendly overtures in the mid-1960s was in part motivated by a desire to undercut the appeal of Chinese propaganda among student radicals. In this way, the unofficial relationship between China and Iranian radicals may have had a substantial impact on official policy.

Previous scholarship has tended to focus on the official relationship between China and Iran, and has neglected the first three-quarters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in their analysis. However, this narrow view of Sino-Iranian diplomatic history as “official history” overlooks the critical importance of the types of unofficial relationships that form social, cultural, and ideological networks of exchange. It has also been dismissive of Iranian Maoism as a significant ideological tendency or one with a long-term impact. The

full impact of the Chinese Revolution and global leftist currents on the Iranian opposition and the Islamic Revolution cannot be appreciated without knowledge of these networks and how they contributed to Iranian and Chinese reading public's conceptions of the self as a global citizen deeply connected to revolutions throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Propaganda was one way in which the state could disseminate particular narratives about the relationship between different sets of “self” and “other,” and in which dissident organizations could push back against those narratives. Additional studies of the voluminous propaganda produced by China, Iran, and Iranian opposition groups during this period might reveal new insights into what other types of Other/Self dynamics were at play without reference to an explicitly Western “other.”

The history of Iranian and Chinese interaction is far more complex than official discourse would imply. This dissertation offers but the opening salvo in a sustained attempt to explore the history of social, cultural, and intellectual exchange between China and Iran in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In doing so, it is attentive to questions of representation, identity, and social history. An ideological tour of Iran-China relations highlights the multiple “stages” of modern Iranian and Chinese history, from the early 20th-century constitutionalism and anti-colonialism, to the interwar state-nationalism, to the 1940s Soviet-style anti-imperialist discourse, to the Cold War-era ambivalence between nativism versus the Red threat, to the 1980s discourse and the austerity aesthetics of Cultural Revolution, to pseudo-pragmatic policy swings of the 1990s and beyond. This “tour” reveals fundamental similarities between the two that point towards a common social, cultural, and political experience across Asia. Furthermore, it highlights the

global, interconnected nature of modern Asia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These ideological stages were made possible by this interconnectedness, as Iranians and Chinese citizens finally had access to the information necessary to form imagined social bonds and reflect on their own identities and politics as a result.

### A Historical Perspective on Modern Sino-Iranian Relations

Since establishing official relations between the PRC and Iran in 1971, China has continued to take a cautious and balanced approach to Sino-Iranian relations.<sup>514</sup> Official ties developed when Iran was still a monarchy under Mohammad Reza Shah, and China was still ideologically committed to Mao Zedong's particular brand of Communism. In the context of Cold War politics, Iran was interested in playing the "China Card" against both the United States and the Soviet Union and reducing the appeal of Chinese propaganda among the Iranian left. China wanted to tempt Iran away from the United States and the Soviet Union, mostly to counter the Soviet Union after the collapse of Sino-Soviet relations in the 1960s. If a monarchy and a communist dictatorship seemed like strange bedfellows, the situation became even stranger after 1979, when officially-atheist China quickly recognized and established relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Positive relations emerged despite profound ideological contradictions between the two governments. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Sino-Iranian relations remained limited even as China slowly expanded its role in the Middle East as an economic power and small arms supplier.<sup>515</sup> China sold weapons to both sides in the Iran-Iraq war,

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<sup>514</sup> Garver (2006), 57-94.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-129, 166-201

although its contributions were vastly outstripped by the United States, Russia, Germany, and France, which did the same.<sup>516</sup> When the war ended in 1988, Chinese industries played an essential role in reconstructing the Iranian economy, and Chinese companies completed critical projects like the Tehran Metro. By the mid-2000s, China had also become a significant importer of oil in violation of US sanctions.<sup>517</sup> Trade relations increased steadily, from just over one billion dollars annually in the 1980s to nearly three billion dollars by the early 2000s.<sup>518</sup> China also gained Iran's support—and silence—on hot-button issues that traditionally have damaged Chinese international standing. Notably, Iran has refused to condemn China's horrific treatment of the Uighurs in Xinjiang, which recently has escalated to a policy of systematic brutality centered on a network of concentration camps.

Despite many analysts' predictions, Beijing consistently balanced its relationship with Tehran against Washington's demands. John Garver argues that from the 1980s to the mid-2000s:

China is both a partner and a rival of the United States. At times it has cooperated with the United States in ways contrary to Iranian policy. At other times, it has cooperated with Iran in ways contrary to U.S policy...The United States–China–Iran relation involves elements of Sino-American cooperation at the expense of [Iranian] policy interests, and elements of Sino-American rivalry with Beijing

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<sup>516</sup> *Ibid*, 169

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid*, 237

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid*, 240

supporting Tehran against U.S. policy aims...In effect, China has decided not to oppose the United States in the Middle East.<sup>519</sup>

At times, China did oppose American policy in Iran, but it has balanced its support for Tehran with the need to maintain relations with the United States. This policy has remained consistent in recent years, as has been demonstrated by Behraves and Scita. Though China denounces US policy, it has occasionally voted for resolutions that have expanded sanctions at the United Nations. Though it sells Iran military equipment, it withholds drones due to US pressure. Though it has continued to do business, it has also kept trade and political ties modest and in line with Iran's regional rivals. This is out of necessity, as whatever it might desire, China has no real capacity to oppose things like the US decision to assassinate Iranian General Soleimani or the unilateral re-imposition of sanctions.

Historical analysis can help bring perspective to a discourse that is often alarmist and exaggerated. For example, in June 2020, during the completion of this dissertation, the leak of a document attributed to the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs made waves on social media.<sup>520</sup> The document outlined a statement of intent to pursue a strategic partnership between China and Iran that would enhance political, military, cultural, and economic cooperation between the two nations. Called a "deal,"<sup>521</sup> a "pact,"<sup>522</sup> and even

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<sup>519</sup> *Ibid*, 281-283

<sup>520</sup> "China-Iran Document"

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54db7b69e4b00a5e4b11038c/t/5f0a3b017adc097c9945645c/1594506439567/China\\_Iran\\_Document.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54db7b69e4b00a5e4b11038c/t/5f0a3b017adc097c9945645c/1594506439567/China_Iran_Document.pdf), accessed 11/6/2020

<sup>521</sup> "What China's New Deal with Iran Says About Its Ambitions in the Region" Joseph Hincks. <https://time.com/5872771/china-iran-deal/>, accessed 11/6/2020

<sup>522</sup> "China-Iran pact won't be trouble-free for either side" Yun Sun, *AsiaTimes*, July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://asiatimes.com/2020/07/china-iran-pact-wont-be-trouble-free-for-either-side/>, accessed 11/6/2020



an "alliance"<sup>523</sup> as it filtered into the mainstream media, this news has been received in the United States with predictable panic. Foreign policy commentators proclaimed it was the beginning of an "Iran-China axis" between "totalitarian twins" that plans to "dominate the Middle East" through "defying the U.S," a plan that would be "bad news for the West" and make China "the Middle East arbiter."<sup>524</sup> Despite the document's nebulous nature, commentators asserted that the agreement would fundamentally alter geostrategic calculations in the Middle East. Comments on social media were similarly outraged, with some comparing the alleged deal to a "New Treaty of Turkmenchay" Iran's past exploitation by imperial Britain and Russia.

These alarmist predictions stand in contrast to analysts like Jacopo Scita, Lucille Greer, Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, Julia Gurol, Maysam Behraves, and Jonathan Fulton.<sup>525</sup> Through careful quantitative analysis, they have pointed out several

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<sup>523</sup> "China and Iran are about to Become Allies—Here's What We Should Do about It" Barry Pavel. *The National Interest*, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-and-iran-are-about-become-allies—here's-what-we-should-do-about-it-165958>, accessed 11/6/2020

<sup>524</sup> "The Prospects of an Iran-China Axis" Amos Yadlin and Ari Heistein. *War on the Rocks*, August 10th, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/the-prospects-of-a-china-iran-axis/>, accessed 11/6/2020; Keith J. Krach and Brian H. Hook. "Iran and China, the Totalitarian Twins" *Wall Street Journal*, July 20th, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-and-china-the-totalitarian-twins-11595266709>, accessed 11/6/2020; "China's Plan to Dominate the Middle East Centers Around Iran" Ross Harrison and Alex Vatanka. *The National Interest*, September 19th, 2020; <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china's-plan-dominate-middle-east-centers-around-iran-169219>, accessed 11/6/2020; "Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership" *New York Times*, July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/world/asia/china-iran-trade-military-deal.html>, accessed 11/6/2020; "Iran's Pact With China Is Bad News for the West" Alam Saleh and Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas. *Foreign Policy*. August 9th, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/09/irans-pact-with-china-is-bad-news-for-the-west/>, accessed 11/6/2020; "A China-Iran partnership would make China the Middle East arbiter" Dov S. Zakheim. *The Hill*. July 26th, 2020. <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/508686-a-china-iran-partnership-would-make-china-the-middle-east-arbiter>, accessed 11/6/2020.

<sup>525</sup> "The China-Iran 25-Year Cooperation Agreement Needs a Sober Assessment" Jacopo Scita, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, July 15th, 2020. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/china-iran-25-year-cooperation-agreement-needs-sober-assessment-26949>, accessed 11/6/2020; "Last Among Equals: The China-Iran Partnership in a Regional Context" Lucille Greer and Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj. *The Wilson Center Occasional Paper Series*. No. 38, Sept 2020; "China's Balancing Act in the Gulf Relies on Ties to Iran and Arab States" Julia Gurol and Jacopo Scita. *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*. August 4th, 2020. <https://agsiw.org/chinas->

inconsistencies between the reality of the proposed agreement and the response it has generated. Their arguments can be summarized as follows:

First, such analyses miss the broader regional context. Greer and Batmanghelidj note that China has pursued similar and more extensive ties with most of Iran's neighbors. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Iran's two main regional rivals, have already signed comparable comprehensive agreements with China. Scita and Gurol have written about how China has sought to balance ties with Iran against relations with other Gulf Arab states. As Fulton has noted, the ninth China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) Ministerial Meeting was taking place the same week that news of the leak broke. Overall, a partnership similar to the one proposed would bring Sino-Iranian relations back in line with the rest of the Middle East.

Second, economic cooperation between China and Iran has stagnated or declined since 2014. In 2019, Sino-Iranian trade stood at nineteen billion dollars, the lowest number in a decade. At the same time, China's trade relations with other countries in the region have remained constant. While China has defied US sanctions to remain the primary importer of Iranian oil and the only country to do so in violation of US sanctions, it has remained conservative about its overall investment in the Iranian economy over the last six years. Exports, foreign investment, and Chinese construction projects have all

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[balancing-act-in-the-gulf-relies-on-ties-to-iran-and-arab-states/](#), accessed 11/6/2020; "How the Coronavirus Crisis Exposed the False Promise of Iran-China Partnership" Maysam Behraves and Jacopo Scita. *The National Interest*, June 6th, 2020; <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/how-coronavirus-crisis-exposed-false-promise-iran-china-partnership-161396>, accessed 11/6/2020; "Iran isn't the only Middle Eastern country in a unique partnership with China" Jonathan Fulton. *Atlantic Council*. July 15th, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/iran-isnt-the-only-middle-eastern-country-in-a-unique-partnership-with-china/>, accessed 11/6/2020

fallen considerably. Therefore, the proposed agreement should be understood as an attempt to rectify China's underinvestment in Iran relative to other Middle East states.

Third, the terms of the document itself have been greatly exaggerated. The quoted figure, four hundred billion dollars, seems extraordinarily unlikely given China and Iran's current economic capabilities and the impact of international sanctions. Claims that Chinese military personnel will be stationed in Iran are similarly dubious. Doing so would also be nearly impossible given the Iranian public's long-standing hostility to the presence of foreign armies and the legacy of repeated British and Russian occupations. The Chinese and Iranian press have also been silent on the news and according to Scita, the head of the Iran-China Chamber of Commerce referred to the idea of a \$400 billion investment as "a joke."<sup>526</sup> It seems clear that no massive investment is forthcoming.

As this dissertation has shown, Sino-Iranian relations have historically been consistent, but limited. The record shows moments of cooperation and competition, but overall the lesson is that China does what is best for China. More importantly, it shows that China consistently balanced its ideological support for the Iranian opposition with attempts to reach out to the Iranian government. All of this points to a modest increase in Sino-Iranian relations along the lines of what already existed, not a "milestone in history" as some commentators have suggested.

The take-away from this analysis is that Sino-Iranian relations have historically been consistent, but limited. The record shows moments of cooperation and competition, but overall the lesson is that China does what is best for China. Since the 1970s, China

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<sup>526</sup> "No, China Isn't Giving Iran \$400 Billion" Jacopo Scita. Bourse & Bazaar. September 9th, 2019. <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2019/9/20/no-china-isnt-giving-iran-400-billion>, accessed 11/6/2020

has judged that good relations with the United States are best for China, though sometimes that pill has proven difficult to swallow. At the same time, it demonstrates that China tends to choose stable relations with geostrategic advantages over volatile ones that are likely to spark conflict, and is not above playing both sides of an issue. Even at the height of Maoist ideological influence, the Chinese state simultaneously courted the Iranian government and the Iranian opposition. Ultimately, they chose stability over chaos and the Iranian state over Maoist rebels. For all its propaganda, it was more interested in its geopolitical goals than overturning the global order.

Ultimately, the idea that China threatens US geostrategic interests through the Persian Gulf is patently absurd on its face. China has a single strategic port, in Obock, Djibouti, which sits on the Bab al-Mandeb Strait between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and is only a short distance from the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz. But this pales in comparison to the United States, which has bases in virtually every Gulf Arab country and a massive capacity to project naval power globally. Moreover, the types of military cooperation between Iran and China under discussion that are feasible—joint training exercises and intelligence sharing—already exist. Although infrequent, there have been three joint drills and port exercises between China and Iran. By comparison, the United States conducts annual air, land, and sea drills with nearby countries like Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, India, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates.

The real problem that US officials and hawkish analysts have with Sino-Iranian relations is no mystery: it runs counter to the Trump administration's attempts to instigate regime change in Iran through a cruel policy of wide-ranging sanctions. Despite the Trump administration's repeated protests that they are only seeking to compel Iran to act

like a "normal nation," the logic of the sanctions is obvious: if the Iranian people have enough pain inflicted upon them, they might rise up and overthrow the Islamic Republic. This policy is long-standing and has shifted justification from Iran's nuclear ambitions to general accusations of an Iranian threat to regional stability and, perplexingly, the American people. While there is no denying that the Islamic Republic is an authoritarian regime that poses a threat to its own people and has regional ambitions, such exaggerated and inconsistent reasoning only highlights the sanctions' real purpose. The Iranian people are collateral damage in this conflict, as they are the ones who can no longer easily afford food, clothing, and medication. The price of nearly all consumer goods has skyrocketed as Iran's oil exports plummet.

Ironically, sanctions are the reason Iran is courting China in the first place. Since the reinstatement of sanctions, Iran's oil production has fallen from 4 million barrels a day to as low as 1.9 million bpd in June 2020.<sup>527</sup> This is the lowest level since 1981 when Iraq launched the Iran-Iraq War with an attack on Iranian oil facilities. Iran's economy has been hard hit, and ultimately the Iranian people pay the heaviest price. While exaggerated, the leaked deal represents the Iranian state's attempts to tempt China to commit to buying Iranian oil at a discounted price in exchange for economic development. Even this modest and limited attempt to break out of economic isolation is met with apocalyptic predictions from the foreign policy establishment.

That said, closer cooperation between China and Iran is not necessarily a win for the Iranian people. Proponents of the deal describe it in superlative terms, a mark of

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<sup>527</sup> "Iran cuts oil production to lowest in 40 years as storage fills" Al-Jazeera, July 7th, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/7/7/iran-cuts-oil-production-to-lowest-in-40-years-as-storage-fills>, accessed 11/6/2020

China's policy of "mutually beneficial relations" and based on a historic and ancient friendship between Iran and China. It is important to remember, however, that China remains fundamentally self-interested. Opening to Chinese markets has inherent dangers. In the decade when Sino-Iranian trade was at its peak, a flood of cheap, low-quality goods seriously damaged local manufacturing and retail industries and depress wages in Iran. In 2013, the Guardian observed that an influx of Chinese products and capital were putting ordinary Iranians out of business: "Tehran's roads are thus full of taxi drivers who until recently owned businesses, but went bankrupt because they could no longer afford to pay for imports while competing with cheap Chinese merchandise."<sup>528</sup> Should the proposed agreement be put into effect, this problem will no doubt intensify at a time when Iranians are already in severe economic pain. China may also share information and internet censorship techniques, extending the "Great Firewall of China" to Iran. Iranians both inside and outside Iran have raised such objections, notably in a symbolic letter to the United Nations signed by a coalition of expatriate intellectuals, artists, and public figures.

The question "does it benefit Iran" would perhaps be better rendered as "who in Iran does it benefit?" It would unquestionably benefit the government's desire for foreign investment, a market for oil, and pushback against diplomatic isolation. But it is less certain that it would help Iranians. The only certainty is that China will pursue a deal that is in its own best interest, whether or not that lines up with the interests of either the Iranian state or the Iranian people.

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<sup>528</sup> "China floods Iran with cheap consumer goods in exchange for oil" The Guardian. February 20, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2013/feb/20/china-floods-iran-cheap-consumer-goods>, accessed 11/6/2020

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