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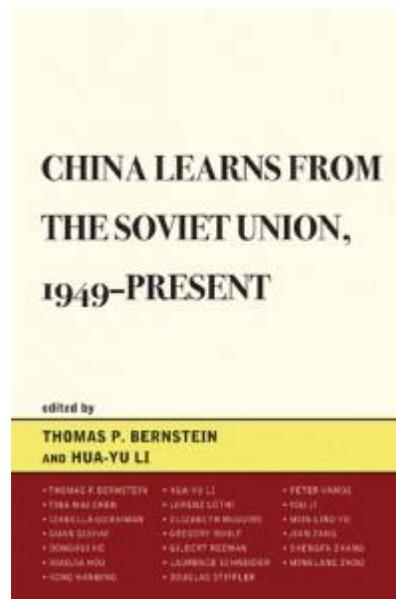
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China Learns from the Soviet Union: An Interview with Thomas P. Bernstein

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Thomas Bernstein, professor emeritus of Government at Columbia University, has recently edited a new book with Hua-yu Li, [China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949-present](#) (Lexington Books, 2010). Below, an interview we conducted with Professor Bernstein via e-mail, exploring the volume's scope and how it came into being.



Does the book mostly deal with the first half of the 1950s, when interactions were at their most intense?

Naturally the book does emphasize the early 1950s, but one of our major points is that Soviet influence was important at all stages of the post-1949 relationship. Many of the chapters start in the early years but then examine what happened to the Soviet model when Mao's China turned to the revolutionary radicalism that partially caused the growing estrangement and hostility between the two states. They show that Chinese learning changed from seeing the SU as a positive model to seeing it in a negative light, or as the Chinese would say, as *fanmian jiaocai* 反面教材. But some chapters show that even during the years when the Soviet model came under fire, it still influenced Chinese practices. For instance, Mao criticized the exploitation of Soviet peasants, calling it a case of "draining the pond to catch the fish." But during the Great Leap Forward (GLF), which is often regarded as having constituted a break with Soviet practice, extraction of resources from the Chinese countryside reached all-time highs, prompting Mao to complain that "Right now we have exactly the same illness." The same applies to the absolute priority assigned by Stalin to heavy industry, which Mao criticized in 1956 as excessive. Yet during the GLF, heavy industry commanded an unprecedented share of investment resources. One of our PRC authors believes that China continued to follow the Stalinist economic model until the reform period, albeit in highly distorted form.

Can you give readers a sense of the range of topics and of the major themes?

The book contains chapters on the Sino-Soviet relationship, ideology, military and the economy — topics which have been discussed in earlier academic literature, usually, however, without access to archives or to the findings of contemporary Chinese scholars, four of whom contributed to the book. But there are also chapters on the Soviet impact on Chinese society, and on science and education, as well as film and literature, which have received less attention.

One of the themes is to convey the idea that what we think of as the Soviet "model" was quite complex. Chinese leaders, who at times disagreed among themselves as to what it meant, could choose among three possibilities. First, the moderate policies of the period of the "New Economic Policy," 1921-28, which Stalin had supported. Remarkably, Stalin's advice to Chinese leaders before his death was to follow this approach, i.e., to go slow with socialist transformation until conditions were ripe. Mao agreed but actually circumvented Stalin's recommendations. Against the preferences of other leaders, including Zhang Wentian and Liu Shaoqi, Mao pushed through his preference for a rapid transition to socialism, which in fact was achieved by 1956 rather than the mid-1960s. Thus Mao followed the second option in the Soviet model, namely to radicalize the socialist advance in ways somewhat similar to Stalin's "revolution from above" in the early 1930s.

The third option was to emulate the bureaucratic, and elitist, Stalinism that emerged in the later 1930s and after World War II, in which upward mobility and middle-class values came to the fore. Mao's stinging critique of a Soviet textbook on political economy written during the GLF aimed at the latter: the neglect of the mass line, the emphasis on hierarchy, and the reliance on material incentives.

But in the first part of the 1950s, this form of Stalinism was publicized, as shown in some of the book's chapters. For instance, after a Chinese peasant delegation had visited the SU in 1952, its members reported on the differentiated incentives and the prosperous and happy lives of collective farm families.

Similarly, China emulated the Soviet practice of rewarding labor heroes with apartments and positions in the hierarchy. Praise was also conferred on women who wore fashionable dresses. Needless to say, these aspects of Soviet practice were repudiated when China turned left.

Several of the authors emphasize the favorable Chinese reception of aspects of the Soviet model. A case in point was gender equality. The idea that women should lead productive lives outside the home, participate in politics and acquire skills was very appealing to women. This part of the model elicited nostalgia in the reform period, when job discrimination against women returned.

A second example of a highly positive reception of the model pertains to the adoption of Soviet methods of industrial planning and construction, accompanied by the the delivery to China of over 100 heavy industrial projects, which constituted the heart of the First Five-Year Plan. The author, Kong Hanbing, writes of the excitement that was felt as these enterprises came on stream:

These achievements . . . moved the people of China. Because of them, China changed its image of being poor and weak. . . . These achievements also demonstrated the superiority of the socialist system. . . . We may say that in Chinese minds the theory of the Soviet model was equivalent to genuine Marxism, and its application was real socialism. The only goal of the whole party, the country, and the people was to nurture this kind of Marxism and to achieve this kind of socialism (p.161).

But this was the Stalinist model of industrialization. After Stalin's death, the author notes that the SU and Eastern Europe "weakened" this model in order to cope with its admittedly real defects. Chinese, however,

had equated the sacred cause of socialism with the Soviet Stalinist model, believing that it represented the material embodiment of Marxism and the truth of socialism. Tampering with [it]. . . . signified to the Chinese a betrayal of Marxism, a form of revisionism, and the restoration of capitalism (p. 162).

Unquestioning belief was followed by bitter disappointment at Soviet abandonment of the "truth," an important emotional ingredient in the Sino-Soviet conflict.

A case of an utterly misguided export to China of things Soviet was the the agronomist Trofim Lysenko's theory of the heritability of acquired characteristics, which promised huge increases in agricultural output and was therefore attractive to Stalin and to Chinese leaders. But Chinese western-trained geneticists rejected Lysenko as a fraud. Thought reform pressured some to convert to this

import, while others kept quiet and still others resisted, at least indirectly. In 1956, Lysenko came under attack in the Soviet Union, while in China the Hundred Flowers policy secured top-level support for the geneticists who resoundingly and publicly rejected Lysenkoism, prompting Mao, when he criticized blind emulation of the Soviets, to ridicule Lysenko adherents as having to do a somersault.

This issue of blind acceptance is also considered in chapters on education. One, entitled "Three Blows of the Shoulder Pole" describes how students at Renda (People's University) could be penalized for in any way questioning their Soviet teachers. This blindness dissipated after Stalin's death, when the relationship became more equal, and Chinese students and teachers became more assertive. The volume contains a chapter that questions "the impact-response" approach to Sino-Soviet academic interactions by arguing that there was always strong Chinese input in the negotiations on exchanges. This argument is somewhat analogous to the criticisms of historians who depicted China as a passive recipient of western initiatives in the 19th century.

With regard to literature, the quintessential example of Soviet socialist realism, the novel *How the Steel was Tempered* (钢铁是怎样炼成的), became required reading for millions of students. It is the story of Pavel Korchagin, who renounces his love for the attractive but bourgeois Tonia for total revolutionary commitment. "Debates" were held in schools to discuss whether Pavel's actions were "correct," with persistent "help" extended to those who thought Pavel made a mistake. During the Cultural Revolution, the book was not reprinted but also not outlawed. Some adolescents who reportedly read it reversed the official view, coming to admire Tonia's beauty and demeanor. The book continues to be read today.

In what sense was the Soviet collapse and the lessons learned by China an important turning point?

The sudden disintegration of the SU and the collapse of the Communist Party in 1991 was a profoundly shocking event. Henceforth China would have to deal with a country on the road to capitalism, a development that necessarily influenced Chinese perceptions of its own location in the Soviet-Chinese-US triangle. In the 1989 rapprochement, each side recognized the other as "socialist." The idea that socialism could suddenly disappear in this cradle of socialism, which had influenced China from the time of the October Revolution on, was viewed as an extraordinary event that called for searching analysis of the causes and examination of what China should do to avoid the Soviet fate. One of our chapters, written by Beida professor Guan Guihai, describes the immense research program that various scholarly units in China undertook and continue to undertake to this day. (The author notes it was easy to get research grants if you were working on this topic.) Chinese researchers found many reasons for the collapse, especially in the Soviet regime's failure to adapt to new conditions but also in its failure to maintain the "imperial sword" which in their view had been relinquished already by Khrushchev. Scholars differed on whether to assign primary blame to Gorbachev's willfulness or to systemic factors. But for purposes of policy, the message of the collapse was simple and unambiguous: don't allow the kind of political liberalization that opened the floodgates to regime change. This determination is a cornerstone of the strategy of China's leaders to maintain power to this day.

How did you become interested in Soviet influences on China?

I have had a long-standing interest in comparing social and political processes in the Soviet Union, the PRC, and other state socialist systems. Comparison doesn't exclude examination of relations or influences, but it mainly treats developments in each country independently of the other. Initially, I was intrigued by the differences in the processes of collectivization of agriculture in the two (1928-1932 and 1952-1956). I wanted to understand why the Chinese Communists seemed to have done a much better a job than their Soviet predecessors in securing peasant compliance. Later I did some research on the Great Leap famine (1959-61), which I compared to the famine that Stalin inflicted on his peasantry in 1932-33, and I learned that the Chinese regime had just as great a capacity to inflict a horrendous catastrophe on its countryside as had the Soviets. But learning from the Soviet Union played a minor role in this research.

It was my co-editor, Professor Hua-yu Li, who got me interested in questions of learning and influence. I was one of the supervisors of her thesis, which she wrote on "Mao and the Economic Stalinization of China, 1948-1953," and which was [published](#) in 2006. She and I organized an international conference on Chinese learning from the Soviets, which brought together scholars from China, Taiwan, Europe, and the US, and which was held in 2007. The book is the result.

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