Dayo F. Gore  
University of California, San Diego


Let the black people of the U.S. take fresh heart in the knowledge that they are not alone, not without friends and allies at home and abroad.  
- Vicki Garvin, 1968

All genuine knowledge originates in direct experience.  
- Mao Zedong, On Practice, 1937

Recalling Mao’s Challenge is to recall a time when many things seemed possible; it is to remember possibility against the pressure to concede to the world as it now appears.  
- Rebecca Karl, Mao and China in the Twentieth Century World, 2010

"Revolutionary greetings to the people of Shanghai!" Vicki Garvin declared as she began her prepared remarks to an overflowing crowd gathered for a pre-rally meeting at the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Languages in April 1968. The gathering was planned in honor of Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong's statement, "In Support of the Afro-American Struggle Against Violent Repression," issued on April 16th. Garvin continued, "May I, on behalf of the revolutionary black people of the United States and their like-minded white allies, express our deep love and respect for, and sincere appreciation to Chairman Mao, the world's revolutionary leader, for his recent statement of encouragement and firm support of the Afro American's struggle against violent suppression."

Garvin went on to outline key recent events in the U.S. black freedom struggle, from the 1963 March on Washington Movement to the passage of the Civil Rights Acts and the rise of Black Power. Borrowing a popular reframe from Mao’s 1938 writings “On Protracted War” Garvin assured her audience that the rising call for “Black Power” reflected recognition by revolutionaries that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun” and "that the entire existing social system …in the U.S. must be changed." Thus she asserted, "There is abundant evidence that the American
blacks have linked their own struggle with that of the world's revolutionary peoples especially in Viet Nam, and the slogan, 'Hell No, We Won't Go!' is a common rallying call against a common enemy.\(^1\)

It is, perhaps, not surprising to find Vicki Garvin, a self-proclaimed black internationalist and former member of the U.S. Communist Party (CPUSA), allying herself in 1968 with Mao Zedong thought and embracing a political view which situated the U.S. black freedom struggle as a part of a worldwide revolutionary movement. Particularly since in 1964 Mao urged “people of the world” to “unite and defeat the U.S. aggressor and all their running dogs!” to “be courageous, dare to fight” and “then the whole world will belong to the people.”\(^2\) But, it is notable that Garvin does so from Shanghai, one of the key cites of mass uprising during China’s explosive and violent Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), and as the representative spokesperson for the black freedom struggle affirming its embrace of Maoist thought and revolutionary solidarities.

Vicki Garvin’s position in this moment reflects the standing of Mao Zedong and China within the revolutionary global politics as well as a continuation of her own life long commitments to communist internationalism and the fight for black liberation. A self proclaimed “pan-Africanist” and “proletarian, working class, internationalist,” by the early 1960s Garvin was looking beyond U.S. borders for sites to continue her work in support of revolutionary struggle and solidarity. In part her decision to live outside the U.S. were inform by her years as a labor activist and member of New York's black left during the early postwar period, working alongside Claudia Jones, Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois. Garvin joined the CPUSA in 1947 and sustained these commitments


throughout the anticommunist attacks of McCarthyism, despite her growing disagreements with what she considered the CPUSA’s misguided policies and practiced appeasement, particularly in regards to “the (African American) national question.” It was these longstanding political commitments and the networks that helped to sustain them, that led Vicki Garvin to China.

Indeed, Garvin’s activist trajectory from the New York black left to decolonizing countries in Africa and Asia stands as a vital part of the genealogy of Third World solidarity projects as well as African Americans contributions to international anti-imperialist movements and a brand of internationalist "Third World communism" that inspired a new generation of radicals in the US and beyond during the 1960s and 1970s.3 These solidarity politics took center stage in the U.S. as part of the explosive social movements of the 1960s and the shifting dynamics of Cold War geopolitics. In this particular context, Third World solidarity came to represent support for liberation and anticolonial struggles in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean as well as support for the struggles of diasporic communities within the U.S. that hailed from these regions and now resides as oppressed minorities (or Third World people) in America.4 The roots of this movement stretched back even further to earlier black internationalists ongoing effort to find models of resistance beyond the West through sustained engagement with those active in the Indian independence movements, investments in challenging the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and


4 The term Third World was coined in 1952 to identify countries considered part of the undeveloped world, which where also often located in the Global South and unaligned with either the Soviet block or Western Capitalist in the Cold War. By the time of the Bandung conference it had emerged as a term of resistance celebrating the rise of newly independent nations and their refusal to concede to the global demands of the U.S. or Soviet Union. See Vijay Prashad, Darker Nations, 10 and 11, a study he begins by asserting, "The Third World was not a place. It was a project."
longstanding support for the struggles against apartheid in South Africa. Yet it connected perhaps most directly to the early postwar years and the 1955 Asian-African conference held in Bandung, Indonesia. In the post-Bandung world, African American activists reframed a meeting of head of states and a profound moment of challenge to Western hegemony, in a variety of inventive and imaginative ways that fueled a range of transnational solidarity efforts. From Castro's Cuba and Nkrumah's Ghana to Mao's China, such solidarities were also buttressed by socialist leaning countries - under the charismatic leadership of “great men” - that sought to forge bonds with activists in the US, particularly black radicals who viewed (and were encourage to view) their fight for liberation as both bolstered by and tied to these new nations.

These U.S. Third World solidarity projects was at their core sustained by imagined, material, and historical connections, exchanges, and collective protest. However, spectacular and symbolic moments such as Kwame Nkrumah's 1958 visit to New York in which over 10,000 people filled Seventh Avenue to Castro setting up camp at the Theresa hotel in Harlem during the 1960 meeting of the United Nation's and Chairman Mao's 1968 statement "In Support of the Afro-American

---


Struggle Against Violent Repression," have, nonetheless, come to represent most of these transnational connections. These moments often make less visible the ways on-the-ground activists took-up and remade these solidarity politics in their own movements and organizing efforts. From feminists groups who embraced Mao's proclamation that "Women hold up half the sky" and black nationalists who re-imagined an African past to inform their political and cultural practices, to the sharpening critiques of U.S. imperialist.  

Expatriate communities, including African American activists and radicals who relocated their political work to leading sites of revolutionary and anti-imperialist activism in the Global South. These countries played an important, if not always central, role in building transnational connections. For the strength of Third World solidarity politics was not simply real and imagined connections between the U.S. and disparate geographic sites (although many viewed it as such), but the ways these connections amplified challenges to U.S. imperialist, white supremacy on a global scale, and the longstanding East-West paradigm of Cold War politics. It also created space for multivoiced visions of revolutionary change and liberation, ranging from left of liberal tranational politics to building an international communist movement, including at times critiquing the masculinist investments of nationalist politics.  

The work of creating and sustaining these connections at times

---

9 The term Third World was coined in 1952 to identify countries considered part of the undeveloped world, which where also often located in the Global South and unaligned with either the Soviet block or Western Capitalist in the Cold War. By the time of the Bandung conference it had emerged as a term of resistance celebrating the rise of newly independent nations and their refusal to concede to the global demands of the U.S. or Soviet Union. See Vijay Prashad, Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World (New Press, 2007): 10 and 11, a study he begins by asserting, "The Third World was not a place. It was a project."
produced very power moments of alliances, key interventions as well as moments of mistrust and miscommunication, blind spots, political compromise and disappointment.10

Centering Vicki Garvin's travels --which took her first to Nigeria, then Ghana and finally to China-- and the communities of American radicals that she joined while living and working in these Third World and socialist countries, this paper examines the experiences of African American expatriates living in China during crucial moments of revolutionary struggle and traces the ways they provided the practical skills, political reputations and activists networks that were vital to making and sustaining U.S. Third World solidarity by serving as a visible link between the U.S. black freedom struggle and leading socialist and anti-imperialist nations in the Third World.

In carrying out such work African American women often encountered gendered limitations, as nationalist and international communist politics reflexively centered and celebrated men of color. However, recent research, including Cheryl Higashida’s exciting study *Black Internationalists Feminism* and essays in my own edited collection *Want to Start a Revolution*, have shown the range of ways black women embraced revolutionary nationalism and communist internationalism while also challenging the patriarchal and masculinist tendencies that buttressed much of its theorizing and practices. Thus in this essay I am seek to explore the ways African American women radicals negotiated the gendered politics of U.S. Third World solidarity. What did this activism mean for their own connections to the black freedom struggle at home and what political options and tensions did they encounter as representatives in a project and networks often represented (if not made and sustained) by charismatic “great men?”

Garvin’s transnational travels reflect the routes taken by a number of American leftists, who found new avenues for their political vision in the rising tide of decolonization. Their decisions to live outside the U.S., although often complicated and constrained by the domestic Cold War, came to stand as a clear indictment of the U.S. democracy (as a few even gave up their U.S. citizenship). They also served to symbolically represent the international reach of and political support for the newly independent socialist nations in which they found a home. Nations such as Cuba and China, who provided political asylum to black radicals prosecuted by the U.S. government such as Assata Shakur and Robert F. Williams, valued this international reputation as an example of their leadership in the worldwide revolutionary movement. Moreover, these internationalists served as welcome committees for U.S. visitors and became crucial voices in building international awareness of U.S. imperialism as well as political struggles in the states, particularly African American struggles for liberation. Thus these radicals operated with a type of translocal consciousness as their political commitments and concerns reached beyond the nation and nationality, even as their experiences in their new home continued to be informed by and inform the politics of identity and resistance in the U.S.11

The African Diaspora and U.S. Third World Solidarity Politics

As with many black radicals, escaping the 1950s U.S. climate of anticommunism and the racial violence of white supremacy proved a strong impetus in Vicki Garvin’s decision to relocate.12 Garvin found her first opportunity for political rejuvenation with a move to Nigeria in May 1961,

---


12 Garvin, interview with Gil Nobel, 6.
just one year after the nation gained formal independence from Britain. In 1963, Garvin left Nigeria and settled in Accra, Ghana connecting a vibrant community of black radicals, including longtime allies from New York, who continued their activism abroad.

It was through her work in Ghana as an English language teacher for foreign diplomats that led Chinese Ambassador Huang Hua to extend the invitation for Garvin to visit China. As Kwame Nkrumah’s efforts at building African socialism and Pan African unity begin to fade, Garvin joined an exodus of activists from the country. Alice Windom summed up the shifting political winds, declaring, “Nothing seems possible to me…all the purpose has gone out of being in Africa now that it has turned into a bloody minstrel show, but I can’t yet face going back to the States.” Windom would move on to work with the United Nations in Ethiopia while Garvin, who also could not face returning to the U.S., except for a brief visit in the summer of 1964, turned her hopes to China.

Representatives of A Global Vision of Revolutionary Struggle

In taking up the offer from Ambassador Hua to work as an English language teacher in Shanghai, Garvin joined a number of African American radicals who sought to developed ties with the communist nation. Perhaps her most famous predecessors were Garvin’s longtime comrades W.E.B. DuBois who visited China in 1936 before the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rose to

13 Vicki Garvin, “Ghana Notes in the 1960s,” VGP.


16 Alice Windom to Julian Mayfield, August 23, 1966, box 6, folder 21, JMP.

17 “Celebrating Women’s History Month,” 9. In 1964 it was still illegal for most U.S. citizens to travel to China, this was not changed until the 1970s.
power and returned again in 1956 with his wife Shirley Graham DuBois. Following the coup in Ghana, Shirley Graham Du Bois was also forced to relocated but remained based on the African continent in Egypt. However, she continued to strengthen her connections to China by traveling there frequently. In addition, Robert F. Williams, the black radical from North Carolina who faced government harassment for advocating armed self-defense, also found a new home in China in 1965. Williams and his wife Mable had initially been welcomed in Cuba to avoid prosecution on false charges in North Carolina, and from there they remained connected to the black struggle at home through the publication of their Crusader newspaper and the transmission of his searing “Radio Free Dixon” broadcasts. Disheartened by the shifts in Cuban politics and ongoing conflicts with white American communists, the Williamses shifted their allegiance and their newspaper to the PRC.

Yet, these renowned activists were considered latecomers when compared to a number of white American leftists who made their home in Beijing China. This included Anna Louise Strong, a longtime radical and prolific chronicler of world revolutions, who returned to China in 1958 at the age of 73. Strong had a long and complicated relationship to communism having reported on numerous revolutions and been expelled from the Soviet Union in 1949 under accusations of being an American spy. Upon returning to the states she was ostracized by the U.S. Communist Party and had her passport taken by U.S. State Department under the anticommunist Smith Act laws. Soon after being exonerated of spying charges in 1955, Strong regained her passport and returned to the

Soviet Union, before settling permanently in Beijing, China. Sidney Rittenberg had perhaps the highest standing as an American expatriate in the PRC. A former member of the U.S. CP, he arrived in China in 1945, at the tail end of World War II, after being drafted into the U.S. Army and trained as a Chinese language specialist. Rittenberg would stay in the country throughout the 1940s, supporting the CCP in the civil war or the “war of liberation,” enduring a brief imprisonment, and emerging in the 1960s as a trusted government translator and vocal supporter of Mao and the CCP.

Other Americans living in China included African American "foreign expert" Frank Coe, an economist and former official in the U.S. Treasury Department, and his wife Ruth Coe. The Coes escaped to China after Frank Coe was accused of being a Soviet spy and faced sustained FBI investigation and government prosecution. Less celebrated American supporters included Nancy and David Milton who worked as language teachers in Shanghai, Gerry Tannenbaum who had been in China since before the civil war, and Talitha Gerlach a former YWCA worker who also settled in Shanghai.

Like Garvin, many left-leaning American expatriates, arrived in China seeking a safe haven and the opportunity to contribute to a viable political movement. Many had been members of or


had some affiliation with the CPUSA and viewed China as the new hope for building a socialist world. Others embraced the People’s Republic as a site for challenging U.S. imperialism and a base of support from which to hone their own politics and see the revolution in action.\textsuperscript{23} China provided all of these radicals a base from which to continue to participate in transnational revolutionary politics, while remaining connected to emerging U.S. activism that advocated a range of Third World solidarities and revolutionary nationalist visions inspired in part by Mao’s writings.\textsuperscript{24} In turn, they all contributed to solidifying China’s reputation as a powerful force on the international stage, a leader in the global communist politics, and supportive of liberation struggles in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The Sino-Soviet split, which became public in 1960, intensified the political importance of these connections.\textsuperscript{25} At the center of these conflicts were both ideological and geopolitical differences. The CCP refused to accept the Soviet Union as the sole leader of the worldwide communist movement or to follow its nation building formula. China’s rejection of Soviet-style communism produced a profound fracture in the International Communist movement.\textsuperscript{26} Historian Anne-Marie Brady notes that, "as relations between China and the Soviet Union worsened and the United States maintained its hostile stance, Beijing focused on strengthening relations with the countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia and lent its support to national liberation movements around the globe."\textsuperscript{27} "Foreign friends," as they were called, played a key role in bolstering this

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{25} Lorenz M. Luthis, \textit{The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World} (Princeton, 2008)
\item\textsuperscript{26} Lorenz M. Luthis, \textit{The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World} (Princeton, 2008)
\item\textsuperscript{27} Brady, \textit{Making the Foreign Serve China}, 124.
\end{itemize}
"people's diplomacy" by working as translators, teachers, and journalists to popularize Mao Zedong's writings and report home on daily life in China. This emphasis on “people’s diplomacy” also provided expatriates with framework for engaging politics in the U.S. and building real support for U.S. liberation movements in the Third World.

Garvin, as well as Mabel and Robert Williams, were a part of a wave of “foreign friends” who arrived after 1960 as the Soviets left. Similar to others in this group, Garvin did not know how to speak the language or have connections to the ongoing political debates and struggles. She also encountered a more structured and isolating protocol that kept foreign activism apart from Chinese activism and required loyalty to the CCP line in regards to the Soviet Union and the international communist movement.

The contours of, at least one aspect of these relationships, can be read in Mao's "Statement Supporting the Afro-American in Their Just Struggle Against Racial Discrimination by U.S. imperials," which was issued on August 8, 1963 soon after the March on Washington. Mao used the statement not only to exemplify China's leadership in fighting U.S. imperials, but by framing the statement as a response to several requests made by Robert F. Williams, "An Afro American leader now taking refuge in Cuba," it also served to elevate Williams’ status in the black liberation struggle in his home country. A similar reading could also be applied to numerous moments, such as the rally in celebration of Mao’s 1968 statement "In Support of the Afro-American Struggle,” in which Shanghai party leadership appointed Vicki Garvin as the lead speaker. In these moment Vicki Garvin’s support authenticated China’s position as a valued ally of the black liberation movement,

---

28 Historians have noted Williams continued presences and impact on the black power politics despite living in exile, including being name president of the Revolutionary Action Movement, a 1960s black nationalist student organization. See Mao Zedong, "Statement Supporting the Afro-American in Their Just Struggle Against Racial Discrimination by U.S. imperials," 91 and Kelley and Esch, "Black Like Mao," 109-112 both in Afro Asia and Taj Frazier, “Thunder in the East”
even as it provided local populations with first hand accounts of U.S. racism and validated Garvin’s work as a solidarity activist.

Moreover, as the Sino-Soviet split intensified the CCP’s interests in welcoming supportive foreigners into the country to fill the gap left by the major exodus of the Soviets and supporters of the Soviet Union Communist Party. Vicki Garvin, and others, had little difficulty embracing Mao’s critique of the Soviet Union as "revisionist." She had broken with the US Communist Party after 1956, not as for many members because of Nikita Khrushchev’s “secret speech” regarding Stalin’s, but as part of a smaller contingent that begin to distance themselves from the party for what Garvin articulated as its "revisionist" tendencies, particularly its concession to U.S. capitalism and "liquidation" of the black national question.29

Mao's recognition of Robert Williams and Vicki Garvin’s role as a representative spokesperson, highlights the unique position African American expatriates had as supporters of the China during this period in which race and gender (and identity politics broadly defined) mattered and traveled in global politics. As scholars have documented, in the landscape of Cold War politics and decolonization the U.S. State Department long feared the challenge black radicals posed to the idealized image of U.S. liberal democracy.30 In the 1960s -with the international reach of civil rights protest, Malcolm X and the Black Panthers- these fears only intensified.31 However, Garvin’s reputation as a dedicated revolutionary, behind-the-scene strategist, and anti-revisionist did not

29 Garvin was particularly angered by the CP’s decision to remove support from black left organization such as the National Negro Labor Council, and Freedom newspaper and instead focus on building with more mainstream organizations such as the NAACP. See Garvin interview with Lincoln Bergman and Harry Haywood, Black Bolshevik.

30Mullen, Afro Orientalism, 78-80; Duziak, Cold War Civil Rights; Von Eschen, Race Against Empire.

garner her the lavish treatment afforded the Williams and Strong, or even the Coes. She contributed to the revolutionary project as an English language teacher at the Shanghai Institute for Foreign Language and lived comfortably, but not lavishly, in the foreigners Peace hotel.

**Teaching as a Representation of U.S. Third World Solidarity in Shanghai**

When Vicki Garvin arrived at the Shanghai Foreign Language Institute in September 1964 she could not have imagined that in less than two years she would witness one of the most widespread cultural and political upheavals in the PRC's brief history. In her opening speech "on behalf of the new teachers" joining the staff, Garvin pledged "our maximum effort and energy to the implementation of our assignments," and assured her audience that "our experiences will be two-sided: receiving as well as giving, learning as well as teaching, thereby enriching our theories with practice." Yet, Garvin's speech also outlined another important aspect of her "assignment" as a representative African American radical living and teaching in China. Informing her audience of her recent return from the United States, she used the majority of the 7-page speech to provide details and analysis of the voter registrations struggles that had occurred in the South during the summer of 1964 and the repressive reactions of U.S. imperialists. Garvin ended the speech reminding her audience, "your continued identification with and fraternal support to their [Negro youth's] struggles will be an important contribution" to their eventual victory.

Garvin dedicated herself to the task of helping "to facilitate communication among peoples" and worked diligently to hone her skills as a teacher. She taught advanced classes in English and also developed an English course on African American history. During much of her time in Shanghai, she

---

32 Rittenberg and Bennett, 267-274 and Brady, 132
33 Vicki Garvin, untitled, p. 1, September 1964, box 2, folder 23, VGP.
34 Ibid. 6-7.
both in speeches and course lessons, Garvin also sought to live up to her promise by sharing her analysis of the history of black oppression and resistance (including the experiences of black women) and the current state of the social movements in the United States.

Indeed, Garvin fully embraced her symbolic role as a representative of the U.S. left and its solidarity with revolutionary movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In a 1965 speech in celebration of International Women’s Day, she addressed all of these themes. Regretful that she could not address her audience "as an official representative of the millions of American women who are also involved in the world-wide fight for peace liberty and plenty for all," Garvin assured her audience that one day "the working women of the United State will develop closer and more direct ties with the women of China." Yet she asserted with confidence, “that I do speak for countless American women, white as well as Negro" in "saluting your [Chinese women’s] remarkable achievements." In her closing statement Garvin reminded the crowd that, "at the very heart of the struggle for the Negro people are the millions of working class Negro women who have historically…shouldered a major share of responsibility and leadership."35 In all, Garvin would teach at the Institute for two years, before the school was closed due to the Cultural Revolution.

**Epistolary Revolution: Letters from China**

Beyond contributing technical skills, epistolary politics served as one of the central ways American radicals carried out solidarity activism in China. American's living in China --whether by choice, political loyalty, lack of knowledge, or fear of surveillance-- were clearly limited in what they could write to friends. Most letters carried few critical comments on the Chinese revolution, the famine that swept through China in the late 1950s as part of the Great Leap Forward, or the violent

---

upheavals produced by the Cultural Revolution or Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution as it was officially known. Alice Windom, who remained in contact with Vicki Garvin after her move to Shanghai, complained to Julian Mayfield that, "I'd love to meet her [Garvin] somewhere and really talk to her because her letters all sound like Chinese new agency press releases."³⁶

The CCP encouraged Americans to share their experiences and observations of life in China as a way of building international support for the Party and challenging negative depictions. The almost ten year publication span of Anna Louise Strong's newsletter, simply titled Letters from China, perhaps best exemplified these efforts. Written by Strong and other American expats, but often in consultation with the CCP, it provided an overwhelmingly positive depiction of life and revolutionary struggle in China.³⁷ Yet this was not the only purpose these letters could or did serve.

Many correspondences between radicals living in China and their friends and comrades in the states or other parts of the world helped to build and sustain a network of activists committed to a global vision of social change and deeply invested in Third World solidarity. Literary scholar Bill Mullen describes exchanges between African and Asian activists outside the U.S. and those within its borders, as "transnational correspondence" that were "meant to inform developments on opposite sides of the world and in so doing to change it." In this framing, Mullen suggests these radicals imagined themselves as "pen pals for world liberation."³⁸ Indeed, the numerous transcontinental correspondences among radicals reveal the networks they employed to remain connected to a broad range of political struggles both within and outside the U.S. These letters also illuminate the roots

³⁶ Alice Windom to Julian Mayfield, Tuesday Sept 27, 1966, box 6, folder 21, JMP.
³⁷ Anna Louise Strong, Letters from China, Peking and Strong and Keyssar, Right in Her Soul. The newsletter was translated into almost every major language group and was viewed as a key tool in "nurturing" anti-Soviet communists.
³⁸ Mullen, Afro-Orientalism, 76
and routes of their affiliations, the key political insights and formulations hashed out through correspondences, and the logistics of solidarity travel.

Some aspects of these correspondences are visible in the letters Shirley Graham Du Bois wrote from her base in Cairo, Egypt. For example in late 1966 and early 1977 Du Bois wrote a series of letters to several friends living in China, including Anna Louise Strong and Frank and Ruth Coe. The letters included a request for help in finding a publication outlet for a recent article she had written on "The Why, How's and What happened in Ghana" and setting up a visit to China in the following year. In detailing her desire to visit China, DuBois writes, "I need advice and counsel…I am beginning to think about my continuing life. What I shall do and how I shall do it. I want to visit China before I make any definite decisions." It is unclear in the exchange if DuBois is seeking advice from her "precious comrades in China!" or perhaps considering relocating to China but not ready to commit, or both.

Graham Du Bois, who had traveled to China in the late 1950s with W.E.B. DuBois, found by 1966 the network of African American expatriates provided her the best avenue for a return trip. In their return letter the Coes assured Graham DuBois that they had sent her travel request through formal channels and that she was "very welcome" to visit. The letter also provides a view of the community of African American's in Beijing. The Coes reported on their role as caretakers for the Williamses two teenage children as Robert and Mabel traveled abroad and of an expected visit from Vicki Garvin who would soon be arriving in Beijing "to talk with Robert Williams and some of her

---


40 Graham used this phrasing in a 1965 letter to Sidney Rittenberg. Shirley Graham Du Bois to Sidney Rittenberg, March 10, 165, box 18, folder 14, SGD papers
other friends." They also assured Graham Du Bois that "she [Vicki Garvin] is very well thought of in Shanghai and kept very busy."  

In March 1967, with her travel still not confirmed and the China’s urban cities caught in the mass politics of the Cultural Revolution, Graham Du Bois sent a more formal letter to Robert Williams to request that he "put in a word for me" to expedite her visit to China. Having heard "directly from" Williams through a mutual friend of theirs who was visiting in Cairo, the meeting served as an opening for her to write to Williams personally. In the letter Graham DuBois highlighted the "recent material" she'd forwarded to Williams from SNCC and promised much more news garnered from recent U.S. visitors that she hoped to share on her next visit to China. This emphasis suggests the value expatriates placed on receiving political news and first hand accounts about the U.S. movement. The more formal tone and extra news incentives were perhaps to compensate for Graham DuBois' vulnerable position as an expatriate without the status of an 'invited guest' in any nation (and a woman with out a "great man" beside her), it also likely reflected her attempts to compensate for her refusal years earlier to support Williams' efforts to relocate to Ghana to join his comrade Julian Mayfield.  

Robert Williams' response to Graham Du Bois highlights the ways he used transnational correspondences including his letters to publicize his own political views and insights, particularly concerning the black liberation struggle. In the one page reply he reluctantly agreed to "try to pass along the word from you," but spent the remaining of the letter outlining his belief that "our [the black liberation] struggle develop international unity and that the peoples of the world be given a

41 Frank and Ruth Coe to Shirley Graham Du Bois, September 7, 1966, SGD papers.  
43 For more discussion of this see incident see Horne, Race Woman, 194.
true picture of U.S. racism and how it relates to imperialism" and his criticism of "many internationalists" who were "trying to analyze the Afro-American problem strictly from a class point of view."

Most of the correspondences with Americans living in China after 1965, whether political or personal, included some reference to China's position in the Sino-Soviet split and some limited discussion of the Cultural Revolution or the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution as it was officially known. The GPCR drew much interest from abroad as many were enthralled by news of China’s attempt to mobilize the Chinese people to remake society through mass politics and the overwhelming activity and attacks on established leadership it produced. This was part of the reason Shirley Graham Du Bois sought to visit China and witness it first hand. Graham Du Bois would finally arrive in China in June of 1967 and stay for ten weeks receiving an extensive tour of the country and witnessing at least some of the tumult and violence produced in the attempt to create a new socialist culture in China.

"Foreign Friends" and The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution

By 1966 the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had taken hold of the China, including Garvin home of Shanghai and brought with it the closing of her school. In September 1966 Garvin found herself out of a job and one of the only foreign visitors still residing in Shanghai’s Peace hotel. It was in this first year of the GPCR that Garvin married fellow American Leibel Bergman and relocated to the Beijing to work for the English language translation of the Peking Weekly Review. It

44 Robert Williams to Shirley Graham Du Bois, April 14, 1967, box 19, folder 6, SDG papers.
was also in this period that Garvin reconnected with the Coes and became “close friends and allies” with Robert and Mabel Williams, and Gerald (Gerry) Tannenbaum as they “shared countless hours recounting the history of the revolutionary struggle”.  

Garvin’s decision to leave Shanghai in the midst of the GPCR, suggests her embrace of a less active relationship with the powerful wave of protest and politics that consumed the city in 1966. This was a common position as most members of this group watched the revolution from the sideline. While they supported the CCP’s efforts at remaking society and witnessed with some awe the excitement on the street, many foreigner radicals still viewed it as politically irresponsible to actively participate in internal Chinese struggles. For those such as the Vicki Garvin, who arrived in China after having witnessed the intense internal struggles and leadership upheaval in Ghana and its negative impact of visiting activists, perhaps previous experience also provided a cautionary lesson.

Despite her view of the GPCR from the sidelines, Garvin had built a strong base of support in Shanghai which, as China most industrialized city, emerged as a leading site of violent protest. In September 1967 Vicki Garvin was invited back to the city to contributed brief remarks at a meeting to celebrate the "Great Alliance of Students" at the Shanghai Institute. Her comments clearly expressed her support for and investment in the GPCR, yet she also hinted at some of her hesitations commenting that the GPCR "has by no means been a 'dinner party,'" and "though most of the extremely harsh and cruel forms of suppression …did not occur here [at the Shanghai

Institute]… it has entailed serious struggle.”

Garvin’s critique of the GCPR would develop more fully over the ensuing years. In a talk given in Detroit in 1972 she attested to witnessing some excess during the Cultural Revolution, particularly among young Red Guard and by 1989 she would assert to Mabel and Rob Williams “the Cultural Revolutions certainly got off the road and screwed up badly,” even as she acknowledge that “consolidating a revolution is tough!”

Other American "foreign friends" took a more active role in the political uproar. In Beijing a group led by Sidney Rittenberg formed its own rebel group called the Bethune-Ya'an, which included a broad array of foreigners living in Beijing. Although markedly different from most rebel groups, which traditionally emerged out of the work units or schools, the Bethune-Ya’an group issued statements of criticism, put out Big Character posters, participated in meetings and faced factional tensions and power struggles. The work of the Bethune-Ya'an gained acceptance within the revolution as members were invited into political struggles and Rittenberg emerged as a powerful political voice at many GPCR rallies.

Acceptance and daily political engagement also made these foreign activists more vulnerable to criticism and attack. Thus in 1968, as the GPCR took on an increasingly nationalist and anti-foreigner turn, Bethune-Ya’an members found themselves under increasing attack and suspicion. Many faced greater surveillance and even arrest. Sid Rittenberg who had risen the highest faced perhaps the harshest treatment. In December 1967 he was accused of leading a spy ring and placed under house arrest. In early 1968 his entire family was imprisoned, and Rittenberg would remain

imprisoned until 1977. Yet, such treatment paled in comparison to the violence meted out to many Chinese radicals as the PRC attempted to reign in the revolutionary factions.\textsuperscript{51}

By 1970 most Americans who could leave China had done so. Robert and Mable Williams, as well as Nancy and David Milton returned to the U.S. in 1969. Garvin also departed in 1970. Crediting her time in China with teaching her much about “the working of imperialism, neocolonialism and socialism,” she returned home with her husband Leibel Bergman to tend to her ailing parents in Jamaica Queens, NY. Garvin would remain a strong supporter of the Chinese Communist Party and continue to view it as “a valuable resource for exploited and oppressed peoples everywhere who have so much in common.”\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{From Cold War Exile to U.S. Third World Solidarity Politics}

After almost 10 of years living in Nigeria, Ghana and China, Vicki Gavin returned to New York to work along side a younger generation of activists in the New Left and Third World Solidarity movements. She encountered a markedly changed country and political scene. Nonetheless, Garvin found some of the political changes quite welcoming. In particular, her radical vision with its critique of white supremacy, gender inequalities, and U.S. imperialism meshed well with the political ideas taking shape in black power politics, women’s liberation, and newly formed Marxist-Leninist and Maoist-based communist organizations.

As she adjusted to living in the states again, Garvin reconnected with veteran allies from New York’s black left including Ernest Thompson and Harry Haywood and deepened her


\textsuperscript{52} Vicki Garvin, “China and Black Americans,” \textit{New China} (Fall 1975): 23; Vicki Garvin Interview with Lincoln Bergman, Tape 6; and “Personal History”, 4a, box 1, biography VGP.
commitment to mentoring a younger generations of activists. She also remained in contact with a number of radicals who had shared her expatriate experiences including Shirley Graham Du Bois, Alice Windom, Maya Angelou, Robert and Mabel Williams, and Gerry Tannenbaum. Garvin sustained many of these connections through her activism with the U.S. China Friendship Network and her work after 1974 on the editorial committee of New China.53

Throughout the 1970s Vicki Garvin dedicated herself to work with the U.S. China Friendship Network as she traveled broadly to share her experiences and analysis regarding life and politics in China. Garvin spoke at a range organizations and events from church groups interested in learning more about China to left formations anxious to receive firsthand details of China’s revolutionary process. In January 1972 she traveled to Detroit to lead a discussion on China sponsored by the Motor city Labor League and the Black Workers Congress. This talk included a lengthy and detailed discussion of politics in China ranging from economic development in rural areas, to communist theories, and gender relations. After a return trip to China in 1974 Garvin embarked on another speaking tour including presenting at an Arab Center in California and a series of talks at Ohio State University.54

In the late 1970’s Garvin briefly join her husband, Leibel Bergman, in the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), a Maoist-oriented organization made up of young activists from the Revolutionary Union and Students for a Democratic Society and one of the largest of the New Left party formations. Garvin’s investments in sustaining a revolutionary politics and commitment to mentoring a younger generation of radicals proved the driving forces in her decision to join, “I said


54 Various fliers, box 2, folder 24, VGP.
maybe don’t work on it a 100% of your time, but whatever as a so called veteran you can add—and stories you can share—and to whatever extent you can participate, then do it.”55 She would stay with the group as it split to form the Revolutionary Workers Headquarters (RWH) and sought to deepen it position on the black national question. In 1980, with her marriage ending, Garvin left the RWH and began working with a new group of black leftists and revolutionary nationalists active in the National Black United Front (NBUF).

Throughout all of these activities Garvin carried her transnational vision. Moreover, Garvin’s investments in Ghana and China not only reflected her lifelong commitments to socialist revolution and her broad vision of Third World solidarity, but also an attendant black nationalist politics that led her to frame herself as “a pan-Africanist,” and “a proletariat, working class, internationalist.”56

The presence of Vicki Garvin, a relatively unknown black woman radical, living in China as a representative of "black revolutionaries…white-allies and her fellow American expatriates" reflects one moment in the long history of transnational solidarity politics within the long black freedom struggle. Garvin’s narrative speaks to the vibrancy of an African American “global vision” that was often sustained through travel and transnational political networks. An intricate web of these alliances and connections provided crucial support and points of cohesion in black Americans’ longstanding liberation struggle. In crucial moments the international arena proved a powerful stage and point of leverage for African American activists seeking to push the U.S. government to fully honor its proclaimed commitments to democracy and equality. A key aspect of these longstanding politics has been the travel and contributions of black women intellectuals and activists. From the early stages of black nationalism and Ida B. Wells’ internationalizing of her anti-lynching crusade in

55 Garvin Interview with Lincoln Bergman, Tape 6 and Elbaum, Revolution in the Air;
56 Garvin, interview with Gil Nobel, 6.
the 1890s, to Amy Jacques Garvey’s role in the Pan African conferences, black women have been important figures in this transnational freedom struggle.