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Forgotten Visits in a Global War* **Song Meiling in Brazil, 1943 and 1944**

Visitas Esquecidas numa Guerra Global
Song Meiling no Brasil, 1943 e 1944

Visitas Olvidadas en una Guerra Global
Song Meiling en Brasil, 1943 y 1944

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ABSTRACT: The Second World War was a transformative event in China and Brazil's global standing, yet the two countries' contribution to the victory of the Allies remains somewhat neglected in traditional narratives of the conflict. This article sheds light on two little known visits by Song Meiling—wife of Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek and a key political and diplomatic actor in her own right—to Brazil in 1943 and 1944. The article highlights the importance of Song in China's wartime connections to South America in the 1940s and analyses the media coverage of her Brazil trips. Based on archival and press sources in Portuguese, English and Chinese, it argues that these visits were important cases of Sino-Latin American interactions during the war. The article also places them in a larger context of China and Brazil's alliance with the United States and of discourses on “Madame Chiang” across the Americas.

Keywords: Second World War. China. Brazil. Song Meiling. Madame Chiang.

RESUMO: A Segunda Guerra Mundial foi um acontecimento transformador no estatuto internacional da China e do Brasil. No entanto, o contributo desses dois países para a vitória aliada permanece relativamente negligenciado nas narrativas tradicionais do conflito. Este artigo centra-se em duas visitas pouco conhecidas de Song Meiling — a mulher do líder chinês Chiang Kai-shek e uma figura política e diplomática de pleno direito — ao Brasil em 1943 e 1944. O artigo enfatiza

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a importância de Song nas ligações da China à América Latina nos anos 1940 e analisa a cobertura midiática de suas viagens ao Brasil. Baseado em fontes de arquivo e imprensa em português, inglês e chinês, o artigo defende que essas visitas foram casos importantes de interações sino-latino-americanas durante a guerra, colocando-as num contexto mais alargado da aliança da China e do Brasil com os Estados Unidos da América, bem como de discursos sobre “Madame Chiang” nas Américas.

Palavras-chave: Segunda Guerra Mundial. China. Brasil. Song Meiling. Madame Chiang.

RESUMEN: La Segunda Guerra Mundial fue un evento transformador en la posición global de China y Brasil. Sin embargo, la contribución de ambos países a la victoria aliada ha permanecido relativamente ignorada en las narrativas tradicionales del conflicto. Este artículo se centra en dos visitas poco conocidas de Song Meiling — esposa del líder chino Chiang Kai-shek y figura política y diplomática clave por derecho propio — a Brasil en 1943 y 1944. El artículo destaca la importancia de Song en las conexiones de China con Sudamérica durante la guerra en la década de 1940 y analiza la cobertura mediática de sus viajes a Brasil. Con base en fuentes de archivo y prensa en portugués, inglés y chino, el artículo argumenta que esas visitas fueron ejemplos importantes de las interacciones sino-latinoamericanas durante la guerra, situándolas en el contexto más amplio de la alianza de China y Brasil con Estados Unidos, así como en los discursos sobre “Madame Chiang” en las Américas.

Palabras clave: Segunda Guerra Mundial. China. Brasil. Song Meiling. Madame Chiang.

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Shortly after Song Meiling (宋美齡) arrived in Rio de Janeiro in July 1944, the São Paulo newspaper *A Tribuna* reported:

The visit that this woman—symbol of heroism in her Motherland—pays us fills all Brazilians with jubilation, integrated in body and soul in the cause of triumphant democracy, as Brazil feels highly honoured in hosting this great defender of the ideals for which a free humanity fights [A visita que nos faz essa mulher-símbolo do heroísmo de sua pátria enche de júbilo os brasileiros, integrados de corpo e alma na causa da democracia triunfante, sentindo-se o Brasil altamente honrado em hospedar a grande defensora dos ideais por que se bate a humanidade livre] (Moura 1944, 8).

It went on saying that “there is not in the civilized world, in the fight for the defence of Freedom and Rights, anyone who does not know the intelligence and rare culture, the dynamism, the great moral qualities of Madam Chiang Kai-Shek” [“não há no mundo civilizado, em luta pela defesa da Liberdade e do Direito, quem desconheça a inteligência, a cultura rara, o dinamismo, as grandes qualidades morais de Mme. Chiang-Kai-Chek”] who “perfectly embodies the bravery and

heroism of her compatriots” [“encarna perfeitamente a bravura e o heroísmo dos seus compatriotas”] (Moura 1944, 8) The tone of the report could not have been of more heightened praise: praise for Song as a competent and renowned figure and praise for China’s participation in the Second World War. China and Brazil were both members of the Allies and, whilst neither republic could be said to have a truly democratic regime at the time, the ideals for which those fighting fascism were combating were highlighted in the piece.

This article is the first academic study of Song Meiling’s visits to Brazil in 1943 and 1944 and underscores their significance in a global Second World War that saw China and Brazil fight on the same side. The Chinese *First Lady*’s trip to the United States in 1943 is a well-known event, having merited considerable media and scholarly attention. In contrast, Song’s visits to Brazil—a short stopover in 1943 and a two-month stay in 1944—have been largely neglected by scholars of China and Brazil in the Second World War. I argue that these visits constitute a key milestone in Sino-Brazilian relations during the war and a significant event in wider entanglements within the Allies’ camp in a global Second World War. Furthermore, Song Meiling’s visits to Brazil showcase the forgotten role women played in informal diplomacy during the war and the interplay of private and public dimensions in international relations.

Song Meiling¹ (1898–2003) was born into one of the most influential families in twentieth-century China. Her father, Charlie Song, had been a migrant to the US, where he graduated in theology from Vanderbilt University. A Christian convert, he became a missionary and made a fortune selling bibles after returning to China. Meiling’s younger sister Qingling married Sun Yat-sen, the founding figure of the Republic of China and the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) and later became an important political figure close to the Chinese Communist Party; her elder sister Ailing, a businesswoman, married H. H. Kung (Kong Xiangxi), the Minister of Finance during part of the 1930s and 1940s, while Meiling married the Nationalist strongman Chiang Kai-shek, the leading figure of Republican China during the Second World War. If her marriage made her known throughout the world as “Madame Chiang Kai-shek”, she was much more than simply “China’s First Lady”. Educated in the United States in her youth (like her sisters), Song Meiling was a very important political and diplomatic actor in her own right. The economic power and influence of her family and her competence and connections made her a key figure in Chiang’s rise to power and nothing short of essential for his maintenance in power during the war.

The importance of Song Meiling’s public persona during the war can hardly be underestimated. Fluent in English and French, she was comfortable interacting with foreign

¹ Her name has been rendered with different spellings, including Mayling Soong and Soong Mei-ling.

audiences and played a key role as Chiang's interpreter in landmark events such as the 1943 Cairo Conference with the United States (US) President Franklin Roosevelt and the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. During the war, she was appointed Secretary-General of the Chinese Air Force (1936–1939) and led three important relief associations: the Women's Advisory Council of the New Life Movement, the National Chinese Association for War Relief, and the Wartime Association for Child Welfare (Hu 2025). She was instrumental in ensuring foreign assistance to China, both in military commitments and in humanitarian aid. She was recognised as immensely visible and powerful at the time and since, both inside and outside of China. Karen Leong has observed that she “was a symbol not only of China's new womanhood but of new China as well” (2005, 106). She is particularly known for her active cultural diplomacy with the US, although she also played important roles as an informal diplomat inside and outside of China, namely in relations with India (Hu 2025, Part III). Her connections to Brazil have been much less studied, yet they are a relevant case to understand China's engagements with Latin America in the Second World War.

The conflict marked a key turning point for China and Brazil, shaping the two republics' social mobilisation and a new awareness of their roles in the international arena, emerging as key US allies while maintaining ideas of strong anti-imperialist nationalism (see Tota 2009 and Fortes 2024 on Brazil, and Mitter 2013 and Fredman 2022 on China). Both countries were home to significant Chinese migrant communities who had been targets of racist discrimination, including through exclusionary legislation. The Second World War marked a change in public perceptions of the Chinese in the Americas, that were now regarded as allies rather than aliens. Song Meiling was a key figure in shaping that transformation. Leong has noted how the war years in China saw an “American surge of interest in the Chiangs” (2005, 125) and her 1943 visit to the United States showed how a “new, improved China had arrived in America and was accessible and comprehensible to the American public” through her person (2005, 144). This article posits that this was, in fact, a trans-American phenomenon, not simply a US one. The case of Brazil is a clear example of this, as can be attested by the multiple news of Madam Chiang and her husband appearing in the Brazilian press, especially in the 1940s. If Song Meiling came to embody a positive image of a modernizing China in the Americas, this association gains a new relevance if we note that the rhetoric of modernization, industrial progress, and big state-sponsored infrastructural projects were elements that Chiang's China shared with Vargas' Brazil.

The histories of China and Brazil in the Second World War are not simply marked by parallels, but also by new connections. The two countries were members of the military alliance known during the war as “United Nations”. China had been fighting Japan alone since the 1930s and it can be argued that the Second World War began in East Asia (either in 1931 with the

Japanese invasion of the three northeast provinces known as Manchuria or with the start of an all-out war between China and Japan in 1937). In 1941, the conflict became truly global after the entry into the war of the US and the Soviet Union, and it was in this context that China integrated the Allies—with the conflict in Asia merging with the one in Europe—and that Brazil entered the war. There was a public awareness that Brazil and China were fighting on the same side. For example, in the public celebrations in Rio de Janeiro on the second anniversary of Brazil's entry into the war in January 1944, large-scale photographs of Vargas, Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin and Chiang Kai-shek were shown above the entrance of the opera house (The Times 1944a, 3).

Diplomatically, the relations between Brazil and China reached new heights in the Second World War. Brazil was “one of the first countries in the world—and the first in Latin America—to have an ambassador” in China (Lima 2023, 140). When the ambassador, Joaquim Eulálio do Nascimento e Silva, presented credentials in Chongqing, China's wartime capital, Chiang Kai-shek praised Brazil for having been the first country to recognise the Republic of China in 1911 (Lima 2023, 140).

The first Chinese ambassador to Brazil was Chen Jie, a seasoned Chinese diplomat educated in Japan and that had been ambassador to Germany until Sino-German relations—hitherto quite good—were broken in 1938. Controversially, he is now known to have sought to restrict the Chinese consul in Vienna in 1938, He Fengshan (Ho Feng-Shan), from issuing life-saving exit visas for Jewish refugees (Ho 2010, 46). Chen served in Brazil for only a year. In his farewell dinner, Brazil's acting foreign minister Leão Veloso gave a speech in which he expressed Brazil's support for China's postwar regained sovereignty and significant international role—something that had already been announced by the treaties with the US and Britain abolishing extraterritoriality in 1943 and by Chiang Kai-shek and Song Meiling's participation in the Cairo Conference. Veloso stated:

[...] As your Excellency can inform your Government and your people, Brazil formulates the most ardent wishes for the coming victory to restore China to the full extent of its territorial rights and grant it the peace and happiness it deserves, after so much sacrifice and heroism [...] o Brasil — pode Vossa Excelência afirmar ao seu Governo e ao seu povo — formula os mais ardentes votos para que a vitória próxima reintegre a China na plenitude de seus direitos territoriais e lhe dê a paz e a felicidade que bem merece, depois de tanto sacrifício e de tanto heroísmo] (A Manhã 1944c, 2)

Chen left Brazil to take up a post as ambassador in Mexico. Mexico and Brazil were the only Latin American countries to dispatch military forces overseas in World War Two (Humphreys 1981, 119; 144). Incidentally, both countries had significant Chinese communities. While Chinese Mexicans have been the topic of excellent studies (e.g. Delgado 2012; Romero 2012; González 2017; Camacho 2020), historiography on Chinese Brazilians remains scarce (a rare exception is Lee 2018).

In the US, the war brought a noticeable shift in how the Chinese were represented in popular culture (Wong 2005). The same seemingly happened in Brazil. Although some of the old racist tropes remained, a new celebration of the Chinese as wartime allies—contrasting them with the Japanese, now depicted as internal enemies—was noticeable in popular music (Lee 2018, 155-157). Interestingly, there are some references that Song Meiling's 1944 visit had an influence in Rio's popular culture in particular. On stage, she was played by Portuguese acting star Beatriz Costa (then working in Brazil) in the "super-revista" (a big production of this genre of popular theatre) "Toca pró pau" in 1944 (O Jornal 1944c, 7; Junqueira Leite de Medeiros 2016, 2239) and even inspired the name of a nightclub, "Mei-Ling" (Liu 2017; Veleda and Vargas 2018, 6).

Song Meiling's visits to Brazil

Song Meiling visited Brazil in 1943 and 1944, and both visits should be understood in a wider context of Chinese and Brazilian close relations with the US during the conflict.

In June 1943, Song Meiling stopped briefly at Natal, in a layover on her way to China from the United States (The Times 1943, 3). The airfield in Natal—Parnamirim—had been built in the middle of 1942 and had become the main airbase for trans-Atlantic supplies to the British campaign in North Africa (Humphreys 1981, 139-140; Tota 2009, 1). It was a key site of Brazil-US relations during the war. Song Meiling travelled on an American air force plane accompanied by her secretary. Her stopover in Brazil was "a military secret" only known to high-ranking military authorities (Diário de Pernambuco 1943b, 8). The *Diário de Pernambuco* reported that she visited the city and showed particular interest in Red Cross activities (Diário de Pernambuco 1943b, 8). Her short stay included interactions with both US personnel and Brazilian audiences. She was received by US Brigadier Robert L. Walsh and seen by Red Cross nurse Bernice Goetz². She had lunch at the American consulate and dinner at the Parnamirim air force base. Her visit may have been short but left a lasting impression: she was the only woman mentioned amongst famous visitors to the Natal base in an illustrated article, "Natal — Base da Vitoria" ["Natal — Victory Base"] published in the very popular magazine *O Cruzeiro* in February 1944 (O Cruzeiro 1944, 50).

The short layover in Brazil is a largely ignored episode in her return journey from the much better known 1943 trip to the United States. Her visit to the US was initially for healthcare reasons (Leong 2005, 132; Jespersen 2005, 136), like her 1944 trip to Brazil would be. However, it later gained a much more public dimension. Song visited different US cities and was received in apotheosis by political and cultural circles and by Chinese diaspora communities. Indeed, her 1943

² Bernice Goetz (1909–1958) was a North American traveller and writer from Cleveland, Ohio, who, like Song Meiling, attained recognition in circles largely restricted to most women at the time. She was known for her expeditions across Latin America, including Brazil (Encyclopedia of Cleveland History, n.d.).

US tour was a landmark event—no Chinese woman before or since attained a comparable level of public visibility and positive reception in the US. Her speech to the US Congress, the first by a Chinese national and the second by a woman, is “considered one of the greatest speeches in Congressional history” (Shih 2021, 41). A sophisticated criticism of the Allies “Europe first” strategy (Shih 2021, 61), it had extensive media coverage, including in Brazil (e.g. *Correio da Manhã* 1943, 1; *Gazeta de Notícias* 1943, 6). As has been noted, “she energetically forwarded a vision of China acting independently in international affairs” (Jespersen 2005, 145): an equal partner to the US, not a subservient client state.

Whilst in the US, Song spoke to a Brazilian foreign correspondent appealing to the Brazilian Chinese “to remember to send their contributions, no matter how modest, to the Chinese Red Cross, to help us win the struggle we are sustaining” (*Diário de Pernambuco* 1943a, 7). Her words in praise of Christian missionaries’ relief work in China were emphasised on the front page of the Catholic newspaper *A Cruz*, that included a photograph of Song (*A Cruz* 1943, 1). Song’s close connections to Christian circles, a key feature of her wartime work and her appeal to US audiences (Jespersen 2005, 130; Hu 2025, chapter 2), would have been well received by many in Brazil.

There was, thus, already considerable attention paid to Song Meiling in the Brazilian press when her return to the country in 1944 began to be discussed. At the time, her trip outside of China was also supposed to include the United Kingdom. Knowing that Song was planning “to go to ‘South America’ for a rest and cure”, Horace James Seymour, the British ambassador in Chongqing, believed she would eventually visit England afterwards (Seymour 1944a). The visit to England after her stay in Brazil was given as a certainty in the British press (*The Daily Mail* 1944, 4), but it never happened. This makes her visit to Brazil even more extraordinary.

Shortly before Song travelled to Brazil, on 3 July, Chiang Kai-shek wrote to President Vargas to convey his thanks to him and the Brazilian government “for having so kindly extended to Madame Chiang the necessary facilities for her much needed rest” (Chiang 1944a). He noted:

I feel that nowhere is there a more ideal place for Madame Chiang’s recuperation than your delightful country, and I am confident that her happy sojourn in Brazil during the next few months will not fail to bring about a speedy improvement of her health (Chiang 1944a).³

On the 5th, Chiang Kai-shek organised a “tea party” for around sixty people, attended by both Chinese and foreign dignitaries, an event that came with instructions to not be reported in the press (Li 2006, 253; Seymour 1944b). Both him and Song Meiling made speeches attempting

³ The file held at the Academia Historica (Guoshiguan) archives, in Taiwan, contains the original Chinese version and an English translation. The Chinese version of this citation reads: “余以為彼養病最理想之叫實無過於貴國者立並信彼於今後數月快逝巴西之時期中定將對其健康有迅速之進步”.

to dispel rumours that Chiang was having an extramarital affair and was about to father a child with the woman in question. The destination of Song Meiling's South American trip was revealed to be Brazil and the reason given was "for the sake of her health" (The National Archives 1944).

The choice of Brazil was not clear to contemporary observers. In her biography of Song Meiling, Laura Tyson Li notes that the Brazilian foreign minister and the US ambassador to Brazil did not know what was "the real motive" of her stay, also mentioning that "British sources suggested the trip was to inspect her 'substantial investments' there" (Li 2009, 254). Indeed, some more critical depictions suggest the real motives for the visit were money transfers and real-estate investments in São Paulo (Seagrave 1985, 413; Pakula 2009, 504). According to Jung Chang, even the US president Harry Truman "believed that the Soong family had stolen American aid money and invested it in real estate in Brazil", although "no proof has surfaced" to justify the claim (Chang 2019, 229). Song Meiling's health may well have been a legitimate reason: her schedule-packed wartime activities had taken a toll on her physical and mental health. References to her health troubles were a "recurring theme in Chiang Kai-shek's diary entries" and, as Esther Hu notes, she had taken convalescence retreats in other cities before and after her stay in South America (Hu 2025, 158).

Altogether, Song Meiling stayed in Brazil for two months, from early July to early September. She left China for Natal on the 10th of July (Pakula erroneously gives the departure date as the 1st [2009, 504]). She reached Rio de Janeiro from the capital of Rio Grande do Norte on the 13th on Vargas's "special Lockheed two-engine plane" and was taken by launch to Brocoió island (The New York Times 1944a, 1). Her arrival was reported in Brazil and in media around the world, from the London *Times* (The Times 1944b, 3) to the Melbourne newspaper *Argus* (The Argus 1944, 12).

Song Meiling travelled to Brazil in the company of her elder sister Ailing. Interestingly, Ailing's entry into the US for education in her younger years—at the height of the Chinese exclusion act—was facilitated by "a student certification from Portugal as a Portuguese citizen" (Leong 2005, 109).⁴ Apart from Ailing, her entourage included Ailing's daughter Kong Lingwei (Jeanette Kung) and son Kong Lingkan (David Kung), her secretary Li Ziqi, two chaperones, two servants, and a cook (Nasser and Manzon 1944a; Liu 2017; Chang 2019, 229; Lima 2023, 142). She stayed for ten days in a Norman-style mansion, Palácio do Brocoió, on Brocoió island, Guanabara

⁴ Spooner states that "she had travelled to the United States using a Portuguese passport which her father had arranged for her in Shanghai" (2011, 30).

Bay, in Rio as a guest of the federal prefect Henrique Dodsworth⁵, and spent the rest of her sojourn at Casa das Pedras in Gávea Pequena, a property owned by banker Drault Ernanny and his wife Myriam Chagas, herself an overseas-educated woman (Nasser and Manzon 1944a, 1; Nasser and Manzon 1944b, 4; 14; Liu 2017; Lima 2023, 142).

Before leaving China, Song had told the Brazilian ambassador in Chongqing that she wished to be left alone at the beginning of her trip so she could control her nervous hives (stress-induced urticaria). She noted that she would then be available for leisure occasions such as operas and concerts, but not for events of a political nature (Lima 2023, 141). On 15 July, a few days after arriving in Rio de Janeiro, she wrote to Getúlio Vargas thanking him and the government for the “cordial and warm welcome” and the flowers he and his wife had sent for her and her sister on their arrival (Soong 1944). She noted that she would meet them later, when “on the road to recovery” (Soong 1944).



Figure 1: Getúlio Vargas and Song Meiling, photograph by Jean Manzon published in *O Cruzeiro*, 16 September 1944.

Source: Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira.

Such a high-level meeting took almost two months to happen. Accompanied by Song Ailing, Meiling had an audience with Getúlio Vargas and his daughter Alzira Vargas do Amaral Peixoto only in September 1944 (The New York Times 1944c, 14; Nasser and Manzon 1944b, 12; 34; Lima 2023, 142). One Chinese article states that Meiling had twice before stood Vargas up, not showing up to invited events (Liu 2017). Having finally met at Guanabara Palace, mutual good wishes were exchanged, with Song thanking in person, and Chiang thanking via telegram, the warm welcome she had in Brazil. Typically for Song, who was always conscious of the mobilising

⁵ Henrique de Toledo Dodsworth Filho (1895–1975) served as federal prefect of Rio de Janeiro until the end of Vargas’s regime, being appointed ambassador to Portugal in 1946.

potential of women, she had a special word of recognition for Brazilian women and brought a necklace to gift Vargas's wife Darcy (Nasser and Manzon 1944b, 12; 34).

Song departed from Brazil on 9 September 1944 (Lima 2023, 142), arriving in New York for treatment at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Centre, where she checked in two days later (The Times 1944c, 3). She had already been treated there the year before. She then moved to Song Ailing and H. H. Kung's New York mansion (Li 2009, 257-258; Chang 2019, 230). Her departure for Brazil proved to be the start of a long period of residency in the Americas and her prolonged stay away from Chiang Kai-shek fuelled rumours of a separation (Li 2009, 258). Song Meiling only returned to China fourteen months later, in September 1945, after the Second World War had ended (Li 2009, 262). Regardless of any marital strain—the veracity of which remained speculative—she went on living with Chiang for the rest of his life, accompanying him to exile in Taiwan after the Nationalist defeat in the Chinese civil war that soon followed World War Two. When Chiang died in 1976, she moved to New York, where she died in 2003, aged 106.

Brazilian media coverage

Song Meiling had featured in the Brazilian press long before her visit to the country. For example, a 1940 article in the Rio de Janeiro magazine *Revista da Semana* introduced her as “the heroic soul of China” [“a alma heroica da China”] (Esqueff 1940, 19). The following year the illustrated magazine *O Cruzeiro*, also published in Rio, assured its readers that “Mme. Chiang is one of the most extraordinary women of her century; one of the most interesting figures to be studied” [“Mme. Chiang é uma das mulheres mais extraordinarios de seu século; uma das figuras mais interessantes para se estudar”] (Symboliste 1941, 11). Shortly before her 1944 visit to Brazil, one of her radio broadcasts from Chongqing was highlighted in a report from *O Jornal* (Rio de Janeiro) on the centenary celebrations of the founding of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), an organisation that had three associations in Brazil at the time (*O Jornal* 1944a, 5) and was very active in China. The Brazilian press also published translations of English-language articles (e.g. Harcourt-Smith 1944). These often portrayed Song as a woman of exceptional ability, both a symbol and a spokesperson for Chinese resistance: “one of the greatest women alive” [“uma das maiores mulheres vivas”] (Boothe 1943, 13). Through her figure, interest was also generated for the wider contributions of Chinese women to the war effort (Forman 1944, 9).

Unsurprisingly, her stay in Brazil made first-page news. *O Dia* published a photograph of Song with the headline: “Madame Chiang Kai-shek is in Rio” (*O Dia* 1944, 1). It reproduced a press release from the Chinese embassy clarifying that she was in Brazil for treatment of hives caused by nervous exhaustion (*O Dia* 1944, 1). The wording was identical to that in Chiang's letter

to Vargas: that she “highly appreciated the warm and cordial reception given by the President of the Republic and the Brazilian government, as well as the friendly interest of people who asked about her health” [“Madame Chiang Khai-shek (sic.) aprecia altamente a calorosa e cordial recepção que lhes proporcionaram o Presidente da Republica e o governo brasileiro, assim como o interesse amigo das pessoas que têm indagado sobre a sua saúde”] (O Dia 1944, 1). The same press release was published in other newspapers, such as *A Manhã* (Rio de Janeiro) (A Manhã 1944a, 3) and *O Estado de Florianópolis* (O Estado de Florianópolis 1944, 6). It also made international news (The New York Times 1944b, 9).

The Chinese embassy in Rio was a key intermediary between Song Meiling and the Brazilian public via the press. By the end of July, it had issued another appreciative press release:

In the few days of her stay in Brazil, Mme. Chiang-Kai-Shek [sic.] has been the object of the most vivid demonstrations of sympathy by the Brazilian people, who have sent her countless letters and telegrams. However, as she is under medical treatment and forbidden by her doctors of undertaking any mental strain, she cannot tend in person, as she wished, to the correspondence that was sent. Therefore, being extremely moved, she reaches her Brazilian friends, via this Embassy, to express her cordial recognition with her utmost thanks [Nos poucos dias de sua estadia no Brasil, Mme. Chiang-Kai-Shek vem sendo alvo das mais vivas demonstrações de simpatia por parte do povo brasileiro, que lhe tem dirigido um sem número de cartas e telegramas. Achando-se, porém, sob tratamento médico, proibida pelos seus médicos de realizar qualquer esforço mental, não pode atender pessoalmente, como seria seu desejo, à correspondência que lhe é enviada. Assim é que, extremamente sensibilizada, faz chegar aos seus amigos brasileiros, por intermédio desta Embaixada, com os melhores agradecimentos, a expressão do seu cordial apreço] (A Noite 1944, 16).

Away from public view, Song Meiling’s sheltered life in Brazil became the news. A report published by São Paulo newspaper *A Tribuna* entitled “How the First Lady of China Lives in Rio” (A Tribuna 1944, 2) stressed and Mazon 1944 assessed the “paradoxical existence” of her “voluntary solitude” in a “bucolic retreat” (A Tribuna 1944, 2). It noted that she would go for short walks across Gávea, Tijuca, and “the most picturesque spots in Rio”, and had a home cinema and ample supply of Brazilian music records (A Tribuna 1944, 2). Although the tone of the report did not spare a note of sexism suggesting that her “long years of intense activity [...] demanded efforts above her endurance as a woman” [“Longos anos de actividade intensa [...] que reclamava esforços superiores ás suas resistências de mulher”] (A Tribuna 1944, 2), it also emphasised her extraordinary intellectual capabilities. It noted how every day she received all of Rio’s newspapers delivered in person, as well as, via plane, newspapers from China and the US and magazines from New York, and that she was an avid reader of philosophy and political books and novels (A Tribuna 1944, 2). She also received frequent correspondence from Chiang and from ordinary people [“pessoas do povo”] who also sent her gifts (A Tribuna 1944, 2).

Song Meiling’s sumptuous residence in Brazil attracted some particular press attention by reporter David Nasser and photographer Jean Mazon who provided an exceptionally detailed

coverage of the contents of Casa das Pedras, part of Solar das Gáveas. The emphasis on domestic space in these reports can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, the secluded routine Song experienced in Brazil, largely kept away from the limelight, turned the private space of the home into an essential locale to understand her stay. On the other, it can be read as part of the association of Song's persona to conservative ideas of feminine domesticity—which is somewhat ironic given the prominence of her public life before and after the visit to Brazil. In any case, in the absence of public appearances, the domestic spaces she inhabited became a symbol of the proximity between her and Brazil and the mutual regeneration her presence in Brazilian soil accorded both countries: “she is in Gávea, in most intimate contact with the Brazilian soil, touched by all the seduction and warmth of the super Brazilian *carioca* [Rio] people, feeling that, in fact, there is a bit of China in the soul and body of Brazil” [“ela está na Gávea, no mais íntimo contacto com a terra brasileira, tocada de todas as seduções e todos os afagos da gleba carioca e brasileiríssima, sentindo que, afinal, há um pouco da China na alma e na fisionomia do Brasil”] (A Tribuna 1944, 2).

The São Paulo newspaper *O Diário* made a news report from Casa das Pedras before Song Meiling arrived at the property in Rio (Nasser and Mazon 1944a, 1). Song was described in superlative terms not unlike those used in the US when she toured the country in 1943: a “heroic legend” (“uma lenda de heroísmo”) and “a woman worth a well-equipped army” [“mulher que ‘vale por um exército bem equipado’”] (Nasser and Mazon 1944a, 1). Despite the praise, her bed, boudoir and jewellery box were described in gendered language unthinkable to have been used to portray a male politician—though perhaps not a celebrity (and Song Meiling can be seen as both a political actor and a famous individual). The mention to a portrait of Chiang Kai-shek in the bedroom (Nasser and Mazon 1944a) served as the visual equivalent of the professions of marital fidelity made in the public farewell party in Chongqing. Nasser and Mazon's report stressed the luxurious and serene nature of the property: “The house offers complete comfort” [“A casa oferece conforto absoluto”]. Song was portrayed as interested in Brazilian culture: “Madam listens to Brazilian radio stations and plays records of our popular music” [“Madame ouve as emissoras Brasileiras e toca discos de nossa música popular”], the report asserted (Nasser and Mazon 1944a, 1). This anecdote suggests a degree of mutual exchange—with Song's visit inspiring Brazilian popular culture (as noted earlier) and also contacting directly with elements of that culture herself.

A similar tone of both admiration and surveillance was given in a much more extensive piece that Nasser and Mazon published in *O Cruzeiro* a few days after Song Meiling left Brazil in September 1944. They again had managed to get rare access to Casa das Pedras. The report included indoor photographs of several rooms, including shots of the bathtub, the boudoir,

mentions to Song's makeup and rocking chair, and, again, Chiang's portrait, as well as outdoor views over the extensive gardens. The report noted the paparazzi-like wait the reporters made to be able to enter the property, where reportedly only the Chinese ambassador had had permission to go (Nasser and Mazon 1944b, 5). Sensationalist lines noted the large number of silk stockings, handbags, and wristwatches that the Song's entourage bought in town (Nasser and Mazon 1944b, 6; 18). These remarks can be seen as veiled critique of the Song sisters' opulent life in Brazil that could not be further from the difficulties faced by ordinary people in China.

The references to the staff who serviced the properties constitute particularly interesting elements emerging from these reports. They included "H." and Lucilla, Brazilian chambermaids; an unnamed Portuguese-speaking Chinese secretary ceded by the embassy who brought her correspondence from Chiang; a Brazilian butler, Elia Alievi; an unnamed Chinese cook; Chon-Chang, a Chinese tailor; Crispim, a Brazilian milkman; and Dorothy Garney, an American nurse dispatched from the US by plane to assist Song Meiling (Nasser and Mazon 1944a, 1; Nasser and Mazon 1944b, 5-6). Chambermaid Lucilla featured in several of Mazon's photographs of the property and a passage noted how Song was moved by a news piece where Lucilla had told reporters it was "one of the biggest honours of her life to make the bed for a night's sleep by the greatest lady in the world" ["uma das maiores honras de sua vida preparar o leito para uma noite de sono da maior dama do mundo"] (Nasser and Manzon 1944b, 14). As the pretext of her trip was healthcare, it is also unsurprising that two of her Brazilian contacts were medical doctors: Aloysio de Castro and Armino Fraga (A Tribuna 1944, 2; Nasser and Manzon 1944b, 18; Lima 2023, 142). This multinational set of employees had daily contact with Madame Chiang, interacting with her, directly or indirectly, with a frequency unmatched by anyone else in Brazil outside her Chinese entourage.

Shortly after she left Brazil, the Rio newspaper *A Manhã* wrote a report full of praise for the Chiangs, assuring that Song's visit "will be registered in our sympathy for her great Motherland" ["ficará marcada na nossa simpatia pela sua grande Pátria"] and underscoring her role in the "heroic and magnificent Chinese resistance" ["heroica e magnífica resistência chinesa"] (A Manhã 1944b, 4). The article subtly lamented her health-driven withdrawn stay in Brazil, stating that had she not been confined to rest, "all the country's social classes would have expressed their affection and enthusiasm" ["teriam todas as classes do país lhe expressado sua afeição e seu entusiasmo"] (A Manhã 1944b, 4). Extensive thanks were also conveyed to her host, Drault Ernanny, who received public acknowledgements from Dodsworth and Veloso. Song Meiling sent him an embroidered portrait of a three-centuries-old Chinese heroine for the house (O Jornal 1944b, 2). The choice of gift is illustrative of Song's promotion of women's contributions.

News from the Christmas edition of the magazine *Revista da Semana* emphasised that the reasons for Song Meiling's visit to Brazil remained unknown: "Nobody knows what brought the Chinese Generalissimo's wife to the Guanabara beaches. They said she comes on a rest trip. Everyone doubts" ["Ninguém sabe o que trouxe a espôsa do generalíssimo chinês até as praias da Guanabara. Dizem que vem em viagem de repouso. Todos duvidam"]; and "Until today nobody knows for sure what brought her to our land" ["Até agora ninguém sabe ao certo o que a trouxe à nossa terra"] (*Revista da Semana* 1944, 36; 81). The visit may well have been simply for rest and recuperation, but Song Meiling's public persona had been elevated to a status of superhuman ability by media narratives to such an extent that people now doubted she had a body capable of suffering like a mere mortal.

The Brazilian press coverage of Song Meiling's visit mirrors the tone of that of US reports during her 1943 tour (e.g. Shih 2021, 50-57; Haygood and Scott 2023, 560-564), though on a comparatively smaller scale. This is explained by the fact that her stay in Brazil had a shorter duration and, intentionally, much less public exposure, being treated as a private medical affair. In any case, the surviving reports evidence the trans-American circulation of a discourse about Song Meiling marked by fascination and recognition, as well as her significance in a global Second World War in which China, Brazil, and the US fought on the same side.

Legacy

Song Meiling's visits to Brazil constitute an important case of global South interactions during the Second World War. The 1944 visit in particular had a direct impact in stimulating good relations between China and the largest country in Latin America. President Vargas decorated the Chinese ambassador Chen Jie in September 1944 and Chiang Kai-shek decorated Vargas in late 1944 (A Manhã 1944d, 2; Lima 2023, 142). More consequently, Song's visit nurtured a smooth cooperation between Brazil and China in the foremost international institution to come out of World War Two: The United Nations. Whilst China's contribution to the victory of the Allies saw the country occupy one of the permanent seats in the UN Security Council, the "the Chinese vote helped Brazil" get into the Security Council as a non-permanent member in 1946 (Lima 2023, 1942).

Significantly, both China and Brazil were pioneers of women's representation in the UN. Amongst only four women who signed the UN Charter in 1945 were Wu Yifang from China—an educator trained in the US who was close collaborator of the Women's Advisory Council that Song Meiling led during the war—and Bertha Lutz, from Brazil—a scientist educated in Rio and Paris who was an internationally recognised women's rights activist, having represented Brazil at the

1922 Pan-American Conference of Women. While not formal diplomats, Wu and Lutz, much like Song, were visible proof of the changing public face of women in international relations.

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