

Mao and The IRA's Chinese Takeaway

Chris A. Connolly, *Mao and The IRA's Chinese Takeaway*

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Chris Connolly: *The following is a short article I wrote a couple of years ago after a research trip to the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives in Beijing. It is based on original research. For those who may be interested I can provide the original source document archive references. Attribution requested.*

UPDATE: On The Cedar Lounge Revolution Blog Brian Hanley has pointed out that the "Moscow was Rome to them" was one of his and Scott Millar's interviewees talking about Irish communists rather than the IRA. In my defence, however, I did email Brian Hanley while writing the original article for clarification on a number of points, however I never received a reply.

On 16th September 1964 a lone figure knocked at the door of the embassy of the People's Republic of China in Paris. The embassy had only opened earlier that year following President de Gaulle's decision to break diplomatic relations with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government and establish them with the Communist government in Beijing. The man at the door handed over a letter of introduction to the junior embassy staffer who had answered his knock. The letter was from the Chief of Staff of the Irish Republican Army, Cathal Goulding, and requested on his behalf that the letter's deliverer be received by Ambassador Huang Zhen.



This unexpected call from an Irishman would prove to be the first of three such visits by Seamus Costello over the next five months, as part of the IRA's attempts to procure arms from Mao's China. The letter requested Chinese assistance in the "Irish struggle against British imperialist rule and to establish a democratic people's republic" and hoped "China would support [the IRA] in the same way it supported the struggles of Asia and Africa." Costello claimed to have been sent to establish contact with the Chinese government on behalf of the IRA and to have talks with them on the provision of assistance. Costello's Chinese interlocutor made no response to his request, but accepted the letter (for which he would later be reprimanded and told that under no circumstances in the future should he accept such a communication). Costello returned to London the next day, and the Chinese embassy cabled Beijing to request that it inform the Chinese *Chargé d'Affaires* Office in London (Beijing and London had diplomatic relations, but would not exchange ambassadors until 1972) of what had transpired that day in Paris.

If the *bona fides* of the man from Bray who had turned up unannounced in Paris in early autumn were doubted by the Chinese, when he turned up unannounced at the *Chargé d’Affaires*’ office in London a little over a month later, at least the London staff knew something of whom they were dealing with. However, when Seamus Costello came knocking on their door on 26th October, this time he was not alone, and was accompanied by none other than Cathal Goulding himself. The two men had come to inquire about whether the Chinese government had a response to the request contained in their letter and had hoped, presumably, to carry out talks as had been indicated during the visit in Paris. They had flown over from Ireland specially, they said, and hoped to meet with the *Chargé*. Specifically they requested that China provide military assistance to help their anti-British guerrilla war, and hoped that they might be able to send men to Beijing to undergo military training. The low-level diplomat who received them (falsely) denied any knowledge of the letter that had been delivered in Paris, and was noncommittal in his response. Unsurprisingly, the two men were not received by the *Chargé* and were subsequently sent on their way.

Apparently uncowed by Chinese stonewalling, Costello approached the *Chargé*’s Office yet again in February 1965, this time calling himself the Adjutant General of the Irish Republican Army. He admitted, however, that because the IRA was an ‘underground’ organization, he used the cover of a car salesman. The Irish people “opposed British control” he told his Chinese contact, and because “China supported the liberation struggles of the world’s peoples, he sincerely hoped to receive Chinese support”, and this time put forward three very specific requests:

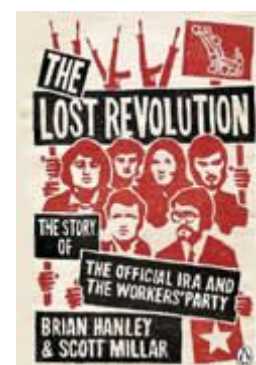


Seamus Costello: looking for a Chinese takeaway.

- 1) Chinese help in training for guerrilla warfare
- 2) Chinese military aid
- 3) Chinese help in training IRA members in the use of printing presses for the distribution of propaganda materials.

He also requested to see the military attaché, but was told that the Office did not have one. The Chinese did not respond to any of his requests, at which point Costello “expressed his disappointment and left.”

These incidents shed light on the intersection of two very disparate revolutionary movements who professed allegiance to the same ideals, but who found themselves in the mid-1960s moving in opposite directions. As Brian Hanley and Scott Miller have demonstrated in [The Lost Revolution](#), from around 1963 onwards the IRA leadership had begun redefining the movement in the direction of communism. “Moscow was Rome to them”, as Hanley and Millar quote one of their interviewees. Given the antagonistic state of Sino-Soviet relations in 1965 however, marked by polemical allegations by the Chinese of Soviet '[revisionism](#)' and by the Soviets of Chinese '[dogmatism](#)', in this light the approach to China is all the more surprising. It must be concluded on this basis



therefore that the approach to China was not out of any sense of ideological solidarity with China's anti-Moscow stance, but on the rather more opportunistic grounds of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. This also then prompts the bigger question of why Mao's China, which would within 18 months be the self-proclaimed capital of the world revolution, shunned participants in what Cathal Goulding and Seamus Costello clearly believed to be part of that same said anti-imperialist global revolution.

The timing of Seamus Costello's approach to the Chinese embassy was, from the IRA's perspective, unfortunate. Since 1963 there had been a clear leftward shift in China's foreign policy, exemplified by a reversal of China's previously cautious stance towards the burgeoning guerrilla campaign (largely modelled on Mao's doctrine of '[People's War](#)') of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam against the American-supported Ngo Dinh Diem government in Saigon. Although the IRA leadership would clearly have been unaware of Mao's decision in the summer of 1962 to supply the Vietnamese with some 90,000 rifles free-of-charge, they were clearly sufficiently inspired by China's rhetoric to believe that some military support might be forthcoming. What they could not have known, however, was of a fundamental shift in China's perspective on the global revolution that had begun to take place at some point around the second half of 1964.



"And then the Irishman said..."
Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong, April 1965.

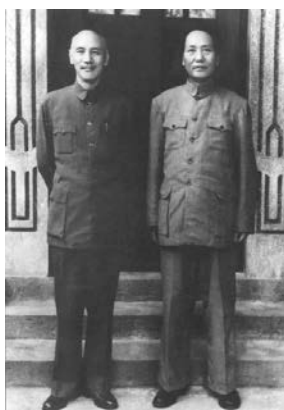
For the earlier part of the 1960s, Mao Zedong's ideological outlook, based on his own brand of [dialectical materialism](#), had declared that there were four basic 'contradictions' in the world: between the socialist and imperialist camps; between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in capitalist countries; between the oppressed nations and imperialism; and among the capitalist countries themselves. Clearly at least two of these contradictions could be seen as having relevance to the IRA, under the growing influence of socialist thought, and their struggle against 'British imperialism' in Northern Ireland. By early 1965, however, that outlook had changed. China had now begun to see "imperialism headed by the United States" as the principal contradiction in the world and the one, therefore, against which required the greatest struggle.

In 1950 Taoiseach Éamon de Valera and his Fianna Fáil government had been considered 'fascist' by the new communist government in Beijing because of Ireland's neutrality in WW2.

Thus, assistance to anti-imperialist struggles that would result in the establishment of a revolutionary anti-American national polity were given rhetorical prominence. Given what the Chinese knew about Ireland's generally pro-American and deeply Catholic stance in global affairs, even were the IRA to bring about a successful reunification of Ireland, it was probably considered unlikely that they would be successful in overthrowing the capitalist class that ruled Ireland. As a result a united Ireland would certainly not have fitted what China considered to be a revolutionary state. What might have emerged in Ireland would not have been a truly 'national democratic' revolution, designed to purge the country of both foreign imperialism and domestic oppression of the proletariat and peasantry.



While in the late 1960s and early 1970s *Peking Review* would announce to the world Beijing's support for the civil rights movements in both the United States and Northern Ireland, and hold them up as evidence of a rising tide of domestic anti-imperialism within the 'imperialist camp', China in 1964/5 also had very good, and less lofty, reasons for not wishing to involve itself in the problems of Northern Ireland. For historical reasons, as well as the continued British possession of Hong Kong and its role in essentially anti-PRC groupings such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and activities such as the establishment of Malaysia in 1963 (contrary to the demands of Indonesia's anti-imperialist President Sokarno) Britain was recognised by China as the second-most prominent imperialist power in the world, after the United States.



Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong

(Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (Nationalist) government had been defeated by Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War of 1946-1950 and had fled to the island of Taiwan off the southeast coast of mainland China where it continued (and continues today) as the 'Republic of China'. Some Western nations such as Sweden and Britain immediately switched diplomatic representation to Mao's Communist government in Beijing, while others continued to recognise Chiang's KMT in Taipei as the legitimate government of China.

Neither Beijing nor Taipei would permit recognition of both.)

Nonetheless, Britain, unlike many other Western nations (most notably the United States, but also including Ireland) did have diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. General de Gaulle's [break with Taiwan](#) in 1964 had also been a major coup for Mao, the fruits of which might be imperilled by overt Chinese support for the IRA: if the IRA, then why not

the Corsicans, Basques, Bretons or any other stateless ethnic or linguistic minority in western Europe? At a time when isolating the United States from its western allies had become the main focal point of Chinese attention, driving America's European 'allies' with whom its relations had become increasingly strained over the course of the 1960s back into Washington's arms was not part of Mao's plan. Thus, while the [Simba rebels](#) in the Republic of the Congo could expect material and military support from Beijing, revolutionaries who sought the dismemberment of an important western European nation could not.

So while the IRA was moving in a leftward direction in the early to mid-1960s, taking it toward the ground that Beijing had occupied, Mao's China was simultaneously moving yet further leftward in matters of ideology, with the result that anti-Americanism became the benchmark of a true revolutionary struggle. Isolating the United States internationally trumped any temptation that might have existed to strike a blow against Britain, China's oldest and most prominent imperialist aggressor. Unfortunately for Seamus Costello, Cathal Goulding and the IRA, this meant they wouldn't even get the loan of an oul' printing press.

Clifford Coonan, Seamus Costello's overtures for assistance were stonewalled by Chinese authorities

First published: *The Irish Times*, Jan 4, 2014

Source: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/asia-pacific/chinese-archives-reveal-ira-approaches-seeking-help-for-armed-campaign-1.1643886?page=1> Chinese archives reveal IRA approaches seeking help for armed campaign



Seamus Costello made several visits to the Chinese embassy in Paris in 1964, seeking military aid, help with training for guerrilla warfare and coaching in the use of printing presses for the distribution of propaganda.

On September 16th, 1964, [Seamus Costello](#) of the Irish Republican Army stood outside the door of the newly opened Chinese embassy in Paris, bearing a letter from the paramilitary organisation's chief of staff, [Cathal Goulding](#).

This letter was a remarkable document. It requested Chinese assistance in the "Irish struggle against British imperialist rule and to establish a democratic people's republic".

The IRA hoped Mao Zedong's communists would provide arms and training as they had done in Africa and Asia.

The Chinese diplomat who answered the door said nothing, although he took the letter, for which he was later reprimanded and told not to accept such a communication in future.

Costello's knock on the embassy door in Paris began a curious footnote to the power politics of the cold war, where Irish insurrectionists and the revolutionaries of closed, impoverished China circled each other.

The fascinating tale came in a blog posting by China scholar [Chris Connolly](#), who uncovered the information six years ago while researching in the archives of the Chinese foreign ministry (see iti.ms/19FfGAW).

Ideological fervour

It is a story filled with the ideological fervour and intrigue of the era. The communists had been in power less than 15 years when Costello came calling in Paris, in visits that were to prove fruitless.

He made three approaches over the next five months, and his shopping list included requests for military aid, help with training for guerrilla warfare and coaching for IRA members in the use of printing presses for the distribution of propaganda materials.

When Costello asked to see the military attache, he was told the office did not have one. The Chinese stonewalled his requests, at which point Costello “expressed his disappointment and left”.

The embassy had opened earlier that year following French president Charles de Gaulle’s decision to break diplomatic relations with Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalist government in Taiwan and establish them with the People’s Republic of China.

Mao’s focus at the time was inward, on rebuilding after the disastrous failed agricultural reform of the Great Leap Forward, in which millions of people died of starvation.

“They did approach at a time when Chinese foreign policy was taking a radical turn, but in a direction even less favourable to the IRA getting any assistance from Beijing than had previously been the case,” says Connolly.

China would not have wished to become embroiled in a disorganised campaign against the British in Northern Ireland, as it would not have suited its international goals.

“Everyone knows Mao’s famous dictum that ‘political power comes from the barrel of a gun’, but few know that that is only half of what he said,” says Connolly.

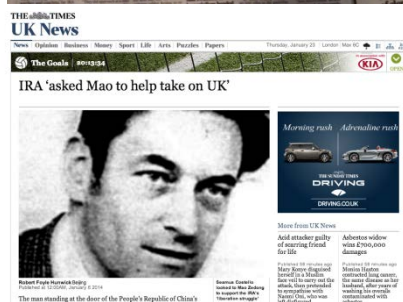
“The full statement was: ‘Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. Our principle is that the party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the party.’

“I think Mao would have recognised that the IRA was a military movement in search of a political base, not the other way round, and that to him was in no uncertain terms putting the cart before the horse.”

Chris Connolly, *The IRA and Mao's China: in the press*

First published: Thursday, 23 January 2014

Source: <http://avellowguard.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/the-ira-and-maos-china-in-press.html>



My piece on the IRA's, in the guise of Seamus Costello, approach to the Mao Zedong's China in 1964 was picked up by Clifford Coonan of *The Irish Times*, with whom I had an email exchange to expand on some issues before he wrote the [piece](#).

I've just been made aware, however, that *The Times* also [picked up](#) (£) on the story, in what is a pretty garbled and incoherent account, complete with totally made up quotes from me! (Google has informed me that [HuffingtonPost.it](#) ran with *The Times* story as well.)

Obviously, a lot of what I said to Cliff by email didn't make it into the piece he wrote, so I have decided to include the bulk of the email below, in case people were interested in a little more of the detail and my take on events. (Some comments were in response to specific questions, which I have removed).

The visits, which included a follow up by Costello about a month later in London, this time accompanied by Goulding himself, to request military training for IRA recruits in Beijing, were to prove of little use to the Irish.

The Chinese ignored the letter, reprimanding the Parisian staffer for even accepting it, and the diplomat in London pretended to know nothing of the original visit, instead stonewalling the pair until they left.

The reason for Beijing's lack of interest was most likely a simple matter of bad timing and political expediency.

China had supplied 90,000 free rifles to the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam guerrillas for use against US-backed Saigon in 1962. However, two years later, Mao's priorities were changing, because China was reeling from the catastrophic Great Leap Forward in 1958; three years of failed agricultural reform that had left tens of millions of people dead and starving, and China in an even deeper isolationist stance than before.

Costello made one further attempt at establishing relations in 1965, once again in Paris. This time, apparently, he arrived in the guise of a car salesman.

"China supported the liberation struggles of the world's peoples," Costello told his Chinese interlocutor. He brought a shopping list of requests, which included training in the use of printing presses for distributing propaganda, but left once again with nothing for his troubles. He was killed by republican rivals in 1977.

The IRA was not considered capable of ever establishing Mao's definition, at the time, of a proper "revolutionary state". Mr Connolly, the researcher, told reporters: "Even were the IRA to bring about a successful reunification of Ireland, it was probably considered unlikely that they would be successful in overthrowing the capitalist class that ruled Ireland."

know what you are not seeing: what had been withheld and not scanned or made available.

At least in the US archives, for example, when a document has been pulled for national security reasons there is a page inserted in place of the relevant page or document, detailing (vaguely) the reasons for its removal, and there is an appeal process that can be applied to to have the decision reviewed, so you have to be aware that you are only seeing what the Party and government want you to see, and view as being non-controversial. Still, what was non-controversial a few years ago can become controversial, and the archive has now closed off access to about 90% of what was formerly open (see [here](#)). (On a sidenote, the Bush administration reclassified a ton of formerly declassified documents relating to the Middle

It wasn't difficult at all to get access to the documents.

About 6 or so years ago the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs partially opened its archives to researchers. They had spent several years scanning as PDFs and cataloguing a selection of MFA documents that could be examined on computer terminals in the reading room at the MFA.

Now, of course, this doesn't come close to getting your hands on the files and documents themselves, as would be the case in 'real' research in an archive - much is learned from the feel, and the organisation and the filing of the documents - but it was a huge step forward in terms of archival access in China. The period available for study was from 1949 to 1965, the eve of the Cultural Revolution, when things get a little too 'hot' and complicated, but nonetheless it was an exciting new avenue for research into China's foreign relations. The other obvious drawback, however, was that you don't

East after 9/11, so it is not a uniquely Chinese phenomenon). Whether we will see open access to the 90% that has been withdrawn after another thoroughgoing review is a question we don't know the answer to at the moment. So in some respects I was lucky to have been able to avail of that window of opportunity while it was open.

I wasn't there to do any research on Ireland at all, as it happened. I was researching a piece on 'The Games of the New Emerging Forces' (tweet or email me if you want a copy of the [article](#)), a sort of anti-Olympics hosted by Sukharno's Indonesia and supported by Mao's China in the mid-1960s in protest at the IOC's suspension of Indonesia for refusing visas to Taiwanese and Israeli athletes when Jakarta hosted the Asian Games. Knowing that there would be much less documentation on Ireland than on the topic I was there to research, I just put a few Ireland-related search terms into the computer system to see what it threw up and in order to familiarise myself with it and how it functioned. I was quite surprised by the results.

I think it is extremely unlikely that even if the IRA had approached the Chinese earlier that they would have had much more of a chance of obtaining assistance, though the rationale for refusing it may have been different. Prior to 1964, Mao was taking a back seat after the debacle of the Great Leap Forward and the focus was on domestic reconstruction.

Additionally, in the absence of the Embassy in Paris, it would simply have been a lot more difficult for the IRA to make contact with the PRC in Western Europe in any case: Seamus Costello would have had to have travelled to Switzerland, Scandinavia, or somewhere in the Eastern Bloc, so the opportunities for physical contact were much more limited. The point I was making in my article was that they did approach at a time when Chinese foreign policy was taking a radical turn, but it was a radical turn in a direction even less favourable to the IRA getting any assistance from Beijing than had previously been the case.

I think it is a false dichotomy to try and determine whether he was anti-American rather than anti-Imperialist - as his rapprochement with Nixon in order to oppose the Soviet Union later proved. And this has to be viewed in the context of Mao's belief that the USSR had become a social imperialist country, as demonstrated by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

This reflects the nuanced view that Mao and the Chinese leaders had, which was deeply rooted in a very specific, Chinese worldview, fitted into a Marxist framework, that placed a high priority and emphasis on state sovereignty, non-interference in domestic affairs and in the revolutionary context, the necessity of self-reliance and the successful implementation of the necessary domestic political struggle before a revolution could move on to the military stage. In that regard they would probably have viewed the IRA's chances for success, in what was clearly a very conservative country - Ireland north and south - in the absence of prior political mobilisation as doomed to fail in any case. China getting implicated in a hopeless and shambolic campaign against the British in Northern Ireland would not have suited China's broader international goals very well. Everyone knows Mao's famous dictum that "political power comes from the barrel of a gun", but few know that that is only half of what he said. The full statement was that "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. Our principle is that the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party." I think Mao would have recognised that the IRA was a military movement in search of a political base, not the other way round, and that to him was in no uncertain terms putting the cart before the horse.

Beijing would have been vaguely aware of the IRA, but would have been sceptical about both their nature and purposes, partly for the reasons explained above. Their knowledge of Ireland was fairly limited, and what they did know upon coming to power in 1949/50, for example,

came from two main sources: Moscow, and the relatively large numbers of Irish Catholic missionaries in China, whom they set about expelling along with almost all other foreigners. Under Moscow's influence they viewed de Valera and Fianna Fáil as being fascists, because of Ireland's neutrality in World War II, and the evident Catholic influence would have leant itself to supporting that perception. They would have been open to the idea that the IRA might be a genuine national liberation movement, but would certainly have categorised it as being part of a 'national democratic' revolutionary phase to rid the country of British imperialism. They would have had strong doubts as to whether they were socialists at all (ironically, these were the same doubts that Stalin harboured towards Mao and the Chinese Communists in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and played a role in Stalin nudging China into the Korean War).

Whether the Chinese were guided by pragmatism or by a Marxist dialectic analysis is a question that will always prove impossible to answer, because the two could always be brought to bring the same answer. In comparison to North Korea, certainly Beijing was more cautious, but that is also partly a reflection of Mao and Beijing's worldview, that was cognisant of a particular place China occupied in the world more broadly, and in Asia particularly. The bottom line was that Mao's China had little interest in fermenting revolution outside the traditional boundaries of China's imperial and historical experience. This could be justified on both ideological grounds (insufficient information; or in dialectic terms being a distraction from the primary contradiction; or analytically the country in question was not yet ready to pass from the plane of political to military struggle) and indeed pragmatic ones. But ultimately, for Mao, much was rooted in a very Chinese notion of China's role: he wanted revolutionary China to be respected and adulated across the world, but took little active interest in fermenting revolution any further beyond China's borders than the emperors had sought to suppress it.
