Sebastian Gehrig’s article examines the competing East Asia-focused cultural diplomacy strategies of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from the late 1940s through to the 1980s. It focuses primarily on the movement and exchange of people, specifically those within the overlapping academic and educational domains on the broad spectrum of cultural diplomacy, following “the activities of language teachers, exchange students, academics, and diplomats of both German and Asian countries along the Bamboo Curtain and of Asian visitors to divided Germany after 1945” (115). While FRG-GDR competition in developing relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) forms the central pillar of the piece, the focus is a regional one, which also includes meaningful discussion involving the rival Republic of China (RoC), as well as with Burma, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam. The extent to which this article achieves a balance in providing satisfying depth of analysis with its temporal and geographic breadth is impressive. There are many moving pieces required to discuss competing German regimes’ long-term engagement with a range of actors and multiple states in East Asia, all of which add up to a coherent whole in a way that is difficult to achieve within the constraints of an article-length piece of scholarship.

In the first section, Gehrig argues that a long-term core characteristic of German cultural diplomacy strategies has been an emphasis on exchange activities. These activities were revived in the post-war period and given new life in the context of a Germany that had been divided into the competing FRG and GDR. In the context of two states seeking to enhance their legitimacy as well as needing to navigate the evolving Cold War ideological contours and divisions, he argues that this type of exchange was attractive in its potential for comparatively low-cost influence overseas, highlighting the fact that those involved in academic or cultural exchange could “arrange travel and accommodation much more easily than official government envoys” (118). Notably, he demonstrates the extent of long-term continuities—and limitations therein—of early FRG strategies. These relied heavily on not only established organizations such as the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) but also groups with which the FRG Foreign Office had links, including involved those in Christian missionary outreach. Meanwhile, in contrast, the GDR created new organizational structures to manage exchange activities such as the Institute of Study for Foreigners. The GDR also sought to leverage socialist-world solidarity in its outreach efforts, with particular emphasis on recruiting international students to study there, including significant numbers from Africa and Asia (123).

In the Cold War context, Gehrig shows that FRG-GDR competition resulted in some intriguing episodes, such as the FRG efforts to build links with the People’s Republic of China in the 1950s, which led to its Foreign Office proposing that the DAAD secretly provide funding for German students to study in the fledgling revolutionary state (127). Such efforts meant that both FRG and GDR were actively competing with
one another when it came to the PRC. This case is productively followed across the whole article across several domains in the context of the dramatic domestic and international realignments that took place in subsequent decades.

The subsequent section traces the ways in which both GDR and FRG sought to navigate the Sino-Soviet split and the impacts of China’s Cultural Revolution. This section highlights one of the article’s greatest strengths which is its inclusion and consideration of the impacts and agency on the part of the non-German actors (ranging from state to party to individual) who were involved in these exchange encounters. Its consideration of mutual influence and dynamics is not limited to that involving China. For example, it includes discussion of the Burmese government’s effective efforts to actively encourage and leverage GDR-FRG competition over language training and funding in 1963 (130-31). In other words, while the article’s stated focus is on the dynamics of GDR-FRG competition, it is of equally substantial interest and value to East Asia specialists and those interested in the dynamics of the global Cold War. In the case of the PRC, Gehrig’s discussion of Chinese students’ activities in the GDR, and Socialist Unity Party (SED) concerns about such potential vectors of Maoist influence (140-43) nicely complements his earlier work on the influence of Chinese ideology in the FRG. In fact, the two articles can be productively read as forming half of a quartet considering mutually influential issues surrounding aid, influence, legitimacy, and sovereignty rooted in FRG-GDR competition. More broadly, in simultaneously considering those influences by actors such as the PRC, the article aligns well with the growing scholarship emphasizing the extent of China’s global influences within the battle of ideology and ideas in the global Cold War.

The article’s final two sections consider the further evolution of the exchange activities of the FRG and GDR in the context of Ostpolitik and wider shifts in the geopolitical terrain of the Cold War starting in the 1970s, particularly the dramatic transformation in PRC diplomatic relations accompanying its successes in securing diplomatic recognition by an increasing number of states and entry into a rapidly expanding range of international organizations into the 1980s. As such, Gehrig also productively considers the ways in which the rival RoC sought to counteract this trend through efforts “to turn cultural relations into semi-official diplomatic relations at the consular level” with the FRG as well as the reasons for the latter’s resistance to those efforts (146-7). In this section in particular, it would have been fascinating if the article had more directly and extensively engaged with the substantial body of scholarship looking at cultural and science diplomacy in the PRC’s rapprochement-era relations, the most substantial of which focuses on those involving the United States.

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This article aligns well with the best examples of that literature in its ability to meaningfully consider the motivations and impacts of multiple actors in such interactions.\(^5\) Balancing out and addressing issues of agency and questions of reception have long been challenges for scholars who work on cultural diplomacy. This is particularly the case when the work in question is primarily focused on one “side” of such efforts at extending influence in trans-regional contexts. While it is primarily focused on elucidating the German side within those interactions, this article further underscores the extent of East Asian actors’ agency and influence. In doing so, it contributes to the still-growing literature in this area. For example, it grapples with themes and issues that run through scholarship emphasizing the breadth and depth of Chinese engagement and influence in relation to everything from the League of Nations to the World Health Organization.\(^6\) So, too, does it make interventions relevant to recent work exploring the intertwining of ideology and diplomacy in PRC aid and development-related outreach in other regions.\(^7\)

Given the sophistication and subtlety in Gehrig’s analysis, there is something of an unfortunate mismatch in the repeated appearance and prominence of the term “Bamboo Curtain.” It is, of course, a term with a long provenance, and one which has made regular appearances in the scholarship on foreign relations in East Asia, particularly China, in the Cold War (including by this reviewer).\(^8\) However, that same provenance—especially its roots as an actors’ term—and the baggage it consequently carries and conventions in its use can pull the discussion in an unintended and unhelpful direction. In particular, in twice framing increasing FRG-PRC engagement in the 1970s as the former having “breached the Bamboo Curtain” (113 and 116) it places all agency and initiative on the German side of these relations, in particular providing a sense of the breakthrough in engagement as sometime forcibly attained by one side, rather than the carefully navigated and mutually constituted development building on the inputs of multiple actors on both “sides” which is so compellingly detailed elsewhere in the article.

Even the less loaded phrase “behind the Bamboo Curtain” (127) conveys a sense of East Asian states and actors as hidden or otherwise isolated prior to contact with a “Western” power such as the FRG when, again, in actuality this article as a whole represents a meaningful intervention that provides further evidence to support the now established—and still growing—shift toward abandoning long-standing tropes about China and socialist actors in East Asia that emphasized distance and isolation while downplaying agency and influence. In doing so, it contributes to the still-growing literature in this area. For example, it grapples with themes and issues that run through scholarship emphasizing the breadth and depth of Chinese engagement and influence in relation to everything from the League of Nations to the World Health Organization.\(^6\) So, too, does it make interventions relevant to recent work exploring the intertwining of ideology and diplomacy in PRC aid and development-related outreach in other regions.\(^7\)

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influence. After all, for all the variation in diplomatic recognition policies across European states, the PRC nevertheless did maintain elements of diplomatic infrastructure within the continent.\(^9\) This is unquestionably a minor quibble in relation to what is an impressive piece of scholarship, and, if anything, provides a reminder of the challenges presented by inherited terminology and language when it comes to contemporary history.

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