

 **Article REVIEW**

**Yinghong Cheng.** “Sino-Cuban Relations during the Early Years of the Castro Regime, 1959-1966.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9:3 (Summer 2007): 78-114. doi: 10.1162/jcws.2007.9.3.78 . <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2007.9.3.78> .

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**Y**inghong Cheng's article on Sino-Cuban relations during the 1960s contributes an important missing piece to the otherwise rich historical record of Cuba after the revolution of 1959 -- and an insightful glimpse into the internal dynamic of relations between the Cuban and Chinese Communist parties. Cheng affords us a detailed look at intra-bloc developments as Cuban president Fidel Castro's efforts to mediate Sino-Soviet tensions and the gradual deterioration of Sino-Cuban relations from the Revolution through the Cuban missile crisis and into the early years of détente.

Cheng argues, for instance, that early Sino-Cuban Communist party ties were closer than previously assumed. After December 1959, China's XNHA agency began to distribute “materials that were essentially the Spanish versions of XHNA's daily reports and commentaries” in Havana (p. 82). He also describes how, earlier that year, Ernesto “Che” Guevara contacted Chinese diplomats on visits to countries including Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia to request that the PRC purchase Cuban sugar--a request to which Mao Zedong personally consented. By January 1960, Zhen Tao, deputy director of the CCP's Shanghai municipal committee secretariat headed out as the first Chinese diplomat stationed in Havana.

Throughout the early contacts, however, Cheng notes that a degree of caution tempered Chinese contacts with the Castro regime: “Mao and Zhou were also a bit skeptical about the nature of the Cuban revolution and wanted to see whether it would move in a socialist or nationalist direction,” (p. 85). Castro's careful avoidance of socialist rhetoric in the early years of the revolution, to ward off the threat of possible U.S. intervention in Cuba, no doubt compounded those concerns. But other Chinese-Cuban ties, like those between the PSP and the CCP, somewhat allayed them, reassuring Beijing of the compatibility of the motivations across both revolutions. And the coincidence of interest across disparate revolutionary Cuban groups like the PSP and the Castroist revolutionaries eventually led to their merger into what became the Communist Party of Cuba in 1965.

But when Sino-Soviet relations began to deteriorate after 1963, Cuba found itself caught between Che Guevara's support for the CCP and Raul Castro and others who clung to the Soviet Union. Cheng posits that Cuban and Chinese Communism shared certain

similarities, like a focus on popular consciousness and mass politics, which accounts for Castro's early sympathies for the Chinese when the ideological rift occurred. Ultimately, in October 1964, after Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's ouster, Castro inflamed Chinese sensibilities by asking the CCP leadership to refrain from "factional activities" and tone down its ideological zeal -- an appeal to which Beijing did not respond favorably. After a delegation of Latin American Communists failed to broker Sino-Soviet amity in the course of a 1965 trip to the Soviet Union and China, Cuba's mediation efforts largely sputtered—cooling Sino-Cuban relations significantly. Those relations collapsed completely when Castro denounced Mao in an anti-Chinese tirade on 13 March 1966.

Importantly, Cheng's article shows, the Chinese documentary record has considerable insights to bring to bear on the complex dynamics of Sino-Soviet-Cuban relations during the early 1960s. These materials reveal, for instance, that the CCP came to perceive a Communist tinge to the Cuban revolution as early as 1959. These sources also allude to the possibility that the deterioration in Sino-Cuban relations may be directly related to the disappearance of Che Guevara from Cuban political life around 1965.

First and foremost, these insights both a new lens onto the hitherto unexplored history of Sino-Cuban diplomacy during the post-Cuban missile crisis period, an important one in the history of the international Communist movement as Soviet and Chinese Communists struggled for the mantle of leadership of the worldwide revolution. But they also provide a critical context for historians of U.S. Cold War foreign policy seeking to rationalize Soviet and Chinese responses to policies and developments in the years of détente as differences between the superpowers seemed to diminish, Sino-Soviet antagonism burst into public view, and the Cold War expanded into the developing world.

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*Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge*