IN SEARCH OF A SOCIALIST MODERNITY:
THE CHINESE INTRODUCTION OF SOVIET CULTURE

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by

Yan Li

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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Abstract

The first decade of communist rule in China featured the widespread introduction of Soviet culture that transformed the lives of ordinary Chinese citizens. The Chinese Communist Party familiarized the populace with a spectrum of Soviet cultural forms, such as architecture, fashion, film, and literature, through every possible channel with the intention of cementing their hold on power and pushing a program of international socialist modernization. However, while in general the popularization of Soviet culture generally achieved anticipated results, at times mass interpretation of Soviet cultural products differed considerably from the intentions of the new regime. The results of this decade-long transnational cultural engagement with the Chinese public’s mentality, behavior patterns, and belief systems remain far-reaching to the present day. Two questions are relevant to understanding this transformation: 1) How did the Chinese government exploit the Soviet culture to mold “socialist new citizens?” and 2) How did the Chinese people utilize the language and imagery from Soviet cultural products to express their own vision and understanding of socialist modernity? Using methodologies in mass communication, cultural studies, literary criticism, and film studies, this dissertation will answer these questions and explain the process by which the values of the PRC party-state and the Chinese masses contested, negotiated, and colluded. In so doing, this study will not only shed new light on early PRC history and Sino-Soviet relations, but it will also contribute to understanding the transnational cultural dynamics shaping the evolution of the communist world.
Acknowledgement

This dissertation is dedicated to my dear adviser Professor Christina Gilmartin and her family – Peter, Beth, Benjamin, Denise, and little Lexi. Just a week ago, I was on email exchange with Chris discussing the Introduction and defense date. But now we are in two different worlds. Rest in peace and power, Chris. Your humanity and scholarship will endure.

Chris was the most influential person in my personal and academic life over the past seven years. In spring 2005 Professor Laura Frader, former Chair of the History Department, and Chris “rescued” my application from the Admission Office (I was unable to pay the application fee; therefore, my application was not considered). The History Department generously paid the fee for me. Chris reviewed my application and kindly arranged a phone interview with me. A few weeks later, I was admitted to the World History program at Northeastern. This changed my life forever.

Over the past seven years, I have received sustained help from the Gilmartin family, who have given me more than I could ever ask. I still remember on August 18, 2005, my first day landing in Boston, Peter greeted me right outside the airplane gate. Chris and Peter kindly offered me their son’s room so that I didn’t have to worry about Boston’s expensive housing in the first year. I miss every meal we ate together in their nice kitchen, every ride they gave me, and every party they had from which I made a lot of friends. I miss Chris’ sweet smiles, Peter’s hearty laughs, and Beth’s silly giggles. Since I moved out, whenever I go back to visit their house, I feel it is my second home and they are my family in Boston.

Over the past seven years, I have also received enormous intellectual and professional
support from Chris. She advised me on everything I encountered in the academic world of this country. For numerous times, we sat down to discuss the courses I could take, the academic plans I should pursue, and the type of scholar I can make of myself. On multiple junctures of my dissertation writing, she inspired me, encouraged me, and dragged me back to the right track. For my job search, she wrote recommendations for me, helped me revise the cover letter and the C.V., and offered me critical advice for the job talk and interviews. She walked me all the way through the past seven years of my doctoral study.

Chris was a paragon of generosity, kindness, and virtue. Her professionalism and her dedication to us graduate students will shine forever. When I heard the news about her passing, I regretted that I was not able to return her all the favors I owed her, but then I realized that she did not expect anything in return when she offered everything – her generosity was entirely selfless. She would, simply, be pleased to see the final version of this dissertation, be proud of my future accomplishment, and be happy to see her influence reflected in all of us. Thus, simply, I dedicate this dissertation to her and her family.

The initial inspiration for this dissertation project came from a cultural history seminar in the theme of Soviet Film that I took with Professor Harlow Robinson at Northeastern University in 2007. Professor Robinson kindled my interest in comparative studies between Russian and Chinese cultures, though I regret the Russian part reflected in this dissertation is lacking because of my inadequate Russian-language proficiency.

I thank Professors Harlow Robinson, Tom Havens, and Laura Frader, who have read and discussed with me every part of this project. Their probing comments and suggestions were most helpful in guiding my revisions. Professor Havens painstakingly line-edited each chapter to
streamline my prose. I am sure this has significantly shortened the distance between this dissertation and the future book manuscript. Naturally, I alone am responsible for the errors that remain.

Over the course of research and writing, I received sustained support from the History Department. I thank the department again for offering me years of financial support. I am grateful for Professor Uta Poiger, Chair of the Department, for her sympathy and timely support to my defense after Chris’ passing. On this note, I also thank Professor Havens for chairing my defense in Chris’ place. I thank our wonderful secretary Nancy Borromey for her assistance and her cheerfulness. I truly enjoyed every chat with her.

Since September 2011, I have benefited immensely from a dissertation writing group that Chris initiated among my fellow students in the History Department. I am grateful to Zach Scarlett, Sam Christiansen, James Bradford, Colin Sargent, Ethan Hawkley, and Burleigh Hendrickson, who laboriously read and commented on the chapters piece by piece. Without their encouragement, good humor, and push, it would have taken me longer to finish the writing. I wish them best of luck in completing their projects and all other future endeavors.

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I acknowledge with love and gratitude how my parents have tolerated my years of being half a world away from home. Even though they do not completely agree that a PhD degree is essential for the fulfillment of life, they are proud of and share delight in what their daughter has
been doing. I am grateful to my brother and sister-in-law for their care of my parents. I am happy that my niece is growing happily and always curious about her auntie’s long hours of working on the computer. Finally, to Steve, there is nothing I can say that could properly convey my appreciation for all the love, care, encouragement, and support he has given me.
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Introduction

To me, youth is about revolution, about love, about literature, and about the Soviet Union... The Soviet Union is my nineteenth year, my first love, and the beginning of my literary career.¹

There is no other foreign country like the Soviet Union, which I have already known so well before I have the chance to see it with my own eyes. She feels so familiar. I so much miss her cities, towns, lakes...²

Wang Meng (A Chinese writer)

When the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, the young communist state allied with the Soviet Union in the Cold War polarization and initiated a plan of socialist modernization based on the Soviet model. Not only were economic structures and political institutions reconstructed on Soviet blueprints, but more important fundamental changes were brought to urban space in the process of disseminating various Soviet cultural imports: school education was reformed, new architectural designs emerged in city topography, aesthetics and personal tastes in everything from music and clothes to food and hobbies were reshaped, views of gender, youth, and social relations changed radically, and new concepts of truth and morality were discussed. The entire conceptual inventory, it seems, was transformed within a decade of Sino-Soviet alliance. Despite the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, Soviet culture has become a cherished memory of thousands of Chinese who braved the country’s political upheavals of the past century. The quotations above express a nostalgia for the bitter sweet “friendship” with the “Soviet big brother” among today’s older generations, as well as a public yearning for certain values and sentiments of revolutionary times, “in stark contrast with the “forward-looking”

² Ibid., 54.
morale that the post-Mao government has strived to instill in the public mind since the economic reforms and opening up to outside investment in 1978.

To understand the Soviet cultural legacy in contemporary China, this dissertation examines a nationwide effort led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to learn from the Soviets during the “Sino-Soviet friendship period” of the 1950s. It investigates how a massive state initiative to “Sovietize” the society, as well as by the subsequent about-face in the official attitude toward the Soviet Union shaped Chinese popular imagination, public mentality, and behavior patterns. In particular, this project takes a fresh look at the collision and collusion on the grassroots level in transplanting Soviet socialist culture into Maoist China. By pitting official treatment of Soviet culture against popular reception of it, this study sheds new light on mass culture, the state-society relationship, and Sino-Soviet relations in the early years of the PRC.

Historians who cover Sino-Soviet relations and Cold War history have conventionally focused on geopolitics, ideological disparity, economic rivalry, technological emulation, and arms races. Yet the cultural dimensions of Sino-Soviet involvement are still under-researched.³


⁴ While much has been written over the past two decades on the cultural dimensions of the Cold War and how they impacted politics, and diplomacy in the West, far less work has been done on Asia, including Sino-Soviet relations. See David Caute, The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), Andrew Hammond, ed., Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), Kwon, Heonik, The Other Cold War (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), Annette沃温克尔, Marcus M. Puyk, and Thomas Lindenberger, eds., Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western Societies (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012).
Specifically, insufficient attention has been paid to how Chinese leaders in the Cold War adhered to certain Cold War doctrines or ideologies, how they depicted or imagined themselves, their friends, and their enemies, and how their cultural perceptions predisposed them toward certain policies. Moreover, even less attention has been paid to the cultural engagement between state and society. This dissertation attempts to bridge these gaps in Cold War history by bringing together three dimensions into the study of Sino-Soviet relations: the Cold War as a historical condition in international history, China as the geographical context, and culture as a site for political and social actions and interactions.

“Culture” has two distinct but interlinked implications. In an abstract sense, it involves not only state ideologies and top leaders’ worldviews but also ordinary people’s perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs. More concretely, “culture” includes not only official discourses and propaganda but also popular novels, poems, films, songs, paintings, fashion, and architectural

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6 In my examination of CCP propaganda work, the word “propaganda,” or xuanhua, is taken as a rather neutral term simply meaning the official promulgation of ideas and policies, despite its often heavy-handed and overbearing nature. I agree with Julian Chang that the Chinese (and Soviet as well) view of propaganda does not carry the negative connotations that the word does in English. See Julian Chang, “The Mechanics of State Propaganda,” 76-77.
designs, which transmit the ideas, values, and institutions that constitute the shared bases of social actions. Here I view Soviet culture as a “contact zone,” where Soviet socialist ideology was translated into the Chinese context, propagated by the Chinese government, and finally consumed by Chinese audiences. I call this transnational contact “transculturation,” to emphasize the fact that this is more than translation or transition from one culture to another; rather, it entails creation of new concepts and cultural phenomena. Engaging with an interdisciplinary methodology that combines historical inquiry with mass communication, cultural studies, literary criticism, and cinema studies, this study examines how the interests and values of the Soviet ideology, the PRC party-state, and the Chinese people contested, negotiated, and colluded in the process of transculturation. It proposes to examine Soviet culture in China in a panoramic view: the propagation of a pro-Soviet rhetoric by the state, the selection, translation, and reinterpretation of Soviet cultural resources by cultural authorities, and the overall impact on the public.

By focusing on culture and society, this work brings to the surface undercurrents in mundane affairs and at the same time brings scholarly attention to hidden trends in Sino-Soviet transnational interactions. It offers a productive way to understand the nature, significance, and repercussions of the Sino-Soviet cultural engagement. Many aspects of the Soviet legacy are still present in China today. This study helps to recognize the Cold War legacies for China and

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contributes to understanding how these legacies still shape attitudes, foreign policies, and international politics today.

A “cultural perspective” on Sino-Soviet relations is crucial to our knowledge of the Cold War, both in Asia and globally. It is also critical to a more nuanced understanding of the states that produced Cold War discourses, concepts, symbols, and images, and the societies that internalized them. While the state was often the dominant player in such processes, the role of society should not be underestimated. In investigating the interaction between the Chinese government and its population, I not only look into official efforts to shape popular perceptions with cultural tools and resources in the Cold War but also ordinary people’s responses to state projects aimed at imparting Cold War values. This contributes to a new understanding of the actions of the Chinese state and society, as well as how countries that “leaned to one side” in the Cold War developed and cultivated communist/anticommunist ideologies, American/Soviet modernity, Maoist revolutionary worldviews, and other institutions.

More broadly, this study suggests parallels between Chinese transculturation of a Soviet-style socialist modernity and the cultural interchanges in other situations where a political elite attempts to impose a foreign ideal. Very commonly in world history, new regimes solidify their identities, cement their power, and promote modernization among their populaces by borrowing and emulating the languages, literatures, school systems, architecture, and fashions of another culture. I believe this study will provide a tool for understanding not only contemporary China’s foreign-inspired modernization, but also the impact that similar transnational historical processes have worldwide.
The “Lean to One Side” Policy in World Perspective

Direct contact between China and Russia occurred when they were both conquered in the thirteenth century by Mongols; mutual contact deepened with the eastern expansion of Russia to the frontiers of Qing China in the seventeenth century. Initially, there was very little exchange between Chinese and Russian cultures. The exchange increased noticeably in the early twentieth century, especially after the Russian October Revolution, when more and more Chinese intellectuals and social activists turned to Russian and Soviet revolutionary culture for a solution to China’s national problems. Henceforth Russian and Soviet cultural products were introduced into China in fair quantity. Not only did they provide an alternative frame of reference (other than the Euro-American model) for the modern transformation of Chinese literature and art, but their increasing impact on Chinese audiences also assisted the communist revolution. All this laid the foundation for the CCP’s radical “Sovietization” plan in 1949. By the 1950s the introduction of Soviet culture had brought remarkable transformations to Chinese society. Although here I use the word “exchange,” the flow of culture between the two countries in the twentieth century, owing to their differing political power, was mainly in one direction, from Russia to China. Especially as a result of their positions in the socialist camp during the Cold War, the Chinese introduction of Russian culture significantly surpassed the Russian introduction of Chinese culture.

The CCP’s endeavor to introduce wholesale the cultural products of the Soviet Union in the 1950s is a critical link in the history of the cultural exchange between China and Russia. To understand this cultural radicalism, it is useful to place it back into the international and domestic conditions of the time. Since cultural exchange is closely related to transnational relations, we
must pay special attention to the international contexts that shaped and justified China’s radical cultural policy. During the Cold War confrontation between the USSR and the United States, China constituted an important component of the two superpowers’ Far East Asian strategies. With the communist ascendency at the end of the civil war between the CCP and the GMD (the Nationalist Party), and Washington’s continued backing for the GMD, Moscow finally chose to favor the CCP. With this newly found support from the communist neighbor, Mao proclaimed the “lean to one side” policy – the Soviet side of the Cold War – to woo Soviet aid and to curb American aggression. However, this policy was not simply a forced reaction to foreign influence; rather, it was a pragmatic consideration based on Chinese national interests. At the beginning of the PRC, the new Communist regime was facing a multitude of challenges from abroad: foreign trade embargo, diplomatic isolation, and hostility from the capitalist world. By contrast, the USSR was a world powerhouse and the leader of the socialist camp. Winning Stalin’s trust and Soviet aid was crucial to New China’s embryonic socialist modernization.

Yet Mao and his leadership did not view the international environment surrounding China only through the prism of national interests; rather they also had a vision of internationalism. The decision to forge an alliance with the Soviet Union meant that “the PRC was conceived as a state in the broader framework of the ‘socialist camp’ from its very first hour.”9 In minds of Chinese leaders, “the issue was not simply a threat to China’s security, but a global confrontation developing between the two camps which permitted no Chinese dalliance with the imperialist United States.”10 This was why Mao and his colleagues “actively sought and indeed, expected

such an alliance.”\textsuperscript{11} For the same reason, they also attached great importance to the “friendship rhetoric” that the Chinese propaganda machine promptly invented for promoting the Sino-Soviet alliance.\textsuperscript{12} Such efforts paid off. In the first half of the 1950s, an amicable atmosphere was created between Beijing and Moscow, which helped China win diplomatic, economic, military, and technological support from the Soviet government.

In the process of promoting Sino-Soviet friendship, Soviet culture played an extremely consequential part. During this time, the PRC government introduced the Chinese populace to a deluge of Soviet novels, poems, songs, films, posters, etc. Concurrently, the government turned hostile to Euro-American cultures and initiated campaigns to root out their influences. These steps in the cultural realm were a forceful demonstration of China’s political stance in the Cold War, and were clearly intended to win Soviet favor. For example, in the 1950s Chinese film making turned to Soviet cinema for ideas and techniques ranging from the writing of scenario to a particular angle of shooting. Soviet films were shown across China to foster a pro-Soviet ambiance. China’s increased film import through Sovexportfilm (the film import and export department of the USSR) and the popularity of these films among Chinese audiences greatly pleased Soviet cultural authorities, who attached much importance to creating and maintaining the Soviet image and popularizing Soviet ideology via the distribution of cinema. As a result, the prestige that Soviet culture enjoyed in China enhanced Sino-Soviet alliance, which gave more status to the young socialist state in the international arena. In this way, the introduction of Soviet culture paved the way for China’s internationalization amid Cold War isolation from the

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 232.

\textsuperscript{12} Even when open rifts surfaced between the two parties in the late 1950s, the Chinese government still tried to maintain the rhetoric, posing to the world (particularly the capitalist world) that socialist solidarity was unbreakable and China would remain its defender.
capitalist camp. The connection with Soviet cultural circles also allowed the PRC to build a socialist identity and share a feeling of community in the socialist world. Through the Soviet Union, China also tied itself to other members of the socialist bloc by importing their cultural products, although in far less quantity. Literary works were translated and films were dubbed from countries such as East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and North Korea. In so doing, China joined a massive effort coordinated by the Soviet Union to circulate new cultural works created in the socialist spirit (mainly by the Soviets) across the socialist bloc. The widespread Stalinist architecture that still looms monumentally over cities like Warsaw, Berlin, and Bucharest is one pointed reminder of this concerted effort. In the early PRC, the symmetrical, imposing, and sometimes grandiose Soviet designs furnished emerging industrial cities with an identity that was both socialist and internationalist. Despite deep internal divisions, the cross-borrowing of socialist culture within the socialist camp created “a border-crossing consciousness emphasizing coherence and simultaneity,” which forcibly stamped China’s newly acquired identity on the minds of its citizens.

Additionally, the cultural connections with the Soviet-led socialist camp expanded the PRC’s international outreach. By sending its writers, artists, athletes, model works, and students on exchange visits or to large-scale conventions in other socialist countries, China was able to

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begin projecting its cultural and political influence across almost all of Eurasia, ranging from Berlin to Pyongyang, from Warsaw to Hanoi, and from Belgrade to Ulan Bator. From the perspective of the 1960s, the cultural stronghold “defending the East” that China was building in the 1950s laid the foundation for the radical expansion of Maoist internationalism during the Cultural Revolution.

**New China, New Culture, New Citizens**

From a domestic point of view, the radicalism in the Chinese adoption of Soviet culture stemmed from an urgent need to build a new culture that would be both compatible with and conducive to a new social order in China. The birth of the PRC not only ended the domestic landlordism and foreign colonialism but also negated their cultural influences. Concurrent with the campaigns to sweep out foreign influence from Euro-American capitalist cultures, measures were taken to eradicate the cultural traditions from China’s imperial past. In the absence of the old culture, a new culture with a new set of values and concepts had to be established not only for mass consumption but more importantly, for the new regime to win popular support and turn the public into “new citizens.” However, in the immediate post-liberation era it was not realistic for the Chinese regime to quickly build a new culture entirely from scratch, nor was it necessary to do so when such a culture could be readily imported from the “Soviet big brother” and modified to suit the needs of the CCP. For the CCP, Soviet culture represented the most advanced socialist achievements and therefore would be the most suitable material for creating China’s “socialist new man.” It was a very persuasive idea to both the party and the population that the path the Soviet Union took was the one that China should be taking and accordingly, the
Soviet present would become the future of China. The importance of Soviet culture to China can be understood from the following remarks by Soviet cultural authorities.

The knowledge about the cultural life of Soviet people who have long been striving for socialism, and the knowledge about their science, literature, and art, will help enhance the influence of Marxist and Leninist worldviews on the Chinese working class and assist builders of New China in mastering the socialist ideology. This knowledge furnishes people with many concrete and real-life examples which will help them find new paths to progress and can be applied to extremely backward countries with a semi-feudal, semi-colonial history to enrich the spiritual life of millions. . . The literary works by Soviet writers effectively depict the process of Soviet Russia’s revolutionary transformation. They serve as a special textbook for China’s builders of socialism who are engaged in similar tasks in their country.\(^\text{15}\)

Although this statement came from a Soviet perspective and denoted Soviet cultural chauvinism, these views were shared by Chinese cultural authorities. Zhou Yang, a consequential figure in the decision making in PRC cultural circles, argued that Soviet socialist realism be the guideline for Chinese literature and art. He commented: “The great Soviet literature has an important place in Chinese people’s life and has influenced Chinese culture immensely… From this literature, we see the most advanced and wonderful social system ever existing in the world that truly reflects the happiness of living; we see the sublime qualities and the highest moral standard of humankind.”\(^\text{16}\) Zhou Yang further asserted that the excellent works of Soviet writers, as well as the decrees and speeches regarding literature and art given by Stalin, Zhdanov, and Malenkov, “provide the richest and the most valuable experience for all the progressive arts in China and the world, and serve as the most important guidance to us.” Moreover, “the significance is not limited to literature but it is also political” because “the great Sino-Soviet friendship is the most important force in defending the East and world peace.” For such reasons,


\(^{16}\) Zhou Yang, “Shehui zhuyi xianshizhuyi: Zhongguo wenxue qianjin de daolu” [Socialist realism: the path of Chinese literature], Renmin ribao, January 11, 1953. The rest of Zhou Yang’s quotation comes from the same source.
Zhou Yang concluded that the immediate task of Chinese writers and artists was to “further popularize Soviet literature, art, and film among Chinese people.”

The popularization of Soviet socialist culture in the 1950s forms the focal point of this dissertation, which explores the transformation of Chinese society through Soviet cultural influence. This decade-long cultural radicalism brought fundamental and, to a certain extent, devastating changes to traditional Chinese culture. Existing research in this regard has enlightened our understanding of the shifts in modern Chinese literature, performing, and visual arts.17 By contrast, the simultaneous changes among the rank and file remain a less studied aspect of Soviet influence on China. Needless to say, the circulation of Soviet cultural imports was not confined to the cultural elites; rather, it was carried out on the many levels and could not have maintained itself without popular acceptance and demand. Ultimately, it was the minds and behavior of ordinary citizens that this endeavor targeted, and popular reception of the Soviet model was essential to the CCP’s success in modernizing China. Understanding the popularization of Soviet culture on the grassroots level allows an understanding of the ways and forms in which China changed during the first decade of communist rule.

In the years before the establishment of the PRC, a diversity of ideals and ideologies were held by proponents in disparate geographic locations. During the 1950s the multitude of ideologies was supplanted by the CCP’s socialist ideology, and the mindset of a new China transcended geographic distances. The promotion of Soviet culture under the auspices of the CCP played a pivotal role in this process. Despite scattered doubts and suspicions, the Chinese populace gradually developed a keen interest in a wide spectrum of Soviet cultural forms that the

17 See, for example, Mark Gamsa’s works on Soviet literature in China; Tina Mai Chen’s works on Soviet films in China.
CCP sponsored in the initial years of the Sino-Soviet alliance. Translations of Soviet bestsellers were stacked in every bookstore and library, and their sales and lending rates remained high. Soviet personages such as Pavel and Zoya (two Soviet heroes idolized in novels and films) became pop icons and role models for young people. Young parents adopted pleasant-sounding Russian names for their children or named them after Soviet heroes. Whenever possible, people avidly learned Russian; even those with low levels of literacy were able to put some pidgin Russian words into daily practice, fancying their “newness.”

In this context Soviet culture exerted an enormous impact on the collective consciousness of the Chinese. Because the Chinese government played a decisive role in rendering and monitoring foreign cultural imports for mass consumption, its effort to impose Soviet influence was a process by which the Chinese government propagated its own ideology by manipulating the ideas and concepts conveyed in Soviet culture. An investigation of this process involves two related questions. First, what were the expected outcomes of the Chinese government’s promotion and appropriation of Soviet culture? Second, how did the Chinese people react to state intervention, and how did they interpret the language and imagery from Soviet cultural products? The following discussion will present my answers to these questions based on the research findings of this dissertation.

Rethinking State-Society Relations

Being internationalist and nationalist at the same time, the CCP expected the introduction of Soviet culture to have two major effects on the populace. First, cultural connections with the Soviet Union would enhance Chinese popular understanding of internationalism. At a time when
a cold war could turn into a hot war at any time, Maoist ideology stressed that class struggle both at home and abroad must be fully understood and applied on a daily basis. By incorporating cultural products from “socialist brothers” into of everyday life – household utensils, clothing, mass entertainment, etc. – and with attendant propaganda that highlighted internationalist cooperation, constant vigilance, and “continued revolution,” the Chinese government engaged the public in a shared struggle (albeit an imagined one) with the people of the socialist bloc against capitalism and imperialism. This would allow the CCP to reshape popular conceptualization of the Chinese nation-state and the new world order.

Second, it was expected that Soviet culture would enhance Chinese popular imagination of China’s socialist future. During this time, the Chinese government spread a slogan that (pro)claimed “the Soviet today is our tomorrow.” Using “the Soviet today” portrayed in the Soviet novels, songs, posters, and films that overwhelmed China’s cultural sectors, the government invited the public to visualize “the Chinese tomorrow” like that of a powerful and advanced socialist nation such as the Soviet Union. It was hoped that people would gain confidence in the new regime and in socialism by viewing the present (poverty and hardship) through the lens of the future (affluence and happiness). It was also hoped that people would be motivated by the superlative socialist qualities portrayed in the literary and artistic works extolling the highest moral standards of Soviet heroes and “shock workers.” This would allow the Chinese party to reinforce popular recognition of its leadership and effectively mobilize the whole nation for New China’s socialist reconstruction.

From the Chinese government’s perspective, the popularization of Soviet culture

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achieved these anticipated results. Popular understandings of the world, socialism, and China’s future were re-formed along the party lines, which brought out enthusiastic mass participation in public projects and campaigns. The compatibility between official intention and popular reaction, if viewed through a typically biased Cold War prism, is often attributed to the CCP’s heavy-handed propaganda and political pressure on the people. Indeed, the Chinese government never viewed people’s cultural activities simply as a matter of entertainment or personal interest, especially in view of the intense Cold War antagonism abroad and the absence of a well-established new value system at home. Under the “lean to one side” policy, accepting Soviet culture was tied to a person’s political stance and was punished or rewarded in political terms accordingly. At the height of Sino-Soviet alliance, one was either a “Russophile” or an “anti-Soviet, anti-socialist, anti-revolutionary rightist.” Whether a person loved the Soviet Union and supported Sino-Soviet friendship was a criterion for judging if the person had an internationalist spirit, loved New China, and supported socialism. By contrast, “worshiping the U.S., fearing the U.S., and being friendly with the U.S.” were severely castigated and ostracized. Scholars, translators, writers, and artists whose professions involved Euro-American cultures were forced to abandon their previous work and switch to new tasks related to “progressive” Soviet culture. Many of those who received training in Europe and America were victimized in political campaigns. Under such pressure, dissidence regarding the government’s pro-Soviet rhetoric on the grassroots level died down. Rarely did people publicly divulge a desire for a Hollywood movie or an English novel.

However, the fact that to all appearances much of the public did not resent the CCP’s

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20 Ibid, 100.
overbearing ideological indoctrination in popularizing Soviet culture cannot simply be seen as the result of political coercion from the regime. If so, the Soviet legacy would not have been so resilient after Soviet culture lost the CCP’s patronage in the early 1960s. To view communist-controlled China as a state with totalitarian rule and its citizens as docile subjects would only perpetuate Western Cold War biases nurtured by anticommunist rhetoric. Moreover, some new trends in post-Mao China further subvert the biased equation between a totalitarian regime and forceful (thereby successful) brainwashing. These new trends show that many old social practices that existed before Chinese communism prevailed have resurfaced recently, “from cosmopolitan Shanghai’s nostalgia for its 1930s heritage to the refurbishing of temples and the resurgence of folk beliefs across the land.”

We are compelled to ponder, how effective was Mao’s massive state initiatives in changing public mentality? How did people interpret new values and concepts during that time? What did people internalize and to what extent? What did they resist and how? How did state agents react accordingly? What were the outcomes?

The decade long Soviet-leaning craze offers a unique vantage point from which to answer these questions and to rethink the state-society relationship in the early PRC. Indeed, the state cultural authorities not only set the parameters for what was permissible to be imported but also wove the Chinese official definition of state, citizenship, and socialist ideology into the translation and interpretation of imported Soviet culture. Furthermore, it was solely up to the CCP when to immerse the nation in the “learn from the Soviets” campaign and when to pull out. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean that the state totally ignored its subjects. The communist experiment in China, as in the Soviet Union and North Korea, demanded extensive

mass mobilization, and the government was fully aware of the limitations of ideological indoctrination toward that end. To achieve voluntary mass participation to the fullest extent, the communists deemed a fundamental change in aesthetics suitable to public taste as equally important as the thought reform targeting at the cognitive level. This is exactly why the CCP, from its inception, attached huge importance to integrating popular cultural forms – nianhua (New Year prints) and yangge (a folk dance), for example – into its revolutionary propaganda. Amid Cold War isolation, the CCP’s adoption of Soviet culture had a special appeal to the public who desired something foreign and exotic, although nobody publicly acknowledged this desire at the time. Despite ideological indoctrination, cultural imports from the Soviet Union opened a window to the world and a much-needed means of learning about foreign countries. It also offered a form of “mental tourism” during the heightened period of the Cold War when international travels were utterly impossible for most Chinese. All this immensely contributed to Chinese people’s enthusiastic response to the “learn from the Soviets” campaign initiated by the government.

The entire Soviet-leaning endeavor was at the same time a cultural experiment in which the masses participated, and which they internalized and lived. While the people of Maoist China did not control what emanated from the authorities, they did determine to various extents what they liked to absorb into their lives and how they wanted to use that knowledge. In this sense, what James Scott calls “weapons of the weak” could be as powerful as the authorities’

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dominance. Under the appearance of compliance there could run currents of defiance. Although such undercurrents were buried in the mainstream media of the 1950s because of widespread censorship, they did surface in the turbulent waters of the Cultural Revolution and personal memoirs of the post-Mao era. As we now know, as much as people responded to the lofty ideals and morals in Soviet novels, it was often the less grand narratives that people took to heart then and retained for many years. *How the Steel Was Tempered*, a model novel of socialist realism published in Stalin’s time, captivated thousands of young Chinese with the romantic plots between Pavel and Tonya. Although the translator’s note stressed the central theme of revolutionary spirits and whole hearted devotion to the party-state, readers’ personal interpretations often displayed a considerable departure from official indoctrination. Many people secretly devoured the book even during the Cultural Revolution when state authorities labeled Soviet culture “bourgeois,” “revisionist,” and “unhealthy for China’s revolutionary culture.” Die hard music fans secretly hummed melodies from Soviet films. Clandestine circulation of Soviet literature and music grew into a subculture that flourished underneath China’s orthodox cultural forms. More ironically, many people went several times to the highly political and propagandist film *Lenin in October*, one of the few Soviet films permitted for public screenings during the Cultural Revolution, only to see a fleeting scene of the ballet *Swan Lake* that the film arbitrarily included. Apparently, secret consumption of what was forbidden became a much-needed channel for unleashing personal discontent. By uncovering the symbolic and ideological underpinnings of the often subtle, covert forms of nonchalance, resistance, and sabotage on the day-to-day basis, this dissertation unveil the multiple ways by which the

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“nameless” carved out their own space to maneuver in the new political and social order.

**Sources and Outline**

Culture, identity, and memory in the Cold War were built by propaganda. In the Maoist era, they were formed in the repetition of an array of propaganda materials for the public to read, see, and listen to on a daily basis. The propaganda materials for Sino-Soviet friendship form one source basis for this dissertation. This category of sources involves directives and speeches by state leaders and cultural authorities in a few party organ newspapers such as *Renmin ribao* (People’s Daily), *Hongai* (Red Flag), and *Guangming ribao* (Guangming Daily), as well as in state-sponsored mass journals that were instrumental in “relaying” official dictates to targeted groups: *Zhongguo qingnian* (China Youth), *Xin Zhongguo funü* (New Chinese Women), *Zhongguo gongren* (Chinese Workers), and *Zhongxuesheng* (Middle-School Students). This category also includes a good number of “odd pieces” for the pro-Soviet propaganda: slogans, posters, pamphlets, reader’s guides to Soviet literary works, film criticism, and reports about a wide range of activities – lectures, exhibits, dance classes, film festivals, commemorations of Soviet anniversaries – organized by the Sino-Soviet Friendship Associations (SSFA) across the country. These materials reveal official intent in promoting a pro-Soviet ambiance among the populace and simultaneously demonstrate the extent of state efforts toward that end.

Whether the state-initiated propaganda was effectively employed must be measured by the public’s reaction to it. Therefore, another source basis involves mass reception of the pro-Soviet rhetoric and Soviet culture. This category includes an SSFA member’s reflections after a meeting, a reader’s interpretation of a Soviet novel, a movie fan’s review of a Soviet film, a diner’s
experience at the famed Moscow Restaurant in Beijing, and other personal responses to things related to the Soviet Union gleaned from popular newspapers, magazines, periodicals, and journals such as Renmin wenzue (People’s Literature), Dazhong dianying (Popular Cinema), and Renmin meishu (People’s Fine Art). Although these opinions, attitudes, and stories are often scattered and trivial, together they offer a much-needed understanding of how policies and designated activities were received, interpreted, and carried out on the popular level.

Beyond textual sources, this dissertation has benefited from a continuous attention to the experiences of the individuals who lived through the tumults of the PRC. In many conversations, I have been struck by people’s eagerness to share a memory of a particular Soviet novel, film, or song that has left impression on their lives. In this “collective memory,” Soviet culture has become a signifier of youth, revolution, inspiration, and intimate human relations. I add this personal touch to the study of Sino-Soviet relations because I believe it is time to humanize this subject that has been overly politicized in historiography. Yet fully aware of the limitations of interviews and casual conversations as historical sources, I handle them in cross-reference with memoirs published in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and some contemporary writings expressing nostalgia for the Sino-Soviet friendship. This method not only adds new perspectives to understanding the society of Maoist China but also allows me to examine how post-Mao politics and social changes have affected people’s remembrance of the Mao era.

This dissertation is divided into three parts. Part I serves as the foundation of the entire work. Chapter 1 presents the CCP’s Sino-Soviet friendship rhetoric and details its methods of disseminating a pro-Soviet message to the public. It shows how the CCP’s propaganda machine, the SSFA, propagated a glorified Sino-Russian history and the activities it organized to engage
the nation. Chapter 2 illustrates the result of the pro-Soviet propaganda with a discussion of the public vogue for Russian and the social dynamic induced by the widespread Russian-language learning. It expands to discuss the comprehensive reform of the Chinese education system along Soviet lines. These two chapters together cover the creation and impact of the friendship rhetoric that the CCP used to influence the public, legitimize its authority, and encourage modernization.

Part II continues the impact of the friendship rhetoric, discussing the transformations in cityscape on Soviet influence and the introduction of international socialist modernity into the PRC. Chapter 3, focusing on the importation of Soviet architecture, examines how Chinese architects, under the direction of the CCP and Soviet advisers, applied an internationalist and socialist element to the public structures still seen throughout China. Chapter 4 covers changes in people’s clothing styles, a more subtle yet pervasive aspect of social change and modernity. Like architecture, fashion legitimized the new national identity through imbuing urban space with symbolic function and national meaning. Together, these two chapters view the architecture and clothing fashion of the 1950s as the semiotics of the type of socialist identity and modernity that China was advocating and outward symptoms of the new direction in Chinese popular worldviews.

Part III, focusing on film viewing (Chapter 5) and public reading (Chapter 6) in Maoist China, deepens the discussion of Soviet influence on Chinese society by reaching to the hearts and minds of millions who were nurtured by Soviet culture. The two chapters discuss how cultural tools and resources – films and literature as two especially effective media – were deployed by the government to shape popular perceptions of the socialist ideology that the CCP tried to propagate. Moreover, this part discusses how the public responded to governmental
guidelines and what energies they derived for their lives. The distance between official intentions and individual reception provides a measure of the extent and effectiveness of this covert “thought reform” through Soviet influence during the first decade of the PRC.

As a whole, this dissertation provides a fresh examination of many of the facets of Soviet influence prompted by the CCP, namely, in education, architecture, fashion, cinema, and literature. While it does not provide a comprehensive coverage of all transformations, the topics covered provide adequate depth and details to understand the trends of the transculturation toward the development of a new China, and the changes in mass perception that occurred concurrently. The following pages show how people in China reacted in quite unexpected ways to a new historical time, a new ideology, and the larger forces that surrounded them but did not determine their lives.
Part I. Forging International Brotherhood: The Strategy of “Friendship”

It was an ordinary day in 1950. A Chinese boat and a Soviet boat met on the Amur (Heilong River) in Northeast China. The passengers kindly greeted each other. The Chinese cheered and waved hands, sending their ardent welcome to the other boat. Some Russians returned smiles and some courteously waved their hats. The atmosphere was infectiously friendly.¹

This random snapshot was from the early days of the PRC in the heat of Sino-Soviet alliance. Judging from their facial expressions and body gestures, the Chinese seemed to be more excited about this casual encounter than their Russian counterparts. The extensive enthusiasm of the Chinese passengers was an expression of admiration for the Soviets and an eagerness to befriend them.

Before Mao proclaimed the “lean to one side” policy in 1949, individual and official efforts to promote Soviet revolutionary culture during the Chinese revolution had already acquainted many Chinese with the Soviet Union and inclined them toward the socialist world led by the Soviet Union. However, far more people still had an attachment to the West, particularly the United States and its culture. Intellectuals admired American democracy and constitutional government; the majority of them, having been educated in Europe or America, were well-read in literary, philosophical, and scientific works written in English, French, and German. On the grassroots level, people were grateful for American aid during the Anti-Japanese War, especially the two atomic bombs that forced Japan to surrender. Some Chinese also feared the consequences of a split with America because of the formidable military power that U.S. forces commanded.

By contrast, popular attitude toward the Soviet Union largely remained ambivalent. The majority of the population had little knowledge of the Soviet Union but believed it was nothing more than a new face of tsarist Russia, and those who had heard about Stalin’s ruthless liquidation of political dissidents resented it. Moreover, residents of Northeast China harbored a deep grudge against Russians for the tsarist occupation of the region and the mass rape and pillage conducted by the Soviet Red Army in 1945 before and after the Japanese surrender in World War II. Direct confrontations between Chinese civilians and Soviet soldiers were not uncommon at the time. In Harbin, people protested with slogans such as “Down with Red Imperialism!” In February 1946, student protests broke out across the country against Soviet military occupation of China’s northeast. Some propaganda “compared the Russian threat to that posed in 1915 by Japan’s Twenty-one Demands,” thereby bringing anti-Soviet sentiment to a new height. The history of Sino-Russian relations seriously affected Chinese public opinion of the Soviet Union. When the Chinese referred to the Russians they often used racially insulting nicknames such as “Old Hairy” (lao maozi 老毛子) and “Big Noses” (da bizi 大鼻子).

To correct such “misjudgment” of China’s “friends” and “enemies” in the postwar world and to educate the masses in the importance of “learning from the Soviet big brother,” the PRC government made enormous efforts to promote popular understanding of Sino-Soviet fraternity and international camaraderie across the socialist world. This part seeks to reconstruct this much

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overlooked aspect of China’s macro-socio-political environment in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{5} Chapter 1 will speak about the CCP rhetoric and detail its methods of disseminating information to the public. Chapter 2 will then give a case study of the changes in public perception of the Soviets. Specifically, it starts with a discussion of a nationwide craze for Russian-language learning, and expands to discuss the comprehensive reform of the Chinese education system driven by a desire to emulate Soviet schools. By examining the nationwide pro-Soviet propaganda and its impact on the public, these two chapters will reveal a more textured picture of how the Chinese party-state extended its pro-Soviet policy within Chinese society and what perceptual and attitudinal changes were generated in the process.

\textsuperscript{5} Lack of recognition of the Soviet contribution to China’s post-1949 development characterizes the official narrative of early PRC history in Mainland China, as a result of the Sino-Soviet rift and Chinese nationalism that emphasizes “self-reliance” (\textit{zili gengsheng}). For example, in 2009 when China commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, a general erasure of Soviet aid to China was glaring in the mainstream media review of PRC history.
Chapter 1. Constructing and Propagating the Friendship Rhetoric

The birth of a new China initiated a process of stepping away from the historical perspectives provided by colonialism toward a past re-created by the postcolonial leadership. In this process of rewriting history, the worldview of the new regime was of fundamental importance, for “without a worldview one cannot narrate well, one cannot construct a well-articulated, complete epic composition that is rich in reversal of circumstances.” Guided by an internationalist worldview, the communist regime of the PRC quickly launched a heroic rhetoric about Sino-Soviet alliance. “Sino-Soviet friendship,” or Zhong-Su youhao, soon became a frequently used new phrase in Chinese vocabulary and a catchword for public commentaries on domestic and international affairs.

A verbal device employed to “humanize” a political term, “Sino-Soviet friendship” was by no means concerned with cultivating and maintaining personal connections between the peoples of both countries, despite the rhetoric and organized activities to that effect. Instead, it carried “the meaning of a strategic relationship” at state level and was used as “a means to neutralize opposition psychologically and to reorder reality” for the exigencies of a polarized world. Amid an increasingly tense Cold War atmosphere, it was clear that winning support from Moscow, instead of Washington, was of strategic importance to the CCP. With an eye to the present and to

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2 Anne-Marie Brady, Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People’s Republic (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 7. As Brady points out, the Chinese diplomats built their political understanding of “friendship” upon the political meaning of druzhba, the Russian word for “friendship” in the Soviet foreign affairs terminology. Nonetheless, the Chinese “friendship strategy” was not simply a direct copy of Soviet approaches to international relations. Combined with a Confucian tradition that valued “faithfulness” of friendship (without being burdened by it at the same time) and a more devoted effort to propaganda, the PRC carried Soviet foreign affairs model to the fullest (or the most successful) extent.
the future, the Chinese regime was able to put aside past grievances against Soviet Russia in an effort to cultivate pro-Soviet attitudes among its people. The result was rhetoric full of “reversals” of past circumstances, as well as laborious redefinitions of the “gray areas” in existing historiography of Sino-Soviet relations.

**The Content of the Friendship Rhetoric**

The friendship rhetoric rewrote the nature of China’s interactions with the Soviet Union since the 1920s, glorifying the Soviet party-state as China’s “selfless” mentor, supporter, and ally in the entire course of Chinese revolution. Soviet support to China was highlighted, and the Soviet Union was esteemed as the “champion of true internationalism” that set the ultimate example for nations of the socialist bloc. Overall, the Sino-Soviet relationship was described as one of “consistent Soviet assistance to China and genuine friendship with Chinese people since the October Revolution.”

Such “new understandings” of Sino-Soviet history fleshed out in a huge number of pamphlets and reading materials published in the early 1950s under directives from the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee. These propaganda materials made no mention of the Soviet government’s reluctance to abrogate the unequal treaties that the tsarist government signed with China, or the fact that the independence of Outer Mongolia was directly built on Soviet backing, notwithstanding Soviet government’s promise to acknowledge Chinese sovereignty over the territory in the 1924 “Sino-Russian Agreement on Resolving Pending Issues” (*Zhong-E jiejue xuan’an dagang xieding* 中俄解决悬案大纲协定). Instead, the Chinese rhetoric

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honored the Soviet Union as the first country to sign an “equal treaty” with China. Hence the 1924 Agreement was viewed as “the first equal treaty” in China’s modern history. As to the sore point that the Soviet Union signed this agreement with the warlord regime of the Beiyang Government and other agreements with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nanjing regime, one book explained: “The purpose for which the Soviet government signed agreements with the warlord regime and the reactionary GMD government was to extend sincere friendship and sympathy to the Chinese people.”4 Far-fetched explanations of this sort flooded the publications of the time.

Moreover, the rhetoric also whitewashed the notorious atrocities that the Soviet army committed in Northeast China toward the end of World War II, as well as Stalin’s intention to keep the GMD on the mainland to balance the power of Chinese communists. To this end, the rhetoric grossly amplified Soviet aid to China, stating that, for example: the CCP benefited immensely from the ideological guidance of the CPSU in the early stages of its development; the Soviet government gave strong assistance to both the Communist and Nationalist parties during the two parties’ first united front; the Soviet Union assisted China in her defense against Japanese fascists and particularly, the Soviet entry into Northeast China played a decisive role in forcing Japan to surrender; during the civil war between the CCP and the GMD, the Soviet Union was on the side of the CCP and lent valuable support to the Chinese people’s struggle for liberation and independence; and so on.5 Therefore, as people were told, “without the Soviet Union, without the victory of the anti-fascist world war under Soviet leadership, without the growth of international

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5 See, for example, Che Jian, “Sulian zenyang banzhu Zhongguo renmin dabai le Riben diguo zhuyi?” [How the Soviet Union helped the Chinese people defeat Japanese imperialism?] in Xuanchuan shouce [Propaganda handbook] (Shanghai: Shanghai xuanchuan shouce she, 1951), no. 17.
forces for peace and democracy championed by the Soviet Union, we would not have won the revolution this early, and even if we had we would not have been able to secure our victory.”\(^6\)

Besides revising the past, the rhetoric highly evaluated positively recent developments in bilateral relations, especially the Soviet government’s recognition of the PRC and the newly forged Sino-Soviet alliance, both of which were deemed to bring “enormous international support to New China.” As Liu Shaoqi concluded in a public address, “the history over the past thirty years has forcefully proven that the people of China and the Soviet Union are as friendly and close to each other as brothers.”\(^7\) (Figure 1)

\[\text{Figure 1. Long live the friendship between the Chinese and Soviet people!} \text{ Source: Courtesy of Wang Yongzhen.}\]

\(^6\) See the editorial of \textit{Xinhua News} on 6 October 1949.

Yet only making “friends” was not enough for the PRC to combat the hostility of the Cold War; as Mao had pointed out in 1925, “we must pay attention to uniting with our real friends in order to attack our real enemies.” Therefore, the glorification of the Soviet Union went hand in hand with the denunciation of the United States. For the PRC’s anti-American campaign, the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 was perfect timing – America truly became China’s major adversary. The war provided the CCP with multiple opportunities to show Americans in an extremely unfavorable light. The denigrating images of Americans portrayed in wartime posters enormously intensified public anti-American sentiments (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). In rhetoric, inflammatory condemnation of U.S. imperialism sowed more hatred, disdain, and contempt for the American government, its people and culture. In fact, the three words “hatred, disdain, and contempt” became a new phrase frequently appearing in the print materials of the time. For example, this phrase was made an entry in *The Dictionary of Neologism (Xin mingci cidian)* published in 1953 and “designated” the phrase as the “the understanding and attitude that every Chinese must have toward U.S. imperialism.” As the entry explained,

“First, U.S. imperialism helped the Chiang bandit gang (Chiang Kai-shek) slaughter Chinese people, brazenly invaded Taiwan and North Korea, and plotted to annex China; therefore, it is China’s enemy and we must hate it. Second, the US is a decayed imperialist country controlled by a few big capitalists who use the US government as their tool. Domestically, they oppress and exploit people and strangle democracy; internationally, they adopt the policies to enslave the world and expand aggression. The U.S. is the supreme headquarters of the world’s reactionary, decadent forces, so we must disdain it. Third, although U.S. imperialism appears very strong, it is actually a paper tiger. Because it invades other countries all over the world, all the people who love peace and freedom in the world oppose it, and even its own people do not want to be the cannon fodder of the capitalists – it is

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completely isolated. The U.S. also has a lot of military weaknesses – its battlefront is too long, its rear is too far away, its forces are insufficient, and its allies are weak – so certainly it can be defeated. We do not need to panic, and we must treat it with contempt.10

In contrast with its disparaging of the U.S., the Chinese rhetoric upheld Sino-Soviet friendship as the “weapon for resisting the U.S.” By claiming “the Soviet Union is the stronghold of world peace and Chinese people’s faithful friend,” the rhetoric called for determination and confidence to defeat American aggression.11 American imperialism thus became the ideal foil for “Soviet peaceful foreign policy, its great achievements in peaceful development, and its genuine, selfless support to Chinese people,” as the friendship rhetoric acclaimed.12

Figure 2. A children’s poster. The banner reads: “All people of the world unite, down with American imperialism!” Source: Courtesy of Wang Yongzhen.

10 Xin mingci cidian (Shanghai: Chunming chubanshe, 1953), 35-38.
12 Ibid.
It has become a cliché to quote former British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston’s classic statement, “Nations have no permanent friends and no permanent enemies, only permanent interests,” to account for a case of affinity or mutuality of purpose in international relations. This explanation also applies to Sino-Soviet relations. On the Soviet side, it was primarily for Soviet
interests in the Far East that Moscow lent support to China, be it the restoration of diplomatic relations with the Beiyang warlord regime in 1932, the signing of Sino-Soviet Nonaggression Pact (中苏互不侵犯条约) with the Nanjing Nationalist Government in 1937, or the Soviet entry into the war with Japan in 1945 (also known as the Soviet invasion of Manchuria). The alliance with the PRC was intended to expand Soviet influence and to create a buffer zone against the US in Asia, hence further evidence of “Stalin’s utilitarian approach toward China.”

Unquestionably, China also sought its own national interests with Beijing’s strategic friendship with Moscow. The outward appearance of friendly relations was basically a “win-win” situation for both China and the Soviet Union, despite frictions between their top leaderships and disputes over territorial borderlines and international politics (not the least of which was the Korean War). Likewise, when this relationship could no longer benefit their national interests, the “friendliness” was summarily terminated. Of this pair, the PRC government certainly did more to promote Sino-Soviet relations, and in return reaped larger profits from so doing.

Despite the economic, political, and international security the new regime received from the Soviet Union, a significant portion of the population resisted the notion of a Soviet big brother. For this reason, selling the pro-Soviet rhetoric at the grassroots level was no easy task, especially in the Northeast where memories of past dealings with Russians were bitter and it was impossible to refute the first hand experiences of much of the population. When Xiao Jun (萧军), a Communist writer whose works were popular among the general public and especially students, recalled his experience of promoting Sino-Soviet friendship at schools and public gatherings, he admitted:

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The audience raised questions about Soviet soldiers’ violation of military disciplines, such as robbing civilians and stealing machines, and they brought these up with evidence, which I cannot deny or justify. I did not want to cheat the masses by denying these facts. At the same time, however, I had to ‘stand firm on my position’ of protecting the ‘prestige’ of the USSR and I also had to explain the relationship between the CCP and the Soviet Union, in exchange for understanding and forgiveness from the masses, and eventually the removal of their animosity. I admit that this was not an easy or pleasant task, and oftentimes I had to face the risk of being kicked off the podium.14

Here, Xiao Jun provides an understanding of the nature of the CCP’s “friendship rhetoric” by revealing the moral dilemmas that the CCP propaganda workers faced. On the one hand, they were aware of the falsehood in the propaganda materials, but on the other, because of their political allegiance, they had to persuade the people that the Russians were now “our friends.” Below is an example of how Xiao Jun handled a case of “dilemma” when being confronted by an indignant audience. He explained the “bad behavior” of Soviet soldiers:

First of all, it has to be admitted that such misconduct was absolutely wrong and shameful, totally incompatible with the military regulations of socialist countries; therefore, we must oppose it. Second, as I learned, Soviet army lost a huge number of soldiers in the war against fascists, which led to a shortage of military personnel. Out of no other choice, some criminals with relatively good records were enlisted as temporary soldiers, a chance for them to redeem themselves by good service. For the lack of adequate training in military regulations, these soldiers broke the regulations and committed crimes. Third, what attitude should we adopt toward these crimes? Forgiveness? Hatred? If we admit the Soviet Union is our friend, we can forgive them… If they (Soviet soldiers) are the army of imperialism, we should never be forgiving.15

Xiao Jun’s explanation of Soviet soldiers’ misconduct might have held truth, but taken as a whole, it was more of a rhetorical strategy frequently used to promulgate the knowledge of the Soviet Union and Sino-Soviet friendship. This raises the question of what impact the friendship rhetoric generated on the audience it targeted. As Xiao Jun’s case shows, initially the Chinese

government’s pro-Soviet worldview did not altogether appeal to citizens who had scanty knowledge or even negative opinions of the Soviet Union.

One major source of societal opposition to the “lean to one side” policy stemmed from Chinese nationalism. China’s “shameful” losses of territories to Russia, the Russian imperialist presence in China, the Soviet government’s utilitarian policies toward China, and especially wartime traumas in the Northeast all cast a negative shadow on the image of the Soviet Union and fed widespread resentment of Russians. Some people asked, “Why didn’t the Soviet Union return Sakhalin and Vladivostok to us, if it is our friend?” Similarly, some questioned, “Why does the Soviet Union give us loans? Why does it ask for interest? Since it is our friend, why can’t it give to us all for free?” People with such questions believed that “the loans are economic aggression and the interest is exploitation.” Others wondered, “Why should we lean to one side? Why can’t the Soviet Union lean to us? … Isn’t it better to be self-reliant and not dependent on

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17 Sakhalin is a large island in the North Pacific. Also known as Сахалин in Russian, 库页 in Chinese, Karafuto (樺太) or Saharin (サハリン) in Japanese. Also spelled as Saghaliun. Vladivostok is a city of extreme southeast Russia on an arm of the Sea of Japan. It has been a naval base since 1872 and grew rapidly after the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railroad in the early 1900s. The territory on which Sakhalin and modern Vladivostok are located had been part of various Chinese dynasties before Russia acquired them by the Treaty of Beijing (1860) signed with China’s Qing government.


anyone?” These people concluded that the Chinese Communists turned to the Soviets for its patronage, just as the Nationalist Party had used the US as its prop.

Clearly, such nationalist criticism was directed not only at Soviet “red imperialism” and chauvinism but also at the Chinese communist government. That is, it embodied popular mistrust of the CCP in the early days of the communist regime. Societal reaction to Mao’s visit to Moscow on the occasion of Stalin’s seventieth birthday showed this message more explicitly. When Mao arrived on December 16, 1949, Stalin did not go to greet him at the train station. Quite a number of Chinese people with a keen nationalistic sense held that the Soviet government was belittling China, for Stalin once personally saw off the Japanese Foreign Minister at the train station in 1941. Some people commented with sarcasm, “Mao is there to bow and to be taught. Stalin is the host, the mentor, and therefore doesn’t have to greet Mao.” Some people thought Mao’s visit to the Soviet Union “damaged the country’s international prestige” because “it gave the impression that China was like a servant-country being summoned to Moscow.”

In China, the pairing of popular anti-Soviet and anti-communist sentiments was not a new phenomenon. Back in 1946, during anti-Soviet protests, not only did students protest against the

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21 After the Soviet–Japanese Neutrality Pact, also known as Japanese–Soviet Non-aggression Pact was signed between Japan and the Soviet Union on April 13, 1941, Stalin, in an unprecedented gesture, saw Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke off at the train station, which showed the importance Stalin attached to the pact and also sent a signal to Germany.
22 See the CCP Central News Agency’s news bulletin “Xia’ai minzu zhuyi sixiang de biaoxian” [The manifestation of narrow-minded nationalism] published on January 1, 1951, cited from Yang Kuisong, Zhong-Su guojia liyi yu minzu qinggan de zuichu pengzhuang – yi ‘Zhong-Su youhao tongmeng huzhu tiaoyue’ qianding wei beijing” [Initial clash between Chinese and Soviet national interests and nationalist sentiments – on the signing of the Treaty of Sino-Soviet Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance], Lishi yanjiu, no. 6 (2001), 107-109. As Yang Kuisong points out, the News Agency was generally critical of such “narrow-minded nationalist” response, but the report was used to apply pressure to the Soviet Union in order to increase Mao’s bargaining power with Moscow.
Soviet military occupation of China’s Northeast and the profits that the Soviet Union reaped in the region from the Yalta Agreement, but some of them also criticized the CCP’s involvement in the region. The charges against the Soviet Union and the CCP were generated by the postwar situation in the Northeast, where communist power in the region was growing rapidly; the CCP was trying to improve relations with the Soviet Union, and the Nationalist Party’s takeover of the region was impeded by Soviet military forces. At that time, most of the population still regarded the Nationalist Government as the legitimate government of China, and felt that “The CCP is a Soviet puppet,” as one anti-communist slogan asserted. Even though the protests “did not succeed in seriously discrediting the CCP and the Soviet Union,” it was evident that not a small number of Chinese people confused the two and thought they were collaborating to control China.

A lack of public understanding about the relationship between the CCP and the Soviet Union allowed the rampant spread of rumors. One rumor, the “castration” rumor, which was widespread in North China in 1950, can be seen as the continuation of mixed anti-Soviet, anti-communist sentiments. Allegedly, the rumor was first spread by Daoist demagogues who claimed “the Soviet Union has produced 300,000 rubber men which need human hearts, human eyes, and human genitals” to help China wage war on Taiwan. At the same time, as the rumor continued, “Chinese government wants to pay off the loans to the Soviet Union with human hearts, human eyes, and human genitals,” and “the Soviet Union will also use them to make atomic bombs.” The rumor also claimed that those who came to cut human organs were sent by Mao and therefore when they were arrested by local officials, the central authority would release those

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23 Jiang Pei, “1946 nian fan-Su yudong pingshu,” 70.
who were arrested. Because of Chinese traditional fetishism toward reproductive organs, the loss of genitalia weighed heavily with the population, causing this rumor to be known as the “castration” rumor. It caused enormous panic among the population in the area of today’s Beijing, Hebei, Tianjin, Inner Mongolia, and Shanxi; at night every house was brightly lit, men stayed on watch, women clustered together, nobody dared go out, and some people even had hallucinations.  

At the same time, a similar rumor broke out in Lanzhou, the capital of the northwestern province of Gansu. It claimed that “Mao has made an agreement with the Soviet Union to use 100,000 children in exchange for Soviet munitions.” Suddenly, the number of children attending school dropped precipitously. Instigated by the rumor, around 400 to 500 citizens took to the streets and some people took the occasion of spreading anti-communist slogans such as “Down with the People’s Liberation Army!” and “Down with the CCP!”

These rumors arose at the very moment that building the Sino-Soviet alliance constituted the focal point of Chinese foreign policy. The timing of the rumors closely correlated with the official exchange of Chinese resources for Soviet technical assistance and weapons. Mao’s four-month stay in Moscow, unprecedented for a Chinese head of state, no doubt prompted speculations, suspicions, and rumors at the grassroots level. Moreover, the new bilateral treaty and other exchanges between China and the Soviet Union were not readily understood by the people amid the immediate post liberation socio-political conditions. First, communist control was not yet fully established despite the creation of the regime; second, most people remained

xenophobic and skeptical of the communist regime, as a result of their past (direct or indirect)
experience with foreigners and constant power shifts; third, anti-CCP forces such as the remnants
of the Nationalist Party, former landlords, warlords, and local bandits worked to sabotage the
communist regime, and they employed a tried and true method of destroying reputations: virulent
rumors.

Although the rumors might have been produced and spread by the remnants of the
reactionary forces (some of them were arrested), no evidence of any organized attempts has been
found in existing literature.\textsuperscript{26} Like all canards, the origins of these two rumors might remain
mysterious, but the fact that they could spread out means that they had a social base or echoed
certain societal needs. Therefore, it is safe to say that the millions of Chinese whose life was
deeply affected by the ground-shaking social changes in the communist revolution also played an
important role in making and disseminating the rumors. This explains why even until 1954
similar rumors were still heard in some areas. For example, the “hairy monster” rumor, which
was similar to the castration rumor, spread wildly in Shandong, Jiangsu, and Anhui provinces for
several years, suggesting the relative persistence of anti-Soviet, anti-communist sentiments.\textsuperscript{27}

Yet, as communist control became more established, especially in the realm of information
control, were these rumors quickly put down by the government? And with the sort of assiduous
persuasion that Xiao Jun practiced, were people’s early biases, doubts, resistance, and animosity
turned into new attitudes toward the Soviet Union? And if so, how did it happen and to what

\textsuperscript{26} Li Ruojian, “1950 nian huabei diqu de ‘gedan’ yaoyan,” 83.
\textsuperscript{27} The “hairy monster” rumor told a story about a monster living in a lake and coming out at night to catch human
        genitals. For more information, see Li Ruojian, “Shehui bianqian de zheshe: 20 shiji 50 niandai de ‘maoren shuiguai’
        yaoyan chutan” [A reflection of social changes: a preliminary study of the ‘hairy monster’ rumor in the 1950s],
        Shehuixue yanjiu, no. 5 (2005), 182-201, 245-246; Li Ruojian, Xushi zhijian: 20 shiji 50 niandai Zhongguo dalu
        yaoyan yanjiu, 13-76.
extent? And how did these attitudinal changes affect the new regime’s hold on power? To answer these questions, we need to examine how China’s rhetoric of friendship matured and what efforts the government made to promulgate it. We need to look closely at the institutional structures that effected perceptual and attitudinal changes. That is, we need to examine the inner workings of how the CCP’s propaganda machine worked to promote Sino-Soviet friendship.

**The Sino-Soviet Friendship Association**

Four days after the founding ceremony of the PRC on October 1, 1949, the General Committee of Sino-Soviet Friendship Association (SSFA) was established. This officially “unofficial” (fei guanfang) mass organization was to enjoy a prestigious standing in China’s domestic and foreign affairs. Particularly, it would play a critical role in the campaign to propagandize Sino-Soviet friendship and thus reorient popular perceptions so that the CCP could achieve its international and domestic goals.

The SSFA was a legacy from the SSCA (Sino-Soviet Cultural Association), which had served as a bridge between China and the Soviet Union since 1935 under the united GMC-CCP front in the war against Japan.\(^{28}\) It also grew out of the local SSFA organizations that the CCP set up in Northeast China after 1945, whose efforts focused on smoothing out relations with the Soviet Union, removing anti-Soviet sentiments among the local people, and building foundations for the CCP’s takeover of the region after Soviet military occupation.\(^{29}\)

Mao’s proclamation of the “lean to one side” policy pushed forward the transformation of the SSCA and the SSFA in Northeast China. In his “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship”


published on June 30, 1949, Mao stated the necessity and benefits of a pro-Soviet foreign policy. To win popular recognition of this policy and dispel popular mistrust of the Soviet Union among the people, the Preparatory Committee of a brand-new SSFA was set up shortly after Mao’s speech. The Committee involved a wide range of participants, including high-ranking officials of the CCP, prominent figures of China’s democratic parties, and representatives from various pro-democracy organizations. In September, the preparatory meeting chaired by Zhou Enlai drafted the SSFA Constitution and Song Qingling (Madame Sun Yat-sen) was elected director of the Preparatory Committee. Clearly, these steps were meant to declare to the world, particularly to the Soviet government, that the “lean to the Soviet side” policy was not simply rhetoric but a significant decision that the CCP had made. It also signaled to the domestic public that vacillation in the attitude toward the Soviet Union would no longer be tolerated.

The inaugural convention of the SSFA took place right after the founding of the PRC and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the USSR. Song Qingling, a newly elected Vice Chairman of the PRC Central Government, delivered the opening remarks. Liu Shaoqi, also a newly elected Vice Chairman, gave a speech titled “Long Live the Undying Friendship and Cooperation between the Chinese and Soviet People,” setting the key tone for the Sino-Soviet rhetoric. Liu Shaoqi asserted that the purpose of the SSFA was to “improve and fortify the brotherly friendship and cooperation between the Chinese and Soviet people, and to facilitate exchange of wisdom and experience between the two nations.”

The Constitution of the SSFA echoed Liu Shaoqi’s speech, stating that the objectives of the SSFA were “to develop

30 “Zhong-Su youhao huodong jianxun” [Brief reports on Sino-Soviet friendship activities], Zhong-Su youhao, no. 1 (November 1949). Zhong-Su youhao was published by the SSFA General Committee.
and reinforce the friendly relations between the two countries, to further connections and cooperation in culture, economy, and so on, to introduce Soviet experience in politics, economy, and culture and Soviet scientific achievements, and to strengthen unity in the common struggle for long-lasting world peace.” Because it was essential to make the message heard by Moscow, the convention also invited visiting Soviet “friends” represented by Alexander Fadeyev (法捷耶夫, Алекса́ндр Алекса́ндрович Фаде́ев), Head of the Soviet Cultural and Artistic Delegation, and Pavel Markov (马尔科夫, П. А. Марков), a Soviet dramatist and member of the VOKS (Soviet Foreign Cultural Association). Both of them delivered congratulatory remarks and applauded Sino-Soviet brotherhood on behalf of the Soviet government and cultural circles.

The high profile of the SSFA was reflected not only in the attendees at the inaugural convention but also in its high-ranking personnel – a demonstration of the significance that the government attached to Sino-Soviet friendship. In its Beijing headquarters, Liu Shaoqi (from the CCP) was elected the director, and Song Qingling, Wu Yuzhang, Li Jishen, Shen Junru, Zhang Lan, and Huang Yanpei (all from democratic parties) formed the board of deputy directors. Branch associations of major cities and provinces were usually headed by local party authorities. For instance, Peng Zhen, Major of Beijing, was appointed the director of the Beijing Municipal SSFA. As the composition of the association shows, the SSFA involved members of the CCP and members of democratic parties, thereby functioning as a united front between the CCP and other parties in China. Yet the leadership remained in the hands of the CCP, so the SSFA was by no

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32 This delegation was the only foreign delegation invited by the Chinese government to attend the founding ceremony of the PRC

33 See Fadeyev’s speech in Xinhua News, October 6, 1949. Also see Fadeyev, “Xiang Xin Zhongguo renmin zhi relie de xiongdi jingli” [Warm brotherly greetings to the people of New China], in Women he Zhongguo renmin zaiyiqi: Sultan wenhua yishu gongzuohe daibiaotuan yanjiangji [We are together with the Chinese people: speeches by the Soviet delegation of cultural, artistic, and science workers] (Beijing: Zhong-Su youhao xiehui): 1-4.
means the “unofficial” organization of the masses as claimed. The SSFA General Committee was
directly led by the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee. According to “the
Directions for Improving the SSFA’s Work” issued by the CCP Central Committee on March 3,
1953, “all branches are to be directly supervised by local party committees. Except foreign
affairs, all work of the SSFA General Committee is to be directly supervised by the Central
Propaganda Department.”

The strong party leadership of the SSFA ensured that only one version of the friendship
rhetoric could be passed down and circulated. Particularly when it came to important political
events involving Sino-Soviet relations, the CCP Central Committee would give the SSFA a
standard commentary and specific directives regarding when, where, and how to disseminate its
message. For example, immediately after China and the Soviet Union signed the “Treaty of
Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance” in 1950, the Central Propaganda Department
directed lower-level propaganda organizations to publicize the news nationwide. It also
explicated the focus and methods of this propaganda task, especially how to handle possible
questions of mass concern.

The propaganda for the treaty should give attention to the important parts and focus
on the whole picture of Sino-Soviet relations, the benefits of the treaty to China and
its contrast with various unequal treaties. Commentaries in publications should not
be based on isolated interpretations of every single word of the treaty or speculations
about the reasons for certain special stipulations. So far some newspapers have made
explanations for a few specific questions such as why the Chinese Eastern Railway
and Lushun won’t be returned to China until the end of 1952. This is not appropriate
for the following reasons. First, such isolated explanations would only mislead
readers to dig into unnecessary details and forget the full picture. Second, such
explanations involve bilateral diplomatic policies; therefore, superficial and partial
explanations should not be published in writing. Given the fact that questions
concerning the terms of the treaty have been raised from all over the country, it is
better to mention them in passing in general explanations. Except for purely technical questions, no specific answers should be publicized.  

The meticulous attention to detail suffusing this excerpt shows the CCP’s excessive concern for effective propaganda promoting Sino-Soviet friendship. Yet the remarkable consistency from top to bottom in disseminating the Sino-Soviet friendship rhetoric relied not only on strong central leadership, but also on a powerful SSFA network extending from the political center to the remotest corner of the country. 

According to the constitution of the SSFA, the organization was structured into five levels: a general committee at the very top, a general branch association for each region (usually consisting of a few provinces), branch associations at the provincial or municipal levels, sub-branches at the prefectural level, and smaller sub-divisions in the counties. At the very top, the General Committee was composed of several departments: the Secretariat (overseeing general affairs, finances, documents, personnel, etc.), the Organization Department (in charge of recruitment and supervising branch associations), the Liaison Department (maintaining relations with the VOKS, receiving foreign guests, arranging exchange visits and other forms of exchange activities), the Research and Publishing Department (responsible for research, translation, and publication), the Service Department (organizing exhibits, parties, and film screenings, managing clubs, libraries, Russian-language night schools, and subscription to Soviet newspapers and magazines), and a library (managing Russian-language books and material). Through these

departments, the General Committee gave general directions for lower-level units to carry out propaganda work for Sino-Soviet friendship.³⁵

After the formation of the General Committee, lower-level organizations were quickly installed, their structures more or less mirroring the composition of the SSFA General Committee. Major regions such as the Northeast, North, and Mid-south had their own general branches; branches were also set up in major cities and provinces such as Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Nanjing, Harbin, Hebei, and Shaanxi.³⁶ By January 1951 membership had exceeded 2 million, and by the end of 1951 the number had increased to 17 million.³⁷ Membership continued to double in the following two years. In July 1953, in an effort to galvanize the “Learn from the Soviet Union” campaign, the SSFA initiated a nationwide recruitment plan, which substituted individual membership with group membership. Accordingly, members of the People’s Liberation Army, All-China Federation of Trade Union, and All-China Women’s Federation automatically became members of the SSFA. Up to 1955, there were altogether 65 SSFA branches and 119,900 sub-branches, with 652 full-time staff and many millions of members.³⁸

The membership of the SSFA was not mandatory for every citizen, but the pressure to join was high. There was a considerable amount of peer pressure – at a time when it was viewed as an

honor to become a member “defending Sino-Soviet friendship and world peace” and in a society where everyone aspired to be a member of the SSFA, being a non-member meant being a social outcast. Particularly since all it took to join the SSFA was to fill out a form (and later just an oral notification to the organization), not having membership denoted having been denied entry into the SSFA. It might as well be taken as an indication that the person had “historical problems” (lishi wenti) deemed incongruous with Sino-Soviet friendship or heretical views against the Soviet Union, which would further alienate the person from surrounding communities. For this reason, joining the SSFA became a symbolic gesture of renouncing old social ties and becoming a member of the people and the new society.

The fact that membership of the SSFA turned into a matter of expediency rather than personal preference pointed to the hidden political pressure built into the promotion of Sino-Soviet friendship. At the time, whether a person spoke highly of the Soviet Union and supported the Sino-Soviet alliance was an important criterion for judging whether they loved the New China, cherished socialism, and had an internationalist consciousness. As one handbook distributed by the Shanghai SSFA unequivocally announced,

The attitude toward the Soviet Union can be used to test whether a person is revolutionary, patriotic, and progressive, for if you oppose the Soviet Union, you are helping imperialism, which will do harm to the interests of the world and the interests of the Chinese people in their revolutionary struggle. Whatever your own subjective wishes are, an anti-Soviet position is anti-revolutionary, reactionary, and treacherous; it would lead to Titoism and turn one into a lackey

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39 See Wang Zhichen, Bisheng xinxu qingzhu Dagong bao: yidai baoren Wang Yunsheng [Wholehearted devotion to Dagong bao: Wang Yunsheng] (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2004), 55-58. From 1935 to 1953, Wang Yunsheng was the chief editor of Dagong bao (also spelled as “Ta Kung Pao”), the oldest Chinese language newspaper in China. For his “middle-road” political stance between the US and the Soviet Union before 1949, Wang was initially denied the SSFA membership. After persistent requests, he was admitted.

By bringing Sino-Soviet friendship to a new level of political importance and defining it in both internationalist and nationalist terms, the friendship rhetoric tactfully excluded oppositional opinions. Because things were so divided into black-and-white categories, it was difficult not to opt for the officially sanctioned side, even more so when the government later set out to penalize anti-Soviet remarks in the 1957 Anti-Rightist Movement. Obviously, nothing else could be a more concrete manifestation of a positive response to Sino-Soviet friendship than “voluntarily” and “loyally” joining the SSFA. Sincere or not, being a SSFA member was “proof of one’s revolutionary consciousness” and “correct understanding of the government’s ‘lean to one side’ policy,” as well as a statement of one’s “support to socialist solidarity and world peace.”\footnote{“Dui Sulian de taidu jiushu dui geming de taidu” [The attitude toward the Soviet Union is the attitude toward revolution], Xuexi, no. 21 (1957), 12.} It was thus of grave consequences to personal survival in the new political order.

While peer pressure and political exigency served as “invisible hands” to influence people, the SSFA also offered incentives to attract and retain members. Membership fees were kept reasonably low so as not to add financial burdens on members. Moreover, with a membership badge or card, one could get a discount on certain merchandise, bus fare, movie tickets, and hotel lodging.\footnote{Chen Xuwei, “Yi Zhong-Su youhao xiehui” [Remembering the SSFA], Gua cang shi zhi, no. 1 (2010), 6.} Apparently the practical benefits that were closely related to day-to-day subsistence were immensely appealing, thus swelling the SSFA’s numbers. In just a couple of years, the SSFA had grown into the largest “mass organization,” embracing almost the entire population. However, membership, as we shall see in the next section and in subsequent chapters, was just
one method by which the SSFA distributed its messages. The effectiveness of the SSFA depended on its ability to communicate with the public through every means possible.

“Friendship Activities”

Under the auspices of the CCP and equipped with a well-orchestrated network that reached out to the masses, the SSFA offered a broad spectrum of cultural activities at the mass level designed to advance popular understandings of Sino-Soviet friendship. By interweaving the friendship rhetoric into everyday life and endowing the everyday with an internationalist significance, these activities weighed heavily on public attitudes toward the Soviet Union. The major forms of cultural activities during this time did not differ significantly from those in the pre-1949 promotion of Sino-Soviet friendship, but they were carried out on a far more extensive scale to embrace a wider array of Soviet cultural products. The following six categories of “friendship activities” show the extent to which the friendship rhetoric reached the Chinese population. Some of them are discussed in detail in subsequent chapters.

First, the SSFA published a plethora of print material aimed at familiarizing the public with the Soviet Union and propagating Sino-Soviet friendship. More than 70 magazines were issued by the SSFA at different levels, including, *Sino-Soviet Friendship (Zhong-Su youhao)* by the General Committee, *Introduction to the Soviet Union (Sulian jieshao)* by the SSFA Northeastern General Branch, and *Knowledge about the Soviet Union (Sulian zhishi)* by the Shanghai SSFA. In October 1952, *Sino-Soviet Friendship* was reorganized into a newspaper and functioned as the mouthpiece of the SSFA General Committee; it enjoyed wide circulation for its readability and large quantities of visuals. This newspaper was also authorized to be published outside China,

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gaining a status equal to People’s Daily, Workers’ Daily, and China Youth Daily. Within the first three years of the SSFA, over 1820 titles of pamphlets and pictorials, totaling more than 46,566,000 copies, were distributed. A huge number of books and articles were translated from Russian into Chinese, among which a good portion were originally Soviet propaganda material acclaiming the achievements under socialism and Stalin’s leadership. Most of the publications were written in simple Chinese suitable for workers and peasants so as to popularize general knowledge of the Soviet Union and Sino-Soviet relations, as well as Soviet techniques in agriculture and industry. In addition, Soviet literature continued to be promoted for such purposes, and substantial governmental patronage was added to this endeavor. Translated Soviet literary works deluged China’s book market, and many of them ranked high on the list of bestsellers.

The second category of SSFA activities was organizing exhibits. Most major cities had their Sino-Soviet friendship buildings, where normally a portion was designated as an exhibition hall. The SSFA gathered visual material from Soviet sources and turned them into exhibits along various themes. Usually these exhibits were held concurrently with celebrations or commemorations of special events. For instance, on Stalin’s seventieth birthday exhibits were put up to celebrate the “great leader of world people,” and on the ninety-second anniversary of Lenin’s birth, pictures of Lenin were on display in a Sino-Soviet friendship gallery near Beihai Park in Beijing. A quick glance at the titles of some exhibits gives an idea of the wide range of themes involved: “Soviet Construction Projects,” “State-owned Farms and Collective Farms,”

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45 Kong Hanbing, “Xin Zhongguo yu Sulian guanxi de teshu zaiti,” p. 43.
46 “Jinian Liening dansheng niushi’er zhounian” [Commemorating the ninety-second anniversary of Lenin’s birth], Jiefangjun bao [PLA daily], 23 April 1962.
“Moscow Scenery,” “Babies and Mothers,” etc. In addition to such formal events, visuals of the life and progress of Soviet citizens were regularly displayed in show windows and galleries set up in parks, schools, libraries, factories, and other public spaces for mass gathering. These exhibition centers created huge impact on Chinese architecture and urban topography.

The third form of activity, one at which the SSFA was extremely successful, was showing Soviet films. In the campaign to eradicate “feudal” and “bourgeois” remnants at the beginning of the PRC, a large number of Soviet films were imported to replace old China’s “reactionary” films and European or American movies. Loaded with socialist ideals, Soviet films presented the most desirable life that a “more advanced social system” (compared with capitalism) had to offer. They also demonstrated the most desired qualities that a socialist citizen was expected to possess. The government thus attached great importance to showing Soviet films among the people. Not only would Soviet films help the Chinese masses see the advantages of the socialism that their country was building, but they would also motivate Chinese citizens to serve voluntarily in the new social order. Combining education with entertainment, Soviet films offered the SSFA, as well as the Chinese propaganda machine, a powerful tool for reaching a population of low literacy. For this reason, Soviet films drew enormous interest from rural people. “Soviet film weeks,” “Soviet film months,” and “Soviet film festivals” were common ways of promotion. Until the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, about 750 Soviet films were shown to millions, accounting for nearly half of all films shown during this time. The social impact of these films cannot be underestimated.

The fourth major activity involved Russian-language training. The expansion of the SSFA and the development of Sino-Soviet exchange increased the demand for Russian speakers and translators. The SSFA collaborated with local education departments and organizations to provide Russian language training programs. Night schools, continuing education classes, and study groups were set up. Long distance learning on the radio and by correspondence was also made available. Russian dictionaries and grammar books were highly sought after. It quickly became in vogue to mix a few Russian words into daily conversation.

Fifth, in order to further public interest in the Soviet Union, the SSFA organized countless lectures, seminars, discussions, and study groups on the Soviet Union. The sessions that most appealed to the common people were debriefings with delegations to the Soviet Union. The SSFA was responsible for arranging exchange visits between Soviet and Chinese people. The delegations included not only state-level performance groups, film personnel, writers and technicians but also selected workers and peasants from the grassroots level. On returning home, they were summoned to give reports to their colleagues or to the general public. The speakers’ personal experiences in the Soviet Union added much weight to the credibility of the information in print material, thus significantly deepening listeners’ understanding of the Soviet Union and bringing them closer to the “Soviet big brother.”

The sixth avenue for promoting Sino-Soviet friendship was the commemorative celebration of landmark events in Soviet history. Each year festive activities were organized on the anniversaries of the October Revolution (November 7th), the signing of the Treaty of

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48 See, for example, articles written by celebrities in cultural circles such as Ding Ling, Wu Han, Sha Kefu, Ding Xilin, Zhao Shuli, Ma Sicong, Bai Yang, and Xu Guangpin, published in a column called “FangSu yinxiang” [Impressions of the Soviet Union] in Zhong-Su youhao, vol. 1, no. 3 (1950).
Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance (February 14th), the founding of the Soviet Army (February 23), Lenin’s birthday (April 22), Stalin’s birthday (December 21), etc. Party leaders and top government officials attended these ceremonies and made speeches to reassert the significance of Sino-Soviet alliance, the “selfless” assistance from the “big brother,” and the importance of learning from the Soviet Union for China’s socialist construction. Newspapers concurrently published Chinese leaders’ congratulatory telegrams to their Soviet counterparts. On a regular basis, “Sino-Soviet friendship month” was organized by local SSFA organizations. For example, in celebration of the 35th anniversary of the October Revolution, a “friendship month” was organized in many cities across the country. This began with an opening ceremony in Zhongnanhai attended by Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, and other high-ranking officials, along with representatives of Soviet experts in China and envoys from other countries. This amiable gathering was enhanced by performances by the famed Soviet Red Flag Dance Troupe then touring China. At the same time, exhibits, talks, lectures, film festivals, dance parties, and other activities of varied scope were carried out on the mass level.

On top of these six new techniques and methods, the SSFA also employed traditional cultural forms and mass activities to render the friendship rhetoric in a way more understandable and appealing to Chinese audiences. *Nianhua* (New Year prints) were extremely instrumental in this regard, particularly in reaching illiterate populations. As a must-have item of interior decoration in the 1950s, Sino-Soviet friendship-themed *nianhua* effortlessly brought everyday

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55 See, for example, Lin Biao’s telegram to the Minister of Soviet National Defense on behalf of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army published in Jiefangjun bao [PLA Daily] (22 February 1961).
life face to face with the cause of world peace and international solidarity. Additionally, yangge (a popular rural folk dance), er-ren zhuan (a song-and-dance duet popular in the Northeast of China), xiangsheng (a traditional comedic performance in the form of a dialogue) were used to tell stories about the “Soviet big brother helping us build a new country” in vernaculars familiar to local people. The actors usually came from members of the local SSFA units that were often loosely structured to give flexibility to mass participation. Performed on the street or at mass gatherings and often drawing huge crowds of spectators, these entertainment venues connected the CCP’s internationalist rhetoric to mundane affairs and engaged the audience in a shared struggle for international socialism and world peace, thus bringing home to them the importance of Sino-Soviet friendship.

Conclusion

This chapter offers an overview of how the CCP carried out an agitprop agenda in promoting Sino-Soviet friendship. On behalf of the government in this endeavor, the SSFA spared no means of mass communication to ensure maximum mass participation. The fact that the SSFA successfully mobilized available resources and effectively performed its duties not only demonstrated the capability of the new regime in the exercise of power, which was

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53 Agitprop is a bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in charge of agitation and propaganda on behalf of the party. The term also refers to the Soviet-style political propaganda that favors the spread of communism and is disseminated through literature, drama, art, or music. For a comparison between the Chinese and Soviet propaganda mechanisms, see Julian Chang, “Propaganda and Perceptions: The Selling of the Soviet Union in the Peoples Republic of China, 1950-1965” (Dissertation, Harvard University, 1995).
sharpened in subsequent political campaigns, but it also revealed a profound Cold War anxiety to make “friends.” In Mao’s vision of the Cold War, knowing “who are our friends” and “who are our enemies” was a matter of making life and death choices for the survival of the PRC.

Through the strenuous and thoroughgoing work of the SSFA, China presented to the Soviet Union an image of a loyal ally and avid supporter of Soviet leadership in the communist world. Thus the relationship between Beijing and Moscow notably improved, bringing the two countries to a professed “unbreakable brotherhood.” This achievement of the SSFA was confirmed by Soviet ambassador to China Aleksandr Semyonovich Panyushkin (Chinese name Pan Youxin 潘友新), who exalted in 1952 that “the SSFA plays an immensely important role in broadening and reinforcing the friendship and the holy cause of cultural exchange between the people of the two countries.” The strengthened bilateral relations directly resulted in greater Soviet input in China’s burgeoning socialist construction.

What Panyoushkin meant by “friendship” corresponded to the CCP’s definition of the term used in foreign affairs. It was a diplomatic, strategic friendship between the two countries. Accordingly, relations between the people of the two countries remained as psychologically distant as they were physically from each other, despite anecdotal stories of friendly interactions.

54 The SSFA’s mobilization of the nation from the top down to the grassroots – directions were given by the central government and relayed via a network of sub-divisions to the mass level – provided a model for later mass movements. This mobilization model was brought to “perfection” during the Cultural Revolution.
55 “Sulian zhu woguo dashi zai Beijing gejie qingzhu Zhong-Su youhao tongmeng huizhu tiaoyue qianding san zhounian dahui shang de zhici” [The Soviet ambassador to China’s Remarks on the meeting of all circles in Beijing for celebrating the signing of the Treaty of Sino-Soviet Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance], Xinhua yuebao [Xinhua monthly], no. 3 (1953), 9-10.
and a few dozen of interracial romances.\textsuperscript{57} Those who had the opportunity to cross borderlines, especially those on a short tour, rarely saw and heard anything beyond what was officially permitted, and coming back to their home countries, they could only say in public what was officially approved. As a matter of fact, both the Chinese and Soviet governments carefully arranged and closely watched the exchange visits, foreign experts and students, and correspondence between their peoples.\textsuperscript{58} All forms of personal communication between Chinese and Soviet citizens had to be officially sanctioned and subject to surveillance. In China during this time, visiting Soviet experts lived in separate quarters, and their contact with the Chinese rarely went beyond a small circle of Chinese co-workers, interpreters, and attendants.\textsuperscript{59} Chinese nationalist sensitivity, and much of the existing literature, characterized the isolation of Soviet advisers as "Soviet chauvinism."\textsuperscript{60} In addition to chauvinism, governmental control on both sides preferred the separation of Soviet and Chinese peoples. On the Chinese side, “according to the government’s rules on interacting with foreigners, \textit{waishi jìlǜ}, Chinese people are (in theory) only permitted to form friendly relations with foreigners in the interests of the specific political and economic goals of the state.”\textsuperscript{61} The government also had strict regulations on Chinese

\textsuperscript{59} See Mikhail A. Klochko, \textit{Soviet Scientist in Red China}.
\textsuperscript{60} See, for example, William Kirby, “China’s Internationalization in the Early PRC,” 888; Sergey Radcheko, \textit{Two Suns in the Heavens}, 9.
\textsuperscript{61} Brady, \textit{Making the Foreign Serve China}, 16.
students’ love and marriage during their study in the Soviet Union.62 Apparently, purely personal friendships were not only discouraged but they were simply impermissible.

For the particular type of “friendship” that the friendship rhetoric propagated, the CCP expected a popular response to its “lean to one side” policy, and it wanted public acceptance of its vision of international socialism. Ultimately, its objective was to enlist public recognition of the Party’s leadership and brew popular enthusiasm for building socialism in China. Obviously, the CCP’s pro-Soviet rhetoric had an additional purpose: if the people could accept the Soviet Union, they would accept building socialism in China under the CCP’s leadership. The Sino-Soviet friendship rhetoric would thus allow the CCP to achieve both international and domestic goals. This confirms the self-serving nature of the CCP’s friendship strategy.

The results on the mass level largely met the expectations from the top, but it did not happen overnight. As revealed in this chapter, Chinese people did not simply take for granted the government’s claim that the Russians were a trustworthy “friend,” nor did they readily and unanimously subscribe to official reinterpretations of China’s past, present, and future. However, with the CCP’s control of information and a powerful propaganda network that permeated every aspect of Chinese life, a friendly, respectful attitude toward the Soviet Union and its people arose among the general public. Despite scattered suspicion and challenge, opposing voices rapidly subsided, at least as the media from that time conveyed. If the decrease in anti-Soviet remarks in the media did not reflect reality, two things could be held accountable. First, censorship and self-censorship was common in the media reports of the time. Anti-Soviet sentiments and remarks were deemed “wrong” and therefore “unhealthy” to be in circulation. This also explains why

only in some critical reports and later in the Hundred Flowers campaign of 1956 is scattered information found about anti-Soviet sentiment and behavior, again revealing the coercive backbone of the new party-state. Second, for most ordinary citizens the friendship rhetoric was basically innocuous though sometimes overbearing political talk – it was not likely to produce ill effects on their lives. And when they themselves had so many day-to-day concerns they were not likely to care about a distant neighboring country. If this was the case, donning a pro-Soviet appearance could easily serve multiple purposes.
Chapter 2. The Vogue for Russian and the Reform of Chinese Education

Through the SSFA’s meticulously designed cultural activities, the friendship rhetoric began to produce the desired reactions among the population. For one thing, popular knowledge of the Soviet Union was increasing. When the “lean to one side” policy was instituted, many people in remote areas did not even know whether the Soviet Union, or Sulian, was a country’s name or a person’s name. A few years later they had acquired a basic understanding of this country and its relationship with China. Particularly, Stalin became a household name to almost everyone, young and old. Mao’s personal doctor and secretary Wang Hebin remembers an anecdote about Stalin’s popularity among the Chinese people in the early years of the Sino-Soviet alliance. In October 1952 when Mao was en route to inspect the Yellow River, he stopped by a small village to investigate peasant life. An old woman with bound feet came up to greet Mao, “Ah, Chairman Mao, welcome here! Is Stalin with you?”¹ These simple sentences convey an ordinary Chinese individual’s genuine affection for Mao and Stalin, as well as their comprehension of Sino-Soviet friendship. In light of popular reverence for Stalin during this time, it is not difficult to understand why when Stalin died in 1953, many felt as “being orphaned,” “horrified and lost,” “as if the sky were falling down.”²

Within the first few years of the PRC, the friendship rhetoric and activities had imbued Chinese society with an enthusiasm for not only top Soviet leaders and ordinary Soviet citizens

¹ Wang Yanbin, Zai weiren shenbian de rizi – Mao Zedong de baojian yisheng jian shenghuo mishu de huiyi [Days next to the great man – a memoir of Mao Zedong’s personal doctor and secretary] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2003), 326.
² Guo Ya, Yige putong Zhongguoren de jiuzu shi [The family history of an ordinary Chinese person] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2005), 60.
but also for the Russian language. Perhaps nothing measures a nation’s attitude about another country more than its attitude about that country’s language. The vogue for Russian in the early PRC clearly marked Chinese people’s partiality toward the Soviet Union. Just as English is being ravenously studied in China nowadays, back in the 1950s Russian was the foremost foreign language that people from all walks of life desired to learn. By focusing on Chinese people’s enthusiasm for Russian-language learning and the concurrent comprehensive reform of Chinese school education, this chapter will shed light on the effectiveness of the pro-Soviet friendship rhetoric in changing popular views of the Soviet Union.

“The Language of the Proletariat”

The Chinese mania for the Russian language was the direct result and the best illustration of the government’s promotion of the “lean to one side” policy, as exemplified by Mao’s personal endorsement of the magazine *Russian-Language Teaching*, as seen in Figure 4. Specifically, the mania stemmed from two important factors owing to this policy. First, there were practical needs – the alliance with the Soviet Union generated high demand for Russian speakers. The surge in state-level diplomatic, economic, and cultural exchange, and the growing number of Soviet experts dispatched to China, all required a large number of qualified Russian interpreters. The birth of the PRC also gave birth to the Beijing Russian-Language Specialist School (one of the foundation stones of today’s Beijing Foreign Studies University) in October 1949. Shortly thereafter in December of that year, the Shanghai Russian-Language Specialist School (predecessor of today’s Shanghai International Studies University) was founded. By 1951
the number of Russian-language specialist schools across the country had risen to seven. New China’s Russian-language education was officially launched on a grand and spectacular scale.

![Image of Russian-language Teaching magazine cover](image)

Figure 4. Cover of *Russian-language Teaching*, a magazine dedicated to the teaching and research of Russian, launched on October 1, 1951. Mao gave endorsement to the magazine by providing the magazine title in his penmanship.

The second factor was political intervention – a person’s attitude toward Russian was taken as another criterion for judging their political consciousness. As in the political pressure applied to expanding the SSFA membership, the radicalism and coercion in promoting the pro-Soviet policy gave rise to an arbitrary equation between the foreign language one studied and one’s political allegiance. It was said that “Russian is the language of the proletariat, and English is the

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language of the capitalist.”⁴ An influential Russian-language learning periodical, Russian, amply echoed and championed this view in its inaugural issue:

The socialist Soviet Union has gained success with the most advanced theory of mankind, Marxist Leninism, and with a proletarian worldview and methodology. Whether in politics, economy, culture, science, art, and so on, it represents the most advanced ideas and techniques of mankind, strong evidence of its infinite potential for development. For this reason, all progressive countries of the world, all specialists and scholars who truly love their countries and their people, are ardently learning Russian. Without learning Russian, we cannot fully assimilate the most advanced ideas and techniques of mankind, we cannot become true scholars and specialists, nor can we do well in our own country’s revolutionary cause and reconstruction.⁵

As Soviet culture was upheld as “the most advanced” culture, its language, Russian, was likewise elevated to the most “progressive,” “modern,” and “internationalist” language. Those who could speak Russian were highly esteemed and admired in society. By contrast, the number of English learners shrank dramatically and a contemptuous, disparaging attitudes began to overshadow English language learning. In his memoir, Wang Juefei, a historian and professor of world history at Nanjing University, related the change of attitude toward foreign languages at Nanjing University. Before 1949 the university’s English major was the strongest in faculty and student numbers, while the Russian major had only one class with only a handful of teachers and students. However, soon after 1949 the number of students majoring in English dropped; learning English was not only disparaged but also considered a sign of pro-American inclinations. As an example of this, when one female graduate majoring in English from Nanjing University reported to Nanjing College of Aeronautics as assigned,⁶ the school leader appointed her to teach Chinese revolutionary history in the Marxism and Leninism Teaching and Research Section. She

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⁴ Liu Naiyuan, Lijie buhui [No regret after all the disasters] (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1998), 103.
⁵ Harbin Municipal SSFA Russian-language Committee, Russian, no. 1 (January 31, 1950), 1.
⁶ The Nanjing College of Aeronautics was renamed in 1993 Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics.
asked if she could teach English since that had been her major. The school leader, enraged, gave her a severe reprimand: “What is English good for? Do you want to listen to Voice of America?” Under such pressure, this woman had to abandon her nascent English language career.\(^7\)

The above case was not at all unique; countless similar episodes happened throughout China. There were, however, objections to such extreme practices of rejecting English for anti-American purposes. For instance, it was argued that “in the technological and scientific literature around the world, 70 percent was written in English, compared with less than 20 percent written in Russian.”\(^8\) Also, some quoted Stalin to argue against the “class character” of language.\(^9\) These sorts of opinions were heavily criticized and labeled as “anti-Soviet,” “anti-party” remarks. Consequently, some intellectuals who were experts in English and American literature had to put away their expertise and pick up Russian. Xiao Qian, a writer and translator of several well-known English literary classics, was a typical (and tragic) example. He was determined to “reform” himself according to Mao’s recommendations for intellectuals. While writing essays of self-criticism, he taught himself Russian and wholeheartedly studied *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (*Bolsheviks*).\(^10\) Like Xiao Qian, during that time many intellectuals who were trained in Europe and America made compromises, pledged allegiance to the new

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\(^7\) Wang Juefei, *Shizhe rusi* [Gone are the days] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2001), 256.

\(^8\) Qian Jiaju, *Qishi nian de jingli* [Seventy years of life experience] (Hong Kong: Jingbao wenhua qiye youxian gongsi, 1988), 253.

\(^9\) See Huang Tianji, “Jianguochu gaoxiao xue Sulian de naxie shi” [Something about learning from the Soviet Union in the early PRC], *Zhoumo bao* (June 21, 2011). In his *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*, Stalin suggests that Language serves all classes of society and changes very slowly, and he opposes the idea that language is related to class difference, as he says, “It is no secret to anyone that the Russian language served Russian capitalism and Russian bourgeois culture before the October Revolution just as well as it now serves the socialist system and socialist culture of Russian society.” For more information, see Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2003).

regime as well as the new literary and artistic canons from the Soviet Union, and subscribed to the doctrine of Soviet Socialist Realism.\textsuperscript{11}

**“The Whole Nation Is Learning Russian!”**

Russian became extremely hot in the climate of the Cold War. Although switching to Russian devastated many established scholars, for the rank and file studying Russian allowed them to “serve the nation and the world” and at the same time secure a good job. This choice theoretically allowed them to serve international, national, and personal interests (though it soon turned out to be the opposite in the late 1950s). Russian thus became the hottest major at universities, the top choice for many young people who keenly responded to the slogan “My aspiration is to do what the country needs me to do!”\textsuperscript{12} A large number of English teachers and professors switched to Russian, and after a painstaking “re-education” some quickly became the backbone of Russian-language teaching and research.\textsuperscript{13}

For amateur learners, the SSFA organizations of all levels offered different types of Russian learning programs. By 1954, 352 Russian night schools sponsored by the SSFA had attracted more than 51,200 learners across the country, and about 269,400 people regularly


\textsuperscript{12} Yang Dongxiao, “Sandai ren de zhuanye xuanze” [Three generations’ choices of their majors], *Xinshiji zhoukan*, no. 17 (2009), 34-37.

\textsuperscript{13} This information came from interviews conducted in Beijing and Shanghai in June and July 2009 with two professors whose original expertise was in English language and literature but was changed into Russian language and literature in the early 1950s. Both interviewees were granted anonymity.
listened to the SSFA’s Russian learning programs on the radio. Many learned to sing Russian songs in Russian and some schools organized students to exchange letters written in Russian with Soviet students. Even those with low literacy were able to pick up a few pidgin Russian words to “catch up with the tide.” Indeed, it was during this time that a number of Russian loan words gained currency: bulaji (платье, frock), lieba (хлеб, bread), luosong tang (Россия борщ, Russian borscht), for example. All in all, as the Chinese newspapers put it, all of a sudden “the whole nation is learning Russian!”

For many, a good command of Russian paved the way for a period of study in the Soviet Union, which was “the dream of everyone and the highest personal honor recognized by society.” By 1959, a total of 14,798 Chinese students, teachers, and interns were sent to the Soviet Union, making up 91.6 percent of all personnel studying abroad. The importance of students’ basic proficiency in Russian was overlooked by the PRC government when it dispatched the first batch of 375 inadequately prepared students on a long-distance train to the Soviet Union in August 1951. Their lack of Russian comprehension posed a huge obstacle to these students when they were assigned to various Soviet universities. To redress this problem, in 1952, the Preparatory School for Study in the Soviet Union (liuSu yubei bu) was set up at the

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14 Qian Junduan, “Wunian lai de Zhong-Su youhao xiehui (caogao)” [The SSFA over the past five years (draft)], November 1954.
18 Besides the Soviet Union, China also sent students to Eastern European countries in the Soviet orbit such as Poland, Hungary, and Mongolia. For the statistics, see Cao Qiang, “Zhong-Su guanxi polie xia de liuSu xuezi” [Chinese students studying in the Soviet Union under Sino-Soviet split], Dangshi zongheng, no. 2 (2010), 25-26; “Zhuoyi LiuSu ranqing suiye” [Remembering the passionate years of studying in the Soviet Union], Zhongguo Jiaoyu bao [China education daily], September 7, 2009.
Beijing Russian-Language Specialist School. Selected students were to have one-year intensive Russian training before departing for the Soviet Union. To prepare them for the Russian speaking environment in the Soviet Union, the government also invited Soviet linguists to teach the students and guide teachers at the school (Figure 5).^19

![Figure 5. Graduation portrait of No. 25 Class at the Preparatory School for Study in the Soviet Union, 1953. Note the Soviet teacher sitting in the middle of the front row. Source: Zhongguo jiaoyu bao, September 17, 2009.](image)

The growing public interest in Russian led to a rapid expansion of Russian-language programs in China’s educational system. Russian became the required foreign language in secondary and higher education. By 1952, 59 high schools in Beijing, Shanghai, and other major cities had Russian-language departments.

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cities were offering Russian classes, and in the Northeast (the region bordering the Soviet Union and formerly under tsarist Russian influence) all high schools were teaching Russian. Some extremist educators even experimented with replacing Chinese characters with Latin script in their classes based on the alleged advantage of alphabetic languages, like Russian, over ideographic Chinese.\(^{20}\) Although this attempt was unsuccessful, it accelerated the development of simplified Chinese characters in the 1950s,\(^{21}\) and the creation of the pinyin system in 1958 which was adopted by schools as the method of Chinese phonetic instruction.

While Russian language instruction was widespread, the most affected educational sector was higher education. In 1950 Renmin University and an additional 18 key universities set up Russian departments and research centers. In 1952 more than 57 higher educational institutions offered Russian language as a major. These universities became factories for mass producing capable Russian speakers.\(^{22}\) By the end of 1956, there were nearly 2,000 college and university professors specializing in Russian language and literature. Between 1953 and 1956, there were more than 12,000 college students majoring in Russian.\(^{23}\) Together with those who studied in the

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\(^{23}\) See Liu Limin, “Xin Zhongguo eyu jiaoyu liushi nian” [Sixty years' Russian teaching in New China], *Guangming Daily*, September 25, 2009; Ding Shu and Tian Xu, “Zouxiang lixing, zouxiang kexue: E-yu jichu jiaoyu de fazhan”
Soviet Union, these people’s lives were henceforth inextricably linked to the fate of Russian in
China, a sensitive barometer of the personal impact of changes to Sino-Soviet relations.  

**Reform in Education**

The changes in China’s foreign-language education, influenced by SSFA propaganda, set
the stage for the comprehensive education reform being conducted in the early 1950s. In the
making of New China, restructuring the Chinese education system was a pressing task, as a new
type of education would produce a new generation of “red talents” to serve the party-state.
Emulating the Soviet Union, the Chinese educational reform aimed at installing the Soviet school
system in China.

In this endeavor, Soviet teaching methodologies were promoted and esteemed as “the
highest stage in the development of pedagogy,” “the truly scientific, Marxist pedagogy,” and “the
most comprehensive, systematic, revolutionary science.”  

It was claimed that “the Soviet Union
has used Marxist-Leninist standpoint, method and thirty years’ experience in socialist
construction to criticize, absorb, and develop the most advanced achievements in world
science.”  

This generated an upsurge in translations of Soviet pedagogical canons. Between

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24 For the life experience of Chinese students who studied in the Soviet Union and how they were affected by the fluctuating Sino-Soviet relations, see Elizabeth McGuire, “Between Two Revolutions: Chinese Students in Soviet Institutes. 1948-1966,” in China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949-Present, ed. Thomas P. Bernstein and Hua-yu Li (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 359-389.


26 “Shelun: Jinyibu xuexi Sulian de xianjin jiaoyu jingyan” [Editorial: Further study advanced educational experience of the Soviet Union], Renmin jiaoyu [People’s education], no. 11 (1952): 4-5.
1949 and 1959, 56 monographs were translated into Chinese. The most translated, widely used and discussed was Pedagogy, the most influential pedagogy textbook used in Soviet higher education at the time, written by Ivan A. Kairov (1893-1978), a Soviet educator and prominent figure in Soviet public education. Many Soviet experts in China at the time also used Kairov’s works in lectures. Kairov’s Pedagogy became the principal textbook and reference book at Chinese teachers’ colleges, and it was regarded as the highest standard and the solution to every problem in pedagogy. Around the time of Kairov’s visit to China in 1956, lectures and training programs to popularize his pedagogy flourished, bringing the fervor to a new height.

While promoting Soviet pedagogy, Chinese education circles also leveled criticism at John Dewey, the American philosopher and educationist whose pragmatic education theories were influential in shaping the pre-PRC school education. In 1950 Cao Fu, a Chinese educator who received his doctoral degree in education from University of Colorado in 1949, published Introduction to Dewey Criticism based on his doctoral dissertation about Dewey. The book presented the flaws and deficiencies in American life and education. The centerpiece of the book was its criticism of Dewey’s philosophy of education. It pointed out that in order to criticize old education principles the first thing to do was to criticize Dewey and the basis of his pedagogical doctrine – his philosophy of pragmatism. Cao claimed that Dewey’s teaching methods placed a lopsided emphasis on activities and children’s natural interests but failed to give due attention to

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guidance by the teacher and the necessity to impart knowledge in a systematic way. This book represented the first comprehensive criticism of Dewey’s theory among Chinese intelligentsia and the beginning of a governmental attempt to eradicate the “superstitious beliefs in Dewey among old intellectuals,” thereby serving as a prelude to a nationwide campaign in academia to supplant bourgeois educational philosophy with Marxist educational theory.

Around this time Cao also published a series of articles making charges against pragmatism in education and the American school system. In 1952 Cao, now Chair of the Education Department at East China Normal University, gave a series of public lectures to elementary school teachers in Shanghai on Soviet socialist education theory and practice, particularly Kairov’s tenets. These lectures were also broadcast on the radio. The follow-up publication of his lecture notes under the title of *Popular Lectures on Pedagogy (Jiaoyuxue tongsu jiangzuo)* related Soviet theory to the circumstances of Chinese education and became a practical guidebook for Chinese teachers in the early 1950s.

Along with Dewey, Chinese educators who were influenced by Dewey’s pedagogy also came under attack. Between 1951 and 1953, criticism was levied against a few key figures in the pre-1949 education circle and their theories, including Tao Xingzhi and his “life education” theory, Chen Heqin and his principle of “live education,” and Yan Yangchu (known to the West as Y. C. James Yen) and his “mass education.” All the three had substantive formal training in the

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29 Cao Fu, *Duwei pipan yinlun* [Introduction to Dewey criticism] (Beijing: Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1951). Also see, Cao Fu, “Duwei pipan yinlun,” *Renmin jiaoyu* [People’s education], vol. 1, no. 6 (October 1950), 23-25 and vol. 2, no. 1 (January 1951), 15-17.


32 Cao Dawei, “Cao Fu yu Cao Fu de jiaoyu xiangxiang” [Cao Fu and his education theory], *Xueshu jie* [Academics in China], no. 4 (2001), 31-35.
U.S. Tao Xingzhi earned a bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of Illinois in 1915, and two years later a master’s degree in education from Columbia University. Chen Heqin studied at Johns Hopkins University and also received a master’s degree in education from Columbia in 1919. Likewise, Yan Yangchu first studied at Hong Kong University, then at Yale University, graduating in 1918, and then earned a master’s degree in 1921 from Princeton.

Returning from studying abroad, the three pioneer educators committed themselves to building the country’s school system and developing educational concepts, while supporting one another’s experimental projects in educational reform between 1920 and 1940. All of them were immensely instrumental in enlisting support from the intelligentsia for China’s Anti-Japanese War. After the founding of the PRC, Chen Heqin was appointed Dean of the teachers’ college at Nanjing University after 1949, so he was able to continue his educational practice under the new regime. Tao Xingzhi was not so fortunate, and died in 1946 amid the GMD’s white terror in the second Civil War.

Yan Yangchu, on the other hand, did not win favor with the CCP because of his Christian background and his involvement with the GMD administration and the American government. During the second Civil War between the CCP and the GMD, Yan attempted to persuade Chang Kai-shek to direct more resources to the education in the countryside but failed. He then turned to President Truman. In 1948 the American Congress included a provision in the “China Aid Act of 1948” to fund an independent “Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction,” with Yan as one of the five commissioners. This single action was enough to bring about Yan’s disapproval by the CCP. Yan was accused of being “the running dog of imperialism” and had to

33 The Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction (JCRR) was the first law in American history that the Congress passed after lobbying by a foreigner.
leave the mainland after the communist takeover. He moved to the US after a sojourn in Taiwan and continued to promote his “mass education movement” in the developing world.\(^{34}\)

In the political climate of the 1950s, the three men’s education and theoretical backgrounds were deemed “problematic.” Since Yan Yangchu had left the mainland, the criticism was directed primarily towards Chen Heqin and Tao Xingzhi. After 1949, Chen actively participated in the political movements of the time, trying to prove his allegiance to the new regime. For instance, when the Korean War broke out, he made speeches at public gatherings, arguing that “the American imperialism had no other intention in running schools in China than to enslave Chinese children.”\(^{35}\) However, this did not protect Chen from the political storms of the following years. As the first “living example of Dewey’s poisonous influence on Chinese educators,” Chen was heavily denounced after 1951. Charges against his “live education” escalated, which constituted an important portion of the campaign to eradicate Dewey’s influence.\(^{36}\) The major education journal, *People’s Education (Renmin jiaoyu)*, became the frontline of such bombardment. Chen was forced to undertake self-criticism and made public his reflections in newspapers.\(^{37}\)

However, the primary target of the criticism was none other than the late Tao Xingzhi, who was perhaps the most influential figure in the realm of Chinese education. A student of Dewey at

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\(^{34}\) Wu Xiangxiang, *Yan Yangchu zhuan: wei quanqiu xiangcun gaizao fendou liushi nian* [The life story of Yan Yangchu: sixty years for the rural reconstruction of the world] (Changsha: Yuelu chubanshe, 2001).

\(^{35}\) See a report on Chen Heqin’s speech in *Xinhua ribao* [Xinhua daily] (06 December 1950).

\(^{36}\) See, for instance, Zhang Lingguang, “Ping ‘huo jiaoyu’ de jiben yuanze” [On the basic principles of ‘live education’], *Renmin jiaoyu*, vol. 2, no. 6 (1951); Lin Yingcai, “Xiwang changdao huo jiaoyu de xianshengmen jinxing zhi no piping” [I hope the gentlemen who advocate live education will do self-criticism], *Renmin jiaoyu*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1951), 13-17; Wang Tairan, “Huo jiaoyu de zhuzhang neng shi Zhongguo jiuaoyu bianhua ma?—yu huo jiaoyu shangque” [Can the proposal of live education enliven China’s old education? A discussion with the live education press], *Renmin jiaoyu*, vol. 3, no. 5 (1951), 25-26; and a commentary in *Xinhua ribao*, 15 November 1951.

\(^{37}\) Chen Heqin’s “Wo dui ‘huo jiaoyu’ de chubu jiantao” [My preliminary self-criticism of ‘live education’] was published around the same time by *Renmin ribao* (8 October 1951), *Dagong bao* (15 October 1951), and *Xinhua ribao* (15 November 1951).
Columbia University in the 1910s, Tao developed his mentor’s philosophy of education into three basic principles: “life is education,” “society is school,” “teaching and learning must be combined.” These concepts were widely recognized in the communist-controlled areas during the thirties and forties. His anti-GMD activities were also highly regarded by the CCP. Moreover, he enjoyed high prestige among pro-democracy intellectuals for his engagement in patriotic movements. After his death in 1946, Tao was acclaimed by the CCP as a great educator of the people, “a Bolshevik outside the Party who unreservedly followed the Party,” and his creed was identified as “new democratic education theory.” However, when Mao started the 1951 campaign to eradicate bourgeois ideas in the artistic and cultural realms, his criticism of the film *The Life Story of Wu Xun (Wu Xun zhuan)*, changed the CCP’s attitude toward Tao one hundred eighty degrees.

The apparently causal relationship between the criticism of the film and that of Tao was in fact not accidental. The film portrayed a late Qing dynasty figure named Wu Xun, who set up free schools for commoners’ children after years of collecting money as a beggar. Admiring Wu Xun’s spirit, Tao had devoted his life to the mass education movement, thus known as “Wu Xun of modern China.” In 1944, Tao entrusted the project of turning Wu Xun’s story into a film version to Sun Yu, a leftist film director, hoping that the film would popularize the Wu Xun spirit and the idea of mass education. After a strenuous struggle to make the subject matter a “politically proper” fit for the new era, Sun Yu completed the film in late 1950. Although the film was initially well received in the press and by critics, Mao’s assertion that it promoted bourgeois reform soon changed the entire cultural and intellectual landscape. Soon after, party organs

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38 See Zhou Enlai’s telegram to Yan’an about Tao Xingzhi’s death in Zhou Yi and Xiang Ming, *Tao Xingzhi zhuan* [The life story of Tao Xingzhi] (Chengdu: Sichuan jiaoyu chubanshe, 2010), 13.
published a series of articles denouncing both the film and Tao, the embodiment and champion of the Wu Xun spirit.\textsuperscript{39} Given his foreign education background, Tao was labeled a “bourgeois reformist” and his theory a copy of Dewey’s pragmatism.

The criticism of Tao was meant to eliminate pre-PRC educational paradigms and particularly American influences, thereby establishing the party’s control of education. It also served as a stern warning to intellectuals with training in America and Europe that they should abandon their pro-American stance and renounce their connections to Euro-American academia and intelligentsia. Instead, they should switch sides to the Soviet Union, the only “correct” and permissible foreign influence.

Transforming the entire Chinese educational system from its pre-revolutionary form to the Soviet Model was not a simple task. This task was performed as much of the other reconstruction activities - by bringing in Soviet experience. Not only did the Chinese government send students to the Soviet Union to study, but it also invited Soviet specialists to come to China to help construct the new education system. Even before the founding of the PRC, the Chinese leadership had asked to the Soviet government to send experts to assist China’s reconstruction.\textsuperscript{40}

In August 1949, the first group of 220 Soviet specialists arrived in China. Between 1949 and 1960, at least 20,000 Soviet experts worked in China, most as consultants in areas needing

\textsuperscript{39} The causality between the criticism of the film and that of Tao has been widely researched and debated. For an insightful discussion, see Suzanne Pepper, \textit{Radicalism and Education Reform in 20th-century China: the Search for an Ideal Model} (Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 166-174; He Pinghua, “Zhonggong kaiguo hou diyi wenhua zui’an kao” [Research on the first cultural crime under the communist regime], \textit{Twenty-first Century}, no. 42 (August 1997): 27-36. For the role that Jiang Qing played in starting the campaign, see Tang Wenquan, “Kaiguo diyi wenhua yuansuan: Jiang Qing yu Tao Xingzhi ji qi di zhi de enenyuanyuan” [The first cultural wrongdoing after 1949: Jiang Qing’s resentment to Tao Xingzhi and his disciples], in Du Daozheng and Liao Gailong, eds., \textit{Lishi mi’an jiemi} [Disclosing historical myths] (Haikou: Nanhai chubanshe, 1998), 75-88.

assistance (heavy industries and nuclear weapons) and some served as faculty members at Chinese universities.\(^\text{41}\)

In the absence of both American and other pre-PRC influences on Chinese education, the Soviet educational model was consolidated. Based on Kairov’s pedagogy, and with Soviet expert supervision, the entire Chinese education system was fully restructured. In 1952 the Soviet school system was implemented on a full scale wherever education was available. From kindergarten to college, Chinese schools duplicated Soviet curricula, teaching materials, textbooks, and sometimes even their daily schedules.

The most important aspect of the restructuring was reforming colleges and universities. Comprehensive universities were divided into universities specializing in either sciences or liberal arts to develop colleges specializing in one area of study such as the Russian language, agriculture, or teacher training. This pattern mirrored the configuration of Soviet institutes of higher learning, which emphasized specialization rather than comprehensiveness. At the time the PRC was founded, there were 221 universities and colleges in China, mostly patterned on American and European universities. Among them were 49 comprehensive universities. However, once the education reform was completed in 1953, the number of universities and colleges had dropped to 182, with all the private and missionary universities having been reorganized or absorbed into new institutes.\(^\text{42}\) Only 14 comprehensive universities remained, and the rest became specialized colleges. This change reflected the government’s desire for

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\(^{41}\) Shen Zhihua, “Dui zaihua Sulian zhuanjia wenti de lishi kaocha: jiben zhuangkuang ji zhengce bianhua” [A historical investigation into Soviet experts in China: circumstances and policy change], *Dangdai Zhongguoshi yanjiu* [Contemporary China history studies], no. 1 (September 2002): 31-45.

immediate economic and industrial development. The changes did meet the needs of the time for a constant supply of specialists to build the country, but in the long run they proved to be counterproductive.43

The most radical step in this process was establishing new universities modeled on Soviet counterparts, which gave birth to Renmin University (People’s University) in 1950. This new-style university was built on the principle of “connecting teaching with practice, combining Soviet experience and Chinese circumstances.” According to directions from the central government, Renmin University should “adopt advanced Soviet experience in development and invite Soviet professors to train all kinds of cadres for the construction of the new country.”44 Thus Soviet experts were extensively involved in building the university’s curriculum. Between 1950 and 1957 the university produced more than 100 kinds of teaching materials and textbooks written either by the Soviet advisers or under their supervision.45

A similar case was the reconstruction of Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT), not only because developing capable professionals in heavy industry was a national high priority but also because the university had a Russian cultural background and many Russian speakers.46 In 1950

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43 See Suzanne Pepper, Radicalism and Education Reform in 20th-century China, 217-255.
46 The HIT grew out of the Harbin Sino-Russian School for Industry, which educated railway engineers in the Russian education style. The first president was a Russian engineer, and courses were taught in Russian. From 1935 to 1945 during the Japanese occupation of Northeastern China, the school was taken over by the Japanese. After World War II, HIT came under the joint management of the Chinese and Soviet governments through the China
the National Department of Education proposed an outline for improving school design and training talent in engineering; the outline essentially proposed copying Soviet polytechnic institutes. Several majors were added, 67 Soviet experts were invited to teach on campus, and academic programs as well as teaching materials from Soviet polytechnic institutes were borrowed.

As Renmin University and Harbin Institute of Technology were approved by the central government to learn from the USSR, these two universities served as models for reforming Chinese institutions of higher education. Every year, they provided seminars led by Soviet professors for teachers and professors all over the country. Likewise, many universities were restructured along lines proven at these universities. Thus, Renmin University and HIT were established as flagship universities for post-secondary education reform in the Russian model.

**Opposing Opinions**

Despite his harsh criticism of Dewey, Cao Fu’s *Popular Lectures on Pedagogy* did not blindly follow the Soviet model; indeed, he was successful in indigenizing Soviet pedagogy in Chinese education, revealing that not all Chinese educators were blindly “transplanting” Soviet educational models onto Chinese soil. As a matter of fact, as the reform started, many people had reservations about the Soviet educational beliefs and China’s uncritical adoption of the Soviet school system. At times, educators even challenged Soviet advisers during lectures and talks. In a

Changchun Railway Administration. In June 1950, the Chinese government took over the administration of HIT and soon experimental reform of the university began.

47 “Woguo diyipi ‘gongye qiye dianqi zidonghua zhuanye’ biyesheng: yuan Harbin ongye daxue T332 ban” [Our country’s first group of graduates majoring in ‘industrial electric automation:’ former T332 Class at Harbin Institute of Technology], *Jinri Hagongda* [Today’s Harbin Institute of Technology] (May 20, 2004), 9-12; “Sulan zhuangjia dui Hagongda fazhan jianshe de gongxian” [Soviet experts’ contribution to the development and building of Harbin Institute of Technology], accessed July 10, 2010. http://hi.baidu.com/we1d/blog/item/82ee7f0aac8b6832b1351db5.html.
more constructive manner, a number of esteemed educators advocated combining advanced
Soviet experience with the particular conditions in China and cautioned against radicalism and
conservatism in attitude and practice. For instance, Jiang Nanxiang, President of Tsinghua
University from 1952 to 1966, told the faculty and students of Tsinghua many times at school
meetings that “we should not simply install the formal structures of Soviet universities, but rather,
we need to think and use our own brain.”

Mechanically copying Soviet experience was a heavily criticized practice in the education
reform. A typical example was the case of duplicating the daily schedules of Soviet universities.
In the early 1950s, many schools adopted the “six periods in a row” schedule (liujie yiguan zhi, 六节一贯制) used at Soviet universities, squeezing all six periods of classes into a long morning
from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. and leaving the afternoon for political study and extracurricular activities.
This schedule was designed to make optimal use of daytime in the long cold winters of Siberia,
but for Chinese schools it was unnecessary. What was disastrous to Chinese students was that
oftentimes their meager breakfast could not sustain them through the long morning – the average
living standard was still rather low in the 1950s. By the end of the fourth period, students were
already starving, which seriously affected their concentration and effectiveness during the last
two periods. Chen Wangdao, who translated The Communist Manifesto in 1920 and was
President of Fudan University from 1952 to 1966, criticized the mechanical copying of the

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48 Wang Wen and Xu Zhenming, “Qinghua daxue xuexi Sulian jiaoyu jingyan kaizhan jiaoxue gaige de jige jieduan” [Tsinghua University learns from Soviet educational experience and carries out educational reforms], paper presented at the Eighth National Seminar on Tsinghua University History, November 19, 2003.
49 As it was later pointed out, the term “six periods in a row” did not exist in the Soviet Union, but universities did arrange classes around noon time because students normally ate around 2 pm. See “Guanyu tingzhi shixing suowei liujie yiguan zhi wenti de tongzhi” [Notification on the termination of the so-called six periods in a row schedule] issued by the Higher Education Department of China on October 21, 1954, quoted in Zhang Liyong, “liujie yiguan zhi ji qita” [Six periods in a row and beyond], Daxue jiaoyu kexue, no. 6 (2009), 76-97.
Soviet university system: “Lunchtime in China and the Soviet Union is different, and the physical condition of Chinese and Soviet students is different too, how can we mimic another country’s experience without considering such facts? … When we learn from Soviet experience, should we blindly copy regardless of national characteristics, or should we adopt a realist attitude and (make choices) according to our actual circumstances?”⁵¹ Amid complaints and criticism, the “six periods in a row” schedule was finally terminated in 1954.

If a small practice like a campus daily schedule was relatively easy to eliminate, the full-scale reform of higher education that was already in full swing was not. As the largest and most profound education reform in Chinese history, this endeavor to adopt Soviet educational models had far-reaching consequences, many of which are still unsettling today.⁵² The overall changes in the education reform also signaled the decline of American cultural influence and the soaring prestige of the Soviet Union in the PRC. At the peak of Sino-Soviet friendship propaganda, people sang the praises of the Soviet Union, with only rare disparagement in public against the “Soviet big brother.” Once, when the Red Flag Singing and Dancing Troupe of the Soviet Red Army visited Beijing, Cao Yu, a renowned Chinese playwright who was assigned to receive the troupe, added a note on the tickets mandating the audience to “Please applaud at least three times!”⁵³ This anecdote reveals how respectful Chinese people were of their Soviet counterparts on the one hand and the doctrinarism in carrying out the principles of “friendship” on the other.

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⁵² For the negative consequences of adopting Soviet educational models see Suzanne Pepper, *Radicalism and Education Reform*, 217-255; Li Li-xu, “The Influences of the Soviet Educational Model,” 110-112.
⁵³ This information comes from an interview conducted in Beijing on June 23, 2009.
Under the influence of powerful propaganda, some people even developed a blind faith in the Soviet Union. Everything from the Soviet Union was deemed the paragon of its kind. For instance, a doctor claimed “traditional Chinese medicine is feudalistic medicine, Western medicine is capitalist medicine, only Pavlov’s theory is socialist medicine.” Therefore, we must oppose Chinese and Western medicine and only rely on Pavlov’s medicine.” In agriculture, I. V. Michurin’s theory of pomology and selection was upheld as canonical. Based on a contrast between the “Michurinist Biology” and the “fruitless,” “capitalist” Weismanist-Morganist-Mendelist genetics, some people proposed that “human efforts shall produce desired variations according to the needs of socialism.” Conversely, when a teacher at a Hunan military academy used the subway in New York to illustrate the construction of a tunnel, he was instantly criticized for “admiring America” and told to use the Moscow metro as the correct example.

Conclusion

The strong impulse to blindly copy the Soviet model was a product of the powerful friendship rhetoric propaganda espoused by the CCP. With the first salvo of educational reform being the widespread introduction of Russian language programs, the extent to which the Soviet model was followed is not surprising. While to some degree the educational model, departing drastically from the American / Dewey philosophy, was modified to suit the Chinese culture, the overall structure, as seen from the changes to Renmin University and HIT, followed the Soviet

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54 Ivan Petrovich Pavlov (Russian: Иван Петрович Павлов; 1849 – 1936) was a famous Russian physiologist whose theory was popular in China in the 1950s.
56 Yu Mingda, Yige pingmin baixing de huiyilu [The memoir of an ordinary citizen] (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1998), 36.
57 Ibid, 37.
guidelines very closely. These changes were then passed on to newly created universities and modified legacy universities. The far-reaching reforms presented here demonstrate that the SSFA was successful with its friendship rhetoric in bringing about broad-based support for the Sovietization of Chinese society.

Until the Russian-language fever cooled down in 1956, a good portion of the population learned the ABCs of Russian, and thousands acquired a high level of competency. At the same time, through learning Russian and following Soviet educational practices, people were brought closer to the Soviet Union sentimentally, which greatly facilitated societal acceptance of the friendship rhetoric. In the formative years of the PRC a generally pro-Soviet atmosphere crystallized in Chinese society, typified by the Chinese passengers’ enthusiastic response to a casual encounter with some Russians at the beginning of Part I. All this paved the way for carrying out the CCP’s grand scheme of building a new China on the Soviet model.
This city was closely related to cotton. . . . With the help of the Soviet big brother, the city built nearly ten textile factories all at once in the 1950s. . . . In these factories, not only were the equipment, workshops, and techniques provided by the Soviets, even the design of living quarters was done by Soviet experts. Quickly these textile factories and their accompanying residential areas took over half of the city. Today, when we – living in the 1990s – pass by the textile workers’ apartments designed by the Soviets and gaze reflectively at these similar-looking, old, and somewhat clumsy buildings and the smoke pipes on the top that have turned pitch black, we can still see the solid material of Soviet-style buildings and feel the romantic zeal for communism. For example, there is a well-maintained garden in each living quarters and matching the garden there is also a club for employees. On the top of the club, there are always two red characters written in exquisite Chinese calligraphy but standing far apart: wu – hui (dance). . . . This is a city filled up by textile workers, a city covered with Soviet-style buildings. Andelie was born into this city. . . . Andelie was born approximately in March 1954. His father named him, and the name itself was a reflection of Sino-Soviet friendship at the time. Responding to the call of the government, Andelie’s parents moved from Shanghai to support this city’s development; they were both middle school teachers. His father had worn colorful shirts made of Soviet print cotton, and his mother had Soviet-style bulaji. Back then they both yearned for the wonderful life of the Soviet big brother, and they also hoped little Andelie would study in the Soviet Union when he grew up.

The city in Tie Ning’s fictional short story shows the physical manifestations of the deep involvement between China and the Soviet Union in the early 1950s. Today, many Chinese cities that were developed in the 1950s, like the one Tie Ning portrayed, remain reminiscent of Soviet input into China’s urban planning, and readily display the extent to which Soviet culture was assimilated into everyday life. At that time, Chinese architects would turn to Soviet architectural designs for ideas and inspirations, and city planners frequently renamed streets and roads to make reference to Sino-Soviet friendship. Fashion was affected as well, when modified Soviet-
style clothing such as Lenin suits and bib-and-brace overalls became city people’s everyday attire. *Bulaji*, bowknots, and colorful waistbands – typical Soviet women’s clothing – were chic among fashionable Chinese women. Like Andelie’s parents in Tie Ning’s short story, young parents would adopt pleasant-sounding Russian names for their children or name them after Soviet heroes. Whenever possible, people avidly learned Russian; even those with low levels of literacy were able to put some pidgin Russian words into daily practice, fancying their “newness.” The transnational practices that enabled the migration of Soviet experience, personnel, and culture into China constituted one of the most intriguing phenomena of China’s quest for modernity.

In my discussion, I define the modernization that China chose to embrace as “Socialist Modernity.” This terminology seeks to emphasize that the nascent PRC did not modernize blindly, but instead pragmatically sought a particular type of modernity that could effectively establish itself among the Chinese populace. Indeed, it was not just modernity or socialist modernity that the CCP wanted to establish, but an *international* socialist modernity. The intention in constructing a new society was to create a culture that, while still Chinese, was integrated with the larger global society, thus stronger and more resilient in its interactions on the international scene. The international modernity chosen was that of the Soviet Union; the effects of this choice were directly manifested across China, particularly in cities.

Part II of this study examines how China’s urban landscapes were transformed by a national urge to modernize the country based on Soviet blueprints. Following Part I’s discussion of the state initiatives to promote Russian-language training and educational reform based on the Soviet model, Part II will further explore the friendship rhetoric by turning to the achievements
of Soviet socialist modernity the rhetoric acclaimed. I discuss how the “language of modernity” in the rhetoric played out and changed the look of Chinese cities. In this endeavor, I examine two predominant aspects of the cityscape that most conspicuously displayed the changes: architecture (Chapter 3) and clothing fashions (Chapter 4). My focus is not on aesthetics or new theories in architectural and sartorial design, but rather on social functions and cultural implications of Soviet-style construction and clothing. I address how the new trends changed popular tastes, influenced aesthetic appreciation, and brought about new beliefs and perspectives. In other words, I look at the architecture and clothing fashions of the 1950s as the symbols of the type of socialist modernity that China was advocating, and as the outward symptoms of the new direction in Chinese worldviews.

Concentrating on urban space, these chapters also touch on an important aspect of Chinese assimilation of Soviet culture: the urban-rural divide in the changes brought about by Soviet influence. Cities showed the physical effects of modernization more than the countryside, as did urban society compared to rural society. The decade-long friendship propaganda had an overall positive effect in changing popular opinion of the Soviet Union, but to varied degrees. Generally speaking, urban dwellers acquired more knowledge about the Soviet Union than the rural population. There were two contributing factors involved. First, far less propaganda work was carried out in the countryside owing to distance and lack of resources. Second, print material used in propaganda, which was a major means of spreading the friendship rhetoric, had little direct effect on peasants inhibited by low literacy and limited leisure time. By contrast, people living in cities, especially the educated elite including high school and college students, not only possessed good reading skills but also were able to devote more time to reading. Their extensive
exposure to the friendship rhetoric (sometimes even direct contact with Soviet people) influenced their worldviews and behavior in diverse and profound ways.

In light of the stunning speed of modernization and urbanization found in China today, the old Soviet-style buildings have faded into obscurity and loneliness. They were temporarily brought back into the spotlight (although not with the attention they had previously received) after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, in which a good number of buildings (especially school buildings) constructed in the 1990s were reduced to rubble, whereas most Soviet-style buildings built in the 1950s and 1960s firmly stood their ground. This attests to the “solidity” of Soviet-style construction as described in the opening paragraphs of Tie Ning’s short story.

In addition to the protagonist’s name, “Andelie,” the textile factory in the story and its Soviet-style buildings were products of the pro-Soviet 1950s. During the First Five-Year Plan (1953-1957) for city-based industrial growth and modernization, not only did China adopt the Soviet economic model but it also received Soviet aid, as typified by the so-called “156 Projects.”¹ The textile factory in the story clearly depicts one of the key projects as it was carried out with close Soviet assistance. According to a series of agreements between the two governments, the Soviet Union provided equipment and technical support for Chinese factories – particularly machinery designs – as well as the general configuration of almost each plant, including the design of workshop buildings and workers’ dormitories.

¹ For more information about the “156 Projects,” see Michael Webber, Mark Wang, and Zhu Ying, ed., China’s Transition to A Global Economy (Houndsmills, Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 120-122; George C. S. Lin, Red Capitalism in South China: Growth and Development of the Pearl River Delta (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 36-37.
In the meantime, to celebrate the Sino-Soviet alliance and further promote the Soviet model, the Chinese government commissioned Soviet specialists to design landmark public structures for Chinese cities. The most representative of these works included four Sino-Soviet friendship buildings designed for exhibiting Soviet socialist achievements: the Soviet Exhibition Center in Beijing (today’s Beijing Exhibition Center), the Sino-Soviet Friendship Building in Shanghai (today’s Shanghai Exhibition Center), the Sino-Soviet Friendship Building in Guangzhou (partially destroyed during the Cultural Revolution), and the Sino-Soviet Friendship Palace in Wuhan (demolished by the municipal government in 1995). As the earliest exhibition centers of the PRC to demonstrate the distinctive “excesses” of Stalinist architecture,\(^2\) these four monumental complexes unmistakably “underscored the new Soviet presence in China.”\(^3\)

However, the Soviet architecture and the proliferation of Soviet-style buildings across China were not always seen as intrusive or incongruous with traditional Chinese architecture. In fact, at a time when the Soviet Union was China’s main contact with the world, Soviet architecture was viewed as “modern,” “exotic,” and in the words of the rank and file, “especially good-looking, trendy, and worth copying.”\(^4\) The popularity of Soviet architecture demonstrated the CCP’s success in providing a controlled inspiration to the general populace through physical construction, which was another illustration of the effectiveness of the pro-Soviet rhetoric. As these architectural designs came to dominate Chinese metropolitan areas, they constituted the ultimate display of (Soviet) socialist achievements that the friendship rhetoric acclaimed.

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\(^3\) Peter G. Rowe and Seng Kuan, *Architectural Encounters with Essence and Form in Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 92.

The Language of Modernity

Mao Zedong’s “lean to one side” policy did not stop at forging a strategic friendship with the Soviet Union, nor did the friendship rhetoric cease with the creation of a generally pro-Soviet environment in China; these were but the first steps by which China as a nation could claim an internationalist identity. According to this proposed new identity, China was entitled to share the experience of building socialism provided by the Soviet Union. The Soviet model of development was vitally important to the Chinese leadership in the early years of state building and at a time of Cold War isolation. As the communist regime cemented its power in the mainland, it was faced with the enormous task of developing China from a poor, backward agrarian country into a strong, advanced, and economically secure nation. Modernization, however, was a brand-new endeavor for the CCP, far beyond its knowledge and wartime experience. Therefore, the party had to look abroad for a handy model and turned to the leading socialist state, the Soviet Union. Shortly after the PRC was founded, the party leaders embarked on a journey to learn from the Soviet Union.

In 1953, China started the first Five-Year Plan, and the whole country plunged into a comprehensive reconstruction. Acquiring direct Soviet assistance, learning from Soviet experience – or more directly, copying much of the Soviet development model – became an expedient choice for the young communist regime. Against this backdrop, Mao called on the people to “blow up a high tide of studying the Soviet Union across the country to build our own
The campaign to implement the Soviet economic model officially started full scale in all industries.

To mobilize Chinese society for building Soviet-style socialism, the friendship rhetoric and activities came to be endowed with new content and significance. Rather than paying excessive lip service to the Sino-Soviet alliance, the friendship rhetoric began to give concrete examples of Soviet achievements and the Soviet people’s “happy life.” For example, the Soviet Union was said to be a country with the largest area of land, a huge population, and an abundance of natural resources. In numerous pamphlets and handbooks circulated at the time, the Soviet Union was described as the leading country in every regard: the first socialist state in the world, the largest democratic state, a nation with the highest literacy rate and the most advanced culture, the strongest fortress with an indestructible army safeguarding world peace, etc. In the rhetoric, all these accomplishments were attributed to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the socialist revolution, and the “superior” socialist system: under the leadership of the CPSU, the Soviet people not only turned a backward agrarian country into a strong, advanced socialist country marching on the road to communism, but they also made enormous progress in culture and science and surpassed the most advanced capitalist countries. For instance, in a handbook titled “Whom Does Time Serve,” the author raised ten questions regarding the economic rivalry

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5 See Mao’s speech at the Fourth Meeting of the First Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in Xinhua yuebao [Xinhua monthly], No. 3 (1953).
6 See, for example, Gu Lin, Zai xingfu de guojia li: fang Su youji [In a happy country: travel journal in the Soviet Union] (Beijing: Qingnian chubanshe, 1951); Wei Qian, ed., Weida de Sulian [The great Soviet Union] (Shanghai: Huoxing chubanshe, 1951); Zhu Hai, ed., Weida de Sulian [The great Soviet Union] (Shanghai: Guangyi shuju, 1951); Shandong sheng Zhong-Su youhao xie hui [Shandong provincial SSFA], ed., Weida de Sulian [The great Soviet Union] (Jinan: Shandong renmin chubanshe, 1953); Jiangsu sheng Zhong-Su youhao xie hui [Jiangsu provincial SSFA], ed., Weida de Sulian [The great Soviet Union] (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1956); Shanghai shi Zhong-Su youhao xiehui xuanchuanbu [Shanghai municipal SSFA propaganda department], ed., Weida de Sulian: qingzhu shiyue shehui zhu yi geming sishi changzhounian (sheyingji) [The great Soviet Union: celebrating the forty-first anniversary of the October Socialist Revolution (an album)] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1958).
between the Soviet Union and the United States, and then provided answers to them one by one. It claimed that Soviet industry had developed at a much faster pace than US industry and accordingly, by the end of the Seven-Year Plan, the gross industrial output of the Soviet Union would exceed that of the US. The book asserted that it was the “overpowering superiority of the socialist system” that allowed the Soviet Union to win time in the economic contest, and that this advantage would bring the Soviet Union a final victory over America’s “already declining and rotten” imperialism.7

By the same token, a comprehensive comparison between the Soviet Union and the United States demonstrated the supremacy of the former. A constellation of articles emerged, many of which were translated from Soviet sources, juxtaposing the “two worlds,” “two systems,” “one minute in Soviet Russia and one minute in the US.”8 They all conveyed the message that Soviet people were living in a “heaven on earth,” while those in capitalist societies were still struggling in the “vast abysses of misery.”

By all possible means of mass communication – newspapers, magazines, books, pictures, posters, blackboard bulletins, study groups, radio programs, films, songs, etc., the friendship

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rhetoric presented an image of a “perfect” Soviet life to Chinese masses. The following excerpts from a periodical circulated nation-wide captures the highlights of Soviet workers’ lives.

Soviet workers are dressed so well. All men wear well-ironed suits; women all wear perfume and look graceful – they are even prettier than the fashionable women and modern-looking ladies in Shanghai! . . . In terms of eating, by 1946 Soviet workers had reached the following living standard. For breakfast, [they had] 75 to 100 grams of butter, two eggs, or fried sausage, two cups of milk, and a lot of bread. Lunch included a bowl of soup cooked with cabbage, potatoes, noodles, and beef, then a big plate of sautéed pork or fried beans and roast chicken served together with bread, and lastly, a small plate of steamed sweet fruits and a cup of tea with sugar. In the evening, workers could go to worker’s clubs for lemon tea, cakes, and fruits. Of course this was the standard five years ago, and now it is even better. . . . The houses for Soviet workers are also pretty. An apartment for a couple has at least five rooms including bathroom, living room, storage room, and bedroom, not to mention complete water and electricity systems. Each apartment is equipped with radios, carpets, and elegant decorations, and outside the apartment building there is a garden for residents to take a walk. For unmarried bachelors, two persons share a room fully equipped with a closet and carpets, and [they] have easy access to a gymnasium, ballroom, swimming pool, radio broadcasting, etc. 9

As is now known, the average life of Soviet citizens during this time was hardly as ideal as described above. In many places, food shortages and insufficient housing remained persistent problems. However, very few Chinese at the time had the means to verify their sources of information at the time, because self-sponsored travel outside China in the Maoist era was nearly impossible, and those selected for state-sponsored study trips to the Soviet Union constituted only a tiny percentage of the population. Nonetheless, thousands of people strove to find a way to visit the Soviet Union to witness the “heavenly” life with their own eyes, although some were bitterly disillusioned by what they saw there. 10 Most people in China were inclined to believe

9 Li Shulin, “Gongren jieji weishenme yao daitou canjia Zhongsu youhao xiehui” [Why workers should take the lead in joining the Sino-Soviet Friendship Association], in Zhongsu youhao shouce, ed. by Shanghai Zhongsu youxie, vol. 1, no. 2 (1951), 11-12.
10 Some Chinese students found it hard to believe that some “misconducts,” such as theft, alcoholism, cheating in exams, and loose morals, existed among Soviet university students. See Zhonggong zhongyang xuanchuan bu, ed., “Zhongguo liusu xuesheng de yixie sixiang qingkuang,” [Some thinking among Chinese students studying in the Soviet Union], Xuanchuan dongtai, no. 135 (1957).
what the friendship rhetoric claimed, to the effect that Chinese workers were in the midst of aspiring to replicate the idealized Soviet life by adopting Soviet industrial expertise. Besides workers, the friendship rhetoric also targeted peasants, soldiers, intellectuals, women, and youths with specific language about Soviet modernity. In this way, the friendship rhetoric and its impact on Chinese society at large continued.

The Soviet Exhibition Center

To help the population experience Soviet life first-hand without leaving China, deepen popular understanding of socialism, and underscore the importance of building Chinese socialism on the Soviet model, the Chinese government decided to build exhibition centers to showcase Soviet achievements on Chinese soil. The idea first surfaced in 1952 when Li Fuchun, Deputy Director of the Finance and Economic Committee of the Government Administration Council, visited the Soviet Union. In the course of negotiations, the Soviet delegation expressed interest in opening exhibitions in China to demonstrate Soviet accomplishments in economy, science and technology, culture, architecture, etc. The Chinese government quickly responded with a decision to build four large, multipurpose public halls in four key cities across the country – including Beijing (Figures 6, 7, 8), Shanghai (Figure 9), Guangzhou, and Wuhan – so that visitors all over China could learn about Soviet industry from the exhibit spaces, enjoy Soviet paintings in the art gallery, watch Soviet ballet in the theater, and savor Russian cuisine in the restaurant. To optimize visitors’ experience of the Soviet Union, the buildings themselves were built in Soviet style; Soviet architects and technicians were assigned to China to guide their design and construction. Thus one of the foremost methods that the CCP employed to provide material examples of Soviet socialism came to fruition.
The completion of the Soviet Exhibition Center (Sulian zhanlanguan) in Beijing coincided with Nikita S. Khrushchev’s first visit to China in September 1954. After Stalin’s demise in 1953, Khrushchev’s government increased economic and technological aid to China, making a more explicit gesture to court Chinese support in the international communist movement and in world affairs. A legion of Soviet specialists was dispatched to China to provide training and give advice in all industries where help was needed. Altogether, more than 20,000 Soviet specialists in various fields visited China between 1949 and 1960. Against this backdrop of industrial aid on a massive scale, Khrushchev’s visit brought China’s “learn from the Soviet Union” campaign to a new height.

But for China the highlight of Khrushchev’s visit was the myriad of exhibits he brought to the Beijing Exhibition Center’s grand opening. Between October 2 and December 26, 1954, the center held its first exhibition, the “Exhibition of Soviet Economic and Cultural Achievements” (see Appendix A). Both Chinese and Soviet leaderships attached great importance to this exhibition and attended the opening ceremony. A total of 11,500 items were on display, including several of the latest models of machinery used in the manufacturing, metallurgical, and electrical industries, a multitude of textiles, handcrafts, and daily necessities, as well as a variety of improved crops, fruits, and domesticated animals. Besides, the exhibition also presented a wide collection of cultural materials such as books, magazines, textbooks, paintings, sculptures, musical scores, and pictures.

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11 According to Shen Zhihua, the number of Soviet experts in China was difficult to determine because of scattered, insufficient information. See Shen Zhihua, “Dui zaihua Sulian zhuanjia de lishi kaocha: jiben zhuangkuang ji zhengce bianhua” [A historical investigation of Soviet experts in China: circumstances and policy changes], Dangdai Zhongguoshi yanjiu [Contemporary China History Studies], vol. 9, no. 1 (2002), 24-26. Also see Jonathan Spence, To Change China: Western Advisers in China, 1620-1960 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), 282-283.

For a latecomer to the socialist bloc such as China, a country that was still not able to produce its own cars and tractors, the ingenious exhibits from the “Soviet big brother” were eye-opening. The exhibition received a round of applause from Mao, Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, who were “very pleased and satisfied” with this generous gift from Moscow. Mao wrote Khrushchev twice to express his “heartfelt appreciation” for “Soviet people’s deep friendship with Chinese people and Soviet people’s support to Chinese people’s cause of [socialist] construction.”

After being shown in Beijing, the exhibition of Soviet socialist achievements went on tour to Shanghai, Wuhan, Guangzhou, and other cities, drawing a more than 11 million visitors. As the largest exhibition in the early history of the PRC, this display made a remarkable impact on Chinese spectators with actual examples of equipment and industry they heretofore had seen only in photographs and films. Face-to-face encounters with Soviet socialist exploits, and especially the sight of a wonderful, affluent Soviet life, were an illuminating inspiration to all Chinese who desired the same living standard. As Qian Junduan (Secretary of the SSFA General Committee) pointed out, during the exhibition people could see and feel what a beautiful and happy life the Soviet people had: “they eat well and dress well, they have nice houses and enjoy a variety of cultural activities. Our people must know all this. To build socialism is to make all people of China live such a life.” After the inaugural exhibition, in April 1955 the Soviet Exhibition Center hosted a second exhibition showcasing the fruits of Czechoslovakia’s ten years of socialist construction. Seeing the rich evidences of socialist advantages, Chinese people’s

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confidence in the future under the communist leadership was boosted, and public morale for building socialism was noticeably high. These exhibitions brought socialist modernity from the Soviet Union to urban centers throughout China, and they brought to many people the thrill of modernity through the prism of socialism.

Not only did the Soviet products on display win Chinese admiration, but the Soviet Exhibition Center itself was also a monumental spectacle. Still standing in Beijing today, “the tall, tower-like structure, adorned with socialist realist statuary, rises above the main crossing of two sections of the exhibition space at the entrance to the building. Two lower wings form a curvilinear colonnade around the base of the building, symmetrically arranged around the central tower.” Its exotic Russian architectural style made the center a Beijing landmark throughout the Maoist era, and even today it still forms a unique scene among the newer variegated “modernist” office buildings, department stores, and apartment compounds.

For young people growing up in the 1950s, the Soviet Exhibition Center had an additional dimension of significance. It was a symbol of advanced, revolutionary Soviet culture: a sacred place they dreamed of visiting at important moments in their lives. With revolutionary aspirations, they gathered here to celebrate college graduations, engagements, marriages, childbirths, and if they were lucky enough to be selected for study trips to the Soviet Union, they

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16 See a number of articles published on Renmin ribao around this time. For example, Kang Zhuo, “Wo kandao le zuguo de mingtian: Sulian jingji ji wenhua jianshe zhanlanhui” [I see our motherland’s tomorrow: the Soviet economic and cultural achievements exhibition], Renmin ribao, October 3, 1954; Ye Jizhuang, “Yiding yao zou Sulian de daolu: wei Sulian jingji ji wenhua jianshe zhanlanhui kaimu er zuo” [We must follow the Soviet path: for opening of the Soviet economic and cultural achievements exhibition], Renmin ribao, October 3, 1954; Fu dong and Yuming, “Xuexi Sulian xianjin jingyan de xuexiao: ji Sulian jingji ji wenhua jianshe chengjiu zhanlanhui kaimu de diyitian” [A school to learn advanced Soviet experience: on the first day of the Soviet economic and cultural achievements exhibition], Renmin ribao, October 3, 1954.

17 Peter G. Rowe and Seng Kuan, 92.
would make a pilgrimage to the center to take pictures before departing. In their view, the 87-meter tower forming the superstructure of the building was tantamount to the Kremlin in Moscow, “a beacon illuminating the road ahead.” And even today, the huge red star glowing day and night on the top of the building had an irreplaceable place in their memories.

The Soviet Exhibition Center also enriched the cultural life of Beijing residents. In the center’s circular open-air theater, Chinese people had their first encounter with the classical Russian ballet Swan Lake. During this time, Chinese ballet started to take shape under Soviet guidance. Later the theater was furnished with a roof and became the well-known Exhibition Center Theater, where audiences could enjoy dance and singing performances from the Soviet Union and beyond. Similarly, the center’s cinema also became a popular site as Soviet movies quickly gained wide currency in China.

18 Huang Xinyuan, Zhengqing ruge, 153-156.
Figure 6. Soviet Exhibition Center in the 1950s.
*Source:* http://blog.163.com/huzhiwenlxh@yeah/blog/static/123837300200911511439488/.

Figure 7. The inscription on the side wall of Soviet Exhibition Center reads: Long live the unbreakable friendship between the Chinese and Soviet peoples.
*Source:* http://blog.163.com/huzhiwenlxh@yeah/blog/static/123837300200911511439488/.
Figure 8. Today’s Beijing Exhibition Center. *Source:* Photo by author, May 13, 2011.

Moscow Restaurant

Despite the fame of its theater and cinema, the best-known part of the Soviet Exhibition Center, from then until today, has been the affiliated restaurant specializing in Russian cuisine, which is aptly named Moscow Restaurant. As the first restaurant serving foreign food in Beijing after the founding of the PRC, the original Moscow Restaurant looked like a diminutive Russian palace. It comprised the western wing of the Soviet Exhibition Center, with a tall arch gate supported by beautifully carved pillars. The interior décor was even more impressive: an ornate dome reaching three stories high, crystal chandeliers inlaid with snowflake-shaped decorations hanging from the soaring ceilings, four gigantic copper pillars with relief carvings in the spacious dining hall, tall windows with heavy, luxurious curtains, granite curtain walls adorned with Russian paintings, a swing gate, hardwood floors, gorgeous sculptures, and a small fountain sending streams of water into the air (Figure 10 and Figure 11).

In addition to its awe-inspiring design, Moscow Restaurant also gained its exalted standing from the distinguished clientele it served. After the opening ceremony of the “Exhibition of Soviet Economic and Cultural Achievements” on October 2, 1954, Premier Zhou Enlai hosted a state reception at Moscow Restaurant to welcome Khrushchev’s delegation and other foreign guests residing in China. From then on, the restaurant was the appointed gathering site for Soviet experts in Beijing. At the same time it was responsible for catering all the receptions and parties held at the USSR Embassy in Beijing. “Sometimes for special events, all 300 of the restaurant’s staff had to go and cook over there. We also brought over vegetables, ingredients, cooking utensils, and sometimes even tables,” recalled Wang Zhaozhong, who rose
from cook to manager of the restaurant. As the fruit of Sino-Soviet friendship, the restaurant heartily celebrated the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution in 1957: its chefs prepared two sugar carvings – one modeled after the Kremlin and the other the Tian’anmen Tower – to symbolize the strong alliance between the two countries.

Given its unique status, Moscow Restaurant had special payment requirements for diners. Instead of cash, it required meal tickets available only to a small circle of customers such as foreign specialists and their families, Chinese governmental officials, senior intellectuals, and celebrities. Sometimes Chinese delegations to the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries were sent there before departure to learn about western dining etiquette, especially how to use forks and knives. For these reasons, dining at Moscow Restaurant was a statement of personal status. While for Soviet experts in China access was something they took for granted, it was considered a privilege for ordinary Chinese to eat there, an aspect that made Moscow Restaurant a timeless charm in the eyes of the Chinese. Ironically, even though Chinese harbored grievances against the presumptuous, overbearing behavior of certain Soviet experts (especially at the grassroots levels where direct contact was unavoidable), voices against Soviet experts eating separately (and residing separately in special hotels) from their Chinese socialist brothers and sisters do not seem to have been raised, confirming the admiration and respect for Soviet experts on the part of the Chinese populace as well as a public longing for a “foreign,” “exotic” taste.

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23 See, for example, Willian Kirby, “China’s Internationalization in the Early People’s Republic,” 877-888; G. Ganshin and T. Zazerskaya, “Pitfalls along the path of ‘brotherly friendship’ (a look at the history of Soviet-Chinese relations),” Far Eastern Affairs, no. 6 (1994), 63-70.
This longing became more intense when several years later the restaurant’s meal ticket restrictions were lifted and it was opened to the public. But for ordinary people it was a luxury beyond their affordability. At that time, the average cost of living in Beijing was 8 yuan per person per month. The restaurant offered three *prix-fixe* meals at 1.5, 2.0, and 2.5 yuan, and just one serving of borscht cost 1.2 yuan. Apparently for most ordinary people it was nearly unthinkable to eat there. And if they could, they would brag about their experience again and again before admiring listeners.\(^{24}\) Therefore, the fame and symbolic meaning of Moscow Restaurant spread far beyond the small number of people who could eat there. Moreover, if anyone had the chance to work there, that was cause enough for envy and admiration.\(^{25}\)

Yet even the expensive price did not deter but instead intensified people’s desire to visit Moscow Restaurant and sample the food of the “Soviet big brother.” Those whose salary range did not fall into the “privileged” category would save for several months to buy a meal. Admittedly, although some Chinese developed a taste for Russian food, most people could not acclimate to its flavor or texture. Nevertheless, during those years of rationed supplies, the rich Russian food served at Moscow Restaurant doubtless tasted better than the familiar Chinese dish of cabbage and coarse corn buns. In fact, together with all the foreign embassies in Beijing, the Moscow Restaurant was among a limited number of “special units” that enjoyed special supplies. Even during the three extreme years of food shortages and famines between 1959 and 1961, supplies to the restaurant were maintained at the same standard and volume.\(^{26}\)

\(^{24}\) Shen Hong, “Wutuobang de jingshen huican” [A spiritual dinner of the utopia], an essay entry for a writing competition on the theme of Moscow Restaurant. The competition was sponsored by the newly renovated Moscow Restaurant in 2004.


\(^{26}\) See the introduction of Moscow Restaurant on its official website, http://www.bjmskct.com/.
To many, however, especially the “underprivileged,” it was not the food but the feeling of being a “high-end” customer in the dream-like mansion of Moscow Restaurant that completed their Russian experience. Sitting in such a restaurant, one would immediately feel like being in a prestigious piece of artwork, not to mention the gratification of eating exotic food and the unique dining experience. Here, shiny knives and forks replaced chopsticks, brownish coffee served in a cup over silver-rimmed china contrasted with the yellowish tea commonly offered in Chinese restaurants, and big wine glasses with long stems and wide bottoms stood in lieu of familiar Chinese wine cups. Everything on the menu looked foreign and mysteriously appealing: pickled cucumber, borscht, caviar, chicken Kiev, etc. Most utensils, wine, and some cooking ingredients were imported from the Soviet Union to enhance the flavor of authenticity. All these details were deeply and vividly ingrained in the memories of the generations coming of age in the 1950s. Years later, when former patrons of Moscow Restaurant finally had chance to set foot on Russian soil, some even judged the authenticity of Russian food based on their recollections of the dishes served at Moscow Restaurant.27

Privileged they were, to experience such an expensive meal, using strange utensils. Dining in this building representing advanced Soviet socialist culture on the one hand and Russian aristocracy on the other, and granted people a sense of luxury experienced in politically legitimate terms. After a meal, visitors could go to the adjacent cinema to watch Lenin in 191828 or to the theater next door to see a performance, thus concluding their ritual journey to the Soviet

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27 Luo Xuehui, “Laomo: meng jieshu de difang, xiangxiang zhong de Eluosi” [Old Moscow: the place where dreams end, an imagined Russia], an essay entry for the writing competition on the theme of Moscow Restaurant. The competition was sponsored by the newly renovated Moscow Restaurant in 2004.
28 Lenin in 1918 [Russian: Ленин в 1918 году] is a 130-minute Soviet revolution film released in 1939 set during the Russian Civil War after the October Revolution. It was promoted by the Chinese government and became extremely popular in the 1950s.
Exhibition Center complex, a sacred site of socialist ideals, and at the same time gratifying their cravings for something “foreign” and “modern.” Among young men in Beijing, it quickly became the latest fad to bring their girlfriends to the restaurant to propose marriage. A diner recalled that in 1955, after saving every penny for three months, he invited his girlfriend to Moscow Restaurant. In the name of revolution and the socialist cause, he proposed to her by singing the famed Russian song “Moscow Nights.” Since then it has been a tradition for the couple to go there to celebrate their wedding anniversary. This is but one of the many romantic stories intimately associated with Moscow Restaurant.

Interestingly, three years after Beijing’s Moscow Restaurant opened, Restaurant Peking opened business next to Peking Hotel Moscow (completed in 1955) on Mayakovsky Square. Like the Soviet Exhibition Center in Beijing, these facilities were built as tokens of Sino-Soviet friendship and were meant to encourage vibrant cultural exchange within the socialist bloc. However, as Sino-Soviet relations declined in the 1960s and 1970s, both the hotel and the restaurant in Moscow were closed, only to be reopened in the late 1980s. By contrast, the Soviet Exhibition Center and Moscow Restaurant in Beijing remained in operation, although the former was renamed Beijing Exhibition Center (Beijing zhanlanguan) in 1958, and the latter accordingly became Beijing Exhibition Center Restaurant. Ironically, their reputations among

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29 This song’s Russian title is “Подмосковные вечера.” It won the international song contest at the World Festival of Youth and Students in 1957 and since then has become one of the best-known and most beloved Russian songs. It was the most popular Russian song in China and is still well remembered by those who lived through the Maoist era. The title literally translates to “Evening around Moscow” (Russian: Подмосковные Вечера, the suburbs of Moscow), but is most commonly known as “Moscow Nights” or “Midnight in Moscow” to the English speaking world. The Chinese translation is 莫斯科郊外的晚上, meaning “evenings outside Moscow suburbs.”


31 It should be noted that while the interior decor of Peking Hotel Moscow was (pseudo-)Chinese, its exterior design unequivocally boasted Stalinist grandeur.

32 “Zhongsu youyi he hezuo youyi xiangzheng, Mosike ‘Beijing fandian’ bike ruyun” [Another token of Sino-Soviet friendship and cooperation, Restaurant Peking in Moscow receives a lot of guests], Renmin ribao, August 27, 1954.
Chinese youths were not at all damaged, showing the ingrained high regard that Soviet culture enjoyed among the Chinese populace and speaking volumes about the on-the-ground effect which the physical presence of Soviet culture had in influencing general opinion. Remarkably, the Moscow Restaurant retained its distinct status during the Cultural Revolution and eventually regained its original name in the 1980s. Still a symbolic site to many, the Moscow Restaurant has witnessed the ups and downs of Sino-Soviet relations and preserved the bitter-sweet memories of several generations (Figure 12 and Figure 13).

That the Moscow Restaurant still operates today speaks volumes about its popularity. One can easily speculate as to why this establishment has such appeal. Certainly, having such high profile guests from the CCP and the Soviet Union at its inception would have generated broad appeal. Its prominent geographic location, and its location with respect to the Beijing Exhibition Center, and the ever-present Sino-Soviet friendship rhetoric also would increase its long-term popularity. There could be an even more understandable reason: a thirst among the well-to-do cosmopolitan Beijing residents for an international flavor. However, regardless of the reason, the lesson for us is obvious: Soviet socialist modernity became well installed within Chinese society.
Figure 10. Moscow Restaurant facade. *Source*: Photo by author, June 19, 2009.

Figure 11. Dining Hall of Moscow Restaurant. *Source*: Courtesy of Moscow Restaurant website.
Figure 12. A view of the Soviet Exhibition Center (on the left) from a corner of Moscow Restaurant. This photo appears at the beginning of a 1999 TV series titled “A Place Where Dream Starts” (Meng kaishi de difang), which depicts the life stories of a group of Beijing youngsters growing up at the end of the Cultural Revolution. A number of important scenes were shot in Moscow Restaurant. Since then, Moscow Restaurant has adopted the TV series title to advertise itself. 

Figure 13. Moscow Restaurant’s menu today. Obviously, the advertisement on the menu capitalizes on the history of the restaurant. 
Source: Photo by author, June 19, 2009.
The Soviet-style Buildings

Immediately after their completion, the Soviet Exhibition Center complex and the other three exhibition centers in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Wuhan became landmarks of their cities and models for other Chinese cities, making Soviet architecture the prevailing mode of building design. Meanwhile, these four exhibition centers, particularly the one in Beijing, provided Chinese architects with the most concrete illustrations of Soviet architectural concepts. Pseudo- and semi-Soviet-style structures soon mushroomed across the country, especially in the Northeast and in inland China where the 156 projects were located.

In the Chinese context, so-called “Soviet-style” or “Stalinist” architecture was simply a loose term for Chinese buildings that were patterned on Russian architectural designs or incorporated Russian architectural elements. Unlike the buildings in Eastern Europe that still remain pointed reminders of Stalinist taste, Soviet-style architecture in China was generally free from the neoclassical “excesses” of tiers and spires that granted them extraneous height. Typically, this involved a symmetrical tower block featuring a high-rise in the center flanked by two lower wings. Masonry was often used, which naturally dictated narrow windows and sturdy, thick walls. This style dominated new structures built in the 1950s that housed important party organizations and provincial governments, as well as the classroom buildings and dormitories on newly reorganized university campuses. Some of them were completely based on blueprints used in the Soviet Union. For example, the design for the main building of the former Leningrad State Mining Institute (today’s Saint Petersburg Mining Institute) was adopted in its entirety by several mining schools and colleges in Liaoning, Hebei, and Jiangxi provinces (Figure 14 and Figure 15).

33 “Sushi jianzhu gai zouxiang hechu?” [Where should Soviet-style buildings go?], Xin’an wanbao, October 27, 2008.
Others that were designed by Chinese architects, such as the Anhui Provincial Government Building, Tsinghua University’s and Anhui University’s main buildings (both emulating the design of Moscow State University’s main building), absorbed the style and general layout of Soviet architecture (Figures 16, 17, 18).  

To heighten the socialist, internationalist nature of new constructions, Chinese architects also added novel features to their Soviet-style designs in the course of learning Soviet architecture. Some of these features resulted from recoding conventional Chinese architectural elements for new purposes, as reflected in the widespread use of doves and red stars as adornments. In some new buildings such as the “Four Departments and One Committee” Building (sibuyihui dalou) in Sanlihe and Tianjin University’s No. 9 Teaching Building, the image of the dove, a symbol of world peace and internationalism, appeared in place of traditional dragon-head ornaments on the ends of ridgepoles commonly seen in imperial palaces. The red star, the symbol of revolution, was extensively applied to buildings with revolutionary significance. For instance, the Military Museum of Chinese Revolution, like the Soviet Exhibition Center, had a colossal red star at the top of its central tower (Figure 19). Similarly, sculptures and murals – two additional forms of decoration commonly applied to traditional Chinese architecture – took on new content. As in the Soviet Union, sculptures and murals were often made elaborate and grandiose to enhance the artistic appeal of socialist architecture. A typical example was a series of sculptures on the theme of harvesting in front of the National Agriculture Exhibition Center. Like the pillars carved with clusters of fruits on the facade of the

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35 This early office building complex housed four state departments: No. 1 Department of Mechanics, No. 2 Department of Mechanics, Department of Heavy Industry, Department of Finance, as well as the State Planning Committee.
Soviet Exhibition Center, these sculptures displayed the great achievements of agricultural development and the advantages of the socialist system. Additionally, eye-catching slogans were added to reinforce public understanding of the function of certain buildings. Examples of this kind included the slogans of “solidarity” and “progress” on the two side doors of the main entrance to the Cultural Palace of Nationalities, which resembled the fashion that the slogans of “peace” and “friendship” were presented at the entrance to the Soviet Exhibition Center.

It is not clear whether there were mandatory orders from the central government or local leaders to build new buildings in the Soviet style. However, the symmetrical, imposing, and sometimes grandiose Soviet designs did serve to legitimize China’s new socialist order and buttress the CCP’s authority. Symbolizing a break with the past, Soviet-style architecture also represented an appropriate way of celebrating the victory of socialist revolutions (both in China and in the world), the Sino-Soviet alliance, and a new-found sense of belonging in the socialist world. Rising above China’s emerging industrial cities, Soviet-style buildings applied to these cities an identity that was both socialist and internationalist.

For ordinary Chinese citizens, the solidly built Soviet-style buildings surrounding their lives were solid proof of an admirable socialist modernity. Indeed, at a time when high-rises were a rarity in most Chinese cities of the 1950s, the newly built Soviet-style structures – often the tallest new buildings in the city center – became hallmarks of modernity. When the Xinjiang Kunlun Hotel was completed in 1959, “the city of Urumqi still bordered a barren Gobi desert and the roads were bumpy,” recalled Wang Jianming, who worked in the hotel for eight years after its
completion.\textsuperscript{36} Not surprisingly, the hotel – built in a semi-Soviet style and the tallest building in Urumqi – was popularly greeted with a rousing fanfare. In the eyes of local residents, the building looked “strong,” “sturdy,” “magnificent,” and “modern,” and it was deemed a privilege to attend a meeting or eat a meal there.\textsuperscript{37} Even today the townsfolk of Urumqi still refer to it as “Eight Floors” (Figure 20), an intimate nickname they gave to the building fifty years ago.

Soviet-style residential buildings (Figure 21 and Figure 22), which represented the highest standard of residential buildings at the time, gave Chinese people an even closer understanding of Soviet socialist modernity. Although these buildings were not as well equipped as the Soviet residential buildings portrayed in the Chinese friendship rhetoric, they were far better than the commonly found small rundown mud brick houses. Following the Soviet pattern, each residential area was a self-contained unit complete with a garden, a canteen, a worker’s club, and sometimes even with a nursery or a hospital, as the excerpts above from Tie Ning’s short story describes. At the same time, entertainment organized especially to cater to the Soviet people living in China also spread among Chinese residents of Soviet-style buildings. On weekends and for special occasions, the local worker’s club would organize film screenings and dance parties that often drew huge crowds of participants.\textsuperscript{38} Soviet lifestyles thus became even more engrained into everyday urban life; the vision of socialist modernity and the importance of internationalist solidarity also penetrated deeper into the hearts of city dwellers.

\textsuperscript{38} Kuang Chen & Pan Liang, eds., Women de wushi niandai, 273-275.
Figure 14. Former Leningrad State Mining Institute (today’s Saint Petersburg Mining Institute), built in 1806-1811, designed by Andrey Voronikhin.

Figure 15. Jiangxi Pingxiang Mining School, built in 1956.
Figure 16. Moscow State University's main building, inaugurated in 1953. Source: http://www.npointercos.jp/Moscow.html.

Figure 17. The main building of Tsinghua University in Beijing, constructed between 1956 and 1966. Source: Photo by author, June 20, 2009.
Figure 18. Anhui University’s main building in Hefei, Anhui Province, completed in 1958. Source: http://bbs.hfhouse.com/thread-5089781-1-1.html.

Figure 20. Xinjiang Kunlun Hotel, popularly known as “Eight Floors,” built in 1959. 
*Source:* Courtesy Xinjiang Kunlun Hotel.

Figure 21. A Soviet-style dormitory at Anhui University reminiscent of Tie Ning’s description of Soviet-style residential buildings. 
Figure 21. A typical Soviet-style residential block built in the 1950s in Urumqi. Note the high windows and the decorations on the wall. The sink and tap have been used for more than fifty years. Source: Xinjiang dushi bao, August 25, 2010, http://www.tianshannet.com.cn/travel/content/2010-08/25/content_5181527.htm.
The Contention between “Socialist Content” and “National Forms”

Although Chinese architects began studying Soviet architectural theory in the early 1950s, they could hardly find any well-defined terms to explain so-called “socialist realist architecture” from translated Soviet books. In China’s architectural circles at the time, the most widely known but also the vaguest Soviet architectural principle was a Stalinist policy affirming that architecture, like other forms of art, should be “socialist in content, national in form.” This policy was adopted to deal with a poly ethnic reality within the USSR and among countries under Soviet influence. In 1930 Stalin “warned of the twin dangers of Great Russian Chauvinism and nationalism (of the non-Russian peoples in the Soviet Union)” and defined socialist culture – “the culture during the dictatorship of the proletariat” – as “a culture socialist in content and national in form, having the aim of educating the masses in the spirit of socialism and internationalism.” In general, Stalin’s dictum resulted in a revival of classical architectural styles in mainstream architecture, after suppressing Modernist and Constructivist opposition. Classical architecture was regarded as the national form suitable for the proletariat, thus a weapon against “bourgeois” Modernist architecture. As for the national republics of the USSR, although it is questionable whether Stalin’s advocacy of national forms was genuinely intended

42 For the characteristics of Stalinist architecture and its vital role in expressing and promoting ideology in the Soviet Union during the Stalin years, see Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, eds., The Landscape of Stalinism: the Art and Ideology of Soviet Space (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).
to wholeheartedly embrace local traditions (despite the rhetoric to that effect), it did give more or less freedom to architects in developing their own Stalinist styles.\(^{43}\)

Representing the official Soviet attitudes toward the question of national identity and ethnic style, Stalin’s dictum had particular significance for the export of Soviet architecture to countries in the Soviet orbit. In Eastern and Central Europe, the Soviet Union promoted this policy to minimize local resistance and facilitate the assimilation of Soviet cultural models. It was claimed that there was no contradiction between socialist culture and national culture; instead, socialist culture would endow national culture with new content, and national culture would provide socialist culture with new forms and modes of expression. Therefore, in socialist construction different nationalities should, based on their own languages and ways of living, use different forms and methods to represent socialist content.\(^{44}\) But in actual practice, the tendency toward a mononational approach to a polyethnic existence prevailed, and Soviet cultural policy turned high-handed.

By the late 1940s, however, the dictum of ‘socialist in content, national in style’ had been considerably watered down by the insistence that all artists, whatever their nationality, study ‘the great realist heritage of Russian art.’ According to the colonialist ideology of the Zhdanovshchina, a unified artistic culture was to be imposed across the USSR based on the supremacy of Russian culture. What is more, . . . in Eastern Europe there could be no ‘separate national paths’ to socialist culture, the Soviet (Russian) model was to be followed slavishly.\(^{45}\)

As a result Stalinist architecture was extensively employed in the postwar “People’s Democracies” of the Eastern Bloc. Buildings with tiers and spires that granted them superfluous height – often disrespectfully dubbed “wedding cake” or “Stalin’s birthday cake” – marked the

\(^{43}\) The Armenian architect Alexander Tamanian was a typical example. Appointed as the chief architect of Yerevan, he was largely responsible for the neoclassical designs in the city and the Armenian variety of Stalinist architecture.


skylines of major cities in Poland, Romania, Hungary, Latvia, and East Germany. Some of them showed certain local motifs, but they were generally regarded as Soviet imports.46

Soviet cultural policy toward China, however, was less heavy-handed. Despite the chauvinism of the Soviet leadership and the sometimes overbearing presence of Soviet advisers, Soviet authorities did not seem to have aspired, or even attempted, to make China a duplicate of any Eastern European country. Ironically, it was the voluntary choice of the Chinese government to follow the Soviet model closely, at least during the formative years of the PRC. Mao later openly admitted that in the 1950s China was “slavishly” copying the Soviet Union “with little creativity.”47 In architecture, although Chinese architectural designs during this time were inclined to follow Soviet patterns uncritically, it is also fair to say that even the most mechanical imitation conveyed an attempt to translate Soviet architectural theory into Chinese context. This attempt was shown explicitly in Chinese architects’ arduous search for a national form to present the country’s new socialist identity. Paradoxically, this utterly “nationalistic” endeavor was not the result of the Chinese leadership’s determination to break away from the Soviet model in the wake of increasing Sino-Soviet disagreement in the late 1950s. Instead, it was driven by the architectural creed from the Soviet Union – architecture should be not only “socialist in content” but also “national in form” – and it occurred as early as Chinese architects started to learn from Soviet architecture.


47 See Mao’s speech at an expanded meeting of the CCP Central Party in 1962 (also known as “Seven-thousand People Conference”) in Mao Zedong, “Mao Zedong zai kuoda de zhongyang gongzuo huiyi shang de jianghua,” in Mao Zedong wenji, vol. 8 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1999), 305.
Particularly, it was Soviet advisers who urged Chinese architects to develop a Chinese national form from traditional architecture, directly advancing a wave of “revivalism” (fugu zhuyi) in Chinese architecture in the early 1950s. In September 1949 when the first few Soviet architects arrived in Beijing and met renowned Chinese architect Liang Sicheng (then Vice-Director of the Beijing City Planning Commission), they advised that Chinese architects should make something like the Dongzhimen Watchtower. To make sure the message would be conveyed, they even drew a gate tower to show Liang.\(^48\) Despite their opposing blueprints for Beijing’s urban planning (a contest that Soviet advisers won), Liang and Soviet advisers agreed on developing national forms with Chinese characteristics for socialist buildings. With Soviet backing, Liang and some other Chinese architects who advocated protecting traditional architectural structures and designing new buildings in harmony with existing old styles played a key part in renewing strong traditional forms typified in large, upturned tiled roofs, or the “big roof” (dawuding) as it was commonly known.\(^49\)

The “big roof” was a predominant feature of pre-PRC imperial palaces and temples. In premodern Chinese architecture, the style and size of the roof was an expression of hierarchy: the more elaborate and bigger the roof, the higher the social class the building represented. For this

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\(^{48}\) Liang Sicheng, “Wenge jiaodai cailiao” [Confession during the Cultural Revolution], December 3, 1967, provided by Lin Zhu.

\(^{49}\) Liang Sicheng received a thorough western education in his youth and was well educated in Western modernist architecture, but his works were still dominated by a conservative and tradition-oriented spirit, which was probably influenced by his father Liang Qichao, a well-known Chinese thinker and journalist in the late Qing Dynasty. Although Liang Sicheng had been held responsible for proposing and developing the “big roof” style, Liang himself was not pleased by this design, as he compared it to a man “wearing a Western suit and a Chinese skullcap.” However, it was often believed that Liang nevertheless accepted the design as a concession after his plan for preserving old Beijing by building a separate new town for administrative purposes was rejected (the leadership was in favor of Soviet advisers’ plan to install the central government inside old Beijing). For more information, see Wang Jun, *Beijing Record: A Physical and Political History of Planning Modern Beijing* (Singapore; London: World Scientific, 2011); Chang-Tai Hung, *Mao’s New World*, 25-50; Yang Yongsheng, ed., *1955-1957 Jianzhu baijia zhengming shiliao* [The contention between various architectural schools between 1955 and 1957] (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe; Zhongguo shuili shuidian chubanshe, 2003), 3-13, 26-28.
reason, the roofs of imperial palaces were made extraordinarily large with their overhanging eaves richly decorated. After the Republic of China replaced the Qing Dynasty in 1911, the “big roof” was not immediately trashed for its association with the old imperial order mainly because of the internationalization of the style by foreign architects. Some Western architects recognized the artistic appeal of historic Chinese architecture and applied the “big roof” to their works in China. Notably, several missionary schools adopted this style to reduce local resistance to missionary work and foreign presence. The building of the Peking Union Medical College Hospital (Figure 22), designed by American architect Charles Coolidge, was a typical example of capping a modernist high-rise (equipped with advanced facilities inside) with a traditional “big roof.” The Yanyuan Garden (Figure 23) on the Yenching University campus (today’s Peking University), designed by American architect Henry Killam Murphy, and the classroom building of the former Catholic University of Peking (today’s Furen University, Figure 24), designed by a Belgian architect, further advanced Western adaptations of Chinese palace designs for modern uses.

Amid the revivalist trend in the early PRC, the “big roof” was selected to pass on the essence of Chinese national architecture, shielding it from being discarded as “cultural dregs” from old China. Highly commended by Soviet architects, it even survived the CCP’s general hostility and resistance to Euro-American cultures despite its brief history associated with Euro-American architects. Between 1952 and 1956, the high tide of revivalist architecture brought the

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52 Peng Zhen, Mayor of Beijing (1951-1966) and Director of the Beijing City Planning Commission, based on Soviet advisers’ opinions, observed that “we should not blindly criticize traditional as during the May Fourth period.” See Jiang Dongjian, “‘Dawuding’ jianzhu” [The buildings of the “big roof”], accessed February 22, 2012, http://blog.artintern.net/blogs/articleinfo/jianghai/273463.
“big roof” to a number of new public structures in Beijing: the teaching buildings at Central University for Nationalities, the dormitory of the People’s Liberation Army General Political Department in Di’anmen (Figure 25), the main building of the Ministry of Foreign Trade (Figure 26), and the Beijing Gymnasium (Figure 27). In particular, the famed Friendship Hotel (Figure 28), completed in 1954 to house Soviet experts and their families in Beijing, was a quintessential “big roof” design.

Figure 22. Peking Union Medical College Hospital. Source: Photo by author, June 21, 2010.

Figure 23. Left: Gate to the Yanyuan Garden on the Peking University campus. Right: South and North Pavilions inside the Yanyuan Garden. *Source:* Photo by author, June 21, 2010.

Figure 24. The former Catholic University of Peking. *Source:* Photo by author, December 21, 2010.
Figure 25. The dormitory of the People’s Liberation Army General Political Department in Di’anmen, built in 1952. Source: Photo by author, December 21, 2010.

Figure 26. The main building of the Ministry of Foreign Trade in Beijing, built in 1952. Source: Photo by author, December 21, 2010.
Figure 27. Beijing Gymnasium, built in 1953. Source: Photo by author, June 21, 2010.

Figure 28. The Friendship Hotel in Beijing. Source: Photo by author, June 21, 2010.
Folding down

The glamor of the “big roof” in the PRC’s revivalist trend quickly faded when neoclassicism was criticized in Soviet architectural circles shortly after Khrushchev came into office in 1953. Khrushchev condemned the “excesses” of past constructions in the Stalinist era and advocated building low-cost prefabricated concrete apartments that were not aesthetically appealing but temporarily eased the housing shortage in Moscow.54 This new move in Soviet architecture swept Chinese architectural circles, making the “big roof” the main culprit for the “excesses” in China’s new buildings. As a result, not long after the Friendship Hotel was completed, the designer Zhang Bo was criticized for the high cost of the hotel’s elaborate “big roof.”55 Liang Sicheng was forced to engage in open self-criticism at a national conference after a series of struggles.56 Constructions and designs with “big roofs” were immediately halted. The decision was so arbitrary that the original “big roof” for the “Four Departments and One Committee” building was never completed, even though materials for the roof were already piled at the top of the building under construction.57 Similarly, other ongoing projects were either stripped of all their “excesses” or redesigned from scratch.

Concurrently with interactions between Chinese and Soviet architects, Sino-Soviet relations were changing dramatically. After 1956, the Chinese communist regime was more established and its leadership gained more international recognition, conflicts between the

57 Zhang Kaiji, “Wo huyu! Cong ‘Sibu yihui’ gongcheng tanqi” [My appeal! From the “Four Departments and One Committee” Building], Zhongguo jianshe bao, April 6, 2000.
Chinese and Soviet parties became more and more obvious, causing the friendship rhetoric to tone down drastically and the SSFA organizations to shrink considerably. Friendship activities at lower administrative levels halted; many Russian language programs were called off; numerous publications stopped circulation; even Soviet films had to undergo rigorous censorship to be shown publicly. Likewise, constructing Soviet-style buildings was out of tune with the times.

The shifting political climate drove Chinese architects into a dilemma: they could not use the “big roof,” nor could they openly follow Soviet styles (and of course they could not go back to American Modernist architecture). However, the influence of Soviet architecture was so deep that it was nearly impossible for Chinese architects to obliterate its shadow in their new works. For this reason, even the designs of the Great Hall of the People on Tian’anmen Square and the Military Museum of Chinese Revolution, two of the “ten monumental buildings” (shida jianzhu) constructed in 1959 in a concerted effort to “create the new style of Chinese socialist architecture,” resonated with some elements of Soviet architecture.58 Ironically, the “big roof” also resurfaced as an assertion of China’s nationalist independence, which gave birth to traditional roof designs in Beijing Railway Station (Figure 29), the National Agriculture Exhibition Center (Figure 30), the Cultural Palace of Nationalities (Figure 31), and Diaoyutai State Guest House (Figure 32) among the “ten monumental buildings.” In the following three decades, building designs in other cities were mostly modeled on the “ten monumental buildings” in Beijing. The combination of indigenized Soviet elements and traditional Chinese styles continued well into the 1990s.

58 For more information about the “ten monumental buildings,” see Chang-Tai Hung, Mao’s New World, 51-72.
Figure 29. Beijing Railway Station, built in 1959. 
*Source:* Photo by author, June 27, 2010.

Figure 30. National Agriculture Exhibition Center, built in 1959. 
*Source:* Photo by author, June 27, 2010.
Figure 31. The Cultural Palace of Nationalities, built in 1959.  

Figure 32. Diaoyutai State Guest House, built in 1959.  
*Source:* Photo by author, June 27, 2010.
Architecture has often been used by new regimes as a way to enhance their own authority, build nationalism, to bring about popular identification with the state. In this regard, the CCP employed Soviet architectural forms and refashioned cityscapes to cement its authority and develop the newly formed socialist state identity. While Soviet-style structures were on the forefront for achieving such goals, they also were on the leading edge in terms of socialist modern usage: to directly introduce Soviet culture and technology to Chinese society at large.

The CCP succeeded quite well in bringing an international flavor to the physical structures that Chinese people inhabited, used, and recognized in their daily lives. Likewise, from these material forms, the populace was then able to recognize that the claims made by the new regime concerning socialism and modernity, were more than fanciful. Well-built modern structures and the lifestyles they displayed convinced at least some of the population to expect modern Chinese culture to be fully integrated with the modern world. In light of over a century of resisting foreign incursion – from the Opium wars to World War II – achieving broad based support for the international socialist modernization in less than a decade is truly extraordinary.
Chapter 4. Dressing up Maoist China: Sartorial Change and Socialist Fashion

Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang), the famed female writer of 1930s Shanghai, appeared in July 1950, at the First Shanghai Congress of Literature and Arts Workers. Known for her unusual, sometimes quaint dress style and her use of bold colors, on this occasion Zhang was surprisingly attired in a dark gray qipao\(^1\) topped with a white fishnet sweater, sitting in the back of the auditorium. Despite the low-key outfit, she looked quite out of tune with the implicit dress code of the conference – the Zhongshan suit (also known as the Mao suit) for men and the Lenin jacket for women.

This contrast epitomizes the clash between the lingering “traditional” (and westernized) clothing of the Republican era and the emerging new styles of the first decades of the PRC, accentuated in the domain of female fashion. Zhang’s time was gone; before her, a new look embracing socialist modernity was in the making. As socialist reform deepened, qipao, perfume, permed hair, and high heels were increasingly seen as inappropriate for the aesthetics and lifestyles the new regime advocated. Finding it impossible to reconcile herself to the new order after a two-month-long “real-life immersion” (shenru shenghuo) in the land reform of northern Jiangsu Province, Zhang left for Hong Kong in 1952 to keep writing what she knew about (“granny’s stuff”) and wearing what she pleased.\(^2\) Under the new regime, qipao and Western dresses, together with the “petty-bourgeois” femininity they embodied, would be relegated to the back of the wardrobe within a decade. Meanwhile urban fashion was transformed by a few articles of Soviet-inspired clothing starting with the Lenin jacket.

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\(^1\) Also known as “cheongsam,” qipao is a body-hugging one-piece Chinese dress for women.
The Lenin jacket was the first of several trends to sweep women’s fashion in early PRC China. Fashion, like architecture, was also a domain where the CCP exerted influence towards its program of endorsing socialist modernity among the population. Compared to architecture, fashion is more subtle, yet more pervasive, and as we shall see, more directly influential on the population as a whole.

The Lenin Jacket

As a Chinese garment named after a foreigner, the Lenin jacket, or the Lenin suit, was a legacy from the Yan’an period (1935-1949). Allegedly the outfit Lenin wore during the October Revolution, the Lenin jacket was a modified Western suit. It was popular among Chinese revolutionaries in the “liberated areas” of northwest China during the 1930s, recognized as an emblem of Bolshevism and advanced revolutionary culture. The expansion of communist influence soon popularized this piece of outerwear among the communist-led army. Originally worn by males and females alike, the Lenin jacket eventually evolved into a military uniform exclusively for women, featuring a big turndown collar, a double-breasted front with two rows of buttons, two side pockets, and a waistband. When the CCP took over mainland China in 1949, the Lenin jacket soon took the lead in the new China’s “socialist fashion.”

As cultural historian Lynn Hunt’s discussion of dress in the French Revolution reminds us, for all regimes in human history, particularly with the transfer of political power, physical

appearance is considered both critical and instrumental to representing the ideology of the new authorities, unifying the minds of the subjects, and if necessary, asserting a national identity before the world.\(^4\) Like all regimes, the new Chinese government attached great importance to how statesmen looked, what common people wore, and how the nation as a whole was presented to the international community. The “face” of the new China was especially important because it manifested which side the country would take in the Cold War. Thus in the formative stages of the PRC, clothing was highly politicized and became invested with enormous political meaning.

While Mao and his comrades-in-arms set the tone for proper male attire with the display of their Zhongshan suits at the founding ceremony of the PRC, the Lenin jacket steadily established itself as the standard uniform for female cadres and soldiers.\(^5\) It was showcased in the national military parade at the founding ceremony by female student-soldier representatives.\(^6\) Now acquiring the status of a “cadre suit,” this female garb served as an ideal match for Chinese men’s Zhongshan suit on public occasions, as reflected at the 1950 Shanghai Congress of Literature and Arts Workers. It quickly became the latest vogue among Chinese women, especially in urban areas.

The currency of the Lenin jacket among the female population beyond cadres and soldiers can be attributed, first of all, to thriving Sino-Soviet friendship in the early 1950s. During this “honeymoon” period, the state-initiated “learn from the Soviet Union” campaign encouraged people to copy the Soviets in every possible manner. Just as American lifestyles,

\(^5\) “Bu ai hongzhuang ai junzhuang: Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun nübing junfu yanbian” [They love military dresses, not dressing up: the evolution of the military uniform for female soldiers of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army], *Zhongguo funü bao* [China women’s news daily] (July 18, 2006).
\(^6\) “Kaiguo dadian shang de shibasui nübing” [An eighteen-year-old female soldier on the founding ceremony of the PRC], *Xingtai ribao* [Xingtai daily] (May 23, 2009).
Hong Kong fashions, and Japanese and Korean pop cultures are admired in China today, in the 1950s, the Soviet Union was so idolized by the Chinese that everything related to it instantly became a hit. Soviet personages such as Pavel and Zoya (two Soviet heroes) became pop icons and role models for young people. Translations of Soviet bestsellers were stacked in every bookstore and library, and their sales and lending rates remained high throughout the friendship period. Dubbed in Chinese, Soviet films supplanted Hollywood movies in Chinese cinemas, enjoying countrywide circulation and popularity. Against this backdrop, the Lenin jacket, associated with the leader of the Soviet Union and the international proletarian revolution became a timely fashion. More than representing one’s participation in the “learn from the Soviets” campaign, wearing this Soviet-style suit was an everyday pro-Soviet statement, and hence a statement of pro-socialist modernity, on the part of the individual.

Wearing the Lenin jacket meant “wearing one’s political attitude inside out.” At a time of direct ideological confrontation between the two opposing Cold War camps, attitudes toward the “decadent” American bourgeois culture and the “progressive,” “healthy” Soviet socialist culture were regarded as manifestations of one’s political consciousness. At the height of the Sino-Soviet alliance, one was either a “Russophile” or an “anti-Soviet, anti-socialist, anti-revolutionary rightist.” “Worshiping the US, fearing the US, and being friendly with the US” were severely castigated, ostracized, or purged. For this reason, the Lenin jacket was endowed with no small political and ideological significance: it was unequivocally a public expression of a person’s support of the socialist cause, the very “correct” political stance.

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The circulation of the Lenin jacket was also built on the fact that it perfectly met the new, “socialist” aesthetic the Chinese government advocated. Designed to be functional and cost-effective, the Lenin jacket was highly valued in a struggling economy that emphasized the need for frugality. It thus heralded a new type of femininity, a socialist femininity favoring simple styles and plain adornments. As women eschewed sensuous dresses, fancy hairdos, makeup, and other trappings deemed unbefitting of correct appearance, the ensemble of a Lenin jacket, bobbed hair, and flat-heel shoes quickly became chic among professional women, demonstrating the fashion that redefined the concept of a “new woman.”

Embracing this fashion, many publicly recognized female figures became walking models for the Lenin jacket, further promoting the newly-formed socialist femininity across the country. Soong Ching-ling (Sun Yat-sen’s widow), a vice-president of the CCP who was known for her tasteful but low-key qipao and had never previously relinquished this ultimate expression of Chinese femininity in her lifetime, also began to don a Lenin jacket after 1949. Mao’s two English translators, Tang Wensheng and Wang Hairong, always presented themselves on formal occasions in gray or blue Lenin jackets, neatly combed short hair, and black cloth shoes. This simple but smart outfit was an essential ingredient of their dignified grace and sophistication. Liang Jun (China’s first female tractor driver) and Tian Guiying (first female locomotive engineer) were often dressed in similar styles when attending public meetings. In a society in which labor was esteemed glorious and women were encouraged to join the workforce for sexual liberation and equality, the two celebrated female model workers applied additional meaning to

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Tang Wensheng’s and Wang Hairong’s clothing combo: wearing the Lenin jacket also expressed working women’s pride.

In such a political and social environment, having a Lenin jacket became the dream for millions of young women who sought to emulate public role models. Su Xiu, a voice actress at the Shanghai Film Studio in the fifties, recalled how she eagerly aspired to become a professional actress so that she could wear a Lenin jacket issued by the workplace. The recognition of the Lenin jacket by Chinese women was also reflected in an ubiquitous saying of the time: “Tailor a Lenin jacket and save it for the wedding.” This phrase attested to the fact that typical wedding wear, especially in the cities, included a double-breasted Lenin jacket for the bride and a single-breasted Zhongshan suit for the groom, both in gray, blue, or other dark colors.

Although this dress code is unthinkable today, it was the most stylish and widely admired fashion during the first half of the 1950s. Amid the unsightly military uniforms adapted for civilian daily wear, the Lenin jacket stood out and more or less accommodated women’s desire for beauty. The big collar, which buttoned up or folded back against the chest, enlivened its otherwise sternly symmetrical design. Some fashionable women chose to turn out the collar of the white shirt worn inside and fold it atop the jacket collar, thus cheering up the drab color from head to toe. When photos of Tang Wensheng and Wang Hairong dressed in this style appeared in newspapers, almost every woman on the fashion front immediately followed suit.

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9 Su Xiu, Wo de peiyin shengya [My voice acting career] (Shanghai: Wenhui chubanshe, 2005), 25.
effect of the white collar was strikingly refreshing amid generic grays and blues, the predominant fashionable colors of China. Similarly, the two rows of buttons, one functional and the other for display, decorated the dull-looking jacket front. What’s more, women could wear a belt of the same material to accentuate their busts, waists, and hips. Although in a rather restrained manner, these accessories subtly released female sexuality from beneath the otherwise loose-fitting, androgynous uniform (Figure 33).

Figure 33. Women in Lenin jackets. Note the collars and belts.
Chinese women’s innovative ways of wearing the Lenin jacket articulated a natural inclination for self-adornment, seemingly incongruous with new socialist aesthetic standards. This perplexing attitude toward feminine beauty was a legacy from pre-1949 revolutionary culture, as Hung-Yok IP argues. Female revolutionaries rejected the objectified femininity and obsession with physical appearance, but they also shared the perception that female beauty was rewarding in social interactions, and therefore they kept practicing self-beautification whenever conditions allowed during revolutionary times. In the early PRC, this seemingly self-contradictory practice continued. While public rhetoric advocated simplicity and stressed the importance of combining good looks with political correctness, voices in favor of diversified styles and colors arose, leading to alternative ways of wearing the Lenin jacket.

Meanwhile, surmounting immediate post-liberation hardships and the demands of the Korean War, the developing national economy not only stimulated popular demand for sartorial changes but also provided a necessary, if still limited, basis for producing better clothing. In this context the Bulaji became a part of everyday life and added a colorful accent to the urban scene.

Bulaji

Bulaji was unquestionably one of the most frequently used loanwords in China in the 1950s. Unlike most loanwords in modern Chinese, bulaji does not derive from English or Japanese, but rather is the transliteration of the Russian word платье, meaning “dress” or “frock.” Like the Lenin jacket, bulaji was a product of Sino-Soviet cultural exchange at the time. It drew

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on the design of Soviet women’s summer dresses and was quickly adored by Chinese women awaiting something new to wear. The design of a Chinese bulaji was rather simple; it was a one-piece dress with short puff sleeves, round neckline and pleats below the waistband, and it was often made of floral, checkered, or striped cotton fabric. In warm weather and the less chaotic domestic and international climate of the mid-1950s, this brightly colored dress ushered in a brief time of economic recovery and political tolerance in China.

As hallmarks of female sexuality, dresses and skirts were treated with reserve in the (pseudo-) ascetic ethos of Chinese communism. Criticisms against women wearing skirts voiced during the Yan’an era spoke volumes about the worry over such “corrosive,” “bourgeois” lifestyles. Nonetheless, dresses and skirts in modest colors and designs were tolerated and women did not totally abandon wearing them. At the founding ceremony of the PRC in 1949, female soldiers made a marvelously handsome spectacle with their skirt uniforms. This new outfit was modeled on female military uniforms in the Soviet Union, with long sleeves and a mid-waist belt, much like a below-the-knee belted tunic (Figure 34). Between 1950 and 1965, this was the standard summer outerwear for Chinese female soldiers. In a society that extolled soldiers, the design of this distinct military garment was admired and copied by civilian women. Bulaji can be seen as a variation of this uniform.

Like the Lenin jacket, the popularity of bulaji in China owed a great deal to the flourishing Sino-Soviet cultural exchange. With the “Learn from the Soviet Union” campaign in full swing and an increasing number of Soviet experts (and their families) coming to China,

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13 Song Wei, “Wo canjia le kaiguo dadian de nübing fangdui” [I partook in female procession on the founding ceremony of the PRC], *Jiefangjun Bao* [PLA Daily] (June 11, 1999).

14 “Bulaji yingjin wushi niandai de Sushi langman” [Bulaji reflecting the Soviet-style romance in the fifties], *Xin Shangbao* [New business newspaper] (September 4, 2009).
Soviet personnel were held in high regard by the Chinese. Their foods, sports, entertainments, and clothing were also embraced. Moreover, Chinese students returning from the USSR also played a part in imparting Russian lifestyles to the Chinese public. While studying in the Soviet Union, they ate Russian food, learned Russian etiquette, and dressed like Soviet students. Once home, their Russified behavior exerted a subtle influence on their neighbors as well as fellow students.

Knowing that in China all things Russian were infectiously popular in the 1950’s, one would not be surprised to hear the elderly in China proudly boast of their proficiency in using forks and knives, a skill acquired from direct or indirect contact with the Soviets. Russian cuisine, although not to many Chinese people’s liking, symbolized a refined taste and a distinguished status in the early PRC. Through the 1970s, the Moscow Restaurant was the most exotic restaurant serving foreign food in Beijing. Having a meal there was so desirable thing that one could boast about it long thereafter. Some sports and pastimes popular in the Soviet Union also gained currency in China. For instance, ice skating became a popular winter activity that mesmerized thousands of young people in North China. In Beijing, skating in the Shichahai Ice Rink was the second fashionable thing for young people to do, next to going to Moscow Restaurant. Chess, an international game then dominated by the Soviet Union and a Soviet propaganda tool against American hegemony during the Cold War, was promoted as an important sport by the Chinese government. Russian music and dance quickly swept Chinese cities, and many people learned to play the accordion, a musical instrument for Russian folk music. Russian songs were furnished with Chinese lyrics, their beautiful melodies and delightful

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15 Personal interview with Liu Sheng, a Beijing resident born in the 1950s, June 23, 2009, Beijing.
themes of love and happiness captivated the hearts of numerous music fans, and continues to do so until today. On weekends, dance parties were held at schools, in the army, and at workers clubs. Men and women danced in Russian or pseudo-Russian fashion to tunes from mother Russia.

Likewise, the sartorial innovations inspired by Soviet clothing multiplied. The Chinese People’s Liberation Army (the PLA) installed the Soviet military rank system, and soldiers’ uniforms borrowed Soviet designs. Chinese Young Pioneers wore the same uniforms as their Soviet peers. For everyday wear, Russian fur hats and Ukrainian shirts (often with elaborate patterns around the collar) were introduced to Chinese men. Similarly, bulaji were popular among Chinese women eager to follow the “progressive” and “modern” Soviet fashion. Urban professional women and female students, emulating their Soviet counterparts, soon developed a fixation with this costume.

The presence of Soviet women in China undoubtedly contributed directly to this fad. Besides a small number of female Soviet experts, Soviet women residing in China included the spouses of male Soviet experts who brought their families to China. Although the number of Soviet women was small and their interactions with Chinese society rather limited (not far beyond their Chinese colleagues and service people), they never evaded attention from the general public. Their clothing styles, in particular, captivated the imagination of fashion-conscious women of China.

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16 In general, Soviet experts who worked in China for more than half a year were allowed to bring their dependents. The Chinese government encouraged Soviet experts to bring their spouses and children so that they did not have to worry about them during their stay in China. The number of Soviet experts’ dependents in China often exceeded that of the Soviet experts themselves. For instance, in 1956, there were 2,189 Soviet experts living in China, but if their families were counted in, the number would be around 5,000. See Shen Zhihua, *Sulian zhuanjia zai Zhongguo*, 38.
In conveying Soviet fashion to a wider audience, Soviet films and magazines circulated in China played a huge role. Films translated and distributed in the early PRC such as *The Rich Bride* (1938), *Tractor Drivers* (1939), *Village Schoolteacher* (1947), *Cavalier of the Golden Star* (1950), and *The Kuban Cossacks* (1949) brought the Chinese female viewership a closer understanding of the affluent Soviet life radiating from Soviet women’s colorful clothing. The image of Zoya (an 18-year-old martyr whose story was recorded in books and made into a film named *Zoya* in 1944) in a flowery *bulaji*, made the dress a symbol of revolution and political progressiveness. Soviet magazines distributed in China, such as *Soviet Women* (*Sulian funu*) and *Soviet Pictorial* (*Sulian huabao*), and numerous Chinese periodicals about Soviet life, which often had pictures of Soviet people, also familiarized the Chinese with Soviet fashion (Figure 35).

As a symbol of international friendship and progressiveness on the one hand and being a comfortable, pleasant-looking, and affordable garment on the other, *bulaji* quickly altered the urban fashions in Maoist China. It became a must-have summer item for women ranging from celebrities to commoners, and even a kindergarten girl typically had one *bulaji* (Figure 36). A new era unfolded in Chinese cities as thousands of *bulaji* bloomed on the street, encouraging people to dream and work for a brighter future.
Figure 34. Depiction of 1950s uniforms for Chinese female soldiers. From left to right, summer uniform for the navy, summer uniform for the army, winter uniform for the air force. 
Source: http://bbs.tiexue.net/post2_4256986_1.html.

Figure 35. A Soviet model in bulaji.

Figure 36. Chinese women in bulaji in the 1950s. 
The “Soviet Big Floral Cloth”

The spread of bulaji in Chinese cities also coincided with imports of cotton fabric from the Soviet Union. Textiles were the mainstay of Soviet light industry. Despite the priority that Soviet economic plans gave to heavy industries, cotton fabric production continued to grow in the 1950s producing a surplus. By contrast, cotton production was in short supply in the new PRC. As both countries sought to increase bilateral economic exchanges, it turned out to be an optimum deal for China to buy cotton fabric from the Soviet Union – not only would it be mutually beneficial economically, but it would also serve to display Sino-Soviet cooperation on an international scale.

Soviet print cotton entered Chinese market in the early 1950s. Nicknamed “Soviet big floral cloth” (Sulian da huabu), this fabric was characterized by elaborate patterns and gay colors, standing in sharp contrast with the plain and drab clothes that Chinese people normally wore. For several reasons, the floral print cloth was not popular immediately after their introduction. Although they were colorfast, people complained about high shrinkage and poor durability. One foot of this material could lose three inches after the first wash and it wore out easily, proving to be uneconomical for everyday wear. For these reasons and more, Soviet print cotton did not sell well in the very beginning.

To improve sales, the government called on people to purchase Soviet prints by coining the slogan “Love the country, wear prints” (Aiguo chuan huabu), thus turning an individual choice and daily practice into a matter of national and international importance. Buying Soviet

17 These comments were raised during Zhou Enlai’s informal talk with representatives of female entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial families at a meeting organized by the All-China Women’s Federation in 1956. See Renmin ribao, September 16, 1956.
prints was reckoned a patriotic act in support of national economy and socialist solidarity. Clothes made of this material were dubbed “patriotic clothes,” and wearing them displayed one’s political consciousness, as well as one’s recognition of the “selfless” help from the Soviet elder brother. Governmental officials and cadres, including those at top levels, were asked to take the lead in wearing Soviet prints. In one such act of official endorsement, Deng Yingchao, Premier Zhou Enlai’s wife, wore a shirt made of red-dotted white print shirt of the Soviet kind to meet China’s first few female pilots at a dinner reception.\footnote{Wang Yun was among China’s first group of female pilots. She recalled this anecdote. See http://i.cn.yahoo.com/05661639786/blog/p_4/} With state intervention, cotton imports from the Soviet Union contributed to an increase of 47.8 percent in China’s textile supplies and an immediate surge in cotton sales.\footnote{“Sulian huabu: wushi niandai xishi shiyi” [Soviet floral cloth: recollecting small details from the fifties], Tianya shequ, accessed October 22, 2009, http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/no01/1/404188.shtml.}

The bold, eye-catching Soviet fabrics henceforth reinvigorated the drudgery of everyday life with some gaiety and lightheartedness, freeing people of the confinement of gray and blue uniforms. In summertime women donned bulaji made of Soviet prints and men put on shirts and shorts made of it, too. And if a man refused to wear prints, he could be criticized for being “feudalistic” (fengjian) and “backward” (luohou) (Figure 37). In the household, Soviet prints appeared wherever a textiles were needed – bed sheets, quilt covers, curtains, and so on. Beyond adopting Soviet theories and institutions, the campaign to learn from the Soviet Union was now manifested on a day-to-day material basis. In turn, the everyday Soviet presence constantly reminded people of the importance of socialist brotherhood and the superiority of the Soviet experience.
Apart from demonstrating friendship with Soviet brothers and sisters, the brightly-colored prints were also meant to show the achievements of socialist construction under the CCP’s leadership. In the mid-1950s when the national economy reached a new level and supplies of daily necessities increased (though still far from meeting demands), the government also wanted its people to look better. In January 1956, a colloquium specifically devoted to women’s clothing was convened by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Youth League and the All-China Women’s Federation. Themes centered on how to help women improve their physical appearance. Later, *China Youth*, the publicity organ of the Youth League, published a series of articles encouraging women to wear “colorful clothes” (*hua yifu*) and look

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20 Antonia Finanne comments that these girls were still not accustomed to wearing dresses and arranged their legs as they would wearing pants. See Antonia Finanne, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 210.

21 Chen Mingyuan, “Fengxing quanguo de Sulian shi nuzhuang” [Soviet-style clothing sweeping the whole country] in *Wenbao ji xiaokang* [Being adequately fed and clad and being fairly well-off] (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2009), 25.
prettier, which made “colorful clothes” a hot public topic.\textsuperscript{22} Fashion designs and practical information on self-beautification sprouted in magazines and periodicals, especially those targeting female readers.

At the same time an exhibition of print, silk, and brocade products was held by the Shanghai branch of the Chinese Fine Arts Association. The exquisite designs and materials amounted to an eye-opener for the audience, generating enthusiastic public discussion about what people should wear in new China. A report on this event from \textit{Youth Daily} exhorted women in a bold, straightforward way: “Girls, don’t look so gloomy. Put on nice clothes and dress up like flowers.”\textsuperscript{23}

As 1956 unfolded, the “Hundred Flowers” Campaign ushered in a period of political tolerance and artistic pluralism. To change popular attitudes toward physical appearance and embolden people to wear new, colorful clothes, the government spread more slogans, including “Let everyone wear colorful clothes” (\textit{Renren chuan hua yishang}) and “Love labor, wear colorful clothes” (\textit{Ai laodong, chuan huayi}). People were told that being well dressed should no longer be regarded as contradictory to the nature of the working class but rather a demonstration of the brand-new life under socialism.\textsuperscript{24} When the children’s film \textit{Flowers of the Motherland} (\textit{Zuguo de huaduo}, 1955) came out, people were inspired by the happy life portrayed in the theme song “Let Us Row and Paddle” (\textit{Rang women dangqi shuangjiang}). The cheerful imagery of children dressed in fine clothes filled every listener with hope and aspiration. Similarly, a popular song

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\textsuperscript{22} Xu Xing, “Lun ershi shiji wushii niandai Sushi fuzhuang zai Zhongguo de xingshuai” [On the rise and fall of Soviet clothing in the 1950s], \textit{Nanjing yishu xueyuan xibao (meishu ya sheji ban)} [Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute (fine arts and design)] (June 2008): 183.
\textsuperscript{23} Gan Lu, “Shanghai zhanlanhui ganxiang” [Reflections on the Shanghai exhibition], \textit{Qingnian bao (Shanghai ban)}, January 10, 1956.
\textsuperscript{24} Guo Yuyi, “Sulian huabu” [Soviet floral cloth], \textit{Taiyuan wnbao}, January 12, 2010.
\end{flushright}
from the film *A Nurse’s Diary* (*Hushi riji*, 1957), “Little Swallows” (*Xiao yanzi*), registered in people’s minds the concept of “wearing colorful clothes,” a line from the lyrics (Figure 38).25

![Figure 38. Film poster for *A Nurse’s Diary* on the cover of *Shangying huabao*, no. 3 (1957). Source: Photo courtesy of the National Library of China](image)

In this atmosphere, the urban fashion landscape was undergoing exciting changes. Permed hair resurfaced and hairstyles multiplied. Leather shoes were back in stock, offering women a wider range of selection. Now Chinese women had more leeway to adorn themselves. Some educated women put on long skirts, together with white blouses and neatly tailored

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cardigans and low-heeled shoes. *Qipao* staged a comeback with a new look. The modified *qipao* looked modest with loose cuts around the waist and no side slits. The material was mainly cotton instead of the silk and wool used in the past, now in plain colors. Lining and elaborate decoration such as embroidery were often omitted. Altogether, the new *qipao* was a far cry from the body-hugging, glamorous, and alluring *qipao* of the past. Usually women wore it together with a sweater, cardigan, or Lenin jacket on top (Figure 39 and Figure 40).  

The simple but elegant taste that women displayed around this time, although not a fundamental departure from the principles of socialist femininity, nonetheless implied Chinese women’s greater fashion awareness.

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**Figure 39.** Chinese actresses of the 1950s in modified *qipao*.  
*Source: Zhongxi shishang luishi nian* (Sixty years of Chinese and Western fashion), http://www.duitang.com/album/249451/?from=detail_bottom.

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26 Chen Mingyuan, “Qipao de yuhui” [The declining glory of *qipao*] in *Wenbao ji xiaokang* [Being adequately fed and clad and being fairly well-off] (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2009), 55.
Voices of Opposition

The new trends in Chinese clothing in the mid-1950s were received with mass acclamation and enthusiasm on the one hand and with considerable opposition on the other. To start with, the bright, flowery bulaji was radically different from any style in China; most found the prospect of starting such a bold new trend daunting; as with any new style, most found it embarrassing to wear new-style clothes and look different than others. A woman recalled that in
1954 when she put on a *bulaji* for the first time she nearly forgot how to walk because she was so self-conscious about her exposed shins between the hem and her ankles.\(^{27}\)

This anecdote exemplified the public mentality concerning appearance and how successfully Maoist ideology had shaped people’s self-images by that time. In the first few years of the PRC a new value system took shape, in which thrift, modesty, and industry defined the code of conduct in everyday life. Applied to physical appearance, this code encouraged what might be called “minimalist aesthetics,” emphasizing anonymity of style, use of primary colors, and extreme simplification of ornament. Standardized garb such as the Zhongshan suit and the Lenin jacket became the norm because it was believed that they created a look of uniformity and equality, which set the ethics of the new society apart from those of the old. It was also believed that the simplicity of dress would shape a “healthy” outlook with less attention to materialistic concerns. In this sense, from the government’s viewpoint, the unification of clothing via the Zhongshan suit and Lenin jacket represented a justifiable attempt to regulate people’s everyday practices. Unfortunately, the economic conditions at the time and increasingly conflicting political circumstances eventually led to exceptional apprehensiveness towards fine clothes.

The national living standard at the beginning of the PRC compelled the country and people to practice frugality. In an average household, the budget for clothing was rather limited. In order to save money, consumers could not expect much beyond wearability. Gray, black, and blue became popular because they do not show dirt easily. Wearing clothes that could be suitable in any season, for all ages, and for both sexes was the most practical choice. Frugality became a

\(^{27}\) Hu Chunyuan, “Wushi niandai ‘Liening zhuang’ he ‘bulaji’ zheng liuxing” [“Lenin suit” and “bulaji” were popular in the fifties], *Zhongguo funu*, no. 3 (2009), 21.
more pressing issue in 1954 when only a small ration of “clothing tickets” (bupiao) was allotted to each person for purchasing textile products. In fact, the national shortage of fabric and clothing was to a significant extent caused by an economic development guideline in the first five-year plan that placed undue emphasis on heavy industries, copying the Soviet practice. Production of fabric and clothing was not included in new China’s “grand production plan.” As a result, the growth of light industries fell far behind that of heavy industries. Even worse, the state monopoly on commodity purchases and sales introduced in late 1953 showed no propensity to increase market supply on the basis of economic advancement or to meet growing demands from consumers. Instead, the state monopoly was directed at relentlessly curbing consumption, thus driving the nation into a consumer “shortage economy.”

In Maoist China during the 1950s, being poor materially was no longer a shame – only wealth and luxury were. Thrift and hard work were considered virtues of the working class. For this reason, people tried to look as plain as possible to demonstrate their identification with these concepts. A popular saying urged people to wear their clothes “New for three years, old for three years, and with patches for three more years.” Thus, when “colorful clothes” were introduced, most people remained dubious, and questions about whether wearing colorful clothes was related to bourgeois thinking sprang up instantly. Two years before it openly encouraged people to “look

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28 Feng Rongguang, “Liening zhuang bulaji, Hezuoshe fengrenji zuoyi mang” [Lening jacket and bulaji, the sewing-machine of the cooperative is busy sewing], Chengdu ribao, September 30, 2009.
29 Shortage economy is a term coined by the Hungarian economist, János Kornai. He used this term to criticize the old centrally-planned economies of the communist states of the Eastern Bloc. In his article “Economics of Shortage” (1980), János Kornai explains that a shortage of a certain item does not necessarily mean that the item is not being produced; rather, it means that the amount of the goods demanded exceeds the amount supplied at a given price. Kornai concentrates on the role of reduced supply, and argues that this is the underlying cause of Eastern European shortages during the 1980s. There are certainly parallels between the Maoist planned economy and Eastern European economies in terms of the cause of supply shortage.
30 Yang Qingping, “Xin sannian, jiu sannian” [New for three years, old for three years], Dahe jiankang bao, May 20, 2009.
pretty,” *China Youth* in 1954 actually launched a reader’s forum to discuss the matter of “wearing colorful clothes.” While the magazine’s editorials justified the progressive symbolism of colorful clothes and encouraged people to break away from “old thoughts,” they also cautioned people (particularly women) against “being too fastidious about clothing and make-up.” A gender-neutral look resembling industrial workers henceforth grew increasingly trendy alongside the colorful clothes. Young women working in factories started the trend by wearing male workers’ bib-and-brace overalls, checkered shirts, and “liberation shoes.” Accommodating a wide range of body shapes, unisex clothing concealed physical gender differences and rendered a look of gender equality (Figure 41). Women took pride in wearing male workers’ uniforms because these uniforms not only signified their economic independence but also allowed them to work as men and look as strong as men. Unisex garments became a conscious (and safe) choice for many.

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31 The “liberation shoes,” or *jiefang xie*, refer to the green canvas shoes with soft rubber soles and toecaps formerly worn by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). After 1949, they were adopted by ordinary people and remained a kind of durable footwear until the 1980s. They also gained status during the Cultural Revolution amid the popularity of military uniforms.
Against this backdrop, the colorful clothes fervor turned out to be a flash in the pan.

When the ephemeral Hundred Flowers movement was superseded by the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, colorful clothes immediately became a byword for “petty-bourgeois sentiment” or “bourgeois conduct.” People began to pay more attention to what they should and should not wear so as to avoid being branded as rightists. Concurrently, dissension between Chinese and Soviet leaders surfaced, and the rhetoric on Sino-Soviet friendship cooled. In this context, wearing Lenin jackets, bulaji, or Soviet floral prints seemed inopportune. When the Sino-Soviet rift became an irreversible fact in the early sixties, Soviet fashions vanished from Chinese life, together with anything else that was associated with or suggestive of “Soviet socialist imperialism” (Sulian shehui diguo zhuyi). The Russian fad was over, and many Russian-
sounding words disappeared. The Bulaji dress was renamed lianyiqun, and China now had its own “indigenous” word for this dress.

But the new name did not affect the fate of this dress, despite the new name, in the 1960s the bright floral prints eventually ceased to be worn in public and lianyiqun quickly became an empty signifier. The connotation of “revisionism,” a danger against which people were constantly warned, was so arbitrary that a modest demand for better dress could make a person the target of criticism. To avoid “turning revisionist” (bianxiu) or “forgetting the roots” (wangben), people were summoned to “recall the past bitterness and reflect on today’s sweetness” (yiku sitian). Cadres, intellectuals, and students were called on to reeducate themselves by learning from poor peasants and workers. Hence the attributes of the working class, both internal and external, were highly touted.32

When the Cultural Revolution was gathering momentum in 1965, people’s attire underwent radical changes. Women put away their remaining brightly colored dresses and skirts and put on plain, old, and worn out tops and pants. Young women had their hair cut short; the shorter the more revolutionary. Even schoolgirls were clad in gray and dark blue.33 In the 1965 army uniform reform, Lenin jackets and skirts were removed from female uniforms, to be replaced by male soldiers’ tops and pants. The entire army was to wear the same “liberation cap” (jiefang mao) and basically the same style uniform made of the same material, regardless of rank or gender. As the Cultural Revolution started, military uniforms became the new vogue among

32 For this reason, the image of Chen Yonggui (Party Secretary of Dazhai Commune and later Vice-Premier) in his northern peasant outfit with a white towel wrapped on the head and thick callus on both hands was held up as a paragon of the “true revolutionary class” during the Cultural Revolution.

33 Weili Ye and Ma Xiaodong, Growing up in the People’s Republic: Conversations between Two Daughters of China’s Revolution (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 63.
civilians, turning the nation into a homogeneous-looking population (Figure 42 and Figure 43). Mao’s frequently cited lines that “Chinese daughters have high aspiring minds / they love their battle array, not silk and satins” inspired thousands of Chinese women to don army uniforms.

In such a political environment, a leftist view that correlated a person’s clothing with their attitude was nurtured. Some people deliberately put patches on their clothes or washed their new clothes several times until the color faded. The more worn one’s clothes were, the more revolutionary the person was. A strained logic about clothing and class thus came into being: plainness was the true color of the proletariat, whereas attention to appearance betrayed a bourgeois nature. People were forced to cover themselves with plain clothes; otherwise they would be “given a political hat” (kou maozi, meaning to be criticized). Wearing, or not wearing certain clothes became a matter of life and death. Out of fear, self-censorship was consciously practiced in making choices about mundane matter.
Figure 42. Chinese children, men, and women in army uniforms during the Cultural Revolution. 

Figure 43. 20-year-old Tan Hanxin poses for “protecting the motherland’s oceans” in front of a warship background at a photo studio in 1969. The military uniform and the rifle were provided by the studio. 
Conclusion

This chapter offers an overview of the changes in clothing during the early years of the PRC. In terms of women’s fashion, it was dominated by plain colored Lenin jacket in the beginning, and as the mid-1950s approached there was a significant increase in the summer usage of *bulaji*. These two Soviet-inspired sartorial innovations represented more than a new, modern fashion that was in line with party doctrine; rather, they were an international socialist fashion, with a distinct flavor of the exotic Soviet Union. Women who wore them associated themselves with Soviet culture and in so doing personally endorsed the CCP’s modernization program. The prevalence of these fashionable items at the very top of officialdom, and their relatively high availability to urban working classes, served to directly reinforce the state modernization program. Even with the cooling of Sino-Soviet relations in the late 1950s, women continued to wear them until well in the mid-1960’s when they were replaced with the cultural revolutionary “fashion” of military uniforms.

These changes further demonstrate the CCP’s interventative power over public behavior. During this time the state-controlled large-scale manufacturing was focused on heavy industry, which limited the availability of fashion to the typical urban resident. By creating a series of rhetoric and slogans, the CCP successfully introduced Soviet style clothing to the Chinese public and further pleased the Soviet Union by buying the Soviet cotton surplus. In so doing, the CCP wisely weaved the country’s material deficiency into the larger tapestry of international socialist modernity, and placed its ideology squarely in the most visible part of everyday life. By equating the apex of fashion with party ideology, the CCP was able to exert influence on the attitudes of men and women throughout society.
As we know, the friendship rhetoric and the SSFA’s widespread propaganda had been proclaiming that international socialist modernity would bring about huge improvements of living standards for the Chinese. Urban fashion during this time, like architecture, was altered to demonstrate such improvements. Particularly, as this chapter shows, the bulaji adorned by women in the summertime brought direct visual evidence of improved living standards to women (and men, of course!). Designed to boast the advantages of the socialist system and to present the masses with a vision of modernity, the transformations in urban architecture and fashion “reinforced an internationalist image that China was on the verge of enjoying the fruits of socialism just like the Soviet Union was.”

Part III. Hot Movies and Hot Books in the Cold War: the Contest for Hearts and Minds

China’s socialist alliance with the Soviet Union and its allies brought fundamental changes to its urban populace. These changes were manifested in the physical appearance of the cities and the lifestyles of urban dwellers: new architectural designs were added to city topography, aesthetics and tastes were reshaped in everything from music and clothes to food and hobbies. The changes were on more than physical and superficial levels; they extended to the hearts and minds of millions who were coming of age in the 1950s. Under Soviet influence, school education was reformed, views of gender, youth, and societal relations changed radically, and new concepts of truth and morality were discussed. The entire conceptual inventory of social knowledge was transformed within a decade by the Sino-Soviet friendship.

From the perspective of the early 1950s, it would have been difficult to imagine that the massive cultural flow from the Soviet Union to China would freeze so quickly by 1960, never to be restored to the same level. When the alliance foundered, the PRC government made every effort to break away from the Soviet model and blocked all sources of Soviet cultural influence: Soviet-style buildings were repainted or modified to look less foreign, Soviet-style clothes were discarded, Russian-language programs were halted, and Soviet films and literary works were blocked from circulating in public channels.

But did Soviet influence evaporate together with the removal of Soviet presence in China? If one can speak of the immediate and long-term impact of Soviet political structures, economic
patterns, and educational systems on the PRC before and after the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, can one also speak of an enduring impact of various imported Soviet cultural products on the “private” lives of Chinese people? Of the 747 Soviet films shown in China and the millions of copies of Soviet literary works, how many stayed in people’s memories?

The answers to these questions are critically important for understanding the interaction between the PRC government and its population in China’s transculturation of Soviet socialist culture. Focusing on film viewing (Chapter 5) and mass reading (Chapter 6) in Maoist China, Part III deepens the discussion of Soviet influence on Chinese society by looking into state-society cultural engagement. The two chapters discuss how cultural tools and resources – films and literature as two particularly effective media – were deployed by the government to shape popular perceptions of the socialist ideology that the CCP tried to propagate. For each film and literary work presented to the public, the regime had specific intentions about how the public should respond and what energies they should derive for constructing New China. However, while the state was the dominant player in the game, the rank and file should not be overlooked. Each person who watched a Soviet film or read Soviet literature during this time had their own experience, drew their own conclusions, and changed their lives according to what they deemed appropriate. The distance between official intentions and individual reception provides a measure of the extent and effectiveness of this covert “thought reform” during the first decade of the PRC.

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1 For a few representative works on the political, economic, and educational influence of the Soviet model on the PRC, see Thomas Bernstein, Zhang Shuguang, and Suzanne Pepper. Research on these topics has yielded voluminous works, but the purely “private” dimensions of Sino-Soviet cultural relations have remained understudied.
Chapter 5. Envisioning Liberty and Equality: Soviet Films, Socialist Ideals, and Gender Construct in the 1950s

Soviet films played a unique role in 1950s China because of the special relationship between the two communist states. In the context of the Cold War and China “leaning to the Soviet side,” not only did Soviet cinema replenish China’s movie theaters with huge numbers of “ideologically correct” films, but it also influenced China by providing a model of socialist cinema for the Chinese filmmaking industry. Above all, these films exerted the most far-reaching influence on the minds of millions who were endeared to Soviet cultural products. Loaded with socialist ideals, Soviet films presented a cheerful vision of socialism that effectively mobilized the Chinese people toward building socialism on the Soviet experience.

Despite the Chinese government’s attempt to discredit the Soviet model in the late 1950s and the widening rift between the Chinese and Soviet communist parties in the following decade, popular interest in Soviet films did not diminish, and imports of Soviet films continued until 1964. Even amid the denunciation of Soviet cultural forms during the Cultural Revolution, several Soviet films were still allowed to be shown publicly. Also, Soviet films have since become a cherished part of the “collective memory” of the generations growing up in the 1950s. Yet the social impact of Soviet films on the Chinese popular imagination remains a less-studied aspect of early PRC cinema.¹

This chapter explores the influence of Soviet films on Chinese women, family, and gender constructs in the 1950s. Particularly, I examine a critical category of Soviet films that featured women. The use of women to represent socialist ideals was a striking feature of many Soviet films shown in China during this period. On the one hand, these Soviet propaganda films created an image of “happy and emancipated women” that demonstrated the state’s vision of a socialist future: a desirable lifestyle in an egalitarian society. On the other hand, as the beneficiaries of a “more advanced social system” (in comparison with capitalism), women were portrayed as wholeheartedly devoting themselves to the country and the cause of building socialism, thus demonstrating what a woman, as a socialist citizen, was expected to become.

The symbolic meanings that women represented in these films, originally designed to serve the gender rhetoric of the Soviet regime, were an essential part of China’s friendship discourse that successfully integrated workers, peasants, women, and youth; important focal points for public organization. Soviet women’s symbolic representation in films was an instrumental tool for the gender discourse of the Chinese communist regime, which attached as much importance to “the woman question” as its Soviet counterpart. By showing Soviet films, the Chinese government promulgated concepts such as “sexual equality” and “free-choice marriage” along with its socialist ideology, in a form intelligible to a largely illiterate female population. Seeing is believing; if “the Soviet today is our tomorrow,” as a popular Chinese slogan of the time proclaimed, viewing Soviet women’s lives on the silver screen shortened not just the physical distance between Chinese women and their Soviet sisters, but also the gap between reality and imagination. Soviet films therefore successfully motivated Chinese women.

Enactments of Internationalism: Soviet Film and the Making of Maoist China.
to work for the socialist transformation of China and in so doing, toward the ultimate emancipation and transformation of themselves.

In this chapter, I focus on how this woman-specific category of Soviet films facilitated the propagation of the Chinese government’s rhetoric about “women’s liberation,” and on what outlook change of they brought to Chinese women. I suggest that these films were a liberating force for Chinese women, despite their inherent ideological stamps and the political indoctrination that the Chinese authorities attached to showing films. Moving between cinema and broader social implications, this discussion sheds light on the part Soviet films played in the Chinese government’s effort to remold the public mentality with socialist ideology, thus going beyond the focus on women and gender constructs to illustrate how film was used as an instrument of transculturation. Moreover, since dubbed Soviet films constituted a sizable portion of all films shown in China during this period, this chapter contributes to a better understanding of how the early PRC used cinema, “the most important of all the arts”\(^2\) for state propaganda, in reaching the masses and influencing popular values.

**Setting the Stage**

According to an article in a 1959 issue of *Dianying yishu* (film art),\(^3\) which reviewed the history of Soviet film in China, Soviet influence on Chinese cinema began with importation of Soviet films into China during the 1920s. This influence was deepened with the subsequent translation of Soviet revolutionary film theory into Chinese, sparking the Chinese left-wing film

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\(^2\) This refers to Lenin’s a well-known remark in 1922 that “Of all the arts, film is the most important.”

\(^3\) Founded in 1956 under the name *Zhongguo dianying* [Chinese cinema] and renamed *Dianying yishu* [Film art] in 1959, this magazine is the first of its kind to be dedicated to film criticism and film studies in the PRC.
movement of the thirties. Representing an official attempt to rewrite China’s film history, this article extolled the “progressive” transformation of Chinese cinema under Soviet influence and, at the same time, asserted that movies that dominated the Chinese film market, primarily from Hollywood, were nothing but a “bad influence.”

The legitimacy of Soviet cinema that this article established reflects the Chinese Communist regime’s attitude toward the Soviet Union in the early 1950s. As in other fields and industries, Soviet experience in filmmaking became the sole “legitimate” frame of reference for China’s new socialist cinema. Soon after the founding of the PRC, the Administrative Bureau of Film Enterprise (Dianying shiye guanli ju) was established, equivalent to the State Committee for Cinematography of the USSR (Goskino USSR), allowing the state to control all aspects of film production and circulation. Privately owned studios were nationalized and the entire filmmaking industry was incorporated into the state’s planned economy. Apart from institutional apparatus, film workers turned to the “Soviet big brother” for ideas and techniques ranging from the selection of subject matter to the form of representation; actors and directors were sent to the Soviet Union for advanced training. Soviet films were carefully studied and the Soviet doctrine of “socialist realism” was officially endorsed as the “one and the only correct principle” of artistic creation and criticism at the First Joint Congress of Scriptwriters and Filmmakers in 1953. Based on Soviet film theory and practice, the filmmaking of New China radically refashioned itself.

By this process, a large number of Soviet films replaced British and American

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“imperialist” movies in Chinese movie theaters. By 1952, Soviet films and New China films had completely taken over mainland China’s film market. Given that the nascent PRC film studios had not yet developed the capacity to produce enough films for domestic consumption, remaking Soviet films was time and cost efficient. Between 1949 and 1964, the number of Soviet films dubbed by two major film dubbing studios, the Northeastern Film Studio in Changchun and the Shanghai Film Dubbing Studio, exceeded three hundred, almost equivalent to the number of films produced by Chinese studios during that time. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that after being translated, dubbed, and re-edited, Soviet films formed an integral part of 1950s Chinese cinema.

Yet these Soviet films were not immediately hailed by Chinese urban audiences who were accustomed to Hollywood melodramas, nor were they readily accepted by rural audiences who were still new to film. The lack of basic knowledge about Soviet culture, history and cinematic forms often left viewers in confusion. To acquaint (and thus educate) the Chinese masses with Soviet films, a country-wide film projection network was established, and methods of film propaganda were developed accordingly. By “providing an introduction before the show, explaining the plots during the show, and holding discussions after the show,” film projection teams brought home to the audience the meaning of each Soviet film. Mass gatherings for

6 “Dianying gongzuozhe jinian Mao zhuxi ‘zai Yan’an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua fabiao shi zhounian [Film workers commemorating the tenth anniversary of Chairman Mao’s ‘talk on the Yan’an forum on arts and literature],” Dazhong dianying, no. 1-2 (1952), 6-9.
8 Marie Cambon, “The Dream Palaces of Shanghai.”
9 For instance, some spectators were reported to have mistaken the Germans for Soviet troops. See “Renmin jiefangjun tongzhi zuotan dui dianying gongzuo de yijian ji yaoqiu” [Suggestions and requests to the film industry in an informal discussion with the PLA soldiers], “Jieshao renmin jiefangjun de dianying jiaoyu gongzuo.” [On the film education work among the PLA].
10 “Jinli zuohao dianying fangying de xuanchuan jieshuo gongzuo” [Try our best to enhance the work of film
Soviet film screenings soon became an everyday occurrence and a popular pastime.

Henceforth Soviet films entered Chinese popular culture. Major movie theaters were festooned with icons of Soviet film stars.\footnote{Cui Binzhen, “Zheli de liming jing qiaqiao yu Sulian lao dage”[And Quiet Flows The Don and the Soviet elder brother], 27.} Snapshots from Soviet films dominated the front pages of film magazines, many of which used photos of Soviet film stars to reward readers who took part in their “Reader’s Participation” columns.\footnote{For example, the cover of the inaugural issue of Dazhong dianying [popular cinema], which coincided with the Children’s Day, featured the little boy in the Soviet film Son of the Regiment (1945). Among the 306 issues of Dazhong dianying published between 1950 and 1966, about one third used photos of Soviet films and actors.} Russian songs from Soviet films carried Chinese lyrics, capturing thousands of Chinese who became diehard fans of Russian music. People amused themselves imitating gestures of Soviet actors or repeating lines from Soviet films. Cinema played a big part in transplanting Soviet culture onto Chinese soil. In this context the ideas and concepts conveyed by Soviet films exerted enormous influence on the collective consciousness of the Chinese, as well as on the beliefs and attitudes of Chinese women.

The Filmic Experience of Emancipation and Equality

The Soviet films shown in China during the 1950s were mostly from the Stalinist era, among which war films constituted one major category. Taking the Bolshevik Revolution and the Great Patriotic War (the Soviet term for the Second World War) as subjects, these films were made to promote heroism, patriotism, and a Stalinist cult of personality. The most representative works of this category include Lenin in 1918 (1939), The Fall of Berlin (1949), and The
Interestingly, women were strongly represented in a number of war films of this era, including *Member of the Government* (1940), *She Defends the Motherland* (1943), *Rainbow* (1944), and *Zoya* (1944). As Lynne Attwood aptly points out, “in films either made during the war or that look back to the war years, women suddenly came into their own.” As a perfect foil to the ferocity of the Nazis, portrayals of innocent women were frequently employed. However, in Soviet cinema women were not always portrayed as weaker sex. Instead, they became fearless fighters defending the Soviet regime shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts.

For Chinese women at the time, the image of “red women” on the Soviet silver screen ideally demonstrated, in the most rousing manner, what women could contribute to the country at critical times. As a Chinese film essay observed, “the audience is presented with the image of heroic women from collective farms, factories and schools departing for the front to safeguard the country’s freedom and independence.” The new gender role that Soviet women took on in wars is typified in *She Defends the Motherland* (1943), which was widely shown in China after it was dubbed in 1951 (Chinese title: *Jinguo yingxiong*).

To highlight the extraordinary female lead, as well as to attract Chinese viewers, the film was renamed “Female Heroes” in the Chinese-language version, alluding to China’s historical female warriors such as Hua Mulan, She Saihua, and Mu Guiying, who adopted a male role on the battlefield. A standard story of a Soviet woman transformed by war, the film opens with a

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15 I. S. Kon and James Riordan, *Sex and Russian Society*, 70.
16 “Malina ladinina” (Marina Ladynina).
tranquil scene of rural Russia before World War II and the happy family of Pasha, a champion tractor driver. The intrusion of German soldiers suddenly disrupts this idyllic life as Pasha loses her husband and son as she witnesses the sacking of her village. Although heartbroken, Pasha does not give up; she instead becomes a partisan leader under the new title Comrade P and wreaks havoc on the Nazi troops, defending the motherland alongside her fellow citizens.

A wartime legend, Pasha acquired new meanings in peacetime China for inspiring Liang Jun, the first female tractor driver in the PRC and a model worker in 1950. A public icon representing Mao’s well-known proclamation “what men can do, women can also,” the image of Liang Jun driving a tractor was the prototype of a female tractor driver on the 1 yuan (RMB) bill issued in 1960. This was the first time that a woman, by herself, had been represented on Chinese currency. In her “well-rehearsed and officially sanctioned life narrative,”17 Liang Jun attributed her motivation for driving a tractor to Pasha and the Soviet women Pasha represented.

[Soviet women] drive tractors to plow the field in peacetime and operate tanks to fight against the enemy in the war. I was inspired by that film at the time and felt Soviet women were so great. … How wonderful if we Chinese women could be like these Soviet women! … If I can drive a tractor and turn the barren land into fertile [land], wouldn’t it be a great honor? That way I wouldn’t fail to live up to the Communist Party’s call for women’s emancipation. Women are half the sky, aren’t they? When opportunity comes, I will learn to be a woman tractor driver.18

By interpreting Pasha’s driving tractors and tanks as the result of sexual equality in Soviet society, Liang Jun correlated Soviet women with the Chinese Community Party’s (CCP) theory about women’s liberation and equality. This “officially sanctioned” correlation offers a vantage point from which to view the purpose of showing Soviet films and commending Soviet women

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18 Zhang Xiaoyan, “Qingchun de jiyi diyi pian.”
in China. In the heyday of Sino-Soviet alliance, as part of the CCP’s friendship rhetoric, lauding Soviet women’s equal social status and treatment with men was a salient aspect of Chinese gender discourse. According to this discourse, Soviet women were completely emancipated under the socialist system: they are participating in the political arena equally with men, enjoying the same rights as men, being paid equally for equal work, and relieved of housework and childcare, which is entirely mechanized and socialized. Thus this discourse acclaimed conclusively that socialism had ushered in full gender equality and achieved a major triumph in human history.

This discourse was an ornate reproduction of the Soviet government’s gender rhetoric, which, as is widely known now, was nothing more than fairytale about women’s social status. Unquestionably, Soviet women were able to participate in the public sphere of work extensively, which means that one of the prerequisites for women’s equality, according to Marxist feminism, had materialized in the Soviet Union. However, the division of labor by sex still existed, as women were overrepresented in unskilled, low paying, and unpromising jobs, and their presence in state politics was limited, despite the official proclamations of women’s equal rights. When the government closed down the Zhenotdel (the Women’s Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) in 1930, Soviet women found themselves lost in their dual battle for both socialist and feminist goals.

After the middle of the 1930s, there was no more discussion about the state taking over their [women’s] domestic burden, nor was there any attempt to reconstruct male and female domestic roles in order to divide the load more fairly between them. There were some female stakhanovites (shock workers), but women’s contribution to the movement was seen primarily in terms of freeing their husbands from housework so that the men could devote themselves more fully to
Nevertheless, none of these problems made their way into the films that were made during the Stalinist years. If the absence of these problems in war films could be justified by the extreme wartime circumstances that trivialized the issue of sexual equality, what purpose would justify the films about women’s life during peacetime, which not only covered these problems but also embellished the status quo of the Soviet woman? In the following section, I turn to a few Soviet films shown in 1950s China that portrayed the “happy life” of Soviet women in the interwar and postwar eras. It will soon become clear that the upbeat stories of Soviet women dovetailed seamlessly with the Chinese government’s rhetoric about Soviet women.

Women as the Face of Socialism

Apart from representing war and revolution, Stalinist cinema was also about the ideal, if not utopia, of socialism. Despite resistance to collectivization and the reality of continual supply shortages, life on the screen was invariably happy and affluent: mechanized farming, vast ocean of grains, fruit hanging heavily from the branch. For its romanticization of Soviet life, Stalinist cinema has been loathed by critics and audiences outside the socialist bloc. However, fundamental to this cinema is the principle of “socialist realism,” a different type of realism from what the word “reality” generally implies. It is not life as it is, but life as the authorities want it to become. Anotonii Lunarchaskii, the first Soviet commissar for cultural enlightenment, 1917-1929, put it in a straightforward and enlightening way: “the Socialist Realist is not obliged to stick to the limits of realism in the sense of verisimilitude. . . . A Communist who cannot dream

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19 Attwood, Red Women on the Silver Screen, 69.
is a bad Communist. The Communist dream is not a flight from the earthly but a flight into the future.”\textsuperscript{20} Promoting certain idealized conceptions about the future was one of the principal functions of Soviet film making in the framework of socialist realism.\textsuperscript{21} The vision of the future established and maintained by Soviet films was of great service to the PRC regime at its formative stage.

Right before the Chinese Communists assumed state power, Mao announced: “We are not only good at smashing an old world, but we will also be good at building a new one.”\textsuperscript{22} One of the methods the Communists used to build a new China was to disseminate rhetoric about the “happy” life in the Soviet Union. The Chinese regime, like most other socialist states, viewed the Soviet Union as a handy model in all aspects of nation building and socialist construction. If the early Soviet regime had to resort to drawing, from scratch, a picture of the future in order to enlist popular support and mass enthusiasm for building that future, the Chinese government now could show its people much more tangible results of socialism. The official propaganda about Soviet people’s “achievements” that flooded the Chinese media presented Chinese people with a soon-to-be bright future. Yet of all the mass media during that time, nothing was more direct and reliable than seeing the happy, modernized life from Soviet films that reinforced the Chinese glorification of the Soviet Union as a “socialist paradise on earth.” By imagining the “Soviet today” in films as “our tomorrow,” Chinese people were encouraged to view the present (hardship, supply shortage, and social injustice) through the lens of the future (happiness, affluence, and egalitarianism), “for to judge the present by its future effects is already, in an

\textsuperscript{20}Taylor and Christie, \textit{The Film Factory}, 327.
\textsuperscript{21}Taylor, “Singing on the Steppes for Stalin,” 145.
\textsuperscript{22}See Mao Zedong’s speech at the second plenary meeting of the Seventh Party Congress, 5 March 1949, in Gu Longsheng, \textit{Mao Zedong jingji nianpu}, 2661.
important sense, to be living in that future.”

This is exactly how the “socialist realist” strategy was meant to function, as in Stalinist cinema. By this strategy, the Chinese government successfully gained popular recognition and promulgated its socialist ideology.

An example is the Chinese reception of *The Kuban Cossacks* (1950; Chinese title: *Xingfu de shenghuo*, 1950), allegedly one of Stalin’s favorites. The film not only extols the grand life under Stalin’s leadership and the superiority of collective farms, but it also successfully combines ideology and entertainment in a manner both comprehensible and appealing to the audience. Dubbed in Chinese soon after its release in the USSR and renamed “Happy Life,” this lively musical was among the most frequently shown and favorably received Soviet films. The film’s popularity in China owed a great deal to its entertaining elements, especially the light-heartedness overflowing from farmers’ recreational activities and the innocent flirtations between men and women. It brought joyful laughter to an audience whose domestic cinema was treadiing, with greater delicacy and care than its Soviet counterpart, a fine line between ideology and entertainment. Moreover, exotic things such as ice cream and wine, lipstick and leather shoes, together with “girls wearing babushkas” and “men playing the mandolin,” created a dreamland far different from the material life of ordinary Chinese at the time. Of course, music was a highlight of this musical, as several songs about harvest and love, now sung in Chinese, quickly gained currency. Even today, these melodies are still remembered by those who lived through the ups and downs of Maoist China. The popularity of the film allowed the political message to get across: socialism is great; collective farms are great; under the party’s leadership life will be

23 During, *Cultural Studies*, 72.
25 See Xue Fan.
better. Thus this film, as well as other similar Soviet films, helped the Chinese government turn the idea of “socialism” from an abstract concept that rang hollow on the ears of a vastly illiterate population into a foreseeable future that infused the daily life of millions with optimism and enthusiasm.

For Chinese women, The Kuban Cossacks had an additional dimension of significance. In many Soviet films about socialist utopia, women were again conspicuously represented. Whether a collective farm member or a working professional, they all looked strong and cheerful. Dressed in costumes of bright colors, they were constantly singing and dancing. The Kuban Cossacks is undoubtedly the best illustration of the use of women in promoting the notions of “happiness” and “joy.” When the film was shown in China, the image of joyful Soviet women headed by a collective farm chairwoman named Galina, brilliantly played by Marina Ladynina,26 titillated Chinese women and provided them with a basis to visualize “our tomorrow” as a happy and prosperous life. Many (presumably female) readers wrote to Dazhong dianying (Popular cinema), the most popular film magazine at that time, about their admiration of the lives of Soviet women, their determination to emulate Soviet women, and their confidence in attaining the same living standard.27 Such responses continued when other Soviet propaganda films were shown, including The Tractor Driver (1939; Chinese title: Tuolaji shou, 1951) and The Rich Bride (1938; Chinese title: Weihunqi, 1951).28 Applause for these happy Soviet women overwhelmed the Chinese media; more women were now inclined to model themselves on Soviet women. The emulation

26 For a discussion of Marina Ladynina’s stardom in China, as well as that of a few other Soviet actresses, see Chen, “Socialism, Aestheticized Bodies, and International Circuits of Gender,” 63-65.
27 Wang Sun, “Hao yingpian tuidong le women de sixiang gaizao” [Good films promoted our thought reform], 28.
even extended to fashion and appearance: it was around this time that bulaji, bowknot, and colorful waistband, typical female attire in the Soviet movies, became chic among fashionable Chinese women.

**Women in Socialist Construction**

Besides singing and dancing for the happy life under socialism, women in the interwar and postwar Soviet films were seen driving tractors in the field, running collective farms, and operating machinery at the factory. With boundless passion, they took up the new historical task of building socialism for the country. Hence women on the big screen not only signified gender equality and other advantages of socialist system, but they also demonstrated superlative socialist qualities and the highest moral standards that were labeled, by the Chinese rhetoric, “the true new socialist womanhood.” The role Soviet women played in building socialism, although significantly idealized by Soviet cinema, was of huge assistance to the Chinese government eager to obtain “a great resource of manpower” for socialist construction from the female population.

One typical film of this kind that was well-received in China is *The Radiant Path* (1940; Chinese title: *Guangming zhilu*, 1952), which presents the Stalinist ideal of a super-worker. By portraying an ordinary female textile worker, Tanya, who breaks world records by running hundreds of looms at a time, the film proclaims to the audience, especially women: the new

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29 *Bulaji* is the Chinese transliteration of the Russian word платье, meaning “frock.”

30 “Malina ladinina,” 10.

31 In his 1955 speech titled “The Socialist High tide in the Countryside,” Mao proposed a solution to insufficient labor force: “labor forces will become insufficient. This situation is still only beginning and will develop year after year in the future. Women of China constitute a great source of manpower. This source must be tapped.”
socioeconomic order has presented everyone with equal opportunity for upward mobility, regardless of gender; only by working hard in socialist production can a woman take advantage of that opportunity.

Galina, from The Kuban Cossacks, further demonstrates the “new Soviet womanhood.” She firmly upholds the Communist principles and always thinks first about the interests of the collective farm and her duties to the country and the people. By contrast, the male protagonist Gordei, chairman of a nearby farm, is beset with self-conceit and backward thought, despite his absolute loyalty to the country. However, with help from Galina, Gordei overcomes these flaws. In praise of Galina, a Chinese film review commented: “Galina’s moral victory is the victory of the new forces that are emerging and forcefully marching forward.”

As in several other Soviet feature films, imperfection in men serves as a foil to women’s progress and elevated consciousness in the new social order, denoting the reconfigured gender role. With only a change of setting and character identities, The First Echelon (1956; Chinese title: Huangdi zhichun, 1956) tells a similar story about a group of young Komsomol members developing a faraway wasteland with “progressive women helping conservative men to reform thought and improve work.” Sometimes, however, in order to accentuate women’s advancement the male characters are portrayed in a completely negative fashion. For instance, in Marina’s Destiny (1953; Chinese title: Malina de mingyun, 1954) Marina’s husband remains “a mean, selfish person with bourgeois thoughts,” despite Marina’s efforts to influence him. The film proclaims that the good life in the future belongs to Soviet citizens with sublime Communist

32 Mei Duo, “Rang women jinyibu de lai liaojie Sulian renmin de shenghuo” [Let us learn more about the life of the Soviet people], 15.
morals like Marina’s. As for people like her husband, if they cannot stay on the right track, they will be abandoned by the new society.

Interestingly, while such Soviet films about women’s progress were shown in China, the emerging Chinese cinema was producing similar stories encouraging women to break away from conventional gender norms. For example, both *Women Locomotive Drivers* (1951) and *Huang Baomei* (1958) depict ordinary female workers rising to become nationally celebrated model workers, like Tanya in *The Radiant Path*. The “progressive women and conservative men” narrative was also reflected in a number of Chinese films about socialist construction, including *Steel Balls and Flywheels* (1958), *Spring is Always a Variety of Colors* (1959), *A Female Hairdresser* (1962), and *Li Shuangshuang* (1963). As in Soviet cinema, these films were made to underscore women’s rising consciousness and their enthusiasm for socialist production and technical innovation. By contrast, the male coworkers are portrayed as adhering to outmoded methods and husbands as always complaining about their wives’ commitment to work and “neglect” of the family. Yet as these films proceed, the men are educated in the new gender relations and come to understand women’s essential role in building socialism. In the end, men’s attitudes toward women are changed, and all disputes at work or in the household are resolved, demonstrating that women can manage perfectly between the home and the workplace.

The parallels between Soviet and Chinese cinematic narratives were not a coincidence. The progress of women toward liberty and equality, as an important index of social advancement, is a proclaimed objective of socialism. Like its Soviet counterpart, the PRC government found cinema an effective tool for propagating ideas and concepts about “women’s liberation.” In the 1950s when the Chinese film making industry was still young and undeveloped, Soviet films
both eased China’s film shortage and provided a model for Chinese film making. Under Soviet influence, Chinese cinema also created a number of progressive female characters. For example, the Northeastern Film Studio in Changchun, which was the first major studio to dub Soviet films in the early PRC, made quite a few films featuring women. Given the low capacity of film studios and limited resources of that era, attaching such importance to women reveals that “respect for women was still a ‘burning question of the day.’”

The priority that Soviet and Chinese cinemas gave to “the woman question” was raising public consciousness, and Chinese women were gaining more respect and self-esteem. Stories of “progressive women and conservative men” from films encouraged thousands of Chinese women to take on jobs customarily occupied by men and to surpass men in their professions. By practicing the principles of “socialist womanhood” promoted in cinema, a good number of women such as Liang Jun claimed national titles of “Model Worker” and “First Woman.” Their accomplishments further inspired women across the country. For instance, in the Northwest several women set up a film projection team out of their determination to learn from Soviet women. “Now they have got rid of their dependence on male comrades for heavy tasks and are actively engaged in demanding physical work. In the past, they easily got worn out from carrying the equipment. After exercising their bodies, four women can now handle a Soviet power generator of more than 300 pounds effortlessly.”

In the countryside, the films they showed and their own achievements set the example for peasant women, who were inspired to catch up with the times. Those who used to be unwilling to go to local schools changed their attitudes. “Rural

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33 Leyda, *Dianying*, 185.
34 For a study of “First Woman,” see Tina Mai Chen, “Re-forming the Chinese National Body.”
35 Xiang Ping, “Yige nü fangying dui” [A female projection team], 26-27.
women realize that under Chairman Mao’s leadership, women can do anything as long as they work hard.”

It was this belief that brought women to the front lines of socialist construction, including factories, construction sites, and faraway posts. They were seen climbing telegraph poles, digging reservoirs, building dams, operating locomotives, flying airplanes, etc. Following Soviet women’s footsteps, women of New China were practicing the state theory of women’s emancipation: only by entering the public sphere of social production can women achieve equality and ultimate liberation.

**The “Standard Socialist Love”**

When a woman takes an active part in social production and devotes herself to the state and the collective, not only is she marching toward personal liberation, but she is also making herself more qualified for the new-style male-female relationships based on socialist principles. This is another concept that the “progressive women and conservative men” film narrative tried to impart to women. A 1951 issue of *Dazhong dianying* elaborated on this concept by discussing the attitude toward love reflected in *The Kuban Cossacks*. Besides touting the “happy life” under Stalin’s leadership, the film also squeezes in a couple of “standard” love plots. In his article titled “Our Tomorrow,” Chief Editor Mei Duo began by extolling “the brilliant life in Soviet film” and “the Soviet people’s patriotic ardor for work.” Then he turned to his main point about the relationship between Galina and Gordei. In Mei Duo’s words, Galina has “true romantic feelings”—she loves Gordei but would never tolerate his mistakes. “Their love is not simply the

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36 Ibid.
intimate relationship between men and women.” Instead, it is built on the principle of criticism and self-criticism and is “never separated from the people’s cause and their love for the motherland.”

In the same issue Mei Duo wrote another article titled “Let Us Learn More about the Life of the Soviet People” in response to some questions raised by readers’ letters. Some readers found it frivolous that Nikolai and Dasha, another pair of lovers in The Kuban Cossacks, fall in love without an adequate understanding of each other. With regard to this “mistaken view” resulting from “insufficient knowledge of Soviet society,” Mei Duo first made it clear that “male-female relations in the Soviet Union have already achieved real equality.”

[Love in a socialist society] is absolutely different from what it is in the feudal and capitalist societies. As Engels pointed out, “a man no longer has to procure a woman with money or other social forces, while a woman no longer has to give herself to a man for concerns other than true love, nor does she have to refuse marriage with a man she loves for fear of economic difficulties.” That is to say, nowadays a brand-new type of true human relationship has been established.

Building on this explanation, the editor elaborated on Nikolai and Dasha’s personal background, especially their outstanding performance in production, driving home the point that “there is mutual understanding and shared ideals for life between them.” In conclusion, Mei Duo wrote: “Marriage and family are not just based on sexual attraction. The principal thing is mutual interests founded on production and culture, as well as shared political and ideological views.” Thus Mei Duo reassured readers that the love between Nikolai and Dasha mirrors the happy and equal relations between the sexes in Soviet society.

38 Mei Duo, “Rang women jinyibu de lai liaojie Sulian renmin de shenghuo,” 15.
39 Ibid.
Compared with European and American films, the Soviet films imported to the PRC were low-key about intimacy. Even so, some Chinese viewers found in them “too many love affairs” and were embarrassed by the love scenes.\textsuperscript{40} In response, \textit{Dazhong dianying} published a number of articles to explain that love is an essential part of life and people deserve love in their spare time; and that hugging, kissing, singing, and dancing in Soviet films “signal the joy of labor, as well as the pure, healthy love born out of work.” Along the same lines, the marriage between Pavlo and Marinka in \textit{The Rich Bride} is interpreted as the fruit of their production competition, and in \textit{Tractor Driver} it is through passionately working together that Klim and ace female tractor driver Mariana fall in love. However, none of the articles neglected to add in the end that “Soviet people do not regard love as the main part of or all about life. . . . To them the most important thing is love of the country, the people, and work.”\textsuperscript{41}

However, women of Maoist China were reminded that simply becoming a diehard worker, ever loyal to the country, is not enough. When a woman lags behind her man, as in \textit{Cavalier of the Golden Star} (1950; Chinese title: \textit{Jinxing yingxiong}, 1951), she needs to catch up. A review from \textit{Dazhong dianying}, representing the official interpretation of the film, commented on the Golden Star Sergei Tutarinov’s fiancée:

\begin{quote}
She used to be an ordinary peasant girl. She loves Sergei, but feels belittled by his accomplishments, although Sergei never looks down on her. However, she believes that she can catch up. . . . With great effort, she finally makes herself an operator at a power plant. . . . [In the end] this happy couple strive hand in hand on the road to Communism!\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
As a socialist Cinderella story, *Cavalier of the Golden Star* quickly became popular among Chinese female audiences. Many women were inspired by “that girl who used to be an oxcart driver” and idolized her as a role model. For them, the film illustrated the new concepts of “socialist love” and “equal marriage,” and at the same time it demonstrated how to obtain both: a woman needed to be politically progressive, possess professional skills, and demonstrate an independent personhood, so as to stand on equal terms with men in romantic relations; only when built on this type of equality could a relationship meet the requirements of the new era. It is in this way that the Chinese government successfully politicized personal life through modeling proper intimate relationships in *Cavalier of the Golden Star* and other films with similar themes.

**Conclusion**

In the early years of the PRC, movie watching was a critical aspect of social and political life. Thanks to China’s “friendship” with the “Soviet big brother,” a large number of imported Soviet films acquired distinct status in China. For their propagandist potential, Soviet films were used in China to promote an understanding of socialism and the “great Soviet life” that was to soon occur in China. In this endeavor, Chinese cultural authorities not only set the parameters for which Soviet films were permissible but also wove the official definitions of state, citizenship, and socialist ideology into the translation and interpretation of selected Soviet films.

Since movie watching was an especially popular form of mass entertainment, the influence that this state ideology exerted on the viewing public cannot be underestimated. The

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concepts and perceptions that Chinese women derived from watching certain Soviet films in the 1950s speak volumes about the “collaboration” between the propaganda in Soviet films and the self-serving rhetoric of the Chinese government. Using the image of “happy, emancipated women” in Soviet films as a concrete example, the CCP furnished women with basic knowledge about socialism and the path for “women’s liberation.” At the same time, by advocating the socialist womanhood idealized by Soviet cinema, the PRC government educated Chinese women along party lines about how to handle relations between the state and the individual, how to manage love, marriage, family, and work, and why one should bring all this in line with the “historical task” of building socialism in China. In this way Soviet films helped the Chinese government quickly incorporate the female population into socialist state formation.

Although it is important to recognize state intervention in the circulation of Soviet films and the production of knowledge, it is equally important to acknowledge agency on the part of the people. While people of Maoist China did not control what emanated from the authorities, they did determine what they liked to absorb and to what extent. Chinese women’s enthusiastic response to Soviet films and the ideals that Soviet films represented cannot be reduced to top-down indoctrination; rarely can political pressure do anything beyond filling a theater with vacant minds.

To evaluate the impact of Soviet films on Chinese women, requires a look at changes in Chinese women’s self-perception regarding Soviet films and Chinese propaganda. Soviet women’s equal social status with men and the tremendous progress they accomplished, whether a filmic mirage in Soviet cinema or in the CCP’s purposeful glorification, provided a basis for Chinese women to visualize “our tomorrow” in an ultimate socialist state. Viewing the future
through the lens of Soviet women, Chinese women came to see themselves “holding up half the sky” of New China. Invoking Soviet women’s transformation from “baba” (old woman) to “comrade,” Chinese women claimed their legitimacy in the new political order. The Cinderella stories of “stakhanovites” posed an inspiring challenge to Chinese female workers, many of whom quickly turned themselves into model workers. The economic independence that came with Chinese women’s entry into the wage-earning workforce also brought the prospect of a new relationship between men and women in Chinese society.

In the feminist critique of the means and ends of “women’s liberation” in Communist China, the Maoist acclamation that “men and women are the same” is often viewed as a rather simplified and naïve understanding of sexual equality, one that led to Chinese women’s lack of consciousness of their own gender. Feminist analysis also asserts that the purpose of directing women to public social production was primarily to replenish the labor force. These critiques offer insight into the “Maoist mapping of gender” during the ultra-left Cultural Revolutionary era, but when applied to the condition of Chinese women in the 1950s, they downplay the initiatives that women took when responding to the state’s gender rhetoric.

As this chapter shows, Chinese women took an active part in “re-creating” their Soviet sisters and taking advantage of the Maoist acclamation that “Time is different; men and women are the same.” In so doing, they demonstrated a strong consciousness that being gendered female was not supposed to result in discrimination or social limitations. It was this consciousness that brought out women’s own desire to work outside the home and to be “the

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44 Although Mao said this in the 1960s, the concept was already in place a decade earlier.  
same” as men. Empowered by the language and imagery about “women’s liberation” from Soviet films, women of China spelled out their own visions of liberty and equality.

In this sense, Soviet films, along with the Lenin jacket, the Soviet big floral cloth, and the bulaji, served as a liberating force for Chinese women during the era of Sino-Soviet friendship, China’s under recognized “age of openness” amid Cold War isolationism. The cultural connections with the Soviet Union and its allies brought a socialist cosmopolitanism to the PRC. Chinese women certainly carved out their own space to maneuver during this relatively liberal period.

The Soviets had promoted “gender role adjustment centered on the fullest possible female participation in the labor force, and mobilized labor devoted to production targeted at fulfilling ever more ambitious state plans.” China copied these ideals in the campaign to learn from the Soviet Union and kept doing so even after Khrushchev’s 1956 “thaw” revealed that many of them obscured a quite different reality. “Instead of following the Soviet path of correcting for the excesses that had resulted from pretending that the ideals were actually the reality, Mao chose to pursue the ideals more intensely.” It was Mao’s rigid conformity to Stalinist principles, despite his determination to break away from the Soviet model, that locked Chinese women in rigid conformity to the idealized Soviet socialist womanhood, resulting in a strained understanding of gender difference and romantic relationship in the unprecedented labor mobilization of the Great Leap Forward and the “thought control” of the Cultural Revolution. Colorful clothes were put away, and men and women were dressed in the same black or dark blue uniforms. There was no

47 Ibid, 520.
public discourse about such things as romance, dating, or sex, but rather a self-disciplining, self-restraining morality. Much of the androgyny, official puritanism, and demand for “proletarian love” exceeded the limits on men and women in Soviet times. “Even at the start of the 1980s,” Gilbert Rozman observes, “visitors to China found that it had outdone Soviet attempts to deny individual traditions and preferences, leaving morale very low.”

48 Ibid, 520.
Chapter 6. Role Models and Petty-Bourgeois Sentiments: Soviet Literature and Mass Reading in Maoist China

For many Chinese born between the 1930s and 1950s, a mention of “Russian literature” is enough to trigger memories that overwhelm. Their sensitivity to Russian literary works, especially those of the Soviet period, is perhaps second only to that of their Russian contemporaries. Although Russian literature has been admired elsewhere outside its birthplace, nothing can match the “reading mania” it experienced in the early PRC. People recited Pushkin and Turgenev, quoted Gorky and Nikolai Ostrovsky, and invested their youth, love, and dreams in Russian literature. “The Soviet Union was my nineteenth year, my first love, and the beginning of my literary career,” confessed Wang Meng, a renowned Chinese writer born in 1934.¹

The spectacle of Chinese admiration for Russian literature in the PRC has often been attributed to the fluctuating political and ideological relations between the Soviet and the Chinese Communist parties. Indeed, it was the Sino-Soviet friendship and mutual alliance in the 1950s that brought the Chinese mania for Russian literature to its apogee, as it was the split between the two parties in the following decade that ultimately terminated public circulation of Soviet books and open display of personal interest in anything related to the Soviet Union. However, this convenient explanation overlooks the shared, or similar, understanding of the function of literature between China and Russia in the twentieth century. In both cultures, literature adopted a mission to fix societal ills, thus earning writers the esteem of “teachers of life” and passionate attention of readers, as well as the favor and suspicion of communist regimes. In

¹ Wang Meng, Sulian ji, 21.
both countries, literature, politics, and society were inextricably intertwined in their revolutions and social movements. This commonality was a fundamental factor that inclined Chinese intellectuals to Russian literature at the start of the twentieth century, as well as the main reason that Russian literature enjoyed enormous state sponsorship and long-lasting popularity in the PRC.²

Although “Russian literature” is used here as an umbrella term that encompassed Russian-language writings since the early nineteenth century, this chapter is primarily concerned with those of the Stalinist period, which constituted the bulk of translated Russian literary works circulated in the first decade of the PRC. In the Stalinist era, literature was an enterprise of high seriousness and state pressure. In 1934, all Soviet writers became part of the Writers Union and thus were subject to centralized control. At its opening congress, writers—in the Stalinist phrase, “engineers of human souls”—were presented with a single permissible style: socialist realism, “the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development.”³ The term really meant “easy to follow” and “party line.” Although in the Soviet Union “official” literature was offset by “dissident” variants even under high Stalinism, the literary works that the Chinese government borrowed during the time of Sino-Soviet friendship were mostly socialist-realist works that toed the party line. With the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War, these works have largely been discarded in Russia and other countries formerly in the Soviet orbit. Yet in today’s China some of them, such as How the Steel Was Tempered, Stories of Zoya

² For an overview of Russian literature in twentieth-century China (especially in the pre-PRC period), see Mark Gamsa, The Reading of Russian Literature in China: A Moral Example and Manual of Practice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1. It is also worth mentioning that although the book has a focus on literature, the function of literature in both Chinese and Russian societies that Gamsa discusses can be applied to other cultural products such as film and music.
and Shura, and The Young Guards, are still in circulation and have a large readership. What exactly is the enduring appeal of Soviet literature to Chinese readers?

Soviet literature exerted a profound influence on Chinese writers, literary critics, and translators throughout the twentieth century. This impact has generated voluminous works in contemporary Chinese literary studies. 4 “Reaching China, the works of these Russian writers were being translated into another language, but also into another cultural environment, in which they were then enlisted in support of different positions.” 5 However, how Russian literature was received by the rank and file in China remains a topic rarely explored. Given Chinese writers’ high recognition of Russian literature, numerous readers must have been inclined to read the widely circulated Russian books. But can we get a close picture of how extensively Soviet literature influenced Chinese people? What was the Chinese government’s purpose of introducing Soviet socialist-realist literature in the 1950s and what message were Soviet texts trying to impart? More important, how did readers respond and what did they get from reading? From available sources the chapter will reconstruct a sketch of public reading in Maoist China.


Channels for Popularizing Soviet Literature

In the first half of the twentieth century, especially after the October Revolution, many Chinese intellectuals and social activists such as Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai turned to Russian revolutionary culture for a solution to China’s national problems. Russian literature was henceforth introduced into China in considerable quantities. Not only did it provide an alternative frame of reference to the Euro-American model for the modern transformation of Chinese literature, but its increasing impact on Chinese readers also assisted China’s communist revolution. All this laid the foundation for the flourishing of Soviet literature in the PRC. The momentum gathered in previous decades was an essential part of the forces that brought out China’s full-scale introduction of Soviet literature in the 1950s.

As early as 1932 Lu Xun observed that Russian literature was China’s “mentor and friend.” However, the real age when the whole nation was under direct tutelage of Russian literature was later, during the Sino-Soviet friendship period. The PRC authorities in charge of literature stated emphatically that China should stand “unswervingly” and “unwaveringly” in learning from the Soviet literature. Borrowing Soviet official literary line, Chinese literature was used not only to extol the party’s ideology but, more important, to educate the people in that ideology. Because writers were recognized as “engineers of the human soul” by the Soviet leadership, Soviet literature offered the Chinese party a ready-to-use textbook for social

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7 Xi Zhongxun, “Duiyu dianying gongzuo de yijian” [Suggestion on the filmic work], Dianying chuangzuo tongxun [Report on filmic creation], no. 1 (1953).
8 Stalin authorized the use of “engineers of the human soul” (Russian: Инженеры человеческих душ and Chinese: 人类灵魂的工程师) as a reference to the role of writers and other cultural workers. During his meeting with writers in preparation for the first Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, Stalin said: “The production of souls is more important than the production of tanks. . . And therefore I raise my glass to you, writers, the engineers of the human soul” (Joseph Stalin, “Speech at home of Maxim Gorky,” 26 October 1932). This idea was taken up by Andrei Zhdanov and developed into the idea of Socialist Realism. In the PRC, the term was extensively applied to the teaching profession.
engineering. It was in this context that Soviet literature was interwoven into the grains of social and cultural life of China, thereby playing a consequential role in shaping the minds of the Chinese coming of age in the early PRC.

There were three channels through which Soviet literature was popularized in the 1950s. First, school education offered a platform for the spread of Soviet literature among Chinese youth. From the very beginning of the PRC, Soviet literary works were incorporated into Chinese language (yuwen) textbooks for all levels. According to the 1950 guidelines for textbook compilation, all texts must be “ideologically and politically correct,” and at the same time, they should “cultivate patriotic and internationalist spirits in students.” In the spirit of internationalism, it was believed that Soviet literature represented the ideal texts befitting such principles: “Soviet literature is the most advanced literature in the world, the paragon of Socialist Realist creative writing, and excellent material for educating our country’s youth in communist thought.”9 For this reason, works translated from Russian took priority over those from other languages in the foreign literature section of Chinese textbooks.10

The inclusion of Soviet literature in Chinese textbooks was a noteworthy feature and a direct result of China’s nationwide educational reform in the field of Chinese language. As in other fields, the reform in Chinese-language teaching aimed at emulating Soviet teaching materials and methodology. Because in Soviet schools the teaching of literature occupied an important position and was separate from the teaching of the Russian language, Chinese

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10 Yu Yuelong, “Jianguo hou de zhongxue yuwen jiaocai shuping” [A review of middle school Chinese textbooks after the founding of the PRC], Zhongxue yuwen jiaoxue cankao [Reference for teaching Chinese in middle school], no. 3 (1997), 2-4.
educators and teachers started to give more attention to students’ training in literature. Between 1951 and 1952 research units for Chinese-language teaching were set up at key schools and discussions about reform plans were vibrant.\(^{11}\) After a few years’ research, debate and experimentation, a radical step was taken in 1956, finally separating literature from Chinese-language teaching. In the same year the Department of Education issued separate teaching programs for literature and Chinese language.

The program for literature not only set the goals for literature teaching but also defined what was good to be included in literature textbooks. It stipulated that the task of literature education was to “help students form socialist orientation; foster dialectical materialist worldviews; foster communist ethics, especially patriotic spirits, correct attitude towards work, and collectivist spirits. . .” To such ends, new textbooks for literature expanded the coverage of Soviet literature, particularly the works that demonstrated high socialist qualities. For instance, in a suggested extracurricular reading list prepared by the People’s Education Press in 1956, Soviet literature received the lion’s share in the section of foreign literature.\(^{12}\) In these textbooks and suggested readings, Chinese students were exposed to a spectrum of Soviet life: Ivan Michurin developed a new fruit by grafting a pear tree onto an apple tree;\(^{13}\) a tribal chief burned his heart.

\(^{11}\) A good number of research articles and monographs came out during this time, promoting the reform in the field. See, for example, Liu Guoying, “Guanyu zhongdeng xuexiao de guowen jiaoxue” [On the teaching of Chinese language in middle school], Renmin ribao [People’s daily], 15 November 1949; Ye Shengtao, “Guanyu yuyan wenxue fenke wenti” [On the issue of dividing language and literature], Renmin jiaoyu [People’s education], no. 8 (1955); Li Jinxi, Xin guowen jiaoxuefa [A new teaching methodology for Chinese language] (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanbu, 1950).


\(^{13}\) Ivan Michurin (1885 - 1935) is a famed horticulturist whose theories of hybridization were adopted as the official science of genetics by the Soviet regime, despite the nearly universal rejection of this doctrine by scientists.
to illuminate a path that took his people out of a dark forest;\textsuperscript{14} Lenin praised a soldier who strictly observed military rules and principles – proof of the revolutionary leader’s easygoing personality;\textsuperscript{15} Shura played tricks on Zoya while she was deeply absorbed in reading; and numerous other stories about Soviet soldiers, children, school life, and so on.\textsuperscript{16} Until the 1958 Great Leap Forward terminated the division between language and literature in school teachings, the classroom served as an important venue for the dissemination of Soviet literature and the socialist ethos it embodied.

The second channel used to promote Soviet literature was making it more readable for the general public. Many Soviet novels now had abridged versions written in simple, plain, and sometimes vernacular Chinese suitable to workers, peasants, and soldiers (\textit{gong-nong-bing}, a hackneyed phrase of the time referring to the nonelites).\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, in consideration of the high illiteracy rate of the population, adaptations of Soviet literature in the form of comic books were made widely available. As early as in the 1920s when comic book publication was at an embryonic stage, comic strips based on foreign literary works already existed, although in a very small quantity. In Shanghai, the center of comic book publication where over 90 percent of all the comic books were produced yearly, there were more than 70 comic book publishing houses and more than three thousand bookstalls for comic book rentals before 1949. With their easy

\textsuperscript{14} This refers to an excerpt in a middle-school textbook. Titled “Yingsu weishenme kai honghua” [Why opium poppies have red flowers], and is based on a story from Maxim Gorky’s \textit{Starukha Izergil} [Old Woman Izergil] published in 1895.
\textsuperscript{15} This text appearing in an elementary school textbook is titled “Lening he weibing” [Lenin and a soldier], which tells an anecdote about Lenin and a soldier. The soldier refused to let Lenin enter a meeting venue before Lenin showed his identification.
\textsuperscript{17} Zhou Libo, “Women zhen’ai de Sulian wenxue” [The Soviet literature we cherish], \textit{Renmin wenxue} [People’s literature], no. 1 (1949), 70.
readability, comic books gained a large readership among schoolchildren, factory workers, and other people with low literacy. During the early stage of Chinese comic book development, Lu Xun, Qu Qiubai, and Mao Dun paid special attention to this emergent literary and art form. Of this group, Lu Xun in particular wrote many essays to support the publishing of comic books.\(^{18}\) Several of Lu Xun’s translations of Russian literature were made into comic books, including *The Rout* and *Dead Souls*. The publication of *The Illustrations to Cement* in 1931 sponsored by Lu Xun, which consists of prints from woodcuts, can also be included in the category of comic books.\(^{19}\)

When the CCP seized power, China’s comic book market was viewed by the new regime as a critical cultural front. In an effort to eradicate the cultural influences from old times, the government banned and recalled a great number of comic books published before 1949, particularly those anti-Communist and anti-Soviet ones published under the auspices of the GMD.\(^{20}\) At the same time, in order to win the readership of old comic books and propagate the new ideology and policies, the government redirected the industry. In early 1950 the Popular Pictorial Press (Dazhong tuhua chubanshe) was founded under the direction of the Department of Culture, and in the next year it was incorporated into the newly established People’s Fine Art Press (Renmin meishu chubanshe). The bi-monthly *Comic Strip Newspaper* (Lianhuanhua bao) also came into being in 1951, as was the Shanghai People’s Fine Art Press (Shanghai renmin

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\(^{18}\) See, for example, “‘Lianhuan tuhua’ bianhu” [Justification for ‘comic strips’], *Wenxue yuebao* [Literary monthly], no. 4 (15 November 1932); “Lun ‘disan zhong ren’” [On ‘the third kind of people’], *Xiandai* [Modern], vol. 2, no. 1 (1 November 1932). Reprinted in Lu Xun, *Nanqiang beidiao ji* [Collection of mixed dialects], 56.


\(^{20}\) Shortly after the establishment of the PRC, Mao Zedong passed instructions regarding comic book production to Zhou Yang, the Vice Minister of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the CCP. Mao said, “Comic books are favored not only by children but also by adults. The illiterate read them, and the intellectual also read them. Would it be possible to set up a publishing house for new comic books so as to supplant the old ones spreading stories of genies, knights errant, and superstition?” Accordingly, new publishers specializing in “healthy” comic strips multiplied in the following three years.
meishu chubanshe) after a merger of several fine art publishers. The institutionalization of the comic book industry thus opened a new chapter for comic books.\(^{21}\)

Naturally, at this time of Sino-Soviet friendship, topics from Soviet literature or anything about the Soviet Union became recurring themes in newly published comic books. Between 1952 and 1962, more than forty long and medium-length Soviet novels were turned into comic books, plus a large number of short stories. Some of the most popular Soviet novels, such as *Stories of Zoya and Shura*, *How the Steel Was Tempered*, and Gorky’s autobiographic trilogy, had as many as three distinct comic book versions.\(^{22}\) In 1955 the Central Government issued specific directions regarding the expansion of comic book publication and circulation. In response, publishers at all levels quickly plunged into comic book creation, which gave additional Soviet stories life in China. The comic books of this time relied primarily on visuals to build the storyline and involved only a few words of explanation. The easy readability drew people of all social levels to comic books, which also allowed Soviet works to reach a broader audience.\(^{23}\)

As important as textbooks or comic books, the third channel to popularize Soviet literature was through conventional publishing, with added support from sustained state funding. The government’s eagerness to follow the Soviet path and to educate the people with Soviet literature led to a golden age of publication, which in turn fueled public interest in Soviet literature. In the first decade of the PRC, each of the major publishing houses, such as the

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\(^{22}\) Lu Ming, “Waiguo xiaoshuo lianhuanhua” [Comic books of foreign novels], *Linhuanhua shijie bao* [Newspaper of the world of comic strips], 17 June 2009.

People’s Literature Press (Renmin wenxue chubanshe), Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House (Shanghai wenyi chubanshe), and Children’s Press (Shaoer chubanshe), published between three and four hundred titles of Russian/Soviet literary works ranging from ten to twenty million copies. According to a 1959 article reviewing the translation of foreign literature in China, “between October 1949 and December 1958 a total of 3,526 editions of Soviet (including Russian) literary works have been issued, which constitutes 65.8 percent of all the foreign literary works translated during this period; this equals 82,005,000 copies in circulation, which is more than 74.4 percent of the total copies of translated foreign literature.”24 According to another source, more than ninety titles published one hundred thousand copies or more; works such as An Ordinary Soldier and Chetvertaiia vysota (Chinese title: Guliya de daolu 古丽雅的道路) published five hundred thousand to one million copies each; publications of the most popular works such as How the Steel Was Tempered, Stories of Zoya and Shura, Brothers Yershov (by Vsevolod Kochetov), and Story of the Machine and Tractor Station Director and the Chief Agronomist (by Galina Nikolayeva) ran between 1 and 1.5 million copies.25

To help understand the translating and publishing fervor and to give a better sense of the themes of Soviet literature that were translated, here is a list of Soviet literary works published by People’s Literature Press (Renmin wenxue chubanshe), the lead literature publishing house between 1951 and 1959.

1951: *The Iron Flood* (1924) by Alexander Serafimovich

*Unforgettable 1919* (1949) by Vsevolod Vyshnevsky; the State Prize of the USSR, 1950

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24 Bian Zhilin, Ye Shuifu, Yan Kejia, and Chen Shen, “Shinian lai de waiguo wenxue fanyi he yanjiu gongzuo” [The translation and research of foreign literature over the past ten years], Wenxue pinglun [Literary criticism], no. 5 (1959), 45-47 and 63-65.

25 Wu Junzhong, “Eluosi wenxue dui zhongguo wenhua de shenceng yingxiang” [The deeper-level influence of Russian literature on Chinese culture], *Shenzhen daxue xuebao* [renwen shehui kexue ban] [Journal of Shenzhen University (humanities and social sciences edition)], vol. 23, no. 6 (2006), 16.
1952: *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1932) by Nikolai Ostrovsky  
*The Rout* (1926) by Alexander Fadeyev  
*The Ordeal, Book I* (1922) by Aleksey Tolstoy  
*Dead Souls* (1842) by Nikolai Gogol  
*The Overcoat* (1842) by Nikolai Gogol

1953: *Cavalier of the Gold Star* (1947-1948) by Semyon Babayevsky; the Stalin Prize, 1949  
*Light on the Land* (1949-1950) by Semyon Babayevsky; the Stalin Prize, 1951  
*Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* (1924) by Vladimir Mayakovsky  
*Far from Moscow* (1948) by Vasili Azhayev; the Stalin Prize, 1949  
*What Is to Be Done?* (1862–1863) by Nikolay Chernyshevsky

1954: *The Seagull* (1896) by Anton Chekhov  
*The Front* (1942) by Alexander Korneichuk; State Prize of the USSR, 1943  
*The Young Guard* (1945) by Alexander Fadeyev; the Stalin Prize, 1946  
*Three Sisters* (1941) by Anton Chekhov  
*Eugene Onegin* (1825–1832) by Alexander Pushkin

1955: *The Lower Depths* (1902) by Maxim Gorky  
*Fathers and Sons* (1862) by Ivan Turgenev  
*Home of the Gentry* (1859) by Ivan Turgenev  
*Good!* (1927) by Vladimir Mayakovsky  
*Bruski: A Story of Peasant Life in Soviet Russia* (1928–1937) by Fedor Panferov  
*On the Eve* (1860) by Ivan Turgenev  
*Who is Happy in Russia?* (1863–1876) by Nikolay Nekrasov  
*The History of My Contemporary* (1905–1921) by Vladimir Korolenko

1956: *Anna Karenina* (1873–1877) by Leo Tolstoy  
*Oblomov* (1859) by Ivan Goncharov  
*A Month in the Country* (1855) by Ivan Turgenev  
*Enemies* (1906) by Maxim Gorky  
*Short Stories of Chekhov; Song of the Stormy Petrel* (1901) by Maxim Gorky  
*And Quiet Flows the Don* (1934) by Mikhail Sholokhov  
*Mother* (1906) by Maxim Gorky  
*Poor Folk* (1846) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky  
*The Captain’s Daughter* (1836) by Alexander Pushkin  
*My Childhood, Autobiography Part I* (1913–1914) by Maxim Gorky  
*My Universities, Autobiography Part III* (1923) by Maxim Gorky  
*Far from Moscow* (1948) by Vasili Azhayev  
*In the World, Autobiography Part II* (1916) by Maxim Gorky  
*The Story of a Real Man* (1946) by Boris Polevoy; the Stalin Prize, 1947

1957: *The Artamonov Business* (1925) by Maxim Gorky  
*Dubrovsky* (1841) by Alexander Pushkin  
*Resurrection* (1899) by Leo Tolstoy  
*The Pedagogical Poem* (1933–1935) by Anton Makarenko  
*The Road to Calvary, Part Two* (1921–1940) by Aleksey Tolstoy; the Stalin Prize, 1943
Selected Poems of Mayakovsky; Rudin (1856) by Ivan Turgenev
Chapayev (1923) by Dmitry Furmanov
Invasion (1942) by Leonid Leonov; State Prize of the USSR, 1943
Those Who Seek (1954) by Daniil Granin
The Minor (1782) by Denis Fonvizin
The Expedition of Igor (1185–1187), a historical epic
In the World, Autobiography Part II (1916) by Maxim Gorky

1958: The Idiot (1868-1869) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky
The Forty-First (1924) by Boris Lavrenyov
The Blind Musician (1886) by Vladimir Korolenko
Time, Forward! (1932) by Valentin Kataev
Armoured Train (1922) Vsevolod Ivanov
The Open Book (1949-1956) by Veniamin Kaverin
War and Peace (1869) by Leo Tolstoy

1959: Woe from Wit (1833) by Aleksandr Griboyedov
The Storm (1859) by Alexander Ostrovsky
Mumu (1852) by Ivan Turgenev
On the Eve (1860) by Ivan Turgenev
The Tight Knot (1956) by Vladimir Tendryakov

Altogether, the People’s Literature Press published more than sixty-five book-length translations of Soviet creative literary works between 1951 and 1959, plus publications on Soviet literary theory and criticism. These included new translations (of works that had been translated before and of works that had been translated for the first time) as well as reprints of previous translations, which covered both the “old Russian” (pre-revolutionary) masterpieces and the “new Russian” literature of the Soviet era. Gorky continued to occupy first place in the Chinese ranking. Although most of Gorky’s major works had already been translated before 1949, interest in Gorky was so keen that new translations were released. Sholokhov gained more popularity among Chinese readers in the early 1950s. During this period, And Quiet Flows the Don was retranslated based on Sholokhov’s 1953 revised edition. Likewise, Mayakovsky received special attention in the PRC. In addition to his major works, a five-volume collection of his poems, plays,
essays, public addresses, and reportage was compiled. These preferences were also shared by other publishing houses enthusiastically engaged in popularizing Soviet literature.

There are three distinct features to the literary translation of this period. Most notably, the scale of translation and publication was unprecedented, whether in terms of the quantity of works and the range of writers covered or with reference to the number of Chinese translators involved and the extent of circulation. Second, the percentage of new works written in the Soviet era was overwhelmingly high. The Chinese publishing industry and book market were engulfed by Soviet books. More than one thousand Soviet writers found their works read and studied by Chinese researchers and readers. Third, Soviet works were viewed as the “canons” of literary creation and criticism, and anything from the Soviet world of letters was readily accepted, often uncritically. In particular, works that had won state-level prizes in the Soviet Union were held in high esteem and thus favored by Chinese translators who had to “play safe” in selecting what to translate. However, some of these works were sheer Stalinist propaganda and lacking in artistic value. This political criterion brought mainstream Soviet writers to the forefront but drove many excellent writers and works that did not observe the party line to the margins. Furthermore, some writers who had previously been introduced to China were removed from the publishing list because of their “incompatibility” with the current political situation. Yesenin, Blok, Zamyatin, and Demian Bedny were typical examples.

**Soviet Literature as Inspiration**

Most of the Soviet literary products circulated in the Chinese book market of the 1950s centered on two major themes. The first theme covers the wars that Russians fought in the first half of the twentieth century. For the Russian Civil War, the most celebrated works are *And Quiet*
Flows the Don, Chapayev, How the Steel Was Tempered, Bread (or The Defense of Tsaritsyn, 1937 by Alexey Tolstoy, Chinese title: Baowei Chalijin 保卫察里津), along with The Rout and The Iron Flood, which were already influential before 1949. On the Great Patriotic War, well-known works included Simonov’s Days and Nights (1944), Fadeyev’s The Young Guard, and Stories of Zoya and Shura (1953) written by Zoya’s mother Lyubov Kosmodemyanskaya.

This body of war literature resonated particularly well among the Chinese in the immediate aftermath of a century of wars and became even more relevant with the outbreak of the Korean War. Many soldiers were reported to have modeled their battlefield heroism on war heroes from Soviet literature. One well known example was a soldier named Huang Jiguang (1930–1952), who was awarded the distinction of “Outstanding Hero” by the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army fighting in the Korean War. He was seriously wounded during the Sangkumryung Campaign against American troops in Korea in October 1952. Despite his wounds, he continued to fight, and after hurling his last hand grenade, he threw himself onto an American pillbox, blocking the machinegun with his own chest. The sacrifice of his life allowed his regiment to advance and finally take an American position.

Huang Jiguang’s self-sacrifice resembled that of Alexander Matrosov (1924 – 1943), an infantry soldier awarded “Hero of the Soviet Union” during World War II, who was widely revered in the Soviet Union via the novel The Life of Alexander Matrosov (1949) by Pavel Zhurba and film An Ordinary Soldier (1948), both of which were based on his life story.26 The novel and the film told stirring tales of the young Alexander (“Sashka”) growing “from rags to

righteousness” and eventually giving his life for his country. Both the novel and the film were introduced to the Chinese audience, to whom Matrosov soon became a familiar name. As the first Soviet film dubbed in Chinese, *An Ordinary Soldier* (Chinese title: *Putong yibing* 普通一兵, Changchun Film Studio, 1949) was shown to the Chinese People’s Volunteer soldiers in Korea. Huang Jiguang was said to have seen this film and possessed several comic books about Soviet heroes, including *The Life of Alexander Matrosov*. For such correlations, Huang Jiguang was referred to as “China’s Matrosov.”

While the Chinese infantry were learning from Matrosov, the air force was inspired by Aleksei Maresyev (1916-2001), a Soviet ace pilot in World War II who lost both legs in a plane crash and fought his way back to active duty and combat using artificial limbs. His saga formed the basis for Boris Polevoy’s immensely popular novel *The Story of A Real Man* and the film of the same title in 1948. The novel was listed as must-read and virtually served as a political textbook for the Chinese air force. Another Soviet role model for Chinese airmen was Marshal of

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29 See the telegraph report from Xinhua News Agency on the Korean frontline by Liu Yunkui, “Huang Jiguang du qiangyan” [Huang Jiguang blocking the machine-gun], 20 October 1952. The report was subsequently expanded and published as a separate book. See Shi Feng and Wang Yuzhang, “Mateluosufu shi de yingxiong Huang Jiguang” [Huang Jiguang, a hero like Matrosov], *Renmin ribao* [People’s daily], 21 December 1952. For subsequent writings about Huang Jiguang, see, for example, Li Ming, *Huang Jiguang* (Beijing: Zhongguo shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1957); Li Jingying, “Huang Jiguang,” in *Qingnian yingxiong de gushi* [Stories of youthful heroes] (Beijing: Qingnian chubanshe, 1965), 152-179. The story was also included in the fourth-grade Chinese textbook by People’s Education Press.


31 Hailed as a model of Socialist Realism, *The Story of a Real Man* sold 10 million copies in the Soviet Union and was awarded the 1947 Stalin Prize. Later it was made into a popular film and an opera by Sergei Prokofiev (written during 1947-1948 and premiered in 1960). Polevoy was also highly regarded in China. Most of his works were introduced to Chinese readers. He also wrote *30,000 Li Across New China* based on his travel notes during a visit to China in 1956.

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Aviation Ivan Mykytovych Kozhedub (1920-1991), at the time a commander of Soviet Aviation Corps in the Korean War. As a World War II fighter and three-time “Hero of the Soviet Union,” Kozhedub was also highly venerated in the Chinese air force.

It was not just soldiers but the whole Chinese society who drew inspiration and strength from stories of Soviet war heroes. At the same time, Chinese heroes, model workers, and other individuals winning state honors were credited not only for their own feats but also for having consciously learned from Soviet heroes. Thus “China’s Zoya” emerged from teenagers who admired Zoya and applied Zoya’s spirits to protecting public properties or fighting against class enemies. The title of “China’s Pavel” was given to people like Wu Yunduo, whose body and spirit were “made of special material.” Wu Yunduo was severely handicapped in a series of experiments testing explosive weapons. Allegedly, he was inspired by Pavel, the protagonist of Nikolai Ostrovsky’s 1932 novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*, his most favorite novel. After Wu Yunduo’s story was publicized by *People’s Daily* with the headline “How the Steel Was Tempered: Introducing China’s Pavel Korchagin,” “China’s Pavel” became a handy appellation for him. Wu Yunduo’s autobiography *Give All to the Party* (*Ba yiqie xiangei dang*, 1953) was seen as a sequel to *How the Steel Was Tempered*. The book further spread the Soviet “iron man” ethos among China’s new generations.

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32 Zoya was a 18-year-old Soviet girl who was captured and martyred by the German Nazis in World War II. In her home country, she was made a national hero. Poems, dramas, films, and radio programs mythologized her. Portraits and sculptures made her a popular icon. In the film version, Zoya is not only a hero but also an exemplary student, an admirer and successor of Stalin. The book about her and her brother, *Stories of Zoya and Shura*, and the film *Zoya* were both extremely popular in China at the time.

33 The novel portrays a legendary character, Pavel Korchagin, who made himself a steel soldier of great determination in October Revolution in Russia and believed personal business must yield to collective interest. Although an accident left Pavel permanently handicapped and he couldn’t easily get about, he finally rose to his feet with great confidence, persistence, and diligence. He is a quintessentially positive hero of socialist realism.

34 See “Gangtie shi zenyang liancheng de: jieshao Zhongguo de Bao’er kechajin,” *Renmin ribao*, 5 October 1951.

35 Zhao Chang’an, “Zhongguo de Bao’er:” *Wu Yunduo zhuans* [China’s Pavel: biography of Wu Yunduo] (Beijing: Zhongguo gongren chubanshe, 2002); Li Yanjie, “Zhongguo de Bao’er – Wu Yunduo,” *Jiaoyu yishu* [Art of education], no. 3 (2000), 4-5; Xu Zhou and Ge Anquan, “Wandong rongzhu Bao’er shi yingxiong Wu Yunduo”
The second major category of Soviet literature circulated in China centered on postwar reconstruction and socialist transformation. Building the country now became the most urgent task for the Chinese government. A large number of “construction-themed” (jianshe ticai) Soviet literary works were translated into Chinese. The passions and aspirations of Soviet citizens portrayed in these works were meant to inspire Chinese readers to build the country toward Soviet-style socialism. Apart from Cement and Virgin Soil Upturned, newly translated works such as Time, Forward! and First Joys (早年的欢乐 also known as 初欢, 1945 by Konstantin Fedin; winner of the Stalin Prize, 1949) quickly gained popularity.

As the foremost example of the reconstruction and transformation genre, Fortitude (Мужество, Chinese title 勇敢, 1938 by Vera Ketlinskaya) became an instant hit among Chinese youths. The novel is based on the modern development of Komsomolsk-on-Amur (Russian: Комсомольск-на-Амуре), a city located in Khabarovsk Krai, Russia and close to China’s northeastern border. The original site of Komsomolsk was part of the Chinese domain since Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century. In 1858, the Qing court, defeated in the Second Opium War, ceded the area to the Russian empire according to the Treaty of Aigun. In 1931, Stalin announced plans to build a new industrial city in this area. With construction beginning in 1932, thousands of volunteers from the Soviet communist youth organization Komsomol arrived to aid construction; henceforth the city was renamed Komsomolsk.

Written in the Stalinist era, Fortitude embraces all the essential elements of socialist realism: its subject matter is derived from real life; it creates protagonists who are positive

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36 Wu Yunduo’s title of “China’s Pavel” was even recognized by Soviet readers who learned about him through the Russian translation of his autobiography. It was reported that Nikolai Ostrovsky’s wife paid a visit to Wu Yunduo when he was being treated in a Soviet hospital during 1949-1950. At the same time, the Ostrovsky Museum in Moscow also held an exhibit showcasing Wu Yunduo’s achievements.
figures with full communist awareness; it depicts people’s rich spiritual life and their happiness from living and working under the Stalin’s leadership. Overall, it is tailored to reform and educate readers with a high socialist ethos suitable for building the nation on the party’s blueprint. The author portrays an array of participants in developing Komsomol: factory worker, train driver, sales assistant, warehouseman, Red Army veteran, college graduate, party cadre, etc. Having left their original jobs and lifestyles, these people settle in a desolate area of Siberia, in search of the true meaning of life. They experience the sweetness and bitterness of love, work, and growth. Despite a few “cowards” who escaped from hard labor, most of the Komsomol members eventually overcome the hardships and find the path to a meaningful life. A typical example is a former Red Army diver, who is portrayed as a Pavel-like figure, demonstrating great perseverance and endurance. He says, “I would rather live my life like this: as soon as one city is built up, I’ll go to another one and start all over. On the vast wildernesses of our country towns, bridges, factories, and railways will emerge following my footsteps.”

This type of Komsomol spirits that combined collectivist thinking and socialist ideals with personal heroism instantly enthralled Chinese readers with the release of *Fortitude* in Chinese translation in 1954. The book was so popular that some readers preferred to dismiss the historical disputes between the Chinese and Russian governments over the territory of Komsomol-on-Amur. As one reader recalled, “with my intense ‘proletarian internationalist spirit,’ I thought it made no difference which country the area belonged to, and perhaps the people there were even happier under Soviet control.” Numerous reviews appeared in

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37 Vera Ketlinskaya, *Fortitude*, tr. by Margaret Efremov (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 179.
newspapers and magazines, as well as with two monographs specifically discussing the book’s educational values. One commentary reads:

At that time, a generation of young people growing up under Stalin’s care arrives in barren Siberia in response to Stalin’s call. In extremely dire economic conditions and harsh weather, they devote their energy, intelligence, and youth to the cause of socialist construction, and with constant vigilance they fight against hidden anti-revolutionaries. They keep in mind Stalin’s instructions: To work for the collective, and to be willing to subject individual will to collective decision, is what we now call the fortitude of the Bolsheviks. In the course of building a new socialist city, they grow into socialist new men.39

Following the path of Soviet Komsomol members, thousands of Chinese youths gave up their comfortable lives in big cities and left for the least developed areas where they were told they were needed most. They brought not only knowledge and technology for industrial development but also their dreams of building China’s Komsomolsks. Indeed, in 1955 ninety-eight Shanghai youths made this dream come true. In a rural area between Nanchang and Jiujiang in Jiangxi Province, they built a city on the model of Komsomol’s on-Amur that they learned from Ketlinskaya’s Fortitude.40 Later Hu Yaobang, then General Secretary of the Chinese Komsomol, named the city Komsomolsks (Gongqing cheng). The youths put into practice a line from the book that was their favorite maxim and source of inspiration: “What does fortitude mean? It is to knock down the self and march ahead.”41

Vasili Azhayev’s Far from Moscow is another frequently mentioned and well-remembered “construction-themed” Soviet novel. Set in World War II, the plot centers on the construction of oil pipelines in Siberia by a Soviet engineering team in order to defeat the

40 Min Xiao, “Ershi shiji wushi niandai Shanghai qingnian zhihuangdai qi ji huodong shulue” [The Shanghai youth volunteer teams for developing wastelands and their activities in the 1950s], Shanghai qingnian guanli ganbu xueyuan xuebao [Journal of Shanghai College for Youth Administrators], vol. 20, no. 1 (2006).
41 Vera Ketlinskaya, Fortitude (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 238.
Germans. With their hard work, zealous patriotism, and unshakable resolution, the team completes within one year a project that was supposed to take three. Like *Fortitude*, *Far from Moscow* is in strict accordance with the tenets of socialist realism in its characterization and interpretation. For this reason, the fact that these pipelines were built by concentration camp prisoners was excluded. Winner of the Stalin Prize, first class, the novel was not only adapted into film and opera versions but was also translated into twenty languages and widely circulated in the socialist bloc.

In the PRC, readers were captivated by characters that were represented in exceptional situations and always dared to fight against nature and human weaknesses. For many, *Far from Moscow* was the book that changed their life courses. The story of Wu Yi (born 1938), Vice Premier of the State Council from 2003 to 2008 and known as China’s “iron lady,” provides a typical testimony. Wu Yi describes the influence of this novel on her life:

> I love reading novels, and *Far from Moscow* is my favorite. . . I aspired to be an entrepreneur like Batmanov, the party secretary and director of the petroleum factory; for this I have been striving since then. For the same reason, I chose petroleum engineering when applying to college. Although I knew it was a tough major for females, I made the decision to realize my dream and fight for it. It turned out to be successful. I made myself party secretary of China’s largest petrochemical enterprise, thus fulfilling my early dream. I believe that without dreams a person is without spirit; with dreams one can be motivated to overcome all difficulties.

With dreams inspired by Soviet literature, many of the younger generations of China left home for remote areas of the country. Like the characters from Soviet novels that followed Stalin’s instructions, some Chinese youths ardently responded to Mao’s 1955 call to go to “the

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42 Lan Yingnian, “Qu yuanli Mosike de . . . laogai ying” [To the far from Moscow . . . labor reform camp], in Zhu Zheng and Lan Yingnian, eds., *Cong Sulian dao Eluosi: zuixin jiemi lishi dang’an* [From the Soviet Union to Russia: the latest declassified historical documents] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2007).
44 Li Li, “Wu Yi: Shenghuo meiyou fuyu wo lian’ai de jihui” [Wu Yi: life did not bestow the chance of romantic love on me], *Renmin wenzhai* [People’s digest], no. 3 (2009): 37.
vast land of the countryside where huge scope for young people’s talents is offered.”

From the northeastern wilderness (Beidahuang) to the moorland on the southwestern border, from the Gobi Desert to the marshland, youth volunteer teams left their footprints in every corner of the country. From this process emerged China’s versions of Fortitude and Far from Moscow, both in reality and in literary creation, as Chinese writers began to take up the theme of construction in their writings as well. Thousands of urban educated youths boarded trains to the poor and faraway Northwest, heroically reciting He Jingzhi’s poem “Windows of the Westward Train” (Xiqu Leiche de Chuangkou). This movement served as a rehearsal for the bigger waves of urban educated youths “going up to the mountains and down to the countryside” in the Cultural Revolution ten years later.

Among the “construction-themed” Soviet literature, the “collective farm” novels constituted a significant portion. These novels cover the return of Soviet soldiers to their hometowns after World War II, where they started a new life at school, factory, or collective farms. Giving rise to a genre of novels about returning to collective farms, writers focused on a variety of difficulties that a soldier might encounter: adjusting to postwar reconstruction, dealing with war traumas, and forming relationships. The most popular of this genre among Chinese

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45 Mao made this comment while reviewing an article about a group of high school graduates returning to the countryside in Henan to participate in the agricultural cooperative movement. Mao said, “All intellectuals as such who can go to the countryside should be happy to go. The countryside opens a huge world. There great opportunities for young people to apply their talents are offered.” See Mao Zedong, “Zhongguo nongcun de shehui zhuyi gaochao anyu xuan” [Selected introductions to The socialist high tide in China’s countryside] (September and December 1955), in Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed., Mao Zedong xuan ji [Selected works of Mao Zedong], vol. 6 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1999), 462.


47 This poem was first published in Fangge Ji [Collection of Passionate Singing] (Beijing: People’s Literature Press, 1961).

48 This connection is reflected in many works of the “educated youth literature.” For instance, Huang Tianming, Bianjiang xiaoge [Morning song on the border] (Beijing: Zuolia chubanshe, 1965); Guo Xianhong, Zhengtu [Journey] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1973); Ye Xin, Cuotuo suiyue [Idle years] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1982); Cong Weixi, Beiguo cao [Grass of the North] (Beijing: Shiyou wenyi chubanshe, 1984).
readers included Semyon Babayevsky’s *Cavalier of the Golden Star*, Pyotr Pavlenko’s *Happiness* (1947; winner of the Stalin Prize, 1947), and Galina Nikolayeva’s *The Harvest* (1950; winner of the Stalin Prize, 1951). Between 1949 and 1953, four translations for *Cavalier of the Golden Star* and two for its sequel *Light on the Land* was released. Study sessions were convened and laudatory articles that puffed up Babayevsky’s works and the happy life on collective farms abounded in newspapers and magazines. *The Harvest*, which immediately placed Nikolayeva in the ranks of best Soviet prose writers, also acquainted Chinese readers with Soviet farmers who were setting agriculture back on its feet with their own hands in arduous postwar conditions. These novels received special attention when China’s agricultural cooperative movement reached a crescendo between 1954 and 1956, thus letting in a huge flow of “collective farm” novels from the Soviet Union.

**Soviet Literature as Walking Textbooks**

What Soviet works could be selected for translation and publication in the PRC betrayed official intentions to support this endeavor. This was made more self-evident in the readings prepared for the younger generations, the future of China. This section focuses on Soviet works for two age groups: school-age children and college students. It discusses how the government guided young people with Soviet literature to form communist worldviews suitable for China’s socialist construction and nation building.

The first category discussed here, Soviet children’s literature, covers works written for elementary and middle school students. This literature has unique characteristics that distinguish it from the children’s literature of other countries or social systems. The task of educating young people is a salient feature and the primary, if not sole, task of Soviet children’s literature, which
is considered “the most powerful and effective cultural tool of Soviet socialist enterprise to educate new generations in the communist spirit.” As a result, it hugely influenced young readers by immersing them in the positive values of high spiritual, moral worth. However, within the confines of official literary line, Soviet writers of children’s literature still managed to weave in vivid characters, interesting plots, beautiful settings, and elegant prose.

The combination of lofty values and artistic appeals in Soviet children’s literature cultivated children of China in the fifties and early sixties when Soviet children’s books took over almost half of China’s children’s book market. From fairy tales to short stories, from school textbooks to popular science, from comic books to children’s magazines, Soviet children’s literature translated into the PRC familiarized Chinese kids with Russian and Soviet history, with Soviet children’s heroism during wars, and with Soviet schools, sports, and cultural life. These books embraced every aspect of children’s life and had an “enlightening and civilizing” influence on Chinese children. Through Soviet children’s literature, Chinese teenagers formed basic moral concepts and beliefs: every child should love their motherland, love the collective, love life, love to work, do good things, be honest, kind, and brave. They learned about such concepts and beliefs from the legendary story of young Volodia Dubinin and his struggle during German invasion of the Soviet Union (The Street of the Younger Son by Lev Kassil and M. Polyanovsky, 1949), from the captivating account of Timur, an altruistic Young Pioneer member who inspired the “Timur movement” among Young Pioneers all over the Soviet Union (Timur

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and His Squad by Arkady Gaidar, 1940), and also from the growth of a little girl named Malusha going through her first year at school (The First Grader by Yevgeny Shvarts, 1947).\textsuperscript{50}

In their reading and interpretation of Soviet children’s literature, Chinese children and parents alike were always supervised. A number of well-known Chinese translators and writers influenced the public with their fascination with Soviet children’s literature. Cao Jinghua once observed: “I especially love Soviet children’s literature, so I can call myself an old reader of it. I love Soviet literature because it fosters ambitions in the new generations to become wise, brave, and far-sighted people, teaches children to love work, love the motherland, love the working people of the world, trains their creativity and imagination, and raises them to seek grand, beautiful goals. Such works can [also] bring old people back to youth.”\textsuperscript{51} Many “old” fans of Soviet children’s literature also wrote introductions, prefaces, and commentaries for translated Soviet children’s books as reading guides. Ding Ling once wrote a preface for The First Grader, warmly introducing to Chinese children, parents, and teachers this “very interesting” book that “totally absorbed her” and “filled her with pleasure and lovely dreams.” In earnest she told Chinese kids to follow their Soviet little friends who demonstrated “how to participate in the collective and how to love the people,” who “listened to their grandmothers and mothers and had good manners,” who were always ready to “help their peers and correct their own mistakes.”\textsuperscript{52}

Soviet children’s literature also groomed Chinese youth to become firm believers in the superiority of Soviet socialism and the Sino-Soviet alliance. The description of Soviet children’s colorful, happy life enchanted thousands of Chinese children who dreamed of having a childhood

\textsuperscript{52} See Ding Ling’s introduction to \textit{Yinianji xiaoxuesheng} [The first grader] (Beijing: Shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1955), 7.
like Soviet children’s and going to Soviet schools. Anatoly Aleksin’s *Thirty-One Days* (1950) is still well remembered by those who read it in their childhoods. They derived an understanding of Soviet leisure life from Soviet Young Pioneers’ summer camp delineated in this novel. The translator’s note certainly enhanced this understanding:

> All the workers, employees, and children in the Soviet Union enjoy the right to rest, which is prescribed by Article 119 in Stalin’s constitution. When summer comes, some of them go to scenic spots in the south. Adults stay in sanitarium, and children go to summer camps. There are well-established healthcare facilities; sports and recreational activities are frequently organized. This is the best time of Soviet children’s happy life. The buildings they live in are very nice, some of which used to be villas of the aristocrats, landlords, and capitalists, some of which are newly built new-style houses. Living in such buildings is comparable to living in the real Elysium!

Numerous reading materials echo this description was distributed to familiarize Chinese students with Soviet students’ summer camps. The Youth Press published the translation of a monograph on this subject written by a Soviet educator. The book elaborated on every aspect of summer camp from preparation to political education and campfire party. However, in China, only students with good scores and outstanding performance at school had the “privilege” of participating in a summer camp. For most children, reading about Soviet summer camps was a compensation for the lack of the real experience, and this in turn reinforced their attachment to Soviet children’s literature.

If Soviet children’s literature created the image of heaven for Chinese teenagers, then Soviet youth literature was nothing less than Chinese young people’s bible. The youth literature discussed here refers to works about Soviet college life. These works present a panoramic picture of Soviet college life in the postwar peacetime: a diversified student body drawn from each

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nationality of the USSR, students’ differing life principles and ethics, their high ideals and extensive interests, their disciplined studies and rich extracurricular activities, how they debate issues and problems in academe and society, how they carry out cultural programs in factories, how they participate in volunteer work at spare time, how they help each other, and how they conduct criticism and self-criticism on a regular basis. All this is blended with friendship and love between students.

Although the number of works on this narrow theme was not big, each of them tantalized the hearts and imagination of Chinese young adults. At that time of Sino-Soviet friendship, everything from the Soviet Union was so mysteriously charming in the Chinese eye that anything related to that country was admired and oftentimes romanticized. Likewise, Chinese college students idolized Soviet college students. Their desire to learn about their Soviet counterparts and to study, work, and live in the same fashion was so strong that they would be instantly carried away by any description or discussion of Soviet college life. The attraction of Soviet college life not only stimulated many students’ desire to enter college, especially to study in the Soviet Union, but also drew a large number of them to become Russian literature majors. This body of students studying Russian literature under the tutelage of Soviet professors, together with those who returned with degrees in Russian literature from the Soviet Union, became the backbone of China’s Russian literary studies. Lan Yingnian, Gao Mang, and Tan Deling, who have dedicated their lifetime to the translating, teaching, and research of Russian literature are among the most accomplished of this generation.55

Among the highly sought-after works of Soviet youth literature, three novels in particular left a deep imprint on the memory of those who read them in their early adulthood: Yury

Trifonov’s *Students* (1950 winner of the Stalin Prize, 1951), V. Dobrovolsky’s *Three Men in Grey Coats* (多勃罗沃尔斯基 В.Добровольский, 1952), and Alexander Bek (А. Бек) and N. Loiko’s (Н. Лойко) *Young People* (1954, Молодые люди). Even today many people in their sixties and seventies still remember vividly how popular these three works were back then.\(^{56}\) For instance, when the People’s Press published the sixth edition of *Three Men in Gray Coats*, the total number of copies distributed was two hundred thousand, undoubtedly a best-selling standard even by today’s standard.\(^{57}\) Among Chinese college students, these works were heatedly discussed in the classroom, presented in wall posters, and reflected in essays and personal diaries. When the translation of *Students* came out in 1952, Chinese students avidly read it. “We read it in class, at the dorm, and even on the bus. Once when I was on a bus back to school I heard two female students from Peking University passionately talking about the male protagonists in the book. They criticized Sergei’s individualistic heroism and praised Vadim’s collectivist spirits. I shared the same view with them,” recalled Lan Yingnian.\(^{58}\)

**The Role of the State**

Soviet literature exerted a particularly formative influence on the children and young adults of the 1950s and early 1960s. From the very beginning, the Chinese introduction of Russian literature was tied to the mission of “reforming the nation and enlightening society.” In the special environment of the 1950s conditioned by official advocacy of Sino-Soviet friendship

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\(^{56}\) Xiong Tieji, “Xuyan: Lixiang yu qingnian” [Preface: ideals and youth], in Ma Haoran and Chen Ping, eds., *Ruhe jingying nide daxue shiguang: shiwei daxuesheng tamen de daxue zhilu* [How to manage your college life: ten college students telling you of their paths at college] (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2006), 5-6.

\(^{57}\) Xu Chengmiao, “Ershi shiji wushi niandai de ‘xiaozi’ wenben (wai yipian)” [The ‘petty bourgeois” texts in the 1950s (an additional article)], *Sichuan wenxue* [Sichuan literature], no. 1 (2004), 50-52.

\(^{58}\) Lan Yingnian, “Cong Daxuesheng dao Beinhejie gongyu” [From Students to House on Embankment], *Dushu* [Reading], no. 2 (2007), 46. For the Chinese translation, see Telifonuofu (Trifonov), *Daxuesheng*, tr. Ruo Long (Beijing: Pingming chubanshe, 1952). For the English translation, see Iuri Trifonov, *Students*, tr. from Russian by Ivy Litvinova and Margaret Wettlin (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953).
and the campaign to “learn from the Soviet big brother,” the influence of Soviet literature on Chinese society went far beyond the literary level. Soviet literature guided, and to certain extent preset, Chinese people’s value orientation at large. In other words, the moral and social values reflected in Soviet literature formed the foundation on which the Chinese values and measures of right or wrong, and the Chinese judgment of a person’s worth, were based. Through the spread of Soviet literature, patriotism, collectivism, heroism, and idealism⁵⁹ were engraved into the Chinese national consciousness.

In this process, the Chinese government and its official ideology played a consequential part. From the selection of Soviet works for translation to the circulation of each publication, from setting translation principles to interpreting major themes, the shadow of the state was omnipresent. The phenomenon of Gorky in China is a salient example. His “revolutionary” works were translated and published again and again. Via countless introductory and evaluative write-ups, the image of Gorky in accordance with official ideology branded itself into the minds of thousands: Gorky is the “stormy petrel” calling for revolution, a close comrade-in-arms of Lenin’s and Stalin’s, a great writer of the proletariat, and the like.⁶⁰ This was the standardized image of Gorky prevailing in China for a long time.⁶¹ In the world of letters, Gorky was venerated as “the founding father of Socialist Realism,” but his humanistic thought was never

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⁵⁹ Here by “idealism” I mean the belief in elevated ideals or conduct and the quality of believing that such ideals and conduct should be pursued.

⁶⁰ This view originated from Zinoviev’s widely influential account of Russian and Soviet literary history, Soviet Literary History (Chinese translation by Ye Shuifu, published in 1954 by Zuojia chubanshe).

given sufficient recognition. Apparently, this way of “selling” Gorky in China served the official purpose of using Gorky as the spokesperson for socialist ideology and literature.

In terms of influencing public opinion, the state intervened in mass reading through the voice of a so-called “readership,” in addition to translator’s notes and writer’s commentaries. Zicheng Hong has an incisive comment on this unique concept of “reader” that emerged in the social and literary context of the early PRC:

Between the 1950s and 1970s, the relationship between readers of literature and literary writing and activities was fairly complex. When literary criticism led into the concept of the ‘reader,’ it generally did not have meaning as an independent entity, but acted as an extension of authoritative criticism. The introduction of the ‘reader’ was meant to strengthen the ‘validity’ of the criticism. Therefore, at the time, in most circumstances the ‘reader’ was a construct, a concept not to be concretely analyzed. Literary criticism did not acknowledge that readers of literature could be differentiated into different groups or circles, that differing social groups could have differing cultural needs, and therefore did not acknowledge literature that belonged to different groups. This was meant to cause the elimination of the multiplicity of trends in thought, artistic styles, and artistic tastes, and guarantee the movement toward ‘integration.’ Authoritative criticism often used ‘the masses’ and ‘readers’ (especially ‘worker, farmer, and soldier readers’) to embrace a group of readers who had identical ideological outlooks and artistic tastes, and that in fact did not exist. Authoritative criticism would use the ‘reader’ construct under several circumstances. Most frequently, the opinions of the necessary portion of readers were collected and processed, other discordant views were edited out or revised, and then a vague term such as ‘the reading public’ would be used. Another method was to write what one wished and then to claim that the end-result was a letter or manuscript from a ‘reader.’ (Footnote: An early example was published in vol. 4 no. 5 of the Literature & Arts Press (June 1951). A letter from ‘reader Li Dingzhong’ that harshly criticized Xiao Yemu’s short story Between This Husband and Wife and the editorial comments supportive of the letter, and published together with it, were all written by the editor-in-chief at the time, Feng Xuefeng.) This method was widely used on the eve of and during the ‘Cultural Revolution.’ Another important phenomenon was that the literary environment of the time also molded the reader’s modes of experiencing and reacting to literature, simultaneously nurturing a ‘reader’ who was good at divining the prevailing political currents and responding to authoritative criticism. Every time

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62 Although some writers and literary critics—Lu Xun, Fu Feng, Ba Jin, Xiao San, and Qian Gurong, for example—had discovered the humanism in Gorky’s works and used it to advocate humanism in literary creation and criticism. However, these ideas were unfairly labeled “bourgeois humanism” and thus heavily criticized in the 1960s and 1970s. It was not until the beginning of the new era after the Cultural Revolution that Qian Gurong’s assertion that “the art of literature is an art of humanity” was put forward for discussion in the literary circles.
a major event or a polemic occurred in literary world circles, this ‘reader’ was always able to write the appropriate letter or essay in support of mainstream opinion, and was a constituent part of normative power in the literary world.63

The “reader” that Zicheng Hong singles out also appeared extensively in the Chinese reading and criticism of Soviet literature. At the time, newspapers and periodicals often teemed with “reader’s letters” from different places and varied social strata that related to how “readers” were inspired, encouraged, or even “redeemed” by such and such Soviet literary works. In most cases, the “reader” would represent and speak for the group, community, or class that he or she belonged to. The demonstrative views of the “reader,” facilitated by other forms of state intervention in mass reading, thus created a “bandwagon effect” in the general public. Indeed, very often people do and believe things merely because many other people do and believe the same things. Likewise, when books from and about the Soviet Union saturated the Chinese book market, libraries, and reading rooms, it was not unthinkable that people would like to load, or at least decorate, their personal bookshelves with the same items.

However, we should be instantly reminded of the role of the state in setting up such social and cultural environments. Moreover, we should also be aware of the coercive forces from the state that ran deeper beneath the surface of the “bandwagon effect.” When the state cultural agencies used Soviet literature as “a means of ideological work and mass mobilization,” reading Soviet literature was tantamount to a manifestation of a person’s revolutionary consciousness. The totality of political, social, and cultural conditions brought out the public mania for Soviet literature in the 1950s.

63 Zicheng Hong, A Century of Contemporary Chinese Literature, tr. by Michael M. Day (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), 32.
Accordingly, mass reading of Soviet literature focused on heavily loaded political and ideological subjects; terms such as revolution, struggle, devotion, and sacrifice were highlighted as keywords. Exemplary socialist-realist works such as *How the Steel Was Tempered* and *Stories of Zoya and Shura* ranked first on the preferred reading list. The images of Soviet heroes and heroines and the lofty spirits they demonstrated took root in the consciousness of Chinese readers. The feeling derived from reading was often not primarily aesthetic pleasure but revolutionary ethos and political enthusiasm. This manner of embracing a body of foreign literature is phenomenal in literary history. The most typical case is that when reading *How the Steel Was Tempered* people were more inclined to affirm openly how they admired Pavel Korchagin’s remarks on the value of life but invariably shunned Pavel’s romantic affairs. Pavel’s saying about the value of life was so often quoted that it has become an established maxim in Chinese even today.\(^{65}\) So many people copied it down in their notebooks or wrote it on a scroll to hang on the wall to show their determination to learn from the Soviet hero. When applying for the Youth League and the party, almost everyone would end their written pledge with that same paragraph. By virtue of this, Pavel’s words and his “officially sanctioned” value orientation served as a beacon guiding Chinese youths’ life courses.

**Rethinking Ways of Mass Reading**

It seems that the popularity of Soviet literature in the 1950s was primarily bound to politics, or rather the “friendship diplomacy” between the PRC and the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the massive undertaking by the state to impart Soviet literature’s “educational” values

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\(^{65}\) Pavel says in the novel, “A person’s dearest possession is life. It is given to him/her but once, and s/he must live it so as to feel no torturing regrets for wasted years, never know the burning shame of a mean and petty past; so live that, dying, s/he might say: All my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world - the fight for Liberation of Humankind.” See Nikolai Ostrovsky, *How the Steel Was Tempered* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1933), 89.
to the population on the other. This would easily lead to the impression that people read and admired Soviet literature because they were swayed by official opinions. But is this the whole picture? How did the people like Soviet literature personally? To answer these questions requires a look at the “real-life reader,” not the “reader” in Zicheng Hong’s analysis, to discover how an average Chinese person living in the social, cultural, and political environment of Maoist China read Soviet literature and coped with official instructions.

The passion Chinese displayed in responding to the lofty ideals and high morals in Soviet literature, as well as their conformity with official interpretations and expectations, was no mere pretense. It is true that at a time when reading American and European literature was discouraged and sometimes forbidden, it was expedient to feign interest in Soviet literature instead, even if one disliked its ideological indoctrination; moreover, when “misreading” Soviet literature against the official line was deemed a grave political error, it was a means of survival for people to obey. However, this does not necessarily mean that people of that time loathed the moral and political elements in Soviet literature the state promoted. Moreover, we cannot assume that the ideals and principles people pursued necessarily contradicted official norms. In short, although mass reading in the early PRC, in a radical sense, verges on brainwashing by today’s standard, the case may have been different from what we see now.

That said, we need to situate the act of reading back in the immediate post-revolutionary context and take into consideration motivations on the part of the individual. As the CCP cemented public belief in the future of a socialist China, the majority of the population was determined to dedicate itself to the cause of bringing about that future. Thus the heroism, patriotism, and idealism in Soviet literature were exactly what people needed, and it was out of genuine admiration that they emulated Soviet models and heroes. Young people in particular
grew up with heroes from Soviet literature and shared similar growing pains; in this process they internalized the high ideals in Soviet books. Reading and copying Soviet people’s devotion to socialist goals and their tireless diligence in furthering such goals in Soviet literary portrayals was an essential part of their youthful enthusiasm. On this point their personal needs and party demands intersected, if the two did not totally converge.

Moreover, Soviet literature is not all about slogans, doctrines, and endless indoctrination. In fact, even the most principled Soviet writers had moments when pressure proved too strong for them. Many works are written in the most stylish language of the Soviet period, richly textured and aesthetically satisfying. More important, a lot of them deal with topics such as love, emotions, and human weaknesses, of course within the boundary of government tolerance. Although the “selective translation” imposed by Chinese censorship did filter out the “inappropriate” elements in some Soviet works, it did not totally alter the face of the original. Living outside the political environment of the mainland since 1949, Liang Yusheng, a celebrated writer of martial arts (wuxia) fiction, had the leeway to talk about the alternative dimensions of Soviet literature he was attracted to. He wrote on how he was touched by the intense interpersonal conflicts and affection in Far from Moscow, as well as the fine description of the characters’ mental activities and different scenarios of romance in Fortitude and The Harvest.66 Although readers on the mainland did not dare to utter such things, they very likely had similar reading experiences.

The topics of human psychology and romance that run deep in Soviet literature, by contrast, were rarely touched on in the Chinese literature of the Maoist era. As early as 1951, it

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66 See Liang Yusheng, “Sanjianlou suibi: Du Sulian xiaoshuo” [Essays by the Three Swords: Reading Soviet fiction], Ta Kung Pao, 24 March 1957. In this essay, Liang Yusheng also shunned the political and ideological elements but pointed out the confidence and optimism a person feeling sad can gain from reading Soviet literature, thus driving home the significance of Soviet literature, even the most dogmatic pieces, to the individual.
was self-evident to writers and readers alike that human emotions and intimate relations were not “correct” or “safe” topics to write and read about, especially when Xiao Yemu’s short story *Between My Wife and Me* (*Women fufu zhijian*, 1950) became the first to fall victim to the attack on literary works deemed “contradictory” to the officially prescribed worker-peasant-soldier theme. The story was intended, according to the author, to “create a new type of character through the portrayal of mundane life.” It honestly reveals the difference and clash between intellectual-turned cadres (the husband, or “me”) and peasant-turned cadres (the wife) when they were resettled in urban environments after national liberation, and it concludes with their understanding of each other and their personal transformation. The fact that the husband acknowledged “the petty-bourgeois remnants in his thinking” shows that the story was in principle in accordance with the official line, but in 1951 when the criticism of *The Story of Wu Xun* escalated in the film circles, *Between My Wife and Me* was accused of “being disconnected to reality,” “vilifying the peasants and spreading petty-bourgeois sentiments (*xiaozi qingdiao*),” “displaying an unhealthy tendency of observing and portraying life based on the concept and taste of the petty-bourgeoisie.” Apparently, setting the main characters in a marital relationship also generated various other accusations. A direct result of this criticism was that love, marriage, and other intimate human relationships, or simply the trivia of everyday life, became tacit “forbidden zones” in Chinese literature.

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67 Xiao Yemu, “Wo de chuangzuo yuanquan” [Sources of my literary creation], *Wenyi pinglun*, no. 3 (1950), 35. 68 See a series of essays criticizing Xiao Yemu’s “mistaken tendencies,” for example, Chen Yong, “Xiao Yemu chuangzuo zhong de yixie qingxiang” [Some tendencies in Xiao Yemu’s creative writings], *Renmin ribao*, 10 June 1951; Li Dingzhong (Feng Xuefeng), “Fandui wannong renmin de taidu, fandui xinde diji quwei” [Oppose the attitude of playing with the masses, oppose the new pulp fictions], *Wenyi bao*, vol. 4, no. 5 (1951); Ding Ling, “Zuowei yizhong qingxiang laikan: gei Xiao Yemu de yifeng xin” [Viewing it as a tendency: a letter to Xiao Yemu], *Wenyi bao*, vol. 4, no. 8 (1951). Also see Xiao Yemu’s self-criticism, “Wo yiding yao gaizheng cuowu” [I must correct my mistakes], *Wenyi bao*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1951).
In this context, Soviet literature opened a secret window through which Chinese readers could see and feel without guilt (or punishment) what would be labeled “bourgeois sentiments” if portrayed in Chinese literary products. Works written by the “Soviet big brother” assured that readers did not have to worry about making political errors. Instead, they could enjoy some passion, some romantic sentiments, or a vein of melancholy mixed with tenderness – such emotions and feelings were generally suppressed by the raw revolutionary ethos in China’s public arena. Although during that time people had to be careful not to divulge on public occasions this secret dimension of their fondness for Soviet literature, writings today reminiscent of the early PRC era have expressed it without reservation. Wang Meng recalled how he read Pyotr Pavlenko’s Happiness, a 1947 Stalin Prize winner that promoted Stalinist cult of personality.

When I read the lines describing Lena’s feelings – “Entranced by the beauty of the summer night, Lena mused on the long lifetime in front of her” – I felt I was reading the Bible; I [felt my body] was melting and being elevated by this ultimately touching and uplifting sensation. . . I also liked the Vienna he [Pavlenko] describes, plus the waltz there. . . All was like poems and dreams; even though it all remained on the page, it was still so warm, moving, and awe-inspiring. 69

Apparently even the officially acclaimed Soviet novels at the time, such as Happiness, combined work, construction, party leadership, and political study with the everyday routine of living, recreational activities, and innocent flirtations between men and women. Theater, symphony, piano, accordion, ice rink, Christmas tree, Crimean wine, lipstick, perfume, stockings, together with “girls wearing babushkas,” “ladies in fashionable coats,” and “men playing mandolin,” created an exotic world far different from the environment of China. Lan Yingnian’s

reflection on why Trifonov’s *Students* was so popular among Chinese college students in the 1950s reasserted this huge difference:

An important reason is that our life was so boring compared with that of Soviet college students. *Students* brought light to our monotonous life. [In our life] there was too much stress on collectivism which stifled individuality and allowed no room for even personal interests. Individuality equaled individualism, so it must be criticized. We would receive admonitions or criticism if we read books other than those related to political and ideological education. The “other books” refer to publications after 1949; as for literary, philosophical, and historical works from the West, not to mention that they were not available from the library, even if the library had them, with our consciousness at the time, we wouldn’t have read them. Although college students were not forbidden from courtship, the over emphasis on collectivism turned the relationship between fellow students into a “comradeship,” thus chilling the natural human relationship between boys and girls. However, male and female college students in the Soviet Union could go and travel together on vacations – they could climb the Caucasus Mountain or swim in the Black Sea. We went to Dalian one summer, but everything was so carefully organized that we were left with little leeway, let alone free time for boyfriends and girlfriends. To summarize, Soviet college life was freer than ours and gave more room for individual activities.  

Reading Soviet literature acquainted Chinese people with the Soviet Union, a culturally distant but geographically and ideologically close northern neighbor. “There is no other foreign country like the Soviet Union, which I have already known so well before I have the chance to see it with my own eyes. She feels so familiar. I so much miss her cities, towns, lakes. . .”  

Soviet literature created among the Chinese readership an image of the Soviet Union that was no longer what the country was. In other words, the Chinese audience formed their own images of the Soviet Union through reading Soviet literature.

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Afterword

The transnational practice that enabled massive “migration” of Soviet experience, culture, and personnel into China constituted one of the most intriguing phenomena in China's quest for modernity. Since the early nineteenth century when China was pressed into a reorganized world system, how to make use of the foreign to modernize the country was on the top of national agenda. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the “Self-Strengthening Movement” made an attempt to revive the declining Qing Empire by installing Western military and technological innovations. From the turn of the twentieth century until the communist takeover of the mainland in 1949, particularly after the May Fourth New Cultural Movement in 1915, a good number of Russian and Soviet literary works, songs, and films were translated into Chinese, alongside the introduction of Western science, democracy and culture. These cultural activities largely remained an unofficial effort of a number of intellectuals and social activists striving to enlighten and regenerate the nation. After the foundation of the PRC until 1963 (the year before the open polemics between the two countries’ parties started), a wide array of Soviet cultural forms was brought into the PRC in a great quantity under Mao’s “lean to one side” pro-Soviet foreign policy. The Soviet Union hence became China’s major supplier of socialist cultural products, constituting the majority of New China’s foreign cultural import. Despite the drastic changes in lifestyle and mass culture that have taken place in the decades subsequent to the 1950s, it was during this first spurt of modernization that the tone was set for future changes. The social, cultural transformations in the 1950s were the foundation on which the PRC’s modernization started, and their legacies had far-reaching impact on the following decades.

As a whole, the Chinese introduction of Soviet culture in the 1950s, or rather, the CCP’s
effort to promote the socialist ideology through Soviet culture during the time, acquainted millions of Chinese, especially urban youths, with the Soviet Union, a culturally distant but geographically and ideologically close northern neighbor. “There is no other foreign country like the Soviet Union, which I have already known so well before I have the chance to see it with my own eyes. She feels so familiar. I so much miss her cities, towns, lakes,” says Chinese writer Wang Meng.¹ Soviet culture created among Chinese audiences an image of the Soviet Union that was no longer what the country was. In other words, the Chinese people formed their own imageries of the Soviet Union through learning about Soviet culture. This “imagined” Soviet Union proved to be a tenacious part of the collective memory of those who were endeared to Soviet culture.

In the early 1960s, as the “unbreakable friendship” proclaimed between the socialist brothers of the PRC and the USSR turned into venomous verbal polemics and the freeze of diplomatic and cultural relations, the CCP had to revert what it had been painstakingly lauding about the Soviet Union. This was a task as daunting as the one of teaching the people to befriend the Soviets in the initial years of the Sino-Soviet alliance, despite the control over the means of communication the party was able to harness over a decade of rule. When Khrushchev’s 1956 secret speech on the Stalinist cult of personality was reported in China, it was like throwing an atomic bomb to the public mentality. Some felt it impossible to accept the reversed reality,² others felt being cheated.³ All of a sudden, confusion, suspicion, and panic among the general public filled the air.

¹ Wang Meng, Sulian ji, 54.
When the Khrushchev government’s rapprochement with the U.S. government set the Soviet and Chinese parties drifting further apart, many Soviet cultural forms were denounced as the “role-models” of “bourgeois humanism” that were politically “reactionary” and artistically “formalist.” As China entered the Cultural Revolution started in 1966, the country saw no more prize-winning Soviet novels being sold in the book market or displayed in libraries and on personal book shelves, the Soviet school system was criticized and discarded, Lenin jackets and bulaji were abandoned, most Soviet films disappeared from Chinese cinemas, and the Soviet Exhibition Center was renamed Beijing Exhibition Center. The about-face in the Chinese attitude toward Soviet films lays bare the built-in and long-existing tensions in the alliance between the two major communist powers, at the same time offering a glimpse into the complexity of interdependence and interactions, hegemony and defense, reception and resistance at multiple levels of a supposedly uniform communist world revolving around the USSR. In the late 1950s, it became self-evident that the socialist bloc was not, and was never, a monolithic structure. In this uneven power matrix, Moscow, for the “forerunner and flagship” role of the USSR, stood at the core, projecting its ideology onto the new socialist countries and building a “sphere of influence” against the United States. However, none of the “satellite nations” subscribed uncritically, or obediently, to the tutelage of the mentor. Despite all the eulogies to the “big elder brother” in the Chinese press, the CCP did not passively accept Soviet instructions, either. As this dissertation shows, the CCP mediated in the interpretations of Soviet cultural products and used Soviet culture as the tool to propagate its own vision of socialist ideology and socialist modernity.

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4 See “Wenge qijian 400 bu ducao ji you yanzhong cuowu yingpian” [Four Hundred Poisonous Weeds and Seriously Flawed Films in the Cultural Revolution]. Circulated in Hongdaihui Beijing dianying xueyuan Jinggangshan wenyi bingtuan [Jinggangshan Art Corps of the Red Guards Delegation at Beijing Film Academy], Jiangsu sheng wuchan jiejigeming pai dianying piping lianluo zhan [Film Criticism Liaisons of the Proletarian Revolutionary Faction in Jiangsu Province], and Jiangsu sheng dianying faxing fangying gongsi [Film Publishing and Circulating Cooperation in Jiangsu Province], January 1968.
As the Chinese leadership gained more international prestige, China started to challenge and unraveled the established hierarchal structure of the socialist bloc. At this point, it dawns on us that the neologism of “social imperialism (shehui diguo zhuyi),” which appeared frequently during the Cultural Revolution in the official condemnation of a “revisionist” Soviet leadership, must be understood in light of the grudge that the CCP had long harbored against the Soviet Party.

The destructive power of Khrushchev’s secret speech, the subsequent rupture between the Chinese and Soviet leaderships, and the severing of bilateral cultural ties completely smashed the perfect image of Soviet life in the CCP’s previous rhetoric. Although people no longer divulged any open admiration for Soviet culture, their fondness for Soviet culture remained. When orders were issued from Beijing to criticize the Soviet Union, many were reluctant to turn against the “big Soviet brother” they had been eagerly admiring for years. This was partially due to the fact that the CCP’s anti-Soviet propaganda targeted mainly the “revisionist” heirs of Stalin, not the previous leadership, but more importantly, it was the result of a decade of close interaction between Soviet culture and the private lives of millions of Chinese. The rich, profound and humanistic Russian cultural tradition captivated the Chinese for years to come and left among the Chinese a legacy that even the sharp political blade was not able to cut off. The cultural capital contained in Soviet cultural products became cherished memories of many who lived through the ups and downs of Maoist China. Before being blacklisted, the Soviet novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*, together with the same-title film (another film version is entitled *Pavel Korchagin*, which was dubbed in 1957 by Changchun Film Studio), arrested thousands of young boys and girls with Pavel’s romances and Tonya’s “petty-bourgeois” lifestyle, and many secretly devoured the book even during the Cultural Revolution. Melodies from Soviet films were hummed secretly
by the die-hard music fans who, in so doing, formed an undercurrent of a Cultural Revolutionary subculture among the disillusioned youths. For them, secret consumption of Soviet culture became both a form of personal resistance. By rejecting official interpretation of Soviet films and novels and turning away from the lofty slogans and sermons that used to be highlighted in Soviet films and novels, people were performing their discontent and defiance against the tightened “spiritual control” in Maoist China. Once again, Soviet culture demonstrated its huge liberating potential in the Chinese context.

In retrospect, perhaps the biggest irony for the CCP’s pro-Soviet propaganda of the 1950s was that it was so successful that it was no longer able to draw in the reins when, a decade later, it needed to teach its people to unlearn what they had been told about the Soviet Union. Even more ironically, when the post-Mao government was rebuilding Chinese culture in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, it started with the restoration of the cultural achievements of the 1950s and early 1960s, which brought the previously imported Russian and Soviet cultural products back into circulation. Despite the still frozen diplomatic relations, Soviet culture continued to be a source of inspiration for China’s social engineering until the dissolution of the USSR, though with the end of the Cold War it was no longer the only cultural source for the PRC from abroad.
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