

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository:<https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/173626/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Kelly, Jason 2024. Western engineering in the Cultural Revolution: Mixing "Red and Expert" at the Lanzhou Petrochemical Complex, 1964-1968. *Journal of Cold War Studies*

Publishers page:

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



Western Engineering in the Cultural Revolution: Mixing “Red and Expert” at the Lanzhou Petrochemical Complex, 1964-1968

**Jason M. Kelly
Cardiff University**

Introduction

In late 1965, a group of West German and British engineers and technicians, some with families in tow, began to arrive in Lanzhou, the dusty capital of Gansu province in northwest China, to build a modern petrochemical complex for the Chinese government. The China National Technical Import Corporation, a state trading company known as Techimport, had signed five contracts with British and West German firms in 1964 and 1965, worth more than \$40 million, to bring these experts, their technical skills, and cutting-edge technology to Lanzhou. According to the contracts, it would take years to build the complex. British observers estimated it would not be completed until mid-1968, which meant European experts would also be living and working in Lanzhou for years.¹

The project was part of a larger initiative in Mao’s China during the early and mid-1960s. In 1962, China began to develop a program to import dozens of plants and sets of equipment from Western Europe and Japan.² By the end of 1964, Techimport had signed at least 15 contracts with Britain, West Germany, Italy, France, the Netherlands, and Japan worth more than \$130 million.³ In the eyes of Chinese leaders and state planners, this initiative was driven by

¹ Peking to Foreign Office, Peking Despatch PEK/8/ES, 20 January 1968, p. 4, in National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter cited as TNA), Foreign and Commonwealth Office (hereafter cited as FCO) 21/92, FC 5/3. In October 1968, the British Foreign Office became the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. For simplicity, I will refer to the “Foreign Office” throughout this article.

² State Planning Commission, “Guojia jihua weiyuanhui guanyu cong ziben zhuyi guojia jinkou chengtao shebei he yinjin xin jishu wenti de huibao tigang,” 23 September 1964, in *Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan and zhongyang dang’anguan*, comps., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jingji dang’an ziliao xuanbian, 1958-1965, duiwai maoyi juan* (Beijing: Zhongguo caizheng jingji, 2011), p. 437.

³ Liu Yang, “20 shiji 60 niandai cong xifang guojia yinjin chengtao shebei he jishu dui zhongguo keji fazhan yingxiang yanjiu,” *Zhongguo keji shi zazhi*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2018), p. 174.

necessity. Moscow's decision to suspend technical aid to China and recall its experts to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1960 presented China with an urgent problem. Soviet expertise and equipment had been vital to China's industrial development during the 1950s.⁴ When mounting tension in the bilateral relationship prompted Moscow to withdraw its aid, Beijing had to find new sources of expertise and technology to fuel the nation's modernization. Premier Zhou Enlai favored a straightforward solution: buy from the capitalist world. "All important technical information that can be purchased should be purchased from Western countries by all means," he instructed in July 1960.⁵

Chinese planners hoped to acquire various types of technology from the West. China needed help producing foundational industrial goods, including compressors, pipelines capable of resisting extreme temperatures and pressures, and high-quality steel, all of which the Soviet Union had provided.⁶ But following the Ninth Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in January 1961, state planners had also begun to focus more on producing things people could "eat, wear, and use" (*chi chuan yong*) in their daily life.⁷ This emphasis on everyday needs represented a shift away from the preoccupation with breakneck industrialization that gripped the nation during the Great Leap Forward, a misguided campaign that produced more famine and disruption than anything else. Officials now hoped to import technology that would bolster agriculture, such as chemical fertilizers, and light industry. A pillar of this initiative was the importation of entire plants from Western Europe capable of

⁴ One of the most comprehensive accounts of the rise and collapse of Sino-Soviet technical cooperation during the 1950s is Zhang Bochun, *Sulian jishu xiang zhongguo de zhuan yi* (Shandong: Shandong Jiaoyu, 2004).

⁵ Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi bian, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949-1976 (zhong juan)* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian, 2007), p. 331.

⁶ For China's industrial needs in the 1960s, see Qu Shang and Xu Tiancheng, "20 shiji 60 niandai chu zhongguo yinjin xifang huafei shengchan chengtao jishu shebei de gongzuo," *Dangdai zhongguo shi yanjiu*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2019), pp. 65-75.

⁷ Liu, "20 shiji 60 niandai cong xifang guojia yinjin chengtao shebei he jishu dui zhongguo keji fazhan yingxiang yanjiu," p. 170.

converting petroleum into plastics and synthetic fibers, which could be used to make rayon, clothing, rugged plastics, and other high-tech products that Chinese people would wear and use in everyday life.

This was the logic that brought West German and British engineers and technicians to Lanzhou in 1965. Techimport had found firms in Western Europe willing to sell China advanced petrochemical plants. After the right firms had been found and deals signed, parts for the plants were sent from Europe, first by ship to Chinese ports, then by rail to Gansu, where teams of Chinese workers and European technicians would assemble them, test them, and commission them. The Europeans would then hand over the keys to Chinese operators, who would also receive training from the Europeans. The plants, once operational, would convert petroleum from China's own oilfields in Gansu and farther west—in Qinghai and Xinjiang—into plastics and synthetic fibers.⁸

The timing of the project could not have been worse. Not long after the European experts had settled in and construction was hitting its stride, the Cultural Revolution plunged China into chaos. Revolutionary politics surged in importance. In Lanzhou, this intensification of political concerns tapped into latent fears about hosting bourgeois experts that had existed since before the first European set foot in the city. But the start of the Cultural Revolution also revealed a critical difference in the way Mao's China and European firms approached the Lanzhou petrochemical project. Chinese officials and workers believed politics played a central role in all scientific and technological pursuits. This perspective was rooted in an ongoing political and epistemological debate in Mao's China over the proper balance between “red and expert” (*hong*

⁸ For China's development of oilfields in Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang, see Office of Basic Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), “Geographic Support Project: Guide to Lan-Chou,” March 1966, p. 2, in General CIA Records, Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room (hereafter cited as CIA FOIA), CIA-RDP79T01018A000900090001-6.

yu zhuan). Fundamental to this debate was the view, articulated by Mao Zedong, that workers must synthesize politics and technical expertise. These two dimensions were inextricably linked in socialist China, including in joint projects staffed by European engineers and technicians. Foreign experts from Western Europe underappreciated this theme in Chinese politics. In their view, scientific and technological cooperation should be pursued by divorcing politics from projects entirely, especially in the context of projects in the socialist world.

The Lanzhou petrochemical project, because it coincided with a rapid increase in the importance of “redness” relative to expertise at the start of the Cultural Revolution, offers a chance to observe these divergent views emerge as a central and abiding obstacle to scientific and technical cooperation between Mao’s China and the capitalist world during the Cold War. To trace this dynamic and its significance, this article examines the Lanzhou project during the mid-1960s from the perspectives of multiple nationalities and entities. It draws from declassified documents, corporate reports, and private correspondence records based in the United Kingdom, the United States, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Examining the project from these different perspectives reveals how joint technical projects during the Cold War could both obfuscate and accentuate ideological differences, depending on the relative clout of “redness” and expertise in China, a balance that hinged ultimately on shifting political winds in Mao’s China.

Lanzhou in Context

The Lanzhou complex was neither the first nor the only collaborative industrial venture between Western European firms and the PRC during the Mao era. Valeria Zanier, Chad Mitcham, Jason Kelly, Roberto Peruzzi, Qu Shang, and Xu Tiancheng have shown that various firms based in Italy, the Netherlands, Britain, and elsewhere sought to develop industrial and commercial

relationships with the PRC during the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁹ But these studies shed little light on how industrial collaboration worked in practice, on the ground. Most also conclude before the start of the Cultural Revolution.¹⁰ Because Chinese workers and officials saw politics behind every decision and action at the worksite, and European experts did not, these colleagues viewed their daily activities and interactions from different perspectives. They worked together but perceived apart, a divergence that fueled suspicion and distrust as politics became increasingly important during the Cultural Revolution.

The Lanzhou project also offers new context in which to consider China's industrialization efforts in the mid-1960s. Covell Meyskens has shed light on another, much larger industrial initiative at this time: the construction of the "Third Front" (*san xian*).¹¹ Proposed by Mao Zedong in May 1964, this centrally-directed program sought to construct a vast, concealed, and self-sufficient industrial base in the mountains of inland China, far from American and Soviet threats. This archipelago of industrial sites was concentrated mostly in China's southwest, but elements of the program also stretched north, including projects near Jiuquan, a few hundred miles northeast of where the Lanzhou petrochemical complex was being

⁹ Valeria Zanier, "'Energizing' Relations: Western European Industrialists and China's Dream of Self-Reliance. The Case of Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (1956-1965)," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2017), pp. 133-169; Chad Mitcham, *China's Economic Relations with the West and Japan, 1949-1979: Grain, Trade and Diplomacy* (London: Routledge, 2005); Jason M. Kelly, *Market Maoists: The Communist Origins of China's Capitalist Ascent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); Roberto Peruzzi, "Leading the Way: The United Kingdom's Financial and Trade Relations with Socialist China, 1949-1966," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2017), pp. 17-43; and Qu Shang and Xu Tiancheng, "20 shiji 60 niandai chu zhongguo yinjin xifang huafei shengchan chengtao jishu shebei de gongzuo."

¹⁰ For example, Valeria Zanier's study concludes in 1965. See Zanier, "'Energizing' Relations: Western European Industrialists and China's Dream of Self-Reliance: The Case of Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (1956-1965)." Roberto Peruzzi's study likewise focuses on the United Kingdom's trade and financial ties to the PRC before the Cultural Revolution. See Peruzzi, "Leading the Way: The United Kingdom's Financial and Trade Relations with Socialist China, 1949-1966." Mitcham and Kelly both examine China's trade with Western Europe during the Cultural Revolution, but neither examines the effects of the Cultural Revolution on ongoing industrial projects.

¹¹ Covell F. Meyskens, *Mao's Third Front: The Militarization of Cold War China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

built in Gansu province.¹² Despite this proximity, key features distinguished the Lanzhou complex from Third Front sites, perhaps none more than the presence of foreign experts. The Lanzhou project required technical experts from Western Europe to live on site for months at a time, sometimes with their families. Third Front projects, by contrast, were sensitive military-industrial sites shrouded in secrecy and off limits to foreigners. This presence of foreign experts in Lanzhou prompted a level of concern about foreign spies, sabotage, and security that did not exist at Third Front sites. The international dimension to the Lanzhou complex also meant officials in Beijing had to consider the diplomatic implications of the project and its relationship to other foreign-policy objectives, concerns that simply did not exist in the Third Front program.

The European engineers and technicians in Lanzhou were not the only foreign experts living and working in Mao's China during the mid-1960s. Beverly Hooper and Anne-Marie Brady have both examined the "foreign expert" (*waiguo zhuanjia*) community in China at this time, but much of their focus lies with experts who worked in publishing, translation, and education.¹³ As Hooper points out, these experts arrived in China mostly through their own individual arrangements. They lived almost exclusively in major cities and worked for state institutions. They also moved to China because they wanted to live there, not because they sought specific jobs.¹⁴

The foreign experts working at the Lanzhou complex could not have been more different. Their scientific and technical skills brought them to China, not an interest in the nation's history, culture, or revolution. They came for the projects, and perhaps the adventure. Some were

¹² Ibid., p. 71.

¹³ Beverly Hooper, *Foreigners under Mao: Western Lives in China, 1949-1976* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016); Anne-Marie Brady, "Red and Expert: China's 'Foreign Friends' in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, 1966-1969," *China Information*, Vol. 11, No. 2-3 (1996), pp. 110-137.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 165.

dismissive of the PRC; others privately mocked the state and its revolution. They worked for capitalist European firms, which meant they brought with them logics, practices, and expectations that sometimes translated poorly in the local environment, especially once the Cultural Revolution began. They also lived in Lanzhou, nearly a thousand miles and a world away from Beijing. This alone is worthy of attention. The experiences of these foreign experts bring into view a more diverse and eclectic foreign community in China during the “red years,” as one historian has dubbed the turbulent period between 1966 and 1968, than scholars have typically recognized.¹⁵

These experiences add nuance to our understanding Mao-era Chinese foreign relations during the Cultural Revolution. Much of the scholarship on this period concerns China’s diplomacy as it unraveled inside the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, elsewhere in Beijing, or in foreign capitals.¹⁶ Wars, governmental spats, trade, and high diplomacy feature prominently in many of these accounts.¹⁷ Scholars have examined transnational dimensions of Chinese

¹⁵ Frank Dikotter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People’s History, 1962-1976* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

¹⁶ Key works in English include Ma Jisen, *The Cultural Revolution in the Foreign Ministry of China* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004); Barbara Barnouin and Yu Changgen, *Chinese Foreign Policy During the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Philippe Ardant, “Chinese Diplomatic Practice during the Cultural Revolution,” in Jerome Alan Cohen, ed., *China’s Practice of International Law: Some Case Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 86-128; Melvin Gurtov, “The Foreign Ministry and Foreign Affairs during the Cultural Revolution,” *China Quarterly*, No. 40 (October - December 1969), pp. 65-102; Michael B. Yahuda, “Chinese Foreign Policy after 1963: The Maoist Phases,” *China Quarterly*, No. 36 (October - December 1968), pp. 93-113; Barbara Barnouin and Yu Changgen, *Zhou Enlai: A Political Life* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2006), especially ch. 4; and Robert A. Scalapino, “The Cultural Revolution and Chinese Foreign Policy,” in Michael Oksenberg et al., eds., *The Cultural Revolution: 1967 in Review* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1968), pp. 72-96. For an analysis of diplomatic negotiations between China and Britain during this period, see Chi-Kwan Mark, “Hostage Diplomacy: Britain, China, and the Politics of Negotiation, 1967-1969,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2009), pp. 473-493. Insightful memoirs that recount this period in Beijing include Douwe Wessel Fokkema, *Report from Peking: Observations of a Western Diplomat on the Cultural Revolution* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1972) and Percy Craddock, *Experiences in China* (London: John Murray, 1994).

¹⁷ Examples include Chen Jian, “China’s Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-1969,” *China Quarterly*, No. 142 (June 1970), pp. 356-387; Gangzheng She, “The Cold War and Chinese Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1963-1975,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Winter 2020), pp. 125-174; Hongwei Fan, “The 1967 Anti-Chinese Riots in Burma and Sino-Burmese Relations,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (June 2012), pp. 234-256; and Chae-Jin Lee, “The Politics of Sino-Japanese Trade Relations, 1963-1968,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Summer 1969), pp. 129-144.

foreign relations during this period, but these important works have tended to focus mostly on grassroots interactions between China and the world outside China.¹⁸ The Lanzhou petrochemical project offers the chance to observe these types of interactions inside China, in an inland city that became, barely and briefly, an international space.

Inviting Foreign Experts to “Closed” Lanzhou

Six firms from three countries in Western Europe signed the contracts to build the petrochemical complex in Lanzhou. The West German petrochemical company Lurgi agreed to build a plant for oil-cracking, a process by which crude oil is refined into components more suitable for industrial or consumer use. This plant was expected to produce ethylene, a versatile raw material that could be used as feedstock for other plants in the complex. Lurgi also signed a contract to partner with the Austrian firm Stickstoffwerke to construct a plant that would produce acrylonitrile, a toxic, pungent substance that can be used to make synthetic rubber. The British companies Simon-Carves and ICI signed a joint contract to build a high-pressure polyethylene plant that would produce films and resins. Courtauld Company, another British firm, signed a deal to build a plant that would produce synthetic fibers for clothing.¹⁹ Finally, Vickers-Zimmer, a British-West German division of the British industrial conglomerate Vickers Limited, agreed to build a plant that would produce polypropylene, a synthetic resin first created in the mid-1950s that can be used to make various synthetic fibers and plastics.²⁰

¹⁸ Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2019); and Alexander C. Cook, ed., *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁹ Peking to Foreign Office, Peking Despatch PEK/8/ES, 20 January 1968, p. 4.

²⁰ Wei-Cheng Yan et al., “Computational Modeling Toward Full Chain of Polypropylene Production: From Molecular to Industrial Scale,” *Chemical Engineering Science*, Vol. 269 (April 2023), p. 2. For the creation of Vickers-Zimmer as a chemical-engineering unit within Vickers, see Vickers Limited, *Report and Accounts, 1965* (London: Vickers House, 1966), p. 6, in Cambridge University Library, Vickers Ltd: Records, GBR/0012/MS

Because some plants were dependent on others, coordination across these projects was both essential and challenging. The Lurgi oil-cracking plant, for instance, was meant to produce the feedstock for the Vickers-Zimmer polypropylene plant and the Courtauld plant.²¹ If setbacks or delays occurred in the Lurgi project, as they eventually did, then the Vickers-Zimmer and Courtauld plants would also fall behind schedule.

These interdependencies, alongside the usual financial, legal, and logistical concerns that accompanied international, multi-year industrial projects, took center stage in negotiations and planning discussions between the European firms and Techimport. A glance at the Vickers-Zimmer contract reveals terms, clauses, and contingencies concerned with all manner of technical and financial issues.²² Missing is any sense of Chinese concerns about the security and political implications of hosting European engineers from capitalist firms in such a sensitive region. Yet these underlying concerns played a central role in shaping how Chinese officials in Beijing and Gansu prepared for the arrival of the European experts.

From a logistical standpoint, Lanzhou seemed an ideal location for a petrochemical complex in the mid-1960s. The city already had a petroleum refinery just to the west, which had been built with Soviet aid during the 1950s.²³ The city was also connected to rail and road networks. Most transportation between east and far-west China funneled through the city. Equally important, Lanzhou sat deep within China's interior, which made it less vulnerable to attack than cities and factories along China's coast.

Vickers, Doc 1957, Director's Reports, 1955-1970; and Vickers Limited, *Chief Accountant's Report for Year Ended 31st December, 1965* (London: Vickers House, 1965), p. 3, in Cambridge University Library, Vickers Ltd: Records, GB R/0012/MS Vickers, Doc 1827.1, Chief Accounts, Accounts Report, 1965.

²¹ James Murray (Foreign Office) to A. J. de la Mare (Foreign Office), "Foreign Firms Engaged in Erecting Plant in China," 1 December 1967, p. 4, in TNA, FCO 21/107, FC 6/22.

²² A nearly complete copy of the Vickers-Zimmer contract with Techimport can be found as an attachment to Far Eastern Department (Foreign Office), "Vickers-Zimmer at Lanchow[:] Commercial Aspects," 20 December 1967, in TNA, FCO 21/107, FC 6/22.

²³ Office of Basic Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, "Geographic Support Project: Guide to Lan-Chou," p. 2.

But this sensible location also created problems. To build these sophisticated factories, China had no choice but to invite foreign engineers and technicians from capitalist countries to live and work in Lanzhou. Gansu was a “closed area” area at the time, off limits to foreigners without authorization and escorts.²⁴ As a result, unlike Beijing or Shanghai, Lanzhou had almost no foreigners in the 1960s. Local officials counted just 33 in the entire province as late as 1969.²⁵ This meant locals had almost no direct experience with foreigners, nor were they as attuned as their coastal counterparts to the regulations and policies that governed interactions between Chinese citizens and foreign guests.

Lanzhou was also rumored to contain sensitive facilities related to China’s national security, including various industrial sites and a nearby military area.²⁶ Foreign press speculated in the 1960s that elements of a nuclear program lay hidden in or near the city, including a gaseous diffusion plant.²⁷ Other interested observers shared these suspicions. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) assessed in March 1966 that the city was indeed a likely location for developing atomic energy and nuclear weapons.²⁸ It was far from the coast, reportedly convenient to uranium and other raw materials useful for producing fissionable materials, and it had abundant water, good transportation, and electric power potential.²⁹

²⁴ Foreign Affairs Office of the Gansu Provincial People’s Committee, “Guanyu 1965 nian waishi gongzuo de jiben qingkuang he 1966 nian gongzuo yijian,” 25 May 1966, p. 4, in Gansu Provincial Archives (hereafter cited as GPA), 91-009-0666.

²⁵ Gansu Provincial Revolutionary Committee Foreign Affairs Group, “Guanyu jiaqiang dui waiqiao guanli gongzuo de jidian yijian,” 18 January 1969, n.p. [p. 1], in GPA, 129-002-0031.

²⁶ Office of Basic Intelligence, “Geographic Support Project: Guide to Lan-Chou,” March 1966, p. 3.

²⁷ H. R. Vohra, “Second Blast by Peking Likely Soon: U.S. Experts Feel China Will Overtake France,” *Times of India*, 27 November 1964, p. 6. For other press reporting from the early and mid-1960s on the possibility of nuclear facilities in Lanzhou by *Le Monde*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Asahi Shimbun*, and the Indian publication *Link*, see “Notes on a Province – Kansu,” in *China Topics*, 29 March 1968, pp. 4-5, in TNA, FCO 95/2134, YB 462-472.

²⁸ Office of Basic Intelligence, “Geographic Support Project: Guide to Lan-Chou,” March 1966, p. 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

The presence of these sensitive sites raised the stakes of inviting foreigners into the city for any reason, but the concern was all the greater if those foreigners were engineers or other technical personnel, the kind of people who might be shrewder observers than the average tourist. To build the petrochemical complex, Chinese officials would have to invite dozens of such experts, and not just for short visits, but to live in the area for months, perhaps even years. These imperialist experts would reside near the worksites to supervise every stage of the construction process and oversee all testing. They would pass through or near sensitive facilities routinely. They would also work alongside Chinese workers and technicians. People would learn each other's names on the site. They might chat or share personal details. They may even develop affection for one another. Such interactions could erode the vigilance of Chinese personnel in Lanzhou, a threat serious enough anywhere in China during the Mao era, but one that took on even greater significance when the revolutionaries in question lived in such a sensitive region and might have access to secret national security sites.

Living alongside foreign capitalists might also encourage preexisting capitalist tendencies among locals in Lanzhou, a problem that had worried provincial officials well before the arrival of foreign engineers. In an internal report from July 1963, party officials reported alarming signs of nascent capitalist activity in Gansu, including the discovery of eleven "underground factories" in Lanzhou itself, four of which were large enough to employ between 10 and 26 workers.³⁰ Officials also reported cases of embezzlement, theft, and speculation that involved various workers and party members.³¹

³⁰ Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee, "Gansu diqu jieji de yixie tedian," *Xuanjiao dongtai*, Vol. 67, No. 974, 24 July 1963, p. 9, in Hebei Provincial Archives (hereafter cited as HPA) 864-2-482.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Provincial and municipal officials had begun to mobilize locals to root out these remnants of capitalism in 1963 when the Socialist Education Movement arrived in the province. This nationwide campaign, also known as the Four Cleanups, had several aims, but a core objective was to sensitize the population, especially young people, to the importance of class struggle as a method for preventing ideological backsliding and revisionism.³² Gansu officials, like party leaders in other provinces, embraced the campaign. At one synthetic ammonia plant in Lanzhou, more than half of workers had been born before 1949 but grew up in Mao's China.³³ Officials worried these young people lacked class consciousness simply because they did not remember the miseries of daily life in "old" China. To enhance these young workers' class consciousness and sharpen their ideological thought, the party committee at the plant organized study sessions to recall the bitterness of pre-socialist life in China.³⁴ Such activities would prepare workers to confront the threats posed by capitalism and feudalism.³⁵ But they also created a delicate environment for hosting European experts. On one hand, party leaders had reason to worry about locals fraternizing with visiting European experts: If bourgeois elements had yet to be stamped out in Gansu, what would happen if they were exposed to the corrupting influence of capitalists from Western Europe? On the other hand, efforts to mobilize the population against class enemies during the Socialist Education Movement also primed locals to perceive threats from foreign capitalism, even when they may not exist.

Training to Host, Bracing for Threats

³² For an overview of the Socialist Education Movement and its significance, see Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: The Coming Cataclysm, 1961-1966* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 334-348.

³³ Wang Xia, "Gansu sheng 'si qing' yundong yanjiu," MA thesis, Northwest Normal University, 2016, p. 42.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

On the eve of the experts' arrival in Lanzhou, leaders in Beijing were also preoccupied with two international threats, both of which further encouraged anxieties about hosting bourgeois experts in a sensitive region in China. The first of these was the threat of U.S. imperialism. This concern had existed since the founding of the PRC in 1949, but the U.S. threat seemed to be growing in the mid-1960s. In April 1965, the CCP Central Committee warned the provinces that deepening U.S. involvement in Vietnam threatened China's own security. The committee ordered local officials to prepare for the possibility that the United States might bring the war to China itself, including direct attacks on Chinese cities, military installations, transportation hubs, and industrial bases.³⁶

The Soviet Union posed the second main international threat. After years of close cooperation and Soviet support to China during the 1950s, including substantial scientific and technological aid, the Sino-Soviet relationship collapsed. Disputes over a range of issues, from disagreements over Marxism-Leninism to competition over clout within the socialist bloc, escalated to the point that Moscow canceled all aid to China in the summer of 1960. The two sides began to strengthen military patrols along the border. They also erected observation towers and built barracks, airfields, medical clinics, and other infrastructure to support increased military deployments near the border.³⁷ For Chinese leaders, the collapse of Sino-Soviet relations not only created threats; it also removed assurances. The alliance with the Soviet Union had once provided reassurance to Chinese leaders in the form of deterrence against an attack by the United States or its allies. Now, by the 1960s, the Sino-Soviet relationship had transformed from a source of security to a cause of concern.

³⁶ CCP Central Committee, "Guanyu jiaqiang beizhan gongzuo de zhishi," 12 April 1965, p. 3, in GPA, 91-018-0419.

³⁷ John W. Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 185.

The American and Soviet threats encouraged a siege mentality in the minds of senior Chinese officials as the Lanzhou projects took shape. In the spring of 1966, just before the Cultural Revolution began and months after the first Europeans had arrived in Lanzhou, Premier Zhou Enlai told party officials in a secret speech that China was a primary target of both U.S. imperialists and Soviet “revisionists,” and that China must prepare for a coming war.³⁸ In an earlier speech in January, he had already said Chinese officials should foster a “mentality of war readiness” (*beizhan sixiang*), a condition China had lacked because the Chinese people had known a mostly peaceful environment in the 16 years since liberation, despite having participated in several “military actions” since 1949. To prevent the masses from being lulled into “peaceful paralysis” (*heping mabi sixiang*), he proposed mobilizing the masses by drawing their attention to the threats of imperialism and Soviet revisionism.³⁹ Leaders in Beijing also began to worry in the spring of 1966 that foreigners might exploit the growing disorder of the Cultural Revolution to collect sensitive information about China’s internal affairs.⁴⁰

These fears seeped into the way officials in Gansu understood their roles and responsibilities as hosts for the European experts. Espionage was a central concern. The Gansu foreign affairs office warned that foreign enemies might use the Lanzhou construction project to send spies into Gansu to steal intelligence, sabotage the sites, or both. Gansu was a particularly ripe target for such activities, the office reasoned, because it was both a strategic rear area and a front line in the “anti-revisionist” struggle against the Soviet Union.⁴¹ Provincial officials also

³⁸ Zhou Enlai, “Zhou zongli zai huabei ju weiyuanhui di wu ci huiyi shang de jianghua,” 16 March 1966, p. 11, in HPA 855-8-3395-5.

³⁹ Zhou Enlai, “Zongli zai quanguo di wu ci mianhua huiyi shang de baogao (jilu gao),” 15 January 1966, p. 2, in HPA, 855-8-3394-2.

⁴⁰ State Council Foreign Affairs Office, “Guanyu dui zai hua waiguo ren xuanchuan wenhua da geming de qingshi baogao,” 15 May 1966, p. 2, in HPA, 855-20-1330-3.

⁴¹ Foreign Affairs Office of the Gansu Provincial People’s Committee, “Guan yu 1965 nian waishi gongzuo de jiben qingkuang he 1966 nian gongzuo yijian,” p. 14.

worried that representatives from the European firms might sabotage the projects by not fulfilling the terms of the contracts. “Foreign technicians come from capitalist countries, [and] all are bourgeois intellectuals,” the office explained. “They will not hand over all their technology easily.”⁴² Provincial officials were equally concerned that the visiting experts would corrupt the political views of their Chinese counterparts by imposing bourgeois values upon them.⁴³

These expectations reflected a larger consensus within the CCP that ideological struggle would occur in Lanzhou once the European experts arrived. This belief was encouraged by the growing siege mentality in China at the time, but it was rooted in ongoing deliberation within the CCP over what it meant to be “red and expert.” Mao believed Chinese revolutionaries must synthesize politics and expertise in all pursuits, especially in science and technology.⁴⁴ Both redness and expertise mattered, but “redness” was the center. It was the lodestar that must guide all scientific and technological work. Marshal Nie Rongzhen explained this in 1963 to graduating students at China’s University of Science and Technology. Nie, who was then chairman of the State Science and Technology Commission, said that “red” meant “politics must be in command, that we must serve the politics of the proletariat, that we must revolutionize [*geminghua*].”⁴⁵ This may have seemed straightforward in the abstract, but party members had been wrestling with how to implement this approach to revolutionary science and technology since the late 1950s.

When the Great Leap Forward began in 1958, for instance, party officials and school

⁴² Ibid., p. 13.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁴ On the origins and significance of “red and expert” in Mao’s China, see Sigrid Schmalzer, “Red and Expert,” in Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere, eds., *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2019), pp. 215-220. See also Richard D. Baum, “‘Red and Expert’: The Politico-Ideological Foundations of China’s Great Leap Forward,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 9 (September 1964), pp. 1048-1057; and Dennis Ray, “‘Red and Expert’ and China’s Cultural Revolution,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring 1970), pp. 22-33.

⁴⁵ As quoted in Zhou Lin, “Nie Rongzhen sixiang zhengzhi gongzuo sixiang yanjiu,” MA thesis, Chongqing University, 2019, p. 31.

administrators struggled with how to apportion time and resources to ensure students developed expertise and redness in the proper proportions.⁴⁶

In the context of international exchanges, the issue of redness and expertise became even more complicated. During the 1950s, technical cooperation with the Soviet Union and other socialist nations fell within the bounds of socialist solidarity as far as Beijing was concerned. The State Council Foreign Expert Bureau described Moscow's decision to dispatch thousands of technicians to China to help industrialize the nation as evidence of socialist "internationalism."⁴⁷ But the arrival of bourgeois technical experts from capitalist Europe was a different type of cooperation. These experts held their own views on the relationship between expertise and politics. Most likely did not share China's revolutionary aspirations. Some were probably hostile to socialism. How could Chinese workers locate and maintain the proper balance between redness and expertise for themselves, for China, and for the projects when the experts overseeing the construction of the Lanzhou complex were ideological foes who, because of their class origins, might scheme to sabotage construction or conduct espionage? And yet, locals knew also how important the project was. The State Council had explained in the summer of 1965 why the Europeans had been hired: to build advanced factories and to train Chinese workers to operate them.⁴⁸ The red-and-expert formulation insisted that technical expertise was essential to China's modernization and the revolution itself, even if it arrived in the form of bourgeois engineers from Western Europe. The challenge was how to absorb their expertise without succumbing to their political influence.

⁴⁶ Kelly, *Market Maoists*, pp. 130-133.

⁴⁷ State Council Foreign Expert Bureau, "Guanyu waiguo zhuanjia gongzuo huiyi qingkuang de baogao," 11 April 1959, p. 2, in Jilin Provincial Archive, 77-05-21.

⁴⁸ State Council Foreign Affairs Office, "Guowuyuan pizhuan guowuyuan waishi bangongshi dui ziben zhuyi guojia jishu ren yuan gongzuo yaodian de tongzhi," 13 July 1965, p. 61, as included in Ministry of Foreign Trade, "Waimaobu wenjian," 9 June 1973, pp. 61-63, in Guangdong Provincial Archives, 274-2-29.

Local officials grappled with these questions in the spring of 1966 as they prepared for more Europeans to arrive. Nine West German engineers, along with two accompanying family members, were already in Lanzhou by May 1966 and working at construction sites.⁴⁹ Provincial officials expected this group to swell to more than one hundred foreign experts by 1968.⁵⁰ Initial preparation focused on educating Lanzhou locals to ensure a smooth reception for the foreigners. The province organized study groups to familiarize locals with recent instructions from Beijing on how to host and interact with foreign engineers from capitalist countries.⁵¹ The provincial leadership also sent workers to Beijing to study the experiences of workers who had recently “managed” foreign technicians at a vinylon factory there. This delegation included staff from the Lanzhou Public Security Bureau, the city’s Friendship Hotel, and the Lanhua oil refinery, all people who would interact with the Europeans routinely in different contexts.⁵² The Lanzhou municipal government sought to create a hospitable environment by launching a propaganda campaign to educate locals on party guidance concerning China’s friendly relations with the peoples, if not the governments, of various nations.⁵³ Local officials clearly wanted the projects to proceed smoothly. “Our central purpose in foreign technical personnel work is to mobilize their [foreign technicians’] enthusiasm, to unleash fully their technical expertise, to ensure the

⁴⁹ Foreign Affairs Office of the Gansu Provincial People’s Committee, “Guanyu 1965 nian waishi gongzuo de jiben qingkuang he 1966 nian gongzuo yijian,” 25 May 1966, p. 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵¹ Foreign Affairs Office of the Gansu Provincial People’s Committee, “Guanyu 1965 nian waishi gongzuo de jiben qingkuang he 1966 nian gongzuo yijian,” 25 May 1966, p. 3. For a discussion of how the Chinese foreign-affairs system (*waishi xitong*) prepared cadres and locals for short-term visits by foreigners more generally during the Mao era, see Julia Lovell, “The Uses of Foreigners in Mao-Era China: ‘Techniques of Hospitality’ and International Image-Building in the People’s Republic,” *Transitions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 25 (2015), pp. 135-158.

⁵² On the composition of the Gansu delegation, see Foreign Affairs Office of the Gansu Provincial People’s Committee, “Guanyu 1965 nian waishi gongzuo de jiben qingkuang he 1966 nian gongzuo yijian,” 25 May 1966, p. 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

smooth completion of factory construction, and to do everything possible to learn relevant technology,” the provincial foreign affairs office wrote on May 25, 1966.⁵⁴

Yet party leaders attempted simultaneously to prepare Lanzhou residents for the threats posed by their bourgeois guests. The provincial foreign affairs office warned Lanzhou officials that the Europeans would be waging a secret ideological war while building the complex. The West German engineers “appear to disregard politics,” the office wrote, “but this is actually a deception.” They had strict discipline and would not openly discuss politics, the office continued, but they are “secretly watching, listening, and asking.”⁵⁵ The challenge for Chinese workers was to remain vigilant and to wage their own ideological struggle with equal subtlety. The foreign affairs office recommended that locals start by fostering a sense of affection. Build friendly relationships with the Europeans, the office advised, then carry out ideological and political influence work in a natural way.⁵⁶ Locals must also maintain a “correct” political outlook on all current events and foreign affairs to ensure they supported China’s official policies.⁵⁷

The need for vigilance extended also to the paperwork associated with the complex. Because the Europeans could be expected to cut corners and withhold technology, the foreign affairs office thought it essential for Chinese staff to understand fully the contracts associated with each site and insist that the terms be followed. The office urged Chinese staff to “make use of the binding force of the contract” (*liyong hetong de yueshuli*) in every instance to guard against backsliding by the Europeans.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

Internal party guidance reveals that tone and disposition mattered as much as substance when working with the Europeans. The provincial foreign affairs office believed Chinese hosts should be trained to adopt a professional posture that was neither subservient nor cocky.⁵⁹ The office instructed Lanzhou workers to show off the city's local strengths when escorting the foreigners on sightseeing trips, but the foreigners should also be permitted to have a look at backward areas, too.⁶⁰ The party's objective was to allow the visitors to deepen their understanding of China as the CCP wanted the nation presented. This included a few blemishes for contrast, which would highlight the progress China had made under party rule since 1949.

Underlying all this preparation and training was a consistent theme: it was impossible to disentangle the Lanzhou petrochemical project from political struggle and security concerns. Daily interactions at worksites might appear genial and collaborative, but this masked a deeper ideological conflict beneath the surface. Party leaders expected this hidden contest to shape every interaction with the European experts. By sensitizing local workers to this dynamic in the spring of 1966, the party was trying to accentuate redness lest it be overlooked in favor of expertise in the context of substantive technological exchanges.

This approach seemed sensible to party officials in the early months of the Lanzhou project. The international threats against China appeared too grave, the location of the worksite too sensitive, and the importance of redness to China's revolution too great not to highlight the political and security dimensions of the project. But as the political winds shifted and the Cultural Revolution gained momentum in the summer of 1966, these attempts to balance redness and expertise helped to fuel local suspicions of the Europeans, who came under increasing scrutiny by local officials who were primed to see the visitors as threats.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

“Redness” Engulfs Expertise

Security incidents related to the Europeans emerged in late spring 1966 with the start of the Cultural Revolution. On June 11, the provincial foreign affairs office investigated big-character posters in Xigu, a district west of central Lanzhou that contained several industrial sites.⁶¹ These posters, which became ubiquitous in public spaces across China during the Cultural Revolution, often contained manifestos and polemics relating to various political themes. But investigators found that most posters in Xigu contained information deemed sensitive. Some revealed details about work units, the names of cadres, and even specifics related to CCP and national policies.⁶² At the same time, investigators also discovered that some of the European workers carried cameras with them during local outings and sometimes left the company of their local guides. At least two sensitive posters had been photographed in the city, investigators determined.⁶³

Chinese officials viewed these incidents as a serious lapse with potential national security implications. They worried not just about foreigners learning the names of work units or local officials, but also the possibility that foreigners might photograph incendiary posters that could tarnish China’s image abroad and undermine the party’s claim that the Cultural Revolution marked a surge forward in China’s modernization.

Zhou Enlai discussed this concern in the summer of 1967 during an internal speech to officials from Anhui province. After a year of proliferating posters and expanding violence, the premier said permitting foreigners to see this side of the Cultural Revolution yielded no benefits

⁶¹ Foreign Affairs Office of the Gansu Provincial People’s Committee, “Guanyu waiguo ren zai jietou paishe dazibao de qingkuang he chuli yijian de baogao,” 11 June 1966, p. 2, in GPA, 91-005-0644.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

for China.⁶⁴ It undermined the image of unity and progress in China, and it suggested the CCP might not have all well in hand. This alternative image, which foreigners in China might spread through letters, photographs, or newspaper articles, became a national security threat because it challenged the CCP's monopoly over the master narrative of the Cultural Revolution and, by extension, threatened party legitimacy precisely as China was facing heightened ideological and security threats from the Soviet Union and the United States.

The European engineers in Lanzhou seemed oblivious to these nuances not because they were obtuse, but because none was trained to perceive, or even consider, such issues. Available evidence suggests they received no training in the politics, history, or culture of China before departing for Lanzhou. At least one engineer, a West German national, explained after he returned from China that he received no information at all about rules, regulations, or proper behavior in China before departing. He claimed not to know what was permitted—and perhaps more importantly, what was *not* permitted—until after arriving in Lanzhou.⁶⁵ Nor does it appear that European firms screened their engineers for characteristics other than technical expertise and willingness to live in rural China for long stretches.

Instead, the firms simply told employees to avoid politics. Leslie Rowan, the chairman of Vickers Limited, explained his company's approach to politics abroad in April 1968. The contracts for all employees who work on the construction of plants in socialist nations, he said,

⁶⁴ Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed., *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949-1976 (xia juan)* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian, 2007), p. 180.

⁶⁵ "Transcript of Recording of Deckart's Debriefing," attachment in P. F. W. Jay (Vickers-Zimmer Limited) to E. J. Sharland (Foreign Office), 16 January 1969, p. 3, in TNA, FCO 21/472, FEC 6C/1. A British diplomat also observed that an engineer who visited the British mission in Beijing before heading to Lanzhou "seemed to have been told remarkably little about life in China" in preparation for his work. T. Peters (Peking) to Ira. S. Russell (Commercial Relations and Exports Department, Board of Trade), untitled letter, 8 December 1967, in TNA, FCO 21/82, FC 3/21.

“specifically require that they should avoid embroilment in political activity.”⁶⁶ Straightforward on its face, this policy said nothing about what constituted political activity. The chairman of Vickers Limited saw no need to clarify this point because it seemed obvious. But his underlying presumption—that commercial, scientific, and technological pursuits could be quarantined from politics—made more sense in London than in Lanzhou, where locals saw politics in every action at the worksite. For them, redness and expertise were conjoined, a perspective lost on the visiting experts and their managers in Europe. Because of this disconnect, few if any of the European arrivals in Lanzhou grasped the complexity of their new political environment or the consequences of violating the rules. If they had, they almost certainly would not have taken liberties. Yet they did, and they paid heavily for it, perhaps none more than George Watt.

Watt, a British citizen, arrived in Lanzhou in December 1966, when the Cultural Revolution was already in full swing.⁶⁷ Vickers-Zimmer had hired him to work as a “Resident Site Engineer” at the petrochemical complex. A few months after his arrival, in the spring of 1967, anti-British protests erupted in China in response to events in Hong Kong, where violent demonstrations against the colonial governor had prompted the Hong Kong Police Force to arrest protest leaders. The Hong Kong governor had also closed schools and publications deemed sympathetic to the CCP, citing evidence that these institutions had supported the unrest.⁶⁸ Leaders in Beijing viewed the Hong Kong crackdown as evidence of anti-China sentiment and encouraged anti-British demonstrations in retaliation, a cause Lanzhou locals embraced by staging their own demonstrations after Watt’s arrival.

⁶⁶ Leslie Rowan, “Chairman’s Statement,” 18 April 1968, in Vickers Limited, *Report and Accounts, 1967* (London: The Broadway Press Ltd, 1968), p. 9, in Cambridge University Library, Vickers Ltd: Records, GBR/0012/MS Vickers, Doc 1957, Director’s Reports, 1955-1970.

⁶⁷ George Watt, *China ‘Spy’* (London: Johnson, 1972), p. 69.

⁶⁸ On the 1967 Hong Kong riots and their political and legal implications, see Ray Yep, “‘Cultural Revolution in Hong Kong’: Emergency Powers, Administration of Justice, and the Turbulent Year of 1967,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (July 2012), pp. 1007-1032.

Despite the circumstances, Watt decided to invite his wife, Josephine, and their two young children to visit Lanzhou for a two-month holiday in the summer of 1967.⁶⁹ The visit passed without major incidents, but it was unpleasant. The Watt family felt harried by protests and fighting among local revolutionary factions. They slept little. A battery of speakers placed near their hotel blared propaganda nightly. But serious problems arose when Josephine Watt and the children attempted to return to the United Kingdom at the end of the summer.

Red Guards searched Mrs. Watt's luggage "with exceptional thoroughness" at the airport and before she and the children boarded one of their flights en route to Europe.⁷⁰ The searchers found rolls of undeveloped film that, to them, appeared suspicious.⁷¹ Even long after the incident, nobody seemed sure what the images contained. Some said they included pictures of industrial installations in Lanzhou, the local airport, and surrounding scenery.⁷² Others claimed George Watt had photographed at least one industrial plant from the air while traveling to or from the worksite.⁷³ Still others speculated he had photographed local Chinese officials who had been later denounced, including some who had been shot.⁷⁴ Mrs. Watt, who was interviewed by British officials following the ordeal, could not remember if she had also been carrying photographs of the burned British mission in Beijing, which had been attacked by local

⁶⁹ Watt, *China 'Spy,'* pp. 104-105.

⁷⁰ A. J. Hunter (Peking) to A. K. Rogora (Commercial Relations and Exports Department, Board of Trade), untitled letter, 8 September 1967, n.p. [p. 1], in TNA, FCO 21/82, FC 3/21. British sources are inconsistent about where this luggage search occurred. A. J. Hunter reported that it happened at the airport in Beijing. See *ibid.* James Murray, a Foreign Office official, reported that it happened at the airport in Shanghai. See James Murray, "Mr. Watt of Vickers-Zimmer," 27 March 1968, n.p. [p. 1], in TNA, FCO 21/109, FC 6/30.

⁷¹ James Murray, "Mr. Watt of Vickers-Zimmer," 27 March 1968, n.p. [p. 1].

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Michael Stewart (Scott Bader & Company) to Brian Parkyn (MP), forwarded to William Rodgers (Foreign Office), "The Vickers-Zimmer Situation in China," 29 April 1968, p. 2, in TNA, FCO 21/109, FC 6/30.

⁷⁴ E. J. Sharland (Foreign Office) to Mr. John B. Denson (Foreign Office), "Vickers Zimmer: Lanchow[,] Meeting of Mr. Jay with Mr. Hill, a Simon Carves employee on leave from China," 11 January 1968, n.p. [p. 1], in TNA, FCO 21/82, FC 3/21.

protestors during the anti-British uproar in August. Mr. Watt had taken these photographs just before Mrs. Watt and the children departed and may have passed them to his wife.⁷⁵

While the specifics of the photographs remained hazy, British officials suspected the images contained details that would have seemed sensitive inside China at the time. The Foreign Office in London, after reading reports from other engineers who had returned from Lanzhou, believed George Watt had indeed broken regulations by taking photographs in restricted areas.⁷⁶ Watt's autobiography, published years later under the title, *China 'Spy,'* featured images of "Cultural Revolution victims," anti-British posters, and the Vickers-Zimmer plant under construction, which suggests he did indeed take pictures of scenes that Chinese officials would have considered sensitive.⁷⁷ As the title of Watt's autobiography suggests, he had a reputation for bluster and cavalier behavior. Some said he was reckless. Colleagues in Lanzhou had heard him badmouth Mao publicly on occasion.⁷⁸ Josephine Watt did not have the same reputation, but officials in London believed she had been "foolish" to attempt to carry photos out of China.⁷⁹

Some of these critiques were unfair. The behavior of the Watt family may have seemed foolish in retrospect, but other foreign experts in Lanzhou had also taken questionable photographs during this time. British and West German experts in Lanzhou, when they learned of the Watt family troubles, burned "large numbers" of their own photographs.⁸⁰ The Foreign Office thought one West German engineer, Peter Deckart, may also have photographed the Lanzhou

⁷⁵ E. J. Sharland (Foreign Office) to Mr. John B. Denson (Foreign Office), "Exodus of Watt family from China," 11 September 1967, n.p. [p. 1], in TNA, FCO 21/82, FC 3/21.

⁷⁶ Far Eastern Department, "Background Note: Mr. Watt of Vickers-Zimmer," 5 July 1968," pp. 2-3, in TNA, FCO 21/109, FC 6/30; John B. Denson (Foreign Office) to James Murray (Foreign Office), "Vickers Zimmer: Lanchow: Recent Developments," 12 February 1968, n.p. [p. 1], in TNA, FCO 21/107, FC 6/22.

⁷⁷ Watt, *China 'Spy,'* n.p.

⁷⁸ E. J. Sharland (Foreign Office) to John B. Denson (Foreign Office), "Vickers Zimmer: Lanchow[,] Meeting of Mr. Jay with Mr. Hill, a Simon Carves employee on leave from China," 11 January 1968, n.p. [p. 1].

⁷⁹ Far Eastern Department, "Background Note: Mr. Watt of Vickers-Zimmer," 5 July 1968, pp. 2-3.

⁸⁰ E. J. Sharland (Foreign Office) to John B. Denson and James Murray (Foreign Office), untitled letter, 22 July 1968, n.p. [p. 2], in TNA, FCO 21/109, FC 6/30.

airport and other facilities in the city.⁸¹ Which facilities, nobody knew, but it didn't matter because nobody knew what constituted a sensitive site in Lanzhou in the first place, beyond obvious military installations. None could read Chinese, so they had no way of knowing whether the photographs they took contained details of work units or the names of local officials. None had any significant prior exposure to Chinese politics, so it would have been difficult for them to grasp the significance of the big-character posters they may have photographed in town.

But the Red Guards at the airport found more than photographs in Mrs. Watt's luggage. She also had a bundle of letters written by engineers in Lanzhou to their families at home, which she planned to mail once she had left China.⁸² The Red Guards surmised Mrs. Watt's intention had been to evade Chinese censors and to spread anti-China messages. Mrs. Watt had also packed confidential Vickers-Zimmer reports, which the firm said were innocuous, and a report from one Vickers-Zimmer engineer in Lanzhou that, according to information received by the Foreign Office, may have contained "impolite" references to China.⁸³

Josephine Watt and the children were permitted to depart China, but George Watt, who had intended to return to Lanzhou to resume work at the Vickers-Zimmer site, was apprehended by security officers in Beijing, where he had been staying temporarily after seeing the family off. Chinese officials escorted Watt to Lanzhou on September 26 and held him in isolation on the top floor of the hotel where all the other foreign experts and their families lived.⁸⁴ Chinese security

⁸¹ James Murray (Foreign Office) to A. J. de la Mare (Foreign Office), "Foreign Firms Engaged in Erecting Plant in China," 1 December 1967, p. 2, in TNA, FCO 21/107, FC 6/22.

⁸² James Murray (Foreign Office) to the Secretary of State, "Arrest of Mr. Watt of Vickers-Zimmer," 13 October 1967, n.p. [p. 1], in TNA, FCO 21/82, FC 3/21.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ For Watt's arrest date, see Foreign Office, "Background Note: Mr. George Watt," undated memorandum attachment in James Murray (Foreign Office) to Mr. Godden (Foreign Office), "Detention of British Subjects in China: Mr. George Watt's Trousers," 12 December 1969, p. 1, in TNA, FCO 21/472, FEC 6C/1.

officials also detained Peter Deckart, the West German engineer working for Vickers-Zimmer whose letters and photos were also found in Mrs. Watt's luggage.

Chinese officials believed they had discovered a plot that stretched to the Vickers-Zimmer company itself in London. They concluded that Watt and Deckart had been sent to China to collect intelligence by a Vickers manager whom the Chinese believed was really a British "secret service agent."⁸⁵ The chairman of Vickers-Zimmer denied the charge.⁸⁶ The Foreign Office also dismissed the allegations. Mr. Watt was hardly a spy "in the normal sense of the word," one official wrote.⁸⁷ He meant "normal" in London, but Watt wasn't in London. He was in Lanzhou, where growing emphasis on revolutionary politics had altered the balance between redness and expertise. The surging importance of "redness" primed Red Guards and Chinese officials to focus more on the political threats posed by bourgeois visitors from capitalist Europe than the technical expertise these visitors contributed to China's industrialization. From this perspective, the behavior of Watt and Deckart suggested imperialist subterfuge, a plot to spread anti-China slander and conduct espionage targeting China's sensitive industrial interior.

Executives at Vickers-Zimmer and British officials developed their own interpretation of events, one rooted more in cynicism than politics. The rise of redness at the expense of expertise had caused other problems at the Lanzhou petrochemical complex before the detention of Watt and Deckart in the fall of 1967. In January, revolutionaries had abducted the general and commercial managers of the Lanzhou Chemical Construction Company, which controlled all the foreign plants being built in the city.⁸⁸ European engineers also began to complain of worker

⁸⁵ Dr. Hardung-Hardung, "Situation in China," Memorandum of telephone conversation with Mr. Levedag (Lurgi), forwarded to P. F. W. Jay (Vickers-Zimmer Limited), 15 August 1968, p. 2, in TNA, FCO 21/108, FC/22.

⁸⁶ Leslie Rowan, "Chairman's Statement," 18 April 1968, p. 9.

⁸⁷ Foreign Office, "Background Note: Mr. George Watt," undated, p. 1.

⁸⁸ A. J. Hunter (Peking) to A. K. Rogers (Commercial Relations and Exports Department, Board of Trade), 1 February 1967, n.p. [p. 1], in TNA, FCO 21/63, FC 3/3.

shortages. Chinese laborers were routinely pulled from projects to participate in political activities. Unrest and violence also affected the sites. More than one European engineer witnessed Chinese workers strip pipes from the Lurgi and Vickers-Zimmer sites and file them into spears for use in local political battles.⁸⁹

Executives at Vickers-Zimmer began to suspect that Chinese officials were using accusations of espionage to conceal these and other setbacks caused by the Chinese. Rumors circulated among foreign experts that the Lurgi plant would produce a feedstock that was unusable by the Vickers-Zimmer plant. Vickers-Zimmer surmised that the chemical division of Techimport had made a serious mistake, and that the Chinese probably did not even want the plants completed now. Instead, they hoped to blame the failed projects on the European firms themselves rather than their own ineptitude.⁹⁰ Some theorized that Chinese officials intended to use Watt and Deckart as hostages, perhaps to force the European firms to complete the projects despite the delays caused by the Cultural Revolution or to pressure the European firms not to seek arbitration to settle any disputes in Sweden, as the contracts stipulated.⁹¹ Others wondered if the detentions were simply fallout from a seemingly inexplicable “spy mania” gripping China at the time, which had led to foreign journalists, sailors, and others being charged with espionage elsewhere in China.⁹²

The Redness Clause in Technical Collaboration

⁸⁹ “Transcript of Recording of Deckart’s Debriefing,” p. 19.

⁹⁰ James Murray, “Mr. Watt of Vickers-Zimmer,” 27 March 1968, p. 6.

⁹¹ James Murray (Foreign Office) to A. F. R. Maddocks (Hong Kong), “German Nationals in China,” 16 December 1969, in TNA, FCO 21/473, FEC 6/2.

⁹² *Ibid.*

Few if any foreign observers anticipated this turn of events. As late as August 1967, a month before George Watt was detained, the British mission in Beijing had thought it unlikely anyone working on the Lanzhou projects would be pulled into the Cultural Revolution. Dragging foreign experts into the fray would scare away other engineers and technical workers, British diplomats reasoned. Nobody would want to work in China again, and this would jeopardize the nation's industrialization.⁹³ This prediction proved wrong, of course, and Chinese officials soon charged still other Europeans working on the plants with espionage and other crimes.⁹⁴

Anticipating these shifts would have been difficult under the best of circumstances given the fluid nature of politics between 1966 and 1968. But the Foreign Office, executives at Vickers-Zimmer, and the European experts were predisposed not to think deeply about the role of politics within the scope of the Lanzhou commercial venture. The contract itself between Vickers-Zimmer and Techimport embodied this view by eschewing politics altogether. Yet for party officials and Chinese workers in Lanzhou, who viewed scientific and technological pursuits through the lens of "red and expert," daily work at the Lanzhou petrochemical project was inescapably political. So ingrained were these divergent views that European observers and Chinese officials understood the breakdown of the project in vastly different terms. Where Europeans saw cynical efforts by China to conceal mistakes and evade responsibility for setbacks, Chinese officials saw imperialist plots of espionage and sabotage. These differences

⁹³ T. Peters (Peking) to John B. Denson (Foreign Office), untitled letter, 14 August 1967, n.p. [p. 1], in TNA, FCO 21/82, FC 3/21.

⁹⁴ For example, Kurtz von Xylander, a Lurgi engineer, was detained in Beijing in November 1967, returned to Lanzhou in January 1968, and accused of spying for U.S. intelligence. Amnesty International Research Department, "Foreign Nationals Imprisoned, In Detention or Restriction in China," attachment to Stephanie Grant (Amnesty International) to John Boyd (Foreign Office), untitled letter, 19 February 1969, n.p. [p. 2], in FCO 21/498, FEC 14/1; and John B. Denson (Peking) to Colin Wilson (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), "The Xylander Affair," 29 October 1969, n.p. [p. 1], in TNA FCO 21/473, FEC 6/2. At least four other Lurgi employees who worked in Lanzhou were also detained in China for more than a year. Peking to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, untitled telegram, 24 October 1969, in TNA, FCO 21/473, FEC 6/2.

existed in 1964 and 1965 when China signed contracts with the West European firms, but the surge of “redness” during the early Cultural Revolution brought the implications of the contrast fully into view.

In late February 1968, David Cockburn, the managing director of Vickers-Zimmer, visited Beijing for talks with Techimport to resolve the disputes. The meetings devolved into mutual recrimination. Techimport accused Vickers-Zimmer of sending Watt and Deckart to China to spy under the cover of business, which meant Vickers-Zimmer bore full responsibility for the collapse of the project.⁹⁵ Techimport representatives also accused Vickers-Zimmer of a string of missteps and mistakes, all of which constituted a pre-planned fraud.⁹⁶ Because Vickers-Zimmer had already “destroyed” the contract singlehandedly, Techimport argued, China could pursue its claims against the firm in its own “revolutionary courts” rather than submit the dispute to formal arbitration in Stockholm, as the original contract specified.⁹⁷

Several weeks later, on March 15, the Lanzhou Intermediate People’s Court announced that Watt and Deckart had been convicted of espionage. Both men had signed confessions following prolonged interrogations.⁹⁸ Watt was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment and served most of his sentence in Beijing.⁹⁹ Deckart, who had reportedly been more cooperative during interrogations and had done less to offend locals in Lanzhou, was quietly deported.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Vickers Zimmer, “Notes of Meetings with Techimport Re Mulberry Contract,” undated, p. 4, in TNA, FCO 21/107, FC 6/22.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7. The arbitration procedures included in the Vickers-Zimmer contract with Techimport can be found in an attachment to Far Eastern Department (Foreign Office), “Vickers-Zimmer at Lanchow[:] Commercial Aspects,” 20 December 1967, p. 26, in TNA, FCO 21/107, FC 6/22.

⁹⁸ For Watt’s confession, see Watt, *China ‘Spy,’* p. 162. For Deckart’s, see “Transcript of Recording of Deckart’s Debriefing,” pp. 25-26.

⁹⁹ “British Spy Case Broken in Lanchow,” *Peking Review*, 22 March 1968 (No. 12), p. 14; Watt, *China ‘Spy,’* p. 169. Watt was released six months early, on 10 August 1970. Lung-Sheng Tao, “Communist China’s Criminal Jurisdiction over Aliens,” *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (October 1970), p. 614.

¹⁰⁰ During interrogation, Deckart came to believe he had slandered China in Lanzhou by writing a letter to a friend that contained his candid initial impressions of China. “Transcript of Recording of Deckart’s Debriefing,” pp. 22-23.

Techimport also sued Vickers-Zimmer in Beijing. On July 3, 1968, the Beijing Municipal Intermediate People's Court decided in Techimport's favor and annulled the original contract, effective immediately. The court also ordered Vickers-Zimmer to pay an indemnity of £650,000 to Techimport, roughly 25 percent of the £2,500,000 total value of the contract.¹⁰¹

To Vickers-Zimmer and the Foreign Office, these outcomes demonstrated an improper intrusion of politics into commercial affairs. But from the perspective of Chinese officials, politics had suffused the Lanzhou petrochemical project from the beginning. The question for the CCP had always been how to manage the political dimension of the project, not how to expunge it. For the Europeans, this difference in perspective was easier to overlook in 1964 and 1965, when the contracts were signed. But it became all too obvious when the Cultural Revolution ushered in a new climate, one that prized redness to such an extent that it made spies and saboteurs out of engineers and families and shook the foundation of collaboration between ideological foes in Lanzhou.

Not all foreign experts in China during received the same treatment as Watt and Deckart during the early Cultural Revolution. Nor did all European firms suffer the same frustrations as Vickers-Zimmer. Eight other British engineers working at the Lanzhou complex for Prinex, a subsidiary of Courtauld, reported no serious trouble with Chinese authorities.¹⁰² Why had some experts been singled out for charges and others not? Nobody among the foreign expert community in Lanzhou, the company executives in Europe, or the Foreign Office could be sure. Available archival materials from China also shed little light on this question. But what is clear

¹⁰¹ China National Technical Import Corporation (Beijing) to Vickers-Zimmer (London), untitled letter, 28 January 1969, p. 2, in TNA, FCO 21/472, FEC/6C/1. For the value of the Vickers-Zimmer contract, see E. J. Sharland (Foreign Office) to John B. Denson and James Murray (Foreign Office), untitled letter, 22 July 1968, n.p. [p. 1], in TNA, FCO 21/109, FC/6/30.

¹⁰² James Murray (Foreign Office) to A. J. de la Mare (Foreign Office), 1 December 1967, p. 4, in TNA, FCO 21/107, FC 6/22.

from the case of the Lanzhou petrochemical complex is that the concept of redness and expertise was key to understanding how the CCP approached the project itself. After the withdrawal of Soviet aid in 1960, the CCP's desire for new sources of technical expertise to fuel China's industrialization justified the presence of bourgeois European experts in a sensitive region of Mao's China. This despite a sense that China was facing growing threats from abroad. But the party also insisted that redness guide all technical and professional activities, including those at the site, a view that encouraged the quiet presumption that ideological threats would accompany European expertise. In this sense, redness functioned like an invisible clause in the contracts signed by Techimport and the European firms.

During the relatively mild period of rebuilding and consolidation in China in the early 1960s, after the disruption caused by the Great Leap Forward, these threats appeared relatively muted. But when the Cultural Revolution erupted in the summer of 1966, redness and political orthodoxy became increasingly important. This shift reconfigured how Chinese workers and officials viewed the petrochemical complex and the European experts working there by diminishing the importance of expertise relative to redness. In other words, redness swamped expertise in Lanzhou, which produced tragic consequences for Watt and Deckart and unanticipated costs for Vickers-Zimmer. Red and expert became an unsteady foundation for technical collaboration in Mao's China, and as long as the CCP insisted that both redness and expertise were essential to such scientific and technological pursuits, the door remained open for similar tensions to ebb and flow in the future in line with prevailing political winds in Mao's China.