

REVIEWS

Thomas P. Bernstein and Hua-yu Li, *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949-Present*, New York: Lexington Books (The Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series), 2010.

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Sino-Russian relations have grown close lately, as their relations with the United States have cooled. One fortunate consequence has been a revival of interest in the tumultuous history of the relationship. But how close are they really, as heirs to such an ambivalent legacy? This very well-researched and informative anthology sheds a good deal of light on this question. It covers essentially every major aspect of Sino-Soviet relations over the past seven decades, focused mainly on the “learning” dimension and chronologically on the period from 1949 to the collapse of the USSR in 1991 (but not exclusively in either case). The articles are intensively researched based on a myriad of materials: Sources include memoirs and biographies of leading Chinese and Soviet leaders and foreign affairs officials, unpublished documents for internal distribution, the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation, the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, U.S. State Department papers, the Hungarian National Archive, and provincial archives in China that have become accessible to international scholars in the reform period. Featured is an international roster of brilliant historians and social scientists from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, the US, Canada, Germany, Macau, and Hungary.

The overall theme of the collection, learning, is a rich one, for there were several models to learn from, and the learning went both ways. The Chinese at the beginning were enthusiastic students, but they soon became sensitive to the hierarchical dimension of the teacher–student relationship and began to rebel against it. Bernstein in his introduction perceives three Soviet learning models: Leninism (of the relatively moderate New Economic Policy period, carried on by Bukharin), revolutionary Stalinism, and bureaucratic Stalinism. During Mao’s era the inner-Party struggle pitted the “left” (revolutionary Stalinist) faction against the “right” (bureaucratic

Stalinist). At the very time the Chinese were beginning to question rote learning the Soviet model in the mid-1950s, Mao embraced Stalin in a filial reaction against Khrushchev's posthumous *lèse majesté* at the 20th CPSU Congress. This was not however the bureaucratic Stalinism embraced by his colleagues but the revolutionary Stalinism of the collectivization of the *kulaks* and the great purge. Using the dead dictator against his unworthy successors Mao made Moscow a "negative model," the opposite of which would define China's goals in the Cultural Revolution. Then, beginning with the advent of "reform and opening" in China in 1978 and the later rise of Gorbachev in the Soviet Union, learning became more reciprocal, though each side observed the other's experience with considerable caution. By the late 1980s the Russians had become impatient with political impediments to reform and radicalized their approach, while the Chinese drew back in alarm and consternation.

It is a massive tome, divided into seven parts and 19 chapters (not even counting the introduction and a "concluding assessment" bringing us up to the present), altogether 550 pages. The organization of the book consists of a chronological narrative at the beginning and end, with a large central section focused on particular aspects or sectors of the relationship. After an excellent introduction by Thomas Bernstein, the historical narrative is carried forward in chapters 1 and 3, and in the last three chapters. In chapter 1, Lorenz Luethi provides a long and informative review of the "Mao Years" (1949-1976), beginning with the negotiation of the alliance but focusing naturally on the epoch-making dispute that took up most of this period after a surprisingly brief honeymoon. As in his previous book, Luethi gives pride of place to ideology in the genesis of the dispute. At the same time he allows that ideology itself was very plastic in the hands of intensely passionate and headstrong (and implicitly nationalistic) revolutionary dictators on both (but especially the Chinese) sides. Helping to explain their seemingly impulsive policy zigzags are such circumstantial factors as the Soviet refusal to back Chinese moves against Taiwan in 1954-1955 and their reluctance to do so in 1958, Khrushchev's "secret speech" denouncing Stalin (and implicitly Mao), and the exhaustion of Soviet financial and military support for Chinese modernization efforts in the late 1950s. Peter Vamos then reviews the slow and deliberate reconciliation under Deng Xiaoping and a series of post-Brezhnev Soviet leaders, ironically beginning with China's demurral of Brezhnev's offer to renew the alliance. This was however quickly followed by agreement to hold "talks" working toward conditional "normalization" of party-to-party relations. The procedure consisted of seven years of biannual meetings between the two sides pending Chinese approval of Soviet removal of the "three obstacles" Deng had stipulated as a precondition (fortunately the Chinese proved in the end flexible about the Cambodian "obstacle"). The normalization summit oc-

curred amid massive democracy demonstrations making Tiananmen Square inaccessible. Wisely declining invitations to speak to the demonstrators Gorbachev observed events obliquely and with great discretion, apparently determined not to pursue the sort of bloody crackdown that ensued three weeks after his departure. This opened the way to the anticommunist upheaval in Eastern Europe and Soviet Union that left China a (nearly) lone communist survivor and temporarily embittered relations, but both sides soon picked up the pieces and resumed a reconciliation that has flowered since. This leaves us in the quandary discussed in the final three chapters of which of these two disparate models of neighborly relations is likely to prevail henceforth. Gilbert Rozman, Minglang Zhou and Guan Guihai are guardedly optimistic: the “strategic partnership” is now less ideologically encrusted and more balanced and hence likely to endure, provided China does not take undue advantage of its increasingly predominant position.

The other chapters are focused on specific aspects or sectors of the relationship. Economic transfer arrangements are examined by Shengfa Zhang (chapter 3) regarding the return of the Changchun Railway, and chapters by Kong Hanbing, Xiaojia Hou, and Gregory Rohlf review various twists and turns in transplanting Soviet agricultural institutions to China. You Ji looks at the massive transfer of weaponry and organizational templates from the Soviet to the People’s Liberation Army during the Korean War period when cooperation was deemed most essential. The Chinese were grateful at the time but later complained of the sacrifice of revolutionary egalitarianism and Mao erupted at Soviet proposals for naval cooperation suspecting an infringement on Chinese sovereignty. There is a great deal of new information here on the cultural and intellectual impact on China, including Hua-yu Li’s chapter on the translation and wholesale distribution of Stalin’s *Short Course* (which continued throughout the dispute, thanks to Mao’s repudiation of Soviet de-Stalinization), Miin-ling Yu’s chapter on the emulation of Stakhanovism in China’s “model worker” program, Jian Zang on Chinese emulation of Soviet gender equality, and in chapters by Izabella Goikhman, Douglas Stiffler, Laurence Schneider, and Elizabeth McGuire on various aspects (including Lysenkoism) of the scholarly exchange. Donghui He and Tina Mai Chen provide fine overviews of the impact of Soviet novels (spotlighting the famous *How the Steel Was Tempered*) and the depiction of gender relations in Soviet films.

A few nits might be picked: the introduction has many typos, a chapter might have been included on the organization of industry (to complement the excellent coverage of agriculture), and a Russian scholar or two might have been included in the international cast of scholars. But most certainly, this is a very comprehensive, readable, and useful addition to the literature, highly recommended for graduate and undergraduate courses on China, Russia, or on relations between them as well as for interested lay audiences.