

Sovietology in Post-Mao China: Aspects of Foreign Relations, Politics, and Nationality, 1980–1999

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For those who are still interested in the rise and fall of international communism during what Eric Hobsbawm called the “short 20th century,” Jie Li’s book reopens an already “ended history” in which the world’s two largest communist states underwent rapid and extensive reforms leading to vastly different outcomes: Soviet collapse and China’s initial rise. In retrospect, a key element in shaping their different fates was the intensive observing, analysing and “internalizing” of the USSR by China’s political and intellectual elites, particularly its Sovietologists in the 1980s and 1990s.

Li’s “re-evaluation” of “a larger body of updated Chinese sources” in post-Mao Sovietology (p. 1), however, is disappointing for several reasons. To begin with, his extremely small number of secondary Western sources (about seven) are all misquoted. Take, for example, Li’s main critique of these sources as merely accepting the Chinese “univocal” assessment of Gorbachev as “the fundamental catalyst” for the Soviet collapse (pp. 25–26, note 107). Nowhere could such a sweeping assessment of China’s Sovietology be found in the cited pages of those Western sources.

For example, in his book *Unparalleled Reforms: China’s Rise, Russia’s Fall, and the Interdependence of Transition* (Lexington Books, 2005, p. 111) Christopher Marsh notices that most Chinese studies “point to the CPSU and the Soviet system itself as the primary underlying causes...”. In David Lane’s edited volume, *The Transformation of State Socialism System Change, Capitalism, or Something Else?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 272), Jeane L. Wilson describes how CCP reformers led by Deng overcame conservatives’ efforts to publicly repudiate Gorbachev before and after the Soviet fall. Similarly, David Shambaugh’s *China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (University of California Press, 2008, pp. 48, 56, 81) has no traces of “embracing” the alleged Chinese Gorby-only-to-blame discourse that Li notices. Instead, Shambaugh detects a “broad agreement among Chinese analysts that a range of factors” contributed to the Soviet collapse. This “systemic” approach by China’s Sovietologists contrasts sharply with the prevailing Western analyses, “which tended toward a singular emphasis on Gorbachev...” (pp. 54, 60). Moreover, Shambaugh lists 51 factors in China’s assessment of the Soviet collapse (pp. 62–63). Only nine are associated with Gorbachev.

Perhaps because of Shambaugh’s critique of some Western analyses, in Thomas Bernstein and Hua-Yu Li’s edited volume *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949–Present* (Lexington Books, 2010), Bernstein adopts a multi-variable approach to analysing the Soviet fall and the “complexities” of China’s learning curve (p. 1). Accordingly, in the same book Gilbert Rozman detects a “more varied” debate over time regarding Gorbachev’s role and a consistent theme attributing the Soviet fall to Western influence (p. 464). Guan Guihai, in turn, highlights the dynamic discourse between “system-flaw” and “leadership-error” schools, and the latter includes all Soviet leaders. Gorbachev should not be overly blamed but be judged “justly,” cautions Guan (p. 513). Guan’s chapter also constitutes a *do facto* review of the field. It details eight research programmes in 1993–2006 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), leading to over 600 publications. Li ignores all of this, including 11 out of 12 important books Guan identifies with full references (pp. 506–507).

Possibly the most appalling is Li’s mishandling of Minglang Zhou’s works. Page 3 of Zhou’s 2003 book, *Multilingualism in China: The Politics of Writing Reforms for Minority Languages, 1949–2002*

(de Gruyter, 2003) is said to “reveal” minorities’ persistent resistance to the CCP before 1949 (p. 203). Zhou’s page nonetheless is about the minority policies in traditional China (770 BC–600 AD). Nor does Zhou describe China’s minority policy as “a great irony” of Marxism, as Li claims (p. 239). After comparing Lenin’s “communism-in-one-country” theory with the Marxist “all-or-nothing” projection, Zhou simply says Mao follows Leninism (p. 41–42). Curiously, Li’s chapter six on nationality politics completely bypasses Zhou’s excellent chapter (in Bernstein and Li’s 2010 volume) titled “The fate of the Soviet model of multinational state-building in the PRC,” which is buried in the long footnote on Li’s first page as part of a “myth” maintained by the Western scholarly establishment.

Given the sweeping misrepresentation of these Western scholarly sources (pp. 31, 148, 158, 175) for their “guilt” of missing the “forest” (multiple sources for Soviet collapse), Li’s ambitious effort to clarify the “inaccuracies” “perpetuated” by Western scholarly sources (p. 1) resembles a tilting at windmills, surprisingly, in the 21st century.

Similar mishandling of sources is also found in Li’s collection of more than 400 Chinese language sources (pp. 265–308). Deng, for example, is quoted as announcing that “the more the elements of capitalism are introduced, the more capitalism will expand in China” (p. 173). Deng’s original words, however, criticized those who believed that “the more elements of capitalism will be introduced, and the more capitalism will expand in China.” If the “loss in translation” of Deng’s statement could have been avoided given the widely available online Chinese and English versions, the book’s depiction that Li Jingjie “admired Gorbachev’s courage for learning from ‘the capitalist political civilization’” (p. 149) is baseless. Gorbachev’s name is mentioned nine times in Li Jingjie’s 1992 treatise “Historical Lessons of the Failure of the CPSU” (*Sugong shibai de lishi jiaoxun*). All are said to be Gorbachev’s mistakes that China should avoid.

Curiously, Li’s huge collection of Chinese sources excludes some crucial reviews of the fields by China’s own Sovietologists (Zhang Jianhua, Feng Shaolei, Yang Cheng, Sun Chao, Fei Haiting, Feng Yujun, etc.). Nor does Li’s book include a 2006 self-assessment (almost 50,000 characters, *bu pingfan de licheng* [An Extraordinary Journey]) for the 25-year Soviet/Russian studies by the Institute of Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies (IREECAS), whose publications are chosen by Li as the “backbone” of his research (p. 42). These reviews differ considerably, but all critically evaluated the 1980s and 1990s. Few of them were available for those targeted Western researchers at the time but are now openly accessible. Beyond these misses, Li’s pages 8–9 also completely overlook two Shanghai-based Sovietologists: Feng Shaolei of East China Normal University and Zhao Huasheng of Fudan University, whose impact on Sovietology/Russology both inside and outside China is enormous.

Aside from bypassing the mainstream of China’s Sovietology while mishandling some of the finest Western scholarly works, Li’s book has some noticeable slips. Tsinghua University’s renowned international relations scholar Yan Xuetong is said to be an IREECAS researcher (p. 259). Yan nonetheless never worked there. Also, CASS started to re-admit graduate students in 1978, not in the early 1980s as Li says (p. 13, note 38).

Last if not least, the book could have been more reader-friendly if its index followed the conventional last-name-first order, and if the last chapter sorted out its incredibly confusing ordinal numbers sequence (“first... second... third... second... third... fourth... finally... fourth, and last”) on pages 242–245.

Beijing and Moscow have departed significantly from their past orthodoxies, for better or worse. Understanding the turbulent 1980s–1990s, however, remains a challenge, and an art, for both academia and foreign policy practitioners in the brave/grave new world of artificial intelligence and weapons of mass destruction.