

Chinese Lanterns at Leipzig: Looking into Local Archives of the Former German Democratic Republic

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What exactly did the Chinese expect? It was mid-June 1952 when the Main Office of the Leipzig Trade Fair wrote a letter to the Ministry for Foreign and Inner-German Trade in bewilderment about the state of negotiations for a Chinese exhibition at the upcoming annual Leipzig Trade Fair. The fair was less than three months away. Blueprints for pavilions and exhibitions had been finalized already in April. Each participating country and industry sector knew how many square meters to expect, what the layout of their exhibition space would be, and what kind of items they could show. Architects and construction workers were setting up. Now the Chinese government was suddenly unhappy with the first-floor space it had been allotted and, moreover, requested more space. Without prior notice, they had added dozens more new industrial machines to their exhibition. These were simply too heavy for their current first-floor space and would have to be placed on the ground floor.

The fair organizers at Leipzig protested that they had “not heard of this wish, not even the slightest mention of it” in their earlier extensive conversations with the Chinese. It was a major imposition at short notice. The government of the German Democratic Republic in East Berlin meanwhile agreed to the Chinese wishes, in the spirit of brotherly cooperation. They were less concerned with the day-to-day logistics of planning an international fair. This left the organizers with the ungrateful task of sorting out the details. Design plans had to be changed, construction reorganized, and exhibitions shifted. Cinema-Film-Optics would move to China’s old space, and the food processing machinery would have to be re-assembled in the optics division, leaving open the new Hall “E” for the PRC. The delegations from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary might be irritated because the Chinese were given special preference. Not to mention the question who was going to be liable for the extra expenses of re-organization and potential compensation claims of individual exhibitors.¹

In the end, the Chinese government got its wish. In early September 1952 the Chinese pavilion opened in Hall “E” covering more than 3200 square meters.² The China Pavilion, as it came to be known, was second only to the Soviet Union. Over the next years, the People’s Republic of China would exhibit annually here, at the spring and very often also autumn fairs. Zhang Ding, one of the artists who participated in creating the emblem of the People’s Republic of China, was charged with designing the exterior and interior of the pavilion

in order to make it look authentically Chinese and socialist. Until the late 1950s, the Chinese pavilion was one of the major attractions for visitors of the fair and a major logistical challenge for its organizers.

Working with documents from the former German Democratic Republic is an attractive option for China historians. Although not all GDR archival records have been made available, the great majority can be accessed in the comfortable reading rooms of the German National Archives at Berlin-Lichterfelde and the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Berlin-Mitte.³ For most PRC historians accustomed to working their way around the fact that the Chinese central archives are not accessible, these national archives are a treasure trove. Sure enough, both archives hold hundreds of documents on the Leipzig Trade Fairs, one of the most important Comecon (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) fairs of the post-war socialist world. However, I found the above anecdote and much more colorful narratives in records held at the Saxonian State Archives Leipzig and the private Leipzig Trade Fair Business Archives. There were shipment notifications, customs declarations, exhibition catalogue drafts, hotel bookings, closed soirée invitations, and guest lists. I read dozens of letter exchanges between different ministry offices in the national government in East Berlin, the Leipzig municipal government, the offices of the trade fair, and departments of the Chinese national government as well as their diplomatic representation in East Berlin. Add to this an impressive collection of unpublished photographs, not only of the fair grounds and exhibition halls but of the arrival of exhibition objects, pavilion construction, architect meetings, and soirées, and I began to get immersed in the quotidian details of how the People’s Republic of China came to exhibit its “new society” on a large scale in socialist Europe.⁴

The archives at Leipzig hold many documents of the kind that might fascinate someone looking to write a history beyond the political and diplomatic narrative. Often, they had kept copies of correspondence on smaller matters that had either not been retained in East Berlin back in the day or else were now impossibly difficult to locate through the available online databases or national-level archives (the keyword search option in these archives is not particularly helpful). The authors of many of these local documents, moreover, were more candid and less inclined to use the jargon carefully inculcated into GDR high ministerial officials. On the contrary, they were often more willing to put in concrete

words their repeated frustrations at the everyday realities and consequences of their superiors' high-minded pan-socialist ambitions. This contrasted well also with the accessible Chinese sources, from the usual newspaper and magazine reports to published visitor observations marked "internal" and a few biographies of participating traders, politicians, and architects. Much like official correspondence within the GDR government, these Chinese documents tended to be more formulaic and their authors perhaps more guarded in their choice of topics worth writing about.

For many research topics on Sino-GDR history it can thus be most helpful to look beyond the national archives. After all, if we are to disaggregate the Chinese state in our writings on its history, then we should be careful not to accidentally aggregate other socialist states in the process.⁵ In and around Berlin alone, there are many more archives that contain extensive collections on different topics in post-1949 Sino-German encounters. These include, to list a few, the Stasi Archives, the Archives of the GDR Academy of Sciences, the Archives of the GDR Academy for State and Legal Sciences at the University of Potsdam but also venues such as the Bauhaus Archives. And, much as in China, there are plenty of municipal and other local state and private archives outside of Berlin. One of the exciting developments in PRC history, often of course driven by problems of accessibility, has been the push to explore lower-level but also, where available, non-state archival holdings in China. That same principle is useful in any search for documents from other formerly socialist countries.

Back to Leipzig. Historical events such as these fairs offer PRC historians a chance to think broadly about some of the categories of PRC transnational history, particularly when it comes to interactions between Communist China and other socialist party-states.⁶ Trade fairs were meant to dazzle and entertain as much as create and fortify trade links, help collect information (of all kinds), and display the strength of the socialist utopia. They involved a diverse cast of historical actors and provided opportunities for "state-to-state", "party-to-party" and "people-to-people" contacts. Yet these three categories can sometimes be too rigid. They do not readily reflect the colorful hustle and bustle of annual fairs and the diverse personal interactions that took place during these weeks.

Space, then, becomes a dominant theme in the study of these Sino-foreign encounters: exhibition halls, fair grounds, and the city of Leipzig. To reconstruct this sense of space, we have to combine Chinese and German archival sources. Within these spaces many different trivial and meaningful exchanges took place, often between people who pursued a multitude of interests, many of which were connected to, influenced by, but not necessarily focused on politics. China's delegation leaders guided state presidents and high-ranking officials through their exhibition. Private businessmen and trade representatives who had travelled to Leipzig from other socialist and non-socialist countries stopped for chats with Chinese exhibitors. Visitors marveled at the beauty of Chinese ivory carvings, silk textiles, leather shoes, leather bags, and fine furs. The Chinese pavilion with its flowery white (not red!) lanterns that decorated an elaborate exterior façade was exuberant and one of the fair's hot spots. On Sundays, in

particular, curious visitors formed long queues waiting to inspect the "oriental" socialist delights. Some sampled Chinese dishes prepared by two Cantonese chefs flown in from Beijing to cook in the fair's restaurant. As the years passed, the Chinese government became warier of too many unguarded exchanges though. From Beijing, it tried to discipline its delegation members and even its pavilion design group. It wanted to ensure they exercised caution, did not mingle carelessly, made few trade deals on the spot, exhibited Chinese products only within the dedicated China Pavilion, and that they kept in delegation formation whenever possible. That only worked to a certain extent. It did mean, however, that the Chinese soirées seem not to have been known for their entertainment value or extravagance. Other socialist countries hosted much better parties with more guests and more gossip.

Trade fairs were thus part of a wider network of transnational contacts, including delegation visits, cultural exchanges, sport and youth events, foreign experts and scientific-technological support. The information I found certainly cannot substitute fully for the riches of the now much more restricted Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives. Former East German archives can offer some consolation though, particularly if we cast the net widely beyond the national level. What "socialism" meant and might in future mean in 1950s China was, in parts, shaped through the experience of participating at trade fairs. These experiences then linked with those gathered at the complementary exhibitions that socialist countries such as the Soviet Union, the GDR, Poland, or Czechoslovakia held predominantly in Beijing and Shanghai during the mid-1950s.

In 1959, Communist China opened with its largest-ever exhibition in Leipzig, covering more than 6200 square meters; retrospectively one of the last curated hurrahs. The Leipzig fairs were now a venue to exhibit the Great Leap Forward utopia, to gauge the progress of de-Stalinization and to gather intelligence on other countries' industrial progress. Somewhat annoyingly to the Chinese delegation, Leipzig had also become one of the many places outside of China where they had to answer questions about the Great Leap Forward. This gave rise to much speculation and occasional ordinary pan-socialist miscommunications, which we can trace in both the German and Chinese sources. Such may have been the case at one Chinese soirée when an East German party cadre working in foreign trade pulled a Chinese reporter into a quiet corner to ask, most likely off the record, whether people in China were seriously able to get their hands on the kind of leather shoes and other goods exhibited that year. Duly reported upwards, and published in *Neibu Cankao Ziliao* (内部参考资料), this comment was cast as Western doubt about China's progress.⁷ Yet, East Germans themselves could not obtain in daily life most of the products their country exhibited on the fair. Was the cadre really doubtful? Or was he perhaps silently in awe of what might be actual Chinese progress? Leipzig was a hall of moving mirrors and no one could ever be quite sure about which way the mirrors were turning.

Chinese participation in socialist international trade fairs ebbed by the early 1960s, following the growing Sino-Soviet split. Yet the PRC did not disappear from Leipzig's exhibition floors. It organized irregular smaller exhibitions at the fairs throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Poor political relations,

moreover, generated new piles of records. Official contacts may have been reduced to a minimum, but East German fair organizers and the GDR central government used these brief moments to study their alienated socialist brethren carefully and write up reports. These can give PRC historians rich insights into Sino-GDR links and interactions even after relations soured. They also reveal how the Chinese government maneuvered between the now much more acceptable West German government and the GDR in its preferences. From the mid-1980s, the PRC became once again a regular annual presence at what, until today, remains one of Germany's largest trade fairs.

The small example of the Leipzig Trade Fairs shows that East German archives – from the national archives to different local and business archives – can be treasure troves of information. Their records tell us more about the international interactions of a diverse cast of PRC citizens after 1949, from state officials and diplomats, to students, capitalists, artists, architects, engineers, handicraftsmen (and women), customs officials, cooks, train conductors and all sorts of other individuals. Their stories matter to the wider history of the socialist world. And they might be of interest to historians in search of the social and cultural history of Chinese socialism beyond the highest echelons of the party-state.

NOTES

¹ Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Leipzig (Saxonian State Archives, Leipzig), StA-L 21000 VEB LMA (II), No. 1282.

² Leipziger Messe GmbH, Unternehmensarchiv (Leipzig Fairs, Business Archives), "VR China Teilnahme-Aussteller-Besucher (PR China Participation-Exhibitors-Visitors)."

³ Even though the German Democratic Republic no longer exists, not all of its former papers are declassified. Particularly in the case of the Foreign Affairs Ministry Archive, some records still fall under the thirty-year embargo, some personal papers are unavailable unless special permission is granted, and a very few subject matters are not automatically declassified if they pertain to present-day politics. In the latter case, it is important to remember that today's reunified German government inherited and continued some of the former GDR's diplomatic contacts.

⁴ The Bundesarchiv is in the process of making available a large collection of GDR photographs via Wikimedia Commons. See also the archives own picture database at <https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/>. Readers interested in personal papers held in German archives may wish to consult the Union catalogue KALLIOPE: <http://kalliope-verbund.info/en/about/history.html>.

⁵ Elizabeth J. Perry, "Trends in the Study of Chinese Politics: State-Society Relations," *The China Quarterly* Vol. 139 (Sep. 1994): 704-13.

⁶ For a series of studies that examine socialist participation at trade fairs as "sites of convergence" see the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History*, 47:1 (2012).

⁷ Neibu cankao ziliao (内部参考资料), No. 2748, 10 April 1959: 16.