Agents of Change
Soviet Advisers and High Stalinist Management in China, 1949–1960

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Introduction

This is the story of China’s transformation to Communism as told by the men and women who introduced and experienced the implementation of High Stalinism in the People’s Republic of China (PRC).¹ Thousands of Soviet advisers, experts, teachers, and workers came from the USSR to China in the 1950s, bringing with them the methods, habits, and tenets to which they had grown accustomed during the final years of Iosif Stalin.² These citizens left behind an economy still in the throes of its own dramatic recovery from war, which meant repressed living standards, forced conscription of labor into industry and construction, a greatly expanding Gulag work force, and a leadership that resorted to brutal violence to reestablish its control over society.³ Once these Soviet experts and advisers arrived and joined Chinese coworkers, they recognized features of High Stalinism in China: strict Communist Party control over the economy, the political system, and culture; and severe management


². I conducted interviews with 25 former Soviet advisers in Moscow and St. Petersburg after they responded to an advertisement I placed in two newspapers, Pravda and Moskovskaya Pravda, on 16 March 1993. I asked them in detail about their jobs in China, including how they were chosen to go, why they went, where they lived, what their jobs were, with whom they worked, how working with the Chinese comrades went, and their feelings about the Sino-Soviet friendship. I also have drawn on interviews with Chinese who worked with the Soviet advisers, aiming for a representative sample of many different fields and geographic regions of China. These interviews were conducted in various locations in China by Shen Zhihua, Li Danhui, and other interviewers, and transcripts of them were generously provided to me by Shen Zhihua.

methods designed to push a war-weary population to invigorate a devastated economy, including a heavy reliance on mass methods, education and reeducation techniques, coercion, and the threat of imprisonment. From the top government administrators to the technical workers, these Soviet citizens reproduced the techniques and habits of High Stalinism in their work in China.

Many Chinese and Soviet citizens developed good working relations during this time, but after Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin in 1956, these relationships began to fray as Mao Zedong increasingly radicalized his policies and deviated from the Soviet experience. By 1957, the Soviet advisers found that their jobs were being dominated by radical politics. In 1960, the Soviet advisers and experts were hastily recalled to the USSR. Covering just a few years of friendship and then the split, this article looks at these dramatic events from the point of view of the individuals, both Chinese and Soviet, who worked together during the two countries’ “Decade of Friendship.”

China Looks to the Soviet Union

China’s leaders in 1949 faced an overwhelming task. They needed to revive an economy that had been devastated by eight years of fighting against the Japanese in the so-called War of Resistance (1937–1945) and four years of civil war (1945–1949). The population was exhausted and needed to be motivated for the monumental recovery effort. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had neither the resources nor the outside supporters other than Stalin, who, despite supporting the CCP for years, had already proved to be unreliable. Nevertheless, Mao and his new Communist government turned to the Soviet Union for inspiration and assistance. The CCP had been founded with Soviet support as a wing of the Communist International in 1921. Subsequently, Mao as the CCP’s leader had carried on a prolonged correspondence with Stalin for several years. By December 1949, Mao was eager to depart for Moscow to negotiate with the supreme leader of the Communist world, even though it meant leaving China just two months after ascending to power. By most

accounts, Stalin’s treatment of Mao during the CCP leader’s two-month stay in the USSR was frosty, and the disappointing amount of aid that Stalin finally offered to the PRC did not bode well for a satisfying relationship.⁷ At times the Soviet leader seemed not to believe in the Chinese Communists or their revolution, and in the years 1946–1949 he had become increasingly suspicious of Mao.⁸ Nevertheless, the Chinese Communists returned from Moscow with the promise of receiving Soviet money, material supplies, and expertise. Stalin made good on his word by sending advisers, experts, teachers, and others to help the CCP recover from the ravages of civil war and to build a socialist government and economy.⁹

Mao was well aware of the Soviet industrialization model and greatly admired the revolutionary Stalinism of the 1930s. The USSR’s first Five-Year Plan (1928–1932) had been adopted in April 1929 and shortened to 4.25 years in 1930, having been dubbed “5 years in 4” because of its ambitious targets and the unremitting pressure exerted on the population. Originally the plan goals were rapid industrialization and forced collectivization of 20 percent of all households. On 27 June 1929, a few months after the plan was adopted, the Politburo of the Soviet Communist Party, or VKP(b), set up a system of self-supporting prison camps that provided slave labor to enhance the plan.¹⁰ By December 1929 full-tilt collectivization had begun, leading to the “eradication of the kulaks as a class,” a phrase that encapsulates Stalin’s relentless war against the peasantry. With the help of VKP(b) organs and the powerful internal security apparatus (at that time called the OGPU and after 1936 the NKVD), Stalin forced his country through monumental changes. By the mid-1930s, he had created a centralized, planned economy, established the Gulag, collectivized agriculture, and embarked on crash industrialization.¹¹

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From 1937 to 1945, Mao and the CCP closely read and absorbed the lessons of revolutionary Stalinism in Stalin’s own book, known simply as the *Short Course*. When the Chinese read the *Short Course*, however, they probably were unaware that the book contained blatant untruths and exaggerations about Stalin’s revolution in the USSR. For instance, Stalin wrote about collectivization: “The distinguishing feature of this revolution is that it was accomplished *from above*, on the initiative of the state, and directly supported *from below* by the millions of peasants, who were fighting to throw off kulak bondage and to live in freedom in the collective farm.” The truth is that Soviet agricultural collectivization took place at top speed with state security forces and VKP(b) members violently coercing peasants to give up their farms. In the end, many died or were sent to the Gulag, to special settlements, or to giant industrialization sites, and those remaining were left with broken spirits or, worse, to die of starvation. The famine that ensued from Soviet collectivization resulted in an estimated death toll of more than 5.8 million in 1931–1933—a fact Stalin was not about to share with the Chinese in the early 1950s.

Mao and the CCP admired the Stalinist revolutionary model and wanted to implement something similar in China. Stalin, in their eyes, was a leader to revere, both in the USSR and throughout the Communist world. As the supreme leader of the international Communist movement, Stalin had total power and was venerated and feared by his people. His methods of governance and rule were worthy of study. Stalinist political control over the population relied on mass meetings, criticism and self-criticism, purges, arrests, state-sponsored propaganda, and the threat of Gulag servitude. Mao’s own ideas about the development of his country were based on Stalin’s methods. Hua-yu Li has correctly dubbed Mao’s approach “the economic Stalinization of

China.” Indeed, Mao’s 1953 “General Line for Socialist Transition” in China copies ideas and language from Stalin’s *Short Course* and embraces Stalin’s 1929 policy for rapid agricultural collectivization and crash industrialization. In Soviet Russia, the Gulag was the Stalin regime’s indispensable partner. During forced collectivization, the rural population was greatly reduced by famine, as well as by waves of repression that sent thousands of both rural and urban citizens to the Gulag, which grew by leaps and bounds from the early 1930s through the beginning of the war in 1941.

The prison system the Chinese Communists organized in the 1930s in the revolutionary base areas emanated from their own experiences, their study of Marxism, and their close examination of the Soviet Gulag. The CCP’s new system largely mimicked common Soviet labor camp techniques of the 1930s, including the distinctions in prisons between “criminal” and “counterrevolutionary” or “political” prisoners, the use of convict labor as a corrective practice, the belief in prisoner education and reeducation, and the reliance on thought reform (known as “reforging” in the USSR), which would turn prisoners into productive socialist citizens. These techniques were all pioneered in the early 1930s at the USSR’s first Gulag camp, the White Sea Canal. This canal was showcased as the Soviet Union’s first major construction project using forced labor and was touted as one of the achievements of the USSR’s first Five-Year Plan.

Shortly after taking power in 1949, the Chinese authorities asked the Soviet government to dispatch experts from the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs (*Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del SSSR*), which managed the enormous Soviet Gulag, to the Chinese Ministry of Justice’s Laogai Bureau. The Chinese wanted the Soviet experts to provide advice on how best to implement reform-through-labor in the PRC as the Soviet Union had done earlier in the Gulag prison camps. The Soviet advisers were invited to participate in two pilot projects involving the use of reform-through-labor methods: one

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22. “Laogai” is the short name for the Chinese penal labor and prison system. The full name is “laodong gaiiao,” or reform-through-labor.
using agricultural labor at Qinghe Laogai Farm in Beijing; and the other using industrial labor at the Tianjin Municipal Prison (jianyu). The Soviet experts made many recommendations, based on Soviet experience and practices, on all aspects of the management of convict labor in the laogai camps and provided specific advice about how to make the reform-through-labor methods work more smoothly in the Chinese prisons and camps.23

In May 1951, during China’s “Lean to One Side” years, the PRC’s labor camp system was founded.24 The CCP’s laogai system was managed by the Ministry of Public Security, just as the Gulag was managed by the NKVD. At the Third National Public Security Conference, 10–15 May 1951, Mao personally amended the conference’s resolution on setting up reform-through-labor camps. He said,

The large number of convicted prisoners is a huge source of manpower. In order to transform the prisoners’ thinking, in order to resolve difficulties in the prisons, and in order to prevent convicted counterrevolutionaries from sitting as parasites doing nothing [chixianfan] we must begin to organize laogai labor by launching an extensive labor camp system [laodong gaizao].25

At the same conference, Liu Shaoqi spoke admiringly about Soviet labor camp methods, apparently referring to practices at the White Sea Canal: “In the Soviet Union, prisoners were used to build several canals. If we do this, it has economic and political benefits. Because we didn’t kill them, we can let them work and possibly they will at some time in the future turn into good people [hao ren].”26 The CCP did not, however, set up its prisons exactly as the Soviet Union had, for the conditions and needs of the two countries were dissimilar. But Chinese leaders could easily see how economically beneficial the

Gulag was and how easily such a system could be integrated into the country’s overall economic development.  

It is worth noting that by the late 1940s and early 1950s, Stalin was not interested in promoting his own revolutionary model for the Chinese. In fact, he cautioned Mao against being so eager to implement full socialism, and he especially disapproved of Mao’s plan for the collectivization of agriculture within fifteen years. At the Moscow meeting between Mao and Stalin on 16 December 1949, Stalin also tried to moderate Mao’s tough stance toward the West, saying, “The main point is not to rush and to avoid conflicts.” Mao, however, did not always pay attention to Stalin’s cautionary advice, especially when it contradicted his own plans.

In the 1950s, when the Soviet advisers and specialists arrived in China, they brought with them a later Soviet model, known as High Stalinism, which was in effect when the USSR struggled to recover from the devastation of World War II. High Stalinism has been called alternately “the return of the revolution from above” and “a derivative of the Revolutionary Stalin model.” Mark Harrison, in a recent study of Soviet postwar recovery, looks at both models and concludes: “Before the war, terror was indiscriminate, sweeping up the loyal and disloyal alike. In contrast, post-war repression was selective, focused, and efficient.” Harrison’s study provides the best description of the Soviet postwar model: prewar command systems were reinstated; the party’s control over government at all levels and over cultural life was restored; a preference for state property over private property was reinforced; wartime privatization of collective farms was reversed; harsh regimentation of workers was reinstated; forced labor was increased; and secrecy was stringently enforced.

Thus, the Soviet advisers who were sent to China brought High Stalinist administrative and management techniques designed to push a worn-out population to recover from war in the shortest time possible. Stalin had disappointed his exhausted citizens after they had won the war, telling them they


28. Mao’s discussions with Stalin about how to proceed with implementing Communism are well documented, as is Mao’s tendency to not follow Stalin’s cautionary advice to gradually change. See Hua-yu Li, Mao and the Economic Stalinization, pp. 62–69; and Pantsov and Levine, Mao, pp. 357–358.


could have no rest until the economy had recovered and the country had been rebuilt. This meant that Soviet workers had to work six days a week for twelve hours a day, heavy industry once again predominated over consumer needs, and rationing existed until 1948. The Gulag expanded in the 1940s because of a series of repressions of state employees for labor discipline and socialist property violations, as well as the addition of prisoners of war and “national contingents.” The total Gulag population grew from 1.46 million in 1945 to 2.56 million in 1950, along with nearly 3 million more in special settlements and regular prisons.

The High Stalinist model emphasized strong party leadership, heavy reliance on mass methods, education and reeducation techniques, and the threat of imprisonment in the Gulag. This repressive version of revolutionary Stalinism was perfect for the Chinese Communists, who admired Stalin’s policies of the 1930s and wanted to Stalinize their economy. The model made clear that, although the goal was still economic growth at any cost, politics was more important than economics.

The experiences of the Soviet advisers and experts who worked in China in the 1950s, as well as the Chinese who toiled alongside them, provide a snapshot of how the High Stalinist model functioned in China. For the most part, the Soviet advisers were sent to China to do a specific job: teach radio electronics, work at a hydroelectric plant, build railroads, and so on. The Soviet advisers were not introduced to current Chinese political conditions before arriving at their worksites, but from time to time Soviet diplomats briefed them about developments in the USSR and in China. Mostly these Soviet and Chinese men and women were privy to life as Mao implemented and adapted the methods of High Stalinism. What did they see and take part in during their time in China? They experienced the high speed at which everyone was required to work, the pressures ordinary workers felt to keep to themselves and to concentrate on their jobs, the relentless political campaigns, and the overwhelming presence of the Chinese security agents watching them and the whole process. What they saw reflected the state of Sino-Soviet affairs on the ground as both the Chinese and the Soviet advisers lived through the realities of China’s version of High Stalinism.

Soviet Advisers and High Stalinist Management in China

1949–1953: The Limits of Sino-Soviet Friendship

After the CCP had won the war against the Kuomintang and Mao had proclaimed the new Chinese Communist government on 1 October 1949, the Soviet Union and the PRC signed a Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Aid on 14 February 1950 that gave the Chinese $300 million in credits over a five-year period at a low interest rate of 1 percent and promised assistance in building 147 industrial enterprises in China. Serious disagreements arose over the compensation for the Soviet advisers and experts and over the reimbursement demanded from the Chinese for the Korean War, but the work nevertheless began, and the USSR dispatched Soviet advisers and experts to myriad work sites in China, from large construction projects, government ministries, and schools, to mines and farms.

So into the unknown went the Soviet advisers, experts, and specialists, whose main first criterion for being sent was membership in the CPSU. They were not prepared in any way for the reality of China before they left—many went simply for the extra money or for the adventure—and few knew much beyond newspaper accounts of the Chinese revolution. Some of these men and women felt a deep fear of the unfamiliar upon arriving in China. But many of them felt that being assigned to China was exciting and a boost for their careers, or at least an escape from the postwar deprivations at home. A Soviet adviser and journalist who arrived in 1953 put it this way: “It was an honorable assignment to go to China, which was at that time almost completely unknown.” Many remembered these years as the “honeymoon period,” a wonderful time of genuine friendship and comradeship. Yang Ruzhang, at that time a translator at the Changchun No. 1 Automobile Works, recalled the time as “the golden age of Sino-Soviet relations. . . . We never thought there was anything abnormal or strange about this.”

36. The treaty also included secret Soviet protocols giving expansive rights to the USSR. See Pantsov and Levine, Mao, p. 372.
40. Li Yueran, interview; and Yang Ruzhang, and Sun Jingxin, interviews.
China was very poor in the early 1950s. The Soviet advisers noticed this upon arrival, and the Chinese understood it as they witnessed the foreigners observing their lives. Aviation engineer A. V. Chudakov’s first impression of Chinese villagers was that they looked unusually dirty. His wife, thinking that the problem was a lack of supplies, decided to buy and distribute soap to Chinese families in a small village. “They took the soap and began to eat it,” Chudakov said. “They did not know what soap was.”

Xin Jing Tang, a Chinese translator who accompanied several Soviet experts to an elementary school to investigate Chinese teaching methods and then to introduce Soviet practices, mentioned that when he saw the Soviet delegation in the Chinese context he felt embarrassed by his country’s poverty. He said the school was “very poor, there were no flush toilets, the noon lunch was in a simple cafeteria, and instead of real windows, their school had paper ones.” Mostly, he saw that the Chinese teachers, students, and administration felt too intimidated to question these “elegant Soviet experts who wore dazzling red coats.”

Many advisers and experts were impressed by how diligently their Chinese comrades worked. Arkhipov, the head of the Soviet Advisers Program, recalled that “the Chinese were wonderful workers” and that toiling together with their Soviet counterparts “they accomplished a great deal.” He mentioned in particular the workers at the Wuhan Metallurgical Factory, where much of the labor was done by hand. “They didn’t use machines,” Arkhipov said, “because the Chinese [government] needed to put people to work, so they could earn money and feed themselves.”

An interpreter for a group of geologists spoke about how hard-working, industrious, and accurate the Chinese workers were. Chudakov, the Soviet aviation engineer, said he admired the Chinese because “there was no end to what they could do when they set their minds to it.”

Many mentioned that the Chinese were always in a hurry to learn, understand, and work. One Soviet expert who worked at a hydroelectric power station described his Chinese coworkers as “wanting to do everything extremely quickly.”

41. A. V. Chudakov, interview, Moscow, 6 April 1993.
43. I. V. Arkhipov, interview, Moscow, 23 February 1993.
44. O. K. Glazilin, interview, Moscow, 23 May 1993.
45. Chudakov, interview.
to run a Soviet-built power station. He felt that every one of the Chinese workers was anxious to learn the job swiftly, and he observed that they appeared to toil from morning until night. He even saw this in the restaurant of his residential building. As soon a customer appeared, a waitress would hurry to take the order. “They seemed very responsible,” he said, “almost as if they felt they’d lose their jobs if they didn’t do it all quickly.”

As in the USSR in the 1930s and again in the postwar High Stalinist period, the CCP controlled the economy through campaigns. In the early 1950s, Mao initiated political campaigns and mass mobilizations that looked very much like the ones Stalin had recommended in the *Short Course*. The four major campaigns—Resist America and Aid Korea (*kangmei yuanchao*), Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries (*zhenfan*), the Three-Anti (*sanfan*), and the Five-Anti (*wufan*)—aimed to assert government control over all social groups, increase patriotism, weed out bribery and other corruption in the Communist Party, and bring down the bourgeoisie. Each campaign reinforced the notion that the CCP was in control. The CCP also introduced to the Chinese population the classic Soviet tools of criticism, self-criticism, group pressure, and intimidation.

The campaigns tended to be lengthy, largely unavoidable, and a disruption of the normal operations of peoples’ workdays.

The Soviet advisers and experts who were sent to China in the early 1950s experienced the campaigns at their worksites. I. I. Shinkarev, a teacher of military history, said the Chinese self-criticisms would go on for several consecutive days because “everyone had to participate and comment on the others who were participating.” After a few days of “self-criticism exercises,” the people would then practice their self-criticisms for two or three more days. His understanding of the campaign was that self-criticism meant “one must show everything as if in front of a clergy, and tell him how you sinned.” Although he was aware of the campaign—the work stoppages were obvious, and the Chinese laborers came to him to explain why they had not done their work—he was not allowed to take part. “From above, we were instructed not to interfere in these matters and not to get involved in their internal party meetings.” Although he did not really approve of the campaigns, he, like the other Soviet experts in China, followed their government’s instructions.

For the Soviet advisers, the Chinese emphasis on political campaigns was familiar and understandable, as was having their days run by the Communist Party. “We had the party and they had the party, so there were no political contradictions,” one adviser said. Others were not so sure that party control was the best way to run an economy, mostly because it distracted everyone from the job. One adviser noted that the “ordinary Chinese were nice,” but the “party leaders, with their public smiles and cold eyes,” were always around overseeing things.

The ubiquitous presence of the secret police was another aspect of Chinese life for the Soviet advisers. One Soviet expert noted, “There was always at least one security person with me in my room, which I totally understood.” Sometimes people discovered the hard way that the Sino-Soviet relationship was being closely monitored. One Soviet expert learned that whenever a Chinese woman had any interaction with Soviet experts, she would immediately report the conversation to the CCP’s Political Department. An interpreter recalled a time when he had mildly flirted with a young Chinese girl. The Chinese security organs were watching them and later “worked the girl over until she cried.” Both the Soviet experts and the Chinese workers quickly came to understand the limits of Sino-Soviet friendship.

1953–1956: The Advent of Khrushchev

Stalin died on 5 March 1953. Mao sent Zhou Enlai to his funeral in Moscow. The Chinese public had grown accustomed to mass displays of veneration and adoration of Stalin in the previous years, so public mourning was considerable. One adviser in China remembered: “Stalin did much for the Chinese, and so it was a shock for them when he died. In 1953, I was in China, and I saw big crowds of people coming out into the streets. They even filmed it. We saw it on the newsreels, how they came out. It was a colossal shock for the Chinese.”

50. Ibid.
51. Glazilin, interview.
52. Abramchuk, interview.
53. Shinkarev, interview.
54. Glazilin, interview.
55. Odd Arne Westad points out that the limits on the relationship originated directly from Mao, who wanted Soviet contacts and assistance for his country but was “afraid of... Soviet control of his party’s processes.” See Odd Arne Westad, Restless Empire: China and the World Since 1750 (New York: Basic Books, 2012), p. 301.
56. L. G. Sukhov, interview, Moscow, 15 April 1993.
Shortly after Stalin’s death, the Soviet personnel in China began reporting that things at the worksites were moving along fairly well, despite the lack of coordination with Soviet suppliers at various Chinese enterprises. Back in Moscow, the leadership changes were somewhat murky, with the initial “collective leadership” of Khrushchev, Georgii Malenkov, and Lavrentii Beria. Once Beria was eliminated, a move the Chinese leadership supported, Khrushchev was able to take over the leading party job in September 1953. But no doubt because of the uncertainties at the top of the Soviet leadership and the magnitude of the many administrative problems that would plague both countries, the Soviet side began to experience management problems with the Soviet Advisers Program in China. In June 1954, Nikolai Fedorenko wrote an exhaustive overview for the CPSU Central Committee (CC), noting that various USSR ministries were not fulfilling obligations to provide advisers. For instance, the USSR had agreed to send 50 geologists to China, but only 21 had arrived. Similarly, although China had requested five specialists and four instructors, none had ever been sent.

Fedorenko concluded that “not sending Soviet specialists to the PRC in a timely manner speaks negatively about the provision of our assistance to the PRC.” He continued: “The Chinese comrades have requested that we speed up the dispatching of specialists to the PRC. So we need to strengthen control over the ministries to make sure they send people quickly and send only qualified people as advisers.” However, the problems persisted and were reported to the CPSU CC by a Communist Youth League (Komsomol) delegation that visited China. The Chinese press also remarked on the Soviet Union’s failure to dispatch the promised experts “within the time limit agreed upon.”

57. Arkhipov remarked that “the Chinese did not understand collective leadership at all, especially in light of Mao’s developing cult of personality.” Arkhipov, interview.
58. In a letter of 17 July 1953 from the CCP Central Committee to the CPSU Central Committee concerning the “anti-Party, anti-State criminal activities” of Beria, “the Chinese unanimously approved the Soviet actions against Beria.” See the Chinese text in RGANI, Fond (F .) 5, Opis’ (Op.) 28, Delo (D .) 38, Listy (Ll.) 32–33.
59. Zhihua Shen and Danhui Li, After Leaning to 1 Side, p. 125.
On 29 September 1954, Khrushchev, who by then was leader of the CPSU, arrived in China to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Chinese revolution, bringing with him ideas for strengthening political and economic ties. In response to a Chinese appeal for support, Khrushchev offered more than had been requested, which the Chinese interpreted as a promising sign. Khrushchev, however, was less sure that things had gone well. Later he said that Mao had made him feel unwelcome and uneasy. “A kind of Oriental atmosphere of sickly sweet politeness was created around us. They were unbelievably attentive, but it was all insincere.” Nevertheless, Khrushchev still wanted “Mao’s unconditional recognition of him as Stalin’s successor and as the most authoritative leader not only of the CPSU, but also of the world Communist movement.” Mao, for his part, was at first gratified that Khrushchev had acknowledged Stalin’s unequal treatment of China. However, even though Khrushchev was generous in providing money, technical know-how, and experts, Mao soon came to dislike the new Soviet leader, claiming he found Khrushchev’s behavior disgusting. “[Khrushchev] did not observe protocol, went around embracing and kissing Mao, which shocked the Chinese, joked around, told stories about Beria’s sexual escapades, promised a lot, and gave a lot in the fashion of a merchant.”

Khrushchev’s generosity continued into 1955 with promises of free blueprints and technical documentation, more industrial projects, and even the technology for nuclear power. Stresses in the work relationship still occurred now and then, as indicated in a report from Soviet advisers who complained that “the Chinese comrades no longer need their help and thus will not allow them to participate [in decision-making] any longer.” Mao urged his associates to be more accommodating of the Soviet advisers in China. Meanwhile it was business as usual. Soviet advisers and experts continued to arrive in ever-greater numbers; to build factories, bridges, railroads, and even the Academy of Sciences; and to reconfigure education, health, science, and scientific endeavors—in short, they came, thousands of them, each a

67. Ibid., p. 410.
68. Shu Guang Zhang, Economic Cold War, p. 170 n. 118.
representative of one of the huge vertical economic towers (i.e., ministries) that ran the centrally planned economy of Stalin’s and Khrushchev’s USSR.

1956: The Secret Speech

On 25 February 1956, Khrushchev delivered his shocking denunciation of Stalin in a secret speech at the end of the Twentieth Party Congress in Moscow. This public condemnation of the former leader of the socialist world was a huge blow to the Chinese leadership. Reflecting the view of many Soviet advisers working in China, Arkhipov, the head of the Soviet Advisers Program, said, “China could not accept the denunciation of Stalin.” More importantly, Chinese leaders had not been warned that a denunciation was coming. Had they been, they might have welcomed Khrushchev’s harsh comments about Stalin’s treatment of other socialist countries, but because they had been kept in the dark their appraisal of the speech “was especially difficult and severe.”69 Worse still for Mao and the other CCP leaders was finding out that the Secret Speech had been “individually issued to the other fraternal Communist Parties”—but not to the CCP.70

In 1956, USSR General Consul A. I. Elizavetin served in northeast China at Shenyang (Mukden), then later in Shanghai. According to his memoir, the USSR general consul’s office and the local Soviet party bureaus worked closely with Soviet advisers at all levels, bringing them news from home and facilitating good working relationships with their Chinese comrades.71 He describes how confusing it was for everyone when, after Khrushchev’s denunciation, Stalin’s portrait continued to hang in Tiananmen Square and Mao wrote that Stalin was 70 percent good and 30 percent bad.72 At the worksites, some of the Soviet advisers witnessed their Chinese coworkers vehemently disagreeing with Khrushchev’s assessment of Stalin. “They felt it was a mistake,” said one adviser. He claimed that Chinese coworkers expressed strong disagreement with the speech both openly and “at their closed, internal meetings.”73 A Soviet fuels engineer repeated what many advisers said, namely, that “the

71. Elizavetin, Trudnie gody, p. 20.
72. Ibid., p. 27.
73. Shinkarev, interview.
friendship between China and the USSR had [by then] already crystallized. I lived there, and in my whole heart I felt that we really were genuine brothers.” However, he added, “there was a cult of Mao coming on . . . , and Mao decided to suppress the influence of the Soviet Union on China.”

According to A. I. Kozhin, a Soviet adviser at Renmin ribao and a Pravda correspondent in China at the time, even Anastas Mikoyan, Khrushchev’s emissary who was sent to China for damage control, was unsure that the speech had been correct. Ambassador Pavel Yudin, with whom Kozhin had worked previously, called him to a meeting with Mikoyan, who was to “inform us how the Chinese comrades were reacting to the 20th Party Congress.” Mikoyan spent eight hours with the members of the Chinese Politburo but told Kozhin later that it was “actually four hours of talking and four hours of interpreting.” When the meeting finished, Mikoyan appeared gloomy and nervous. He had spent the whole time explaining “what a villain Stalin had been, and how he had many times put his signature on a list of 3,000 people to be shot.” The Chinese leaders offered no discussion after Mikoyan had finished talking. They had only one question: “Doesn’t this affect the unity of the CPSU and the unity of the Communist Parties of the people’s socialist countries?” Mikoyan reassured them that everything would be fine (všè budét normal’no). But that was not to be the case. Relations between the Soviet advisers and the Chinese on the ground soon soured. As Chinese Maritime Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff Ji Tingxie later said, “Revisionism totally ruined the Soviet Union.”

Khrushchev’s report at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 to the larger gathering of all Communist parties consisted of three parts. In foreign policy, he put forth the ideas of peaceful coexistence among states with divergent political systems and the possibility of different roads to socialism. In domestic policy, he advocated strengthening the production of consumer goods, greater productivity of agriculture, greater reliance on technology, economic management, and socialist democracy, as well as increasing living standards for every citizen. In party affairs, he spoke about improving organizational and ideological work, strengthening collective leadership, and opposing the cult of personality. The last point was the subject of his address at the end of the conference, the de-Stalinization speech.

74. E.I. Kleimenov, interview, Moscow, 8 April 1993
75. Kozhin, interview.
The Chinese did not immediately object to any of this publicly. But privately, on 28 March 1956, the Chinese government wrote to the CPSU CC to ask about the order in which the leaders’ portraits should be displayed on May Day 1956. In a CPSU Presidium discussion concerning which portraits to display for May Day, Stalin’s name was raised and immediately rejected. In the end, the CPSU authorities condoned only the portraits of the current political leaders of the socialist countries. Nevertheless, on 1 May 1956 the Chinese, as in the past, carried large portraits of Stalin in the Tiananmen Square May Day parade.

On 5 April 1956 Renmin ribao issued a statement of support for the de-Stalinization speech: “The Chinese Communist Party congratulates the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on its great achievements in this historic struggle against the cult of the individual.” But it went on to say, “Stalin was a great Marxist-Leninist, yet at the same time a Marxist-Leninist who committed several gross errors without realizing that they were errors.” Twenty days later, Mao’s speech of 25 April 1956, “On the Ten Great Relationships,” gave Moscow a clear indication of the effect Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization speech was having in China. Mao, thinking about his country’s “Lean to One Side” policy with the USSR in light of Stalin’s defects, which Khrushchev had aired in public only a month earlier, advocated a new, more independent stance toward learning from others: “Our policy is to learn from the strong points of all nations and all countries . . . But we must learn with an analytical and critical eye, not blindly, and we mustn’t copy everything indiscriminately and transplant mechanically. Naturally, we mustn’t pick up their shortcomings and weak points.”

The de-Stalinization speech created much confusion among the Soviet advisers in China. One adviser to the PRC’s Ministry of Higher Education wrote to the CPSU Central Committee, asking for help in resolving key issues:

“Several comrades say that now we are not allowed to recommend *The Short Course* as a textbook in our course on Marxism-Leninism. Is that correct? . . . How are we to answer the Chinese comrades’ questions as to whether or not Stalin was a classical Marxist-Leninist?” How much the Soviet advisers and their Chinese coworkers had actually read or even heard about Khrushchev’s speech is unclear. One adviser recalled hearing “the cult of Stalin . . . the speech of Khrushchev . . . Revisionist No. 1 . . . and so on,” but he did not pay much attention because he was involved in “concrete things like science, production, and science and technology cooperation.” Nevertheless, many Soviet experts working in China experienced a change in attitude beginning in 1956. “From the moment of the speech, the spiral of our sharp disagreements began to unwind on the ideological front,” Kozhin said. “While not openly, the Chinese called us names, and most of us felt that the discussion was about us. Eventually, the practice of socialist construction in China became the reason for every kind of friction.”

In October 1957, Mao traveled again to Moscow, invited by Khrushchev for the fortieth-anniversary celebration of the October Revolution. Khrushchev lavished attention and time on Mao, who by now was no longer pretending that he respected or even liked Khrushchev. Even though the Soviet Union had launched *Sputnik 1* that year, Mao still seemed convinced that the USSR was no longer the main authority in the socialist world. He appeared to be calculating and developing the special Chinese approach to socialism that he had been contemplating since Khrushchev’s revelations: a Chinese form of Stalinism. This was the Great Leap Forward, which he launched in the second half of 1958 and which would be the campaign that made the strongest impression on the Soviet advisers and experts in China.

**1957–1959: People’s Communes and the Great Leap Forward**

Mao returned from Moscow with new ideas about increasing China’s agricultural yields. He released his slogan “more, faster, better and more economically” to help motivate people. Since 1955, Mao had been pushing the CCP and

84. Kleimenov, interview.
85. Kozhin, interview.
the Chinese population to surpass other countries. (This had been a familiar Soviet preoccupation for decades, as well.) The first campaign in this crash program was one that would eradicate “pests” that the government claimed were harming agricultural production. Soviet adviser Abramchuk was surprised upon arriving in China to encounter the “Four Pests” campaign, which sought to rid the countryside of rats, flies, mosquitoes, and sparrows. He reported that the campaign was very noisy, as the Chinese people were instructed to make such a din that “the sparrows couldn’t land anywhere, flew around and around, and then fell to their deaths.” He was told that they were doing this to save their crops, “because otherwise the sparrows would eat them all.”

Following on the heels of the “pests” campaign came the initiative in 1958 to enlarge the rural cooperatives to form what Mao called “people’s communes,” a major component of the Great Leap Forward. This meant merging the peasant villages into communes. The Soviet advisers did not know what to make of these large communes, and an awkward “parting of the ways” occurred when the Chinese noticed that there had been no real discussion of them in the Soviet press by the end of 1958. Behind the scenes, the CPSU CC had received—and then refused—a Chinese request that the Soviet Union buy 8,000 copies of a Chinese book on the people’s communes.

Pravda correspondent and Renmin ribao adviser Kozhin went to visit Commune No. 1 as soon as it was set up. Like other commentators, he noted that the “noise” surrounding the communes was immense, encompassing newspapers, speeches, talks, slogans, and demonstrations. “This was Mao’s golden stairway to Communism,” Kozhin noted. Mao said that in one year the entire country would have free clothing and free food. “People had to give all their belongings to the commune, home kitchen stoves were smashed, plots of land were seized and handed over to the commune, and so on.” Kozhin reported seeing a new slogan inscribed on pennants in various places saying: “Everything foreigners can do, we can do. Everything foreigners cannot do, we can also do.”

88. Abramchuk, interview.
89. Shen and Xia, “The Great Leap Forward,” p. 872.
Once Kozhin had visited the commune, Yurii Andropov called him.\footnote{Andropov at that time was head of the CPSU CC’s Department for Relations with the Communist and Socialist Workers’ Parties of the Socialist Countries.} In an agitated voice, Andropov said: “Just what are these people’s communes about?” Kozhin told him generally what he had seen, and Andropov said, “Can it be that the Chinese comrades do not understand that they are making a mistake, that they are not going down the right road?”\footnote{Kozhin, interview.} Arkhipov, the head of the Soviet Advisers Program, reported that the new campaign was causing dislocations and problems for the Soviet personnel at their worksites. He told both Chen Yun and Zhou Enlai that the communes were a bad idea.

Arkhipov characterized the experience of the Great Leap Forward—or, as he referred to it later in life, the “Big Leap Backward”—as a very puzzling and challenging time for the advisers and experts.\footnote{Arkhipov, interview.} In 1957, a Soviet husband and wife team, V. M. Il’inskii and M. I. Il’inskaia, was sent to a Beijing radio station to instruct the station staff on how radio journalism worked. Not long after they arrived, they reported that their days consisted of “solid meetings on improving the style of work . . . meetings from morning to evening on this topic, then after dinner, and the next day. And it went on the same way for weeks and months, and meanwhile, no work was being done.”\footnote{V. M. Il’inskii and M. I. Il’inskaia, interview, Moscow, 26 April 1993.}

Unlike at some worksites where the Soviet advisers were invited to the meetings, the radio station personnel never invited the Il’inskiis because they viewed the operation of the station as “a Chinese internal affair.” The Il’inskiis felt sorry for their Chinese coworkers. A colleague told them she was supposed to write 40 self-criticisms but could come up with only two or three. All the radio station employees had to write numerous self-criticisms, which were then displayed in the halls of their office building.\footnote{Ibid.}

Eventually Il’inskii started the broadcasting job he had been sent to do, a show called “This Is Beijing Speaking.” After he recorded his broadcasts, they were sent by plane to Moscow to be aired there. However, before the Chinese would broadcast his shows in China, they edited them and cut portions out.\footnote{Ibid.} Il’inskii also recalled that “a third of the radio staff, many of whom had been educated in the Soviet Union, were sent to the countryside for reeducation.” When a few returned, they told Il’inskii and his wife in secret that they had lived in the countryside in horrible conditions. “They trusted us and asked us
for help and advice, but they couldn’t do anything. . . . In general we feared one another in every instance. Normally we didn’t speak privately because it was an atmosphere of defamation and new accusations at work every day.”

A Soviet botany teacher recalled that when he arrived people greeted his train with applause. But by 1958 the relationship had changed. “Soon there was beating of drums and other noises everywhere, and big-character posters hung all around, because the Great Leap Forward had started.” According to the teacher, relations with coworkers turned sour. Most important to him was that “the campaigns ruined everyone’s work.” He felt that the Great Leap Forward became\textquotedblright; their reason for doing nothing.” His coworkers attended endless meetings to which he was never invited. Another Soviet expert who worked in China during the Great Leap Forward recalled: “Some of my Chinese coworkers started disrespecting the Soviet government in front of us during this time.” They also proposed that the Soviet Union take a big part in the Great Leap Forward, but the advisers and experts did not understand any of it. “When we declined to agree with them that the Great Leap was a good idea, the Chinese side began to arrange these, I would say, obscene things, these enormous gatherings.”

Because a big part of the Great Leap Forward was the smelting of steel in “backyard ovens,” many Soviet specialists and experts witnessed peasants handing over their utensils and woks to be used in the ovens. One adviser, a trained engineer, investigated the smelting process and immediately concluded that the product from those little stoves was the lowest-quality metal, all but unusable and useless for machine building. “It was impossible to tell the Chinese comrades that there wasn’t even a whiff of science in this process.”

The Soviet advisers in China may not have fully understood that the harsh Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957 had made most Chinese citizens extremely fearful of criticizing any government policies, including the Great Leap Forward.

A. I. Elizavetin, the Soviet consul general at the Soviet consulate in Shanghai at this time, personally checked on the many groups of Soviet specialists working in the consulate’s area. He also found it difficult to talk to Chinese counterparts during the Great Leap Forward. At each worksite, he would approach the Chinese managers about the problems the advisers were having

\begin{footnotes}
\item 98. Ibid.
\item 99. A. G. Voronov, interview, St. Petersburg, 16 March 1993.
\item 100. Kleimenov, interview.
\item 101. Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
when they gave written recommendations to their Chinese colleagues (some-
thing they had done for years without trouble.) “Politely, tactfully, I asked them
to look over our comrades’ recommendations, and if they found them unsatis-
factory, I asked them to explain why.” The Chinese side carefully wrote down
what he said, and then, “exquisitely, in the most gracious expressions, they
thanked me, saying they valued my statements as brotherly concerns about
China’s needs.” Then they went on to say that since nothing had changed and
there had been no results, the Chinese were now “working in the spirit of the
Great Leap Forward, and therefore viewed our recommendations as ‘right de-
viations.’” Elizavetin then traveled to Guangzhou, where a well-known Soviet
pilot from WWII had been teaching the Chinese how to fly planes. He insisted
that the Chinese pilots log 42 hours of flight before flying a plane themselves,
but the Chinese insisted that under Mao’s Great Leap Forward their pilots
would need only twelve hours. Elizavetin reported that two Chinese pilots had
already crashed and died as a result of the new Maoist policy and that the
Chinese then tried to blame the deaths on bad Soviet technology.103

As both Elizavetin and Kozhin experienced, the term “right deviation”
began to show up at many worksites. According to one Soviet adviser in China
at this time, “This happened many times: In the morning the Soviet specialist
arrives and sitting on his desk is a white pennant with Chinese characters on
it saying: ‘Right-winger.’” A general coolness or evasiveness had altered the
previously warm working relationships. The same Soviet adviser remembered
how, in 1958, he came to understand the change that had taken place in
the relationship. He passed by a large hall in the Soviet advisers’ hotel where
the Chinese coworkers were dancing and having fun. Previously they would
have included their Soviet colleagues, “but now they didn’t invite us to things,
and they became evasive. They never came out and said, ‘We are against you.’
They just became evasive around us.”104

One engineer noticed that “the organs of the State Security of China
were shadowing me, adding: “Well, in general it wasn’t just me they were
following, they recorded everything they saw. It was easy for us to spot them,
they always wore the same boots and uniforms.” This Soviet adviser went on
to admit that his own interpreter was connected to the Soviet state security
apparatus.105 The Soviet botany teacher said, “The Chinese were reading my

103. A. I. Elizavetin, O sovetskikh spetsialistakh v KNR, glazami ocvevidtca (unpub. memoir, n.d.),
pp. 28–30.
104. Abramchuk, interview.
105. Kleimenov, interview.
mail and going through our rooms.”¹⁰⁶ Ji Tingxie recounted that by 1959 most cadres knew there was trouble in the Sino-Soviet relationship. “The Soviet experts used telephones to communicate with the Soviet Union. At that time we installed listening devices in the central switchboard.”¹⁰⁷ Later, the Chinese began to complain about having to send Soviet advisers back because of “moral turpitude” or “illegal misconduct.”¹⁰⁸

**Back to the USSR**

Many of the Soviet advisers and experts felt that their withdrawal from China was connected with the policies of the Great Leap Forward. Advisers and experts reported that the call for faster and faster results, for “galloping ahead,” began to disrupt technical instructions and production norms. This was inevitable, for machines and people cannot operate properly if production is focused on excessively quick results. Soviet officials had discovered this during the Stakhanovite movement, and the Chinese must have understood it as well after importing Stakhanov-like methods in the early 1950s.¹⁰⁹ The Soviet personnel in China worked with their Chinese counterparts as best they could until Khrushchev decided in mid-July 1960 to recall them.

Although most Soviet advisers and experts had seen their relationships with Chinese coworkers deteriorate after 1956, neither side expected the advisers to be abruptly recalled. This was true at the Baotou Steel Plant in Inner Mongolia. An Chunxiang, who had studied in the Soviet Union in 1954 and graduated from the Moscow Institute of Steel in 1959, was a plant manager at Baotou. He and 41 other Chinese technicians and workers had been in the USSR to study nuclear design and production.¹¹⁰ In Moscow, he said, “The Soviets were extremely friendly, serious, passionate, unreserved with us, even arranging a

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¹⁰⁶ Voronov, interview.
¹⁰⁷ Ji Tingxie, interview
tour of the Volga River during the summer. When we left, we all hugged each other, because we were very reluctant to part from one another.” In April 1960, more than 30 Soviet advisers arrived at Baotou to help with construction and to train Chinese workers and technicians. Then in August, they heard that the Soviet personnel were to return right away to the USSR. The Russians were dismayed to hear this, “and many of them asked us what we needed to know so they could tell us, and what they could leave behind for us.”

In a matter of months, most of the Soviet advisers, experts, specialists, consultants, and teachers had left China, many of them taking with them their blueprints, plans, and work documents. The Chinese leaders were “shocked and furious,” realizing that the sudden withdrawal of Soviet advisers and experts would damage China’s economy. Many large and important projects ceased immediately.

Even before the official recall in 1960, it seems that China had begun to tire of some of the Soviet advisers. The Soviet radio engineers in China found out through a telegram from Moscow that they were to leave on 5 January 1959, when they had previously been told they would be staying in Beijing until August 1959. Upon leaving, the Chinese held a banquet for them, presented them with a medal, and expressed sorrow that they were going. At the banquet, the Chinese hosts said, “We understand that you are needed in Moscow for important, urgent matters.” However, after they arrived in Moscow, they discovered that the Chinese, not the Soviet government, had requested the early departure.

Kozhin’s experience was somewhat different. He and the Soviet advisers working in journalism in China were given only one month to leave. This “nerve-wracking background” put everyone into a “nervous state.” The families of specialists began to send their family members back to the Soviet Union as soon as possible. Everything was so urgent that they began to ask themselves, “What is this, war or what?”

Conclusions

This overview of Sino-Soviet friendship from the point of view of the Soviet advisers and Chinese citizens who worked together building socialism in the

113. Il’inskii and Il’inskaia, interview.
114. Kozhin, interview.
Soviet Advisers and High Stalinist Management in China

PRC in the 1950s not only adds texture and new details to our understanding of the alliance but also allows us to see more clearly the model China adopted in the early 1950s. Mao was most interested in the revolutionary Stalinist model of the 1930s. The Soviet advisers who came to work in the PRC brought with them the High Stalinist model, which resembled the 1930s model but was more repressive because, as Donald Filtzer notes, “the leadership had to resort to terror in order to reestablish its political preeminence and control over society.”

The model as implemented in China relied on all of Stalin’s postwar tactics of worker management: widespread use of mass methods, campaigns that reinforced CCP control, education and reeducation techniques, criticism and self-criticism, various forms of coercion, and using the threat of imprisonment to push people to work. This article recounts the experiences of the Soviet advisers and experts in China as they witnessed first the implementation of this model and then China’s turn to radicalism after 1956.

What the Soviet advisers experienced of China’s radicalization after 1956 was only a small part of Mao’s enduring commitment to radical socialist construction. Although Mao had relied on the Soviet Union for money, assistance, advice, and prestige since the 1940s, he hewed to his own beliefs about what was best for China. His plan was the economic Stalinization of his country, by which he hoped to implement socialism faster than Stalin had in the USSR. In many ways the High Stalinist practices brought by the Soviet advisers and experts were a good fit for Mao’s “economic Stalinist” designs, insofar as the violently coercive High Stalinist methods forced people to obey and to produce quickly and in as short a time as possible.

After Khrushchev denounced Stalin in 1956, most Soviet advisers saw their relationships with Chinese colleagues and coworkers begin to deteriorate. Shortly after the speech, Mao began radicalizing his policies in China, thus deviating in important ways from the Soviet model. Khrushchev’s speech freed Mao from any constraints he may have felt earlier. By 1958, the Great Leap Forward and its radical methods made the work of the Soviet advisers in China untenable. By 1960, when the advisers were sent back home, China was in its third year of countrywide radicalization and at the height of the famine that claimed at least 45 million lives.

Even as we illuminate the political machinations ordinary people lived through during this period, we can admire the strength and dedication of the

115. Filtzer, Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism, p. 3.
Soviet and Chinese citizens who worked together, learned from one another, and tried to help one another. The people on the ground deserve recognition. Despite the political bickering, mass campaigns, hardships, lack of language skills, and myriad difficulties of working with unfamiliar coworkers from totally different cultures, the Soviet and Chinese personnel tried their best to do their jobs well during these years.

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