

Learning from the Soviet Union: CPC Propaganda and Its Effects

A study Centered on the Sino-Soviet Friendship Association

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I

During its long struggle against the KMT, the CPC had accumulated a wealth of experience in mass propaganda, mobilization and organization. Full play was given to such experience in running the country after the Party came to power. Reliance on its powerful ideological-political work to integrate society and lead the masses to follow the ruling party became the core of the CPC propaganda. In the 1950s, when the CPC policies of friendship with the Soviet Union and of “leaning to one side” were in full swing, “learning from the Soviet Union” was at the heart of official propaganda work, while the Sino-Soviet Friendship Association (SSFA) was the key institution in advancing the movement to “promote and learn from the Soviet Union.” Focusing on this propaganda, the present article aims to analyze how the CPC used the Association to conduct a rousing propaganda campaign that translated the policy of friendship with the Soviet Union into popular will. The article will also evaluate the actual effects of the propaganda.

General discussions of the CPC’s propaganda work appeared in the West early on,¹ followed in recent years by monographs on propaganda during the Cold War period.² As to studies on the CPC approach to propaganda on the Soviet Union, the Ph. D. thesis of Zhang Bogeng of Harvard University is probably the only research result available. In 1991, Dr. Zhang interviewed 250 Beijing residents (two-thirds of whom had been engaged in propaganda work in the 1950s) using a questionnaire.³ Owing to the fact that it was directed not only at government cadres and intellectuals, but also at the whole population, including hundreds of millions of peasants, CPC propaganda promoting the Soviet Union had to be conducted through large-scale wide-ranging mass activities organized by popular associations as well as through conventional mass media and the organization of meetings and study sessions. This makes it an important topic for research. However, important as the issue is, no monographic study has been produced so far. The present paper proposes to examine diverse activities of the Association as a “mass organization” to assess the way the CPC promoted the Soviet Union among the population and their response.

On 30th June 1949, Mao Zedong published his important article “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship” and formally announced China’s policy of “leaning to one side” in favor of the Soviet Union. This policy was relevant not merely to foreign affairs but to ideology and the national economy as well, especially since China had to rely upon Soviet assistance in domestic construction. However, the CPC’s establishment and proclamation of its pro-Soviet policy did not immediately call forth pro-Soviet feelings among the Chinese. Indeed, for some time after the War of Resistance Against Japan, the great majority of the lower strata in the Chinese population had

little understanding of the Soviet Union. With the exception of a minority of left-wing intellectuals, most intellectuals and urban residents, especially in the Northeast, had an unfavorable impression of the country. The reasons for this lay not only in painful memories of Tsarist Russia's occupation of Chinese territories in the Northeast and its high-handed oppression of the Chinese population there, but also in Stalin's postwar Chinese policy and the acts of Soviet troops in the Northeast.

The Soviet army failed to withdraw from the Northeast China within three months after the conclusion of WWII, as had been stipulated by the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Alliance. Rather, the prolonged period of occupation was devoted to transporting to the Soviet Union the greater part of those machines and installations that could be dismantled as well as other equipment and materials. On top of this was the publication after February 1946 of the secret Yalta Agreement reached by the US and USSR behind China's back, with the revelation that Chinese sovereignty and interests had been played off as bargaining chips between the two powers. This led to a series of large-scale anti-Soviet demonstrations, spreading from Jiaochangkou in Chongqing to all the major cities in China.” In particular, the behavior of occupying Soviet troops in the Northeast — theft and rape were virtually an everyday occurrence — added fuel to the fire of popular resentment. “Now that the Small Noses (Japanese) are gone,” Northeasterners commented, “the Big Noses (Soviets) are coming.” Not only did the ordinary people feel like this; even rank-and-file CPC members in the region found it puzzling and disappointing. The Soviet troops were Communists like themselves: why did they monitor, check and obstruct the Chinese Communists at every turn? ⁴ On the one hand, the CPC was confronted by popular ignorance and even antagonism with regard to the Soviet Union; it needed the Soviet Union as a concrete exemplar of the achievements of socialist construction in order to make the great masses of the people understand what the socialist China of the future would be like. Consequently, promoting the Soviet Union and urging the nation to learn from it became top priorities for the CPC after the establishment of the PRC.

II

On 5th October 1949, the SSFA headquarters was formally launched in Beijing, with Liu Shaoqi, Vice President of the country, as Chairman. A look at the list of the Association's sponsors and the process of its structuring and organization indicates clearly the significance attached to this piece of propaganda project by the top echelons of the Party. The Association was defined as a united front organization whose primary mission was to devote every effort to developing its membership and set up branch organizations. Anyone willing to work for Sino-Soviet friendship and learn from the Soviet Union could join. By early November, 1952, its membership topped those of the Youth League, the Trade Union and the Women's Association, making it the largest “mass association” in the country. ⁵

The CPC's methods of propaganda came in all shapes and sizes, ranging from the traditional—*dagu* (story in verse sung to the accompaniment of a small drum and other instruments), *yangpian* (magic lantern shows with a chanted explanation), variety shows, *yang ge* (a kind of popular rural dance), waist drum dance, etc.—to the modern, such as slides or film shows. Regular activities sponsored by SSFA branches in different parts of the country included exhibitions, lectures, seminars, get-togethers, study groups, mobile libraries, wall-newspapers, blackboard newspapers,

street corner propaganda stations, propaganda buses, fancy dress performances, classes in Russian songs and dances teaching sessions, etc. The SSFA promoted also the Russian language throughout the country, so that it had become, by 1952, the most widely taught foreign language in China. All SSFA branches in the major cities had their own publications, that of the headquarters in Beijing being *Zhongsu Youhao Bao* (Sino-Soviet Friendship Bulletin).⁶ Most people's main source of knowledge and understanding of the Soviet Union was the *Soviet Pictorial*, which had the largest circulation and the greatest influence of all the publications. Furthermore, the SSFA and the Union of Soviet Societies of Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries sent delegations for mutual visits and organized penfriend exchanges. Beside its general propaganda and education, the CPC regularly organized study sessions to deepen ideological education by means of exposition of articles, current affairs discussion, reading data and informal discussion.⁷ To extend the propaganda front, the SSFA also expanded its "hardware" infrastructure by setting up Friendship Halls or Cultural Palaces in the major cities to serve as centers for promoting the Soviet Union and other friendship activities.⁸ In addition, what occupied pride of place was propaganda work that was in tune with the current situation at home and abroad and with the Party's policies, dovetailing SSFA work and the Party's political line. From the CPC's assumption of power to the Sino-Soviet split, two grand festivals were inevitably celebrated year after year; the one to mark the October Revolution, the other the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance.

During the First Five-Year Plan, SSFA branches in different parties of the country produced large numbers of pamphlets eulogizing the accomplishments of Soviet experts in China to promote the idea of learning from the Soviet Union. Their concrete contributions became the best testimony to Sino-Soviet friendship. However, though Soviet experts in China made many significant contributions, a number of problems did appear. Among these was the tendency among Chinese cadres and technicians to place to great a reliance on them. Another, more serious, problem was that some of their proposals or ways of doing thing did not fit Chinese conditions.⁹ Then there was disagreement over the weighty issue of whether the Chinese army should also adopt the Soviet institution of one-man leadership.¹⁰ Owing to a series of conflicts of this sort, after the success of the First Five-Year Plan and the accumulation of experience in economic development, the CPC set about exploring a route better suited to China's development. A certain attitude of reserve began to set in with regard to all-out-learning from the Soviet Union.¹¹ Towards the end of February 1956, on the evening of the closing ceremony of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Khrushchev presented his criticism on the errors of Stalin and the personality cult. This "secret report" shocked the world and exerted tremendous and far-reaching influence upon the future political development of the CPC and of China itself. At the same time, it sowed the seeds of the split between China and the Soviet Union in the years to come. In so doing Khrushchev had, to quote Mao, "lifted the lid and made a big mess." Accordingly, from then on Mao began his repeated expositions of "On the Ten Major Relationships," formally proposing that China take the Soviet Union as an object lesson.¹²

By 1958, when the whole of China started on the frenzied road of "national construction" with the CPC's launch of the "Great Leap Forward," Soviet experience started to look conservative and backward. Khrushchev, who was highly dubious about both the "Great Leap" and the People's Communes, dragged his feet over a response to China's request for new assistance.¹³ It so

happened that it was at this very juncture the CPC bombarded the Jinmen Islands without notifying the Soviet Union in advance. Relations between the two parties became more and more strained. Then the 21st National Congress of the CPSU made implicit criticisms of the CPC political line on the People's Commune and the "Great Leap Forward." This was followed by Soviet neutrality during the Sino-Indian border conflict, when the Soviet Union went so far as to declare that it was hardly worth resorting to arms for those barren scraps of land on the border. The CPC was deeply angered. After the heated quarrel between the two parties at the Bucharest Conference in 1960, Khrushchev made the sudden decision in July to recall all Soviet experts in China, and the Sino-Soviet split was finally in the open. While top-level tension relaxed somewhat in 1962, at the Moscow Conference of the next year the relations between the two parties broke up once again, and general political polemics became the order of the day, setting off the thirty-year Sino-Soviet confrontation.

From the time when the CPC's Central Committee formally proposed taking the Soviet Union as an object lesson to the split between two countries, relations grew ever more distant. The cooling of relations was accompanied by an annual decrease in the SSFA organization, personnel and funds. At the same time propaganda on learning from the Soviet Union diminished in both range and scale, no longer conducted with the fanfare of the past. On April 4th, 1966, the organization and its local branches were formally transferred by the CPC Central Committee to the jurisdiction of the Foreign Affairs system as a department of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries,¹⁴ i.e. simply a channel for minimal people-to-people contact. Once the "Great Cultural Revolution" started and propaganda switched to "opposing and fending off the infiltration of revisionism," the SSFA simply disappeared without a trace.

In the early stages after 1949, SSFA propaganda on the Soviet Union focused on the Soviet state system, social conditions, people's livelihood, and the impact of the October Revolution on the Chinese Revolution. During the First Five-Year Plan, the major point of propaganda was on the advanced Soviet economic construction. As the high tide of Sino-Soviet relations began to ebb, the focus shifted to the relatively apolitical field of Soviet science and technology. This development was also related to the staggering progress made by the Soviet Union in terms of science from 1957 on. Another focal point was Lenin and, in particular, the significance of the October Revolution; it was no longer possible for the CPC to continue eulogizing Stalin and his magnificent deeds. In the late 1950s, the rapid deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations at the highest level as well as Ultra-Leftist domination of the domestic scene led to the gradual decline of the SSFA's routine propaganda activities in terms both of frequency and scale. The situation also made it hard for cadres responsible for that specific field of propaganda to determine where they should keep going and where to stop. An example is the puzzlement on the part of local cadres during the period of the "Great Leap Forward" when China was setting up People's Communes and promoting small blast furnaces. The Soviet Union had never done anything of the sort, so how could propaganda about learning from the Soviet Union be integrated with their current central work tasks?¹⁵ The Central Committee's response to their confusion was the instruction that propaganda work "has to be done, but not overdone."¹⁶ Faced with such directives, local propaganda workers' enthusiasm cooled into utter passivity; they became extraordinarily cautious, sidestepping all locally-based exchanges whenever possible.¹⁷ Only activists were allowed to take part in routine activities in the major cities,¹⁸ although they still bore the name "mass activities."

Such activities decreasing each year until they disappeared completely with the launching of the Great Cultural Revolution.

III

Whatever the object of propaganda, the evaluation of its effects is always a difficult and complex task. Data limitations make it impossible for the writer to categorize popular responses in terms of class, occupation, sex, age, locality, education, etc. All that can be done is to indicate the general trends that can be gleaned from materials at hand.

In the first years after the establishment of the PRC, the CPC conducted intensive propaganda through the SSFA. Through such activities, especially in the “Sino-Soviet Friendship Month” in November 1952, vast numbers of ordinary people gradually became interested in and learned about the Soviet Union, and learned that China would follow the same path. Generally speaking, good results could be expected when propaganda about the Soviet Union went hand in hand with real-life practice: an example was effect produced by the timely aid provided by an epidemic-control team in rapidly eradicating a plague epidemic in the provinces of Jehol and Chahar.¹⁹

In general, intellectuals and urban residents, who were more concerned with current affairs and the nation’s sovereignty and fate, tended to be suspicious of official propaganda. They did not respond to the vague professions of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance about consolidating friendship between the two countries and protecting world peace; rather, they questioned why Changchun Railroad and Lüshun would not be returned to China until 1952.²⁰ By autumn of 1952, when the Sino-Soviet Talks issued a bulletin announcing the return of Changchun Railroad to China and the extension of the Soviet lease on the Lüshun Base, some people did respond positively towards Soviet goodwill, but others began to question the essence of the two countries’ co-administration of Lüshun: was the Soviet Union “guarding the gate” for China because the Chinese navy was still weak, or was this invasion and occupation?²¹ Lüshun residents had strong negative responses; they vented their anger on the Soviets living in their city, quarreled with Soviet soldiers, or pushed and jostled Soviet people on streetcars, sometimes even beating them up.²²

At the end of Sino-Soviet Friendship Month, Friendship associations in various places and related government departments jointly reviewed the results of their propaganda. Naturally much had been accomplished, but they had also recorded a fair amount of discontent. Analysis shows that the causes of popular dissatisfaction fall roughly into the following categories:

(1) Misunderstandings resulting from lack of clarity or inappropriate tactics in conveying the message. For example, because some propagandists’ failed to clearly explain the meaning of “The salvos of the October Revolution brought us Marxism-Leninism,” many inhabitants of Shanghai’s tenements asked in bewilderment : “what good would it do for the Soviet Union to fire cannonballs into China?”²³ Another example was the dumping and subsequent forced purchase of large quantities of Soviet cotton prints in a number of places in 1951, arousing much discontent among ordinary people.²⁴

(2) Pro-American sentiments among many intellectuals and businessmen had not been thoroughly eliminated. In the first years of the PRC, their anti-Soviet and pro-American ideas often

intertwined. Many who had lived in the US felt that America had warm-hearted people, advanced science, genuine democracy and freedom, high quality education and teaching materials, abundant material wealth, and possessed of everything desirable from cars and “foreign-style houses” to the atomic bomb.²⁵ Even those who had never left the country but had read books, journals and newspapers, watched Hollywood films, or made their own interpretation of modern Chinese history, saw America as a “moral state”²⁶ that had never engaged in aggression. There were also those who worshipped the US because of its material civilization and, even more, those who felt closely bound up with the US because of their faith in Christianity.²⁷

(3) The psychology of suspicion of and opposition to the Soviet Union arising from historical grievances or nationalist sentiments. The Chinese people, especially Northerners, could not forget that of all the Chinese territories lost to the Powers in the last years of the Qing Dynasty, the Russians had taken the lion’s share. “How comes it,” they frequently asked, “that the Soviet Union refuses to return our Sixty-Four Villages East of the Heilongjiang River and our Lake Baikal, which they occupied by force?”²⁸ Some Beijing citizens were doubtful of the “selflessness” of the Soviet aid to China, holding it to have ulterior motives.²⁹

(4) Antagonism towards the policy of “leaning to one side” and praising everything about the Soviet Union. Many ordinary people disagreed strongly with the policy, especially with the practice of lauding to the skies the Soviets and every aspect of their social life. College teachers in Tianjin coined a popular saying: “Chairman Mao says we Chinese People have stood up. What a pity that no sooner had we stood up than we fell prostrate again.”³⁰ Extolling the wealthy life of Soviet peasants, a teacher of politics in a Shanghai school said that “even the pigsties in the Soviet collective farms are much better than the houses we Chinese people live in” and disgusted all his students.³¹

(5) The people’s ignorance of the behind-the-scenes policies of both the Chinese and Soviet authorities. After the proclamation of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance in 1950, ordinary people wanted to know why China had not got Zhongchang Road back and why Soviet troops had not withdrawn from Lüshun. In fact, the failure to answer their questions was due to special directives from the CPC Bureau of Propaganda to all Chinese periodicals, newspapers and other organs involved with propaganda not to provide answers since these were issues of foreign policy.³² Another example: many Chinese were particularly indignant that no Soviet troops were dispatched to help fight the Korean War, and no Soviet planes were given China to support its war efforts.³³ They were not told that while the Soviet air force did in fact take part in combat in coordination with Chinese troops, the missions were carried out under cover because the Soviet Union did not want to escalate its confrontation with the US in the Korean Peninsula.³⁴

In spite of this, the intensive propaganda mobilized and organized by the CPC from 1949 on to promote the Soviet Union did achieve considerable success among urban residents. The most illuminating example to this effect was the profound grief they expressed on the death of Stalin, as if the skies were collapsing overhead.³⁵ Some even worried that Stalin’s death would affect the friendly relations between China and the Soviet Union, decreasing Soviet support to China and, ultimately, making it impossible for China to attain the realm of socialism.³⁶

However, what really worked to make intellectuals and urban residents give up their prejudices against the Soviet Union was the general policy of “learning from the USSR in an all round way” formulated by Mao Zedong and the CPC Central Committee during the period of

February to September, 1953. Responding to the call, the Chinese nation as a whole was swept up in a high tide of learning from this first socialist country in the world.³⁷ The U-turn was completed in the following year of 1954 by the Khrushchev's visit to China and the wealth of gifts he brought: long-term loans to China were increased, Soviet troops withdrawn from the military harbor of Lüshun, and Soviet shares in all joint Sino-Soviet firms transferred to China. Once this news was made public, there was widespread rejoicing and appreciation.³⁸ In addition, large numbers of Soviet experts began to arrive in China after 1954. Their technical knowledge and conscientious attitude convinced numbers of CPC cadres and intellectuals of Soviet sincerity, adding to Chinese goodwill towards the Soviet Union.³⁹ If in the early days of the PRC the Soviet Union was promoted out due to domestic political requirements, the second high tide of learning from that country was undoubtedly due entirely to the needs of economic construction—the First Five-Year Plan that was being launched had to have substantial Soviet assistance. As Mao Zedong put it later, that at the time we did not know how to go about construction, and we had no choice but to learn from the USSR.

It was at this juncture that an event took place in the Soviet Union that destroyed China's image of that country. This was the secret report made by Khrushchev at the 20th CPSU Congress in condemnation of Stalin. The report was widely circulated among Chinese cadres and intellectuals, the tremendous impact thus produced smashed past the Soviet myths and almost virtually eliminated in one stroke all that had been achieved in the past seven years by the CPC's pro-Soviet propaganda. Since the Soviet model had problems, thought many intellectuals, China had to cut loose from it and search for an alternative course. Also, while pondering how to switch tracks away from the Stalin debacle, they began to examine critically the communist theory and the fundamental problems in its essence. Dai Huang, a reporter with Xinhua, recalls that when he and his colleagues heard the report they felt as though a soundless atomic bomb had exploded in their mental universe.⁴⁰ The doubts aroused by this report resurfaced as discontent with the Soviet Union during the brief "airing of views" in the spring of 1956.⁴¹ However, was immediately countered by Mao's Anti-Rightist Movement, in which anyone who dared to challenge the Party's policies and authority was ruthlessly punished. One of the crimes of many of the intellectuals who were branded "Rightists" was their critical speeches on the Soviet Union. At the time, to be opposed to the USSR meant opposing the Party and opposing socialism — i.e., being counter-revolutionary.

Thus when the movement of "opening up one's heart to the Party" took place in 1958 and intellectuals were called upon to make their political stand explicit, even personages in democratic/science circles who had looked up to Europe and America's democratic systems and science and technology all had to attack their previous reverence for America and contempt for the Soviet Union, and announce that they would henceforth endeavor to study Marxism-Leninism and the advanced experiences and science and technology of the Soviet Union.⁴² The drastic changes in these people indicated that the most "stubbornly" pro-US and anti-USSR elements of Chinese society had been rounded up and brought under the pro-Soviet banner. The twin-pronged campaign of propaganda and political movements aimed at learning from the Soviet Union and making the whole nation pro-Soviet that was introduced around 1949 can be said to have been crowned with success by 1958.

Ironically, just at the very moment when CPC propaganda had achieved the much desired

success in transforming China into a pro-Soviet nation, Party relationships at the top made an about turn. However, Mao Zedong's thunderous outburst of wrath at Khrushchev when they met in the summer of 1958 was kept from the rank and file cadres and the man in the street for the time being. News of the heated quarrel between the two sides that took place in autumn 1959, on Khrushchev's third visit to China, was widely circulated among high-ranking CPC cadres, but remained unknown at the grassroots. This state of affairs prevailed until the summer of 1960 when the USSR decided all of a sudden to call back from China all its experts, finally making the Sino-Soviet split plain to cadres and ordinary people. The scenes of distress at railway stations between the departing Soviets and the Chinese seeing them off demonstrated the depth of friendship between the two peoples, albeit rather inopportunistly.

IV

Immediately after the founding of the PRC, the CPC launched all out propaganda efforts to explain and promote its pro-Soviet policy of "leaning to one side". The fundamental mission of the newly set up Sino-Soviet Friendship Association was to mobilize and organize the masses to promote and learn from the Soviet Union. Through a range of colorful activities, ignorance or resentment of the Soviet Union was to be transformed into understanding and admiration. At the same time, it was to eulogize the superiority of the socialist system, drawing with bold strokes pictures of the happy future life for which the Soviet Union provided the model.

Obviously, the propaganda was marked by indoctrination and coercion. This was because stabilizing and consolidating the regime required a uniformity of social opinion despite the huge gap between Party policy mass political consciousness. The evolution of Sino-Soviet relations and the orientation of CPC propaganda provides a classic example of this process. In the early 1950s, when there was strong anti-Soviet sentiment among the majority of intellectuals and urban residents and the great masses of peasants knew little about the USSR, the CPC, because of its pro-Soviet policy of "leaning to the one side", had to promote that country and Sino-Soviet friendship. However, by the early 1960s, when favorable impressions of and friendship with the Soviet Union had gradually taken root among the Chinese, the CPC, determined to take an alternative route, started to propagate the general policy of opposing and guarding against revisionism and of confrontation with the Soviet Union. There was an anecdote that vividly illuminated this dislocation between the CPC official propaganda and popular feeling: during the "airing of views" coincident with the Sino-Soviet honeymoon of 1957, an engineer in Beijing said "actually, not all Soviet experts are necessarily good." For saying this, he was branded a Rightist, kicked out of the capital and exiled to work in the Northeast. Then in 1965 when Sino-Soviet relations had already deteriorated, this same engineer said "actually, there are quite a few good guys among the Soviet experts". Because of this, he was branded "counterrevolutionary" when the Cultural Revolution took place the next year and exiled to Qinghai to be reformed through labor.⁴³ This classic example shows the effectiveness of CPC propaganda throughout the evolution of Sino-Soviet relations and how it was quite capable of swaying popular feeling. However, there was always a time-lag between popular responses and policy changes from the top; tragedy became inevitable when warm relations at the top conflicted with chilly sentiments at the bottom of vice versa.

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Notes

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