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Changing the Terms: What Chinese Newspapers Show about the Black Panthers in Beijing

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Abstract. This paper explores the way the People's Republic of China (PRC) demonstrated Black Panther Party delegations to the public from 1970-1972 as Beijing worked towards better relationships with the U.S. The article uses news articles published in People's Daily and Peking Review to analyze the position of officials who met the BPP delegates, where they appeared in the newspaper, when they appeared and what language used to describe the BPP. The data collected indicates a recalibration in levels of public visibility given to BPP members as opposed to a complete end to support. For example, Huey P. Newton received a high level of access during his January 1971 visit to meet with Premier Zhou Enlai; however, only one day of coverage on his trip received significant publicity, and he was described in very broad terms. In contrast, a much larger delegation of Black Panther Party members visited in May 1972, immediately after Richard Nixon's visit to the PRC. However, this group was greeted by a much lower ranking official, and received significantly less prominent coverage than some other visiting delegations. Therefore, Beijing continued its support for the Black Panther Party, although at a decreased level of publicized political recognition as Sino-American relations began to improve.

Keywords: Black Panther Party, China, Sino-American rapprochement, People's Daily, revolutionary solidarity

1. Introduction

In late September, 1971, the co-founder and leader of the Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton, traveled from Oakland to Beijing and met with Premier Zhou Enlai. This visit, the second of three Panther delegations to China between 1970 and 1972, came nearly five months before U.S. President Richard Nixon made his own trip. At a time when China and the United States were moving toward rapprochement, one of the most prominent revolutionary organizations in the United States was being welcomed in Beijing [1, 2].

Such timing raises the main question of this paper: How would Beijing treat this revolutionary organization while it was trying to improve relations with Washington? This paper argues that rapprochement changed the way Beijing supported the Panthers rather than ending that support altogether. Chinese officials still welcomed Panther leaders, met with them, and used their visits to show support for anti-imperialist movements.

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The Black Panther Party sought to build a relationship with China because it saw important similarities between its own revolutionary politics and the ideology of "New China." The Panthers' politics extended beyond armed self-defense to community programs such as free breakfasts, health clinics, and education. Mao's call to "serve the people" resonated with Panther organizers. The Panthers adapted these ideas to their own political circumstances, combining Maoism with Black nationalism, Marxism, and their analysis of race and policing in the United States [3, 4].

China had long treated Black American activism as part of an international anti-imperialist movement. W.E.B. Du Bois met Mao Zedong in 1959, and, at the request of Robert F. Williams, the exiled black activist, Mao issued two statements in 1963 and 1968 supporting the Black American struggle against racial discrimination and U.S. repression [5-7].

By the time Newton traveled to China in September 1971, the diplomatic opening had begun, but Nixon had not yet traveled to China. During Nixon's February 21–28, 1972 visit, he met with Mao and Zhou Enlai, and the two governments issued the Shanghai Communiqué near the end of the trip [2]. Shortly after the communiqué was issued, another delegation of Black Panthers traveled to China [8].

2. What others have said

One approach sees Panther testimony and the dramatic meetings with high-ranking Chinese officials as proof of China's backing for the Panthers. Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin make the strongest argument of this type in Black Against Empire. They describe the 1970 delegation as having received "Chinese state sponsorship" from the People's Republic of China, and Newton as having received "high state honors" during his 1971 trip [9]. Chao Ren refers to Newton's trip as a "pilgrimage to the holy land of his revolutionary belief" [3], and Newton himself later referred to photos taken during the visit as proof of how "very well received" the Panthers were [1].

Another set of scholars emphasizes both the limitations and the stage-managed quality of those meetings. Ruodi Duan makes a strong case that Newton "never received the scale of reception that he sought in Beijing," arguing that although he attempted to meet Mao Zedong, he failed to do so, and that the visit received limited attention in the Chinese media [10]. Mingwei Huang similarly raises doubts about Newton meeting privately with Zhou Enlai, citing that when Newton did see Zhou, it was part of a larger meeting with American visitors, including but not limited to the Panthers [1]. Sean Malloy also identifies such limitations in the 1970 visit, writing that the Panthers' official diplomatic standing was limited and that many of their meetings were "largely pro forma publicity opportunities" [11].

Thus, the central dispute is not whether the Panthers were greeted warmly; they certainly were. Rather, the debate is what that greeting indicated.

3. Method and sources

The primary source is People's Daily, the central newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party. Each Panther visit was analyzed using reception reports, departure notices, arrival notices, publication dates, and page placement. Additionally, the English-language Peking Review was reviewed to assess how Beijing presented the same Panther visits to foreign audiences.

A Panther visit receiving a front-page reception by Mao or Zhou, especially when paired with terms such as comrade, comrade-in-arms, fighting solidarity, or direct support for the Panthers' revolutionary struggle, would represent strong evidence of significant political recognition. Conversely, lower-ranking hosts, interior-page placement, delayed notices, generic descriptions such

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as "friends," or weaker treatment than similar revolutionary delegations would indicate a lower level of recognition.

Guolin Yi uses People's Daily and Reference News to document how Beijing prepared the Chinese public for rapprochement with the United States, including press coverage of visiting Americans referred to as "friends" and their receptions and ceremonies [12]. Likewise, Yew-Jin Fang examines differences in the labels and sentence structures People's Daily used to describe protests in countries with different relations to Beijing. Fang found that those choices reflected the ideological perspective of People's Daily [13]. None of these studies demonstrates that newspaper treatment directly reveals the private beliefs of Chinese leaders. Together, however, they show that the amount, placement, and language of coverage in an official party newspaper can provide systematic evidence of what Beijing chose to emphasize publicly.

4. Findings

4.1. 1970: a partial benchmark

Although the Chinese records from the 1970 trip are much less extensive than those for 1971 and 1972, the 1970 group, Eldridge Cleaver and Elaine Brown, represents an earlier point of comparison. They traveled through China as part of the U.S. People's Anti-Imperialist Delegation. Brown later described her visit to China as an experience of unusual respect and solidarity, while Sean Malloy has noted that there were still "clear limits on the diplomatic status accorded" to the Panthers during this time [11, 14].

However, this study did not locate the same kind of People's Daily coverage for the 1970 trip found for the subsequent trips. Therefore, the 1970 trip is treated as a partial benchmark rather than a full protocol comparison.

4.2. 1971: high-level access without equivalent public recognition

Newton's 1971 visit provides the strongest evidence for the standard interpretation, since he was the Party's best-known leader, he met with Zhou Enlai, and the images produced during the visit were later used to represent Sino-Panther solidarity. The records show that Newton certainly received significant attention, yet they also indicate that his front-page meeting with Zhou was unusual, since the rest of Newton's visit received much less prominent coverage.

On September 30, People's Daily announced on page four that Newton, along with Elaine Brown and Robert Bay, had come to China at the invitation of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries [15]. On October 6, People's Daily ran a front-page story about Zhou Enlai's meeting with the Panther delegation. This article provided considerable prominence to the meeting, but the headline named four Chinese officials and referred to the Panthers only as "American friends" [16]. Four days after they had already departed, their departure appeared on page five of People's Daily on October 11 [17]. A similar representation appeared in Peking Review, which placed the three Panthers within a longer article about various American visitors to China and listed them after both a small American Maoist delegation and a Young Lords leader [18].

The fact that Mao did not receive Newton does not clearly tell us how Beijing viewed the Panthers. Newton said that the Central Committee considered a meeting inappropriate because he was not a head of state [19]. As Newton pointed out, Mao was not present at the 1971 National Day celebrations [19]. When the delegation arrived in Beijing, the National Day parade had been canceled, and Mao made few public appearances during this period [20, 21]. Therefore, Mao's

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nonappearance should not be interpreted as evidence that Beijing was distancing itself from the Panthers.

Newton also wrote in his autobiography about a private meeting lasting six hours with both Zhou Enlai and Jiang Qing. However, neither the Chinese reports reviewed here nor the FBI account corroborates this claim. Therefore, the meeting should be considered unverified [1, 19, 22].

Newton recalled crowds of people at the airport clapping, waving Little Red Books, and holding up signs supporting the Black Panther Party [19]. The Panthers could clearly experience an unusually warm reception even if Beijing gave them less official prominence in its meetings and newspapers.

Newton often characterized his hosts as comrades [19], while Panther publications expressed the relationship through the language of anti-imperialist solidarity. People's Daily did not use similar language in reporting on Newton. Instead, it referred to the visitors as "American friends," a cordial but politically less specific term [16].

4.3. 1972: contact survives rapprochement

Only days after Nixon left China, a twenty-member Panther delegation, headed by Raymond Hewitt and Emory Douglas, arrived in China. People's Daily featured the arrival on page five [8]. However, on March 27, Geng Biao, a member of the Central Committee and head of the International Liaison Department, received the delegation and hosted a banquet [23]. A senior Party official responsible for maintaining international political relationships formally receiving the Panthers after the most significant step yet toward Sino-American rapprochement directly contradicts the idea of an abrupt end to formal contact.

Although the 1972 Panther delegation was nearly seven times larger than Newton's three-person delegation in 1971, its highest-ranking host was Geng Biao instead of Zhou Enlai. The banquet report published in People's Daily appeared on page four. It characterized the conversation during the banquet as a "warm and friendly conversation," without employing either "comrade" or "comrade-in-arms" [23]. The Panthers' departure announcement also appeared on page five and was printed four days late [24], while Peking Review further reduced the visit to a news brief that was omitted from the issue's table of contents [25].

When compared with other visiting delegations, there are good reasons for believing that such differences cannot simply be viewed as typical Chinese diplomatic language. For example, in November 1972, Geng Biao received a youth delegation from Algeria's ruling party. The delegation's reception was marked by a headline celebrating "fighting solidarity," and included a rally at Peking University [26, 27]. More importantly, three days after the Panther banquet in March, a Palestine Liberation Organization delegation arrived before a crowd of more than two thousand people and was received by the foreign minister. Moreover, it was reported on page one under a headline welcoming "Palestinian comrades-in-arms" [28]. Clearly, Beijing had more explicitly revolutionary terms available and employed those terms to describe other delegations in 1972.

However, these comparisons also caution against viewing any single characteristic as an adequate explanation. For example, Geng Biao's position did not necessarily indicate political insignificance, since a small American Maoist group received the same host that June [29]. Likewise, American nationality alone cannot account for the treatment accorded to the Panthers, since Zhou Enlai, two Politburo members, and a vice foreign minister received a delegation from the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars in April [30]. Additionally, armed revolutionary status was also unreliable in predicting whether delegations would receive higher-level treatment, since Amilcar Cabral's African independence delegation was hosted by a vice president of the friendship association [31].

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5. Alternative explanations

Newton's decision to be secretive about his travel provides a viable alternative explanation for the lack of publicity regarding his 1971 trip. Newton stated that he made this choice because he was under indictment and continued to avoid the media upon returning to the U.S. [19]. This likely explains some elements of the 1971 travel record; however, it does not explain the larger pattern.

An August 1972 memo by National Security Council staff member John Holdridge to Henry Kissinger noted that Beijing was "keying in on" Chinese Americans, Black groups, and left-wing intellectuals so that Beijing could maintain its position as a force against imperialism, partly by hosting organizations like the Black Panthers and the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars [32].

While improving relations with Washington created reasons for Beijing not to provoke the U.S. government, Beijing also wanted to continue projecting China as a supporter of revolutionaries and anti-imperialist movements. Hosting the Panthers served this goal by allowing Beijing to support them without making them major political partners.

6. Conclusion

In addition to providing the Panthers with significant access and allowing Panther delegations to continue visiting after U.S.-China relations had begun to improve, Beijing also set limits on this support. While Newton's 1971 meeting with Zhou Enlai received special attention, most of his visit received much less prominent coverage. Although Beijing received another Panther delegation after Nixon's 1972 trip, that delegation was received by a lower-ranking official and was given less prominent news coverage. Contact remained; however, the level of public recognition given to the Panthers declined.

Newton and Brown remembered China as a place of remarkable respect, solidarity, and revolutionary possibility. These recollections do not contradict the more reserved account found in People's Daily. Instead, they answer a different historical question. Panther recollections about China reflect what China represented to the Panthers and how they perceived their welcome. Chinese newspaper reporting, diplomatic protocol, and official terminology show how Beijing publicly positioned the Panthers relative to other foreign visitors.

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