

Review Article: Mao's Soviet Policies

John W. Garver

Shi nian lunzhan, 1956–1966, Zhong Su guanxi huiyilu (Ten-Year War of Words, 1956–1966, a Memoir of Sino-Soviet Relations). By WU LENGXI. [Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1999. Two volumes. 940 pp.]

This is the most detailed account to date of Chinese decision-making during the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations from 1956 to 1966. Wu Lengxi was head of Xinhua news agency from 1952 to 1966 and general editor of *Renmin ribao* from 1957 to the start of the Cultural Revolution. Wu joined the Party in 1938 at the age of 19, and attended Yennan's anti-Japan resistance university before being assigned to propaganda and then news work.¹ He was also the CCP's designated record-keeper on Sino-Soviet relations during the crucial decade between the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956 and the final collapse of Sino-Soviet relations in 1965. In his capacity as record-keeper, Wu personally attended most of the international and CCP Politburo meetings involved in Sino-Soviet relations during this crucial period. He was one of only a few people (and perhaps the only person) authorized to take notes at these meetings. When meetings were convened which he did not attend, or delegations of which he had not been a part returned from abroad, he was allowed to debrief the CCP leaders who had participated in those delegations or read reports of the proceedings. Wu thus offers a virtually meeting-by-meeting account of Chinese decision-making, often listing the participants of those meetings and reprising decisions reached. He dwells longest on Mao's words, while adumbrating comments by Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and other CCP leaders. Comments by foreign communist leaders receive even shorter shrift. While there are major lacunae in Wu's account, his memoir offers an authoritative and first-hand account of what China's leaders thought as they manoeuvred towards the collapse of Sino-Soviet relations. Wu's account will be a major source for scholars.

As is always the case with the emergence of important new sources, Wu's memoir allows us to revisit earlier generations of scholarship and pass judgement on the conclusions of that work. In this case, earlier scholarship stands up quite well. While providing much new detail about the Chinese decision-making process, Wu's memoir adds little to the broad outlines that non-PRC scholars previously surmised regarding the collapse of the Sino-Soviet partnership. The first generation of Western scholarship, represented by Donald Zagoria, which stressed the ideological nature of the conflict and a derivative contest for influence within the

1. *Zhong-gong renmin lu (Who's Who in Communist China)* (Taipei: Zhengzhi daxue guoji guanxi yanjiu zhongxin, 1999), pp. 129–130.

world communist movement, fairs particularly well. Zagoria, for example, identified the crux of the conflict as “a direct result of the ideological commitment [of leaders on both sides] to worldwide revolution and of differences on how to promote it.”²

One thing that emerges clearly from Wu’s memoir is that Mao was a true believer in Marxist-Leninist ideology and took very seriously the mission of achieving a socialist world. The amount of time and energy the Politburo devoted during these years to debating Marxist-Leninist theory and preparing for convocations of the international communist movement is amazing. The issues that were the substance of the ideological debates between the CCP and the CPSU in those years were debated at length, for days on end, month after month, by Politburo or central leader conferences. Mao participated actively in these meetings. He personally read and commented on, frequently extensively, various theoretical statements. From Wu’s account it is clear that, for Mao, theory was not some sort of rationalization added on after calculations of power or gain had been made. It was, as Zagoria pointed out, the key to history and to successful political action.

A second generation of Western scholarship, represented by A. Doak Barnett and Edmund Clubb, stressed conflicts over national interest as the taproot of the dispute.³ Chinese concern for the episodes stressed by this national interest narrative is also substantiated by Wu’s memoir. Wu details the same episodes analysed by this second generation of scholarship: Moscow’s proposal in mid-1958 of a “joint fleet” and a naval radio station on the China coast, divergent policies towards the United States, Taiwan and India, the Quemoy crisis of 1958, and disputes over nuclear weapons, nuclear war and nuclear non-proliferation. Yet the intense ideological concern of China’s leaders, plus the focus of CCP–CPSU rivalry for influence on the common constituency of the world communist movement which are apparent in Wu’s account, leaves this analyst with the conclusion that it is the first generation of Western scholarship that came closest to the mark, at least in terms of trying to understand that conflict from the standpoint of China’s leaders. In light of the intense ideological conviction apparent in Wu’s account, explaining the CPSU–CCP conflict in terms of conflicting national interests seems like a way of making that conflict intelligible to less ideological Westerners. Framing the dispute in terms of national interest is a way of explaining CCP actions in terms that Westerners can understand, rather than in the terms experienced by CCP leaders themselves.

The major conclusion arising out of my reading of Wu’s memoir, and the thesis structuring this review, is this: Mao’s key decisions regarding

2. Donald S. Zagoria, *The Sino-Soviet Conflict, 1956–1961* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 5.

3. A. Doak Barnett, *China and the Major Powers in East Asia* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1977). O. Edmund Clubb, *China and Russia, The “Great Game”* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971). Walter Clemens was also a seminal member of the national interest approach, although chronologically he fits better with Zagoria. Walter S. Clemens, *The Arms Race and Sino-Soviet Relations* (Stanford: Hoover Institute, 1968).

relations with Moscow during this period were not predicated on, and did not serve, China's national interests understood in terms of national wealth, security and power. Mao's decisions were predicated, rather, on pursuit of world revolution via rectification of the line of the international communist movement. Moreover, his key decisions regarding China's national interests, especially his handling of Moscow's mid-1958 joint fleet proposal, was fundamentally mistaken, involving attribution to Khrushchev of sinister motives which the Soviet leader did not, in fact, hold. In the jargon of international studies, this is called a fundamental attribution error and is recognized as a fairly common malady. It occurs when actors in one nation attribute sinister motives to actors in another country to explain behaviour that arises, in fact, out of political circumstances in that other country. Even more, this particular fundamental attribution error seems to have arisen out of the bizarre idiosyncrasies of Mao's personality. His determinations cost China greatly in terms of its pursuit of wealth, security and power.

Rectification of the Line of the International Communist Movement

In Wu's account, the organization and direction of the world communist movement clearly emerges as the core issue of the Sino-Soviet dispute. Conflicts over national interest such as those elaborated by Doak Barnett and Edmund Clubb do enter into Wu's account, and sometimes play an important role. But – with the one very important exception of the 1958 “joint fleet” proposal – they play a secondary role in CCP deliberations and calculations. The core issues, the issues debated at length by CCP leaders and between them and their CPSU comrades, as recounted by Wu, had to do with the theoretical issues under debate in the world communist movement: the “contributions” versus the “mistakes” of Stalin, the nature and role of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the historically progressive nature of war, socialist countries' support for Third World revolutionary struggles, the nature of US imperialism, the possibility of peaceful transition to socialism, and, most important of all, the role of the CPSU and the CCP in making such determinations. It was the world communist movement, made up of 100 ruling and non-ruling communist parties by the early 1960s, which the CCP and the CPSU, Mao and Khrushchev, were struggling to influence and guide.⁴ Issues such as “peaceful coexistence” and the nature of war became deep conflicts between Beijing and Moscow, between the CCP and the CPSU, because of the impulse of the two parties to define the line of the international communist movement in relation to those concepts.

To understand Wu's account, some context is necessary. Direction of the world communist movement was, in fact, a very important instrument of USSR national power. Inspired, organized and supported by the CPSU beginning in 1919, the world communist movement gave the CPSU a

4. The count of communist parties derives from Witold S. Sworakowski (ed.), *World Communism, A Handbook, 1918–1965* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1973).

very real ability to project its views, and frequently to influence events significantly, in virtually every region and country of the world. Soviet direction of the world communist movement was second only to the might of the Red Army as an instrument of Soviet global power. It was Soviet control over this instrument that Mao and the CCP challenged.⁵

It is also important to understand that the world communist movement was ideologically based. It derived its elan and discipline from ideological conviction by at least a core of its adherents. It was a movement inspired by a mission to create a new, better world, and looked to the USSR for inspiration in that regard. The CPSU claim to leadership over the world communist movement was derived from its putative ability to formulate a "correct" political line. This claim was in turn derived from greater and more successful "experience" of the CPSU in the "construction of socialism." It was this claim that was challenged by the CCP beginning in 1956. CPSU leadership of the world communist movement was not "correct," the CCP said with increasing directness, but was deeply marred by various "mistakes." By 1959 the CCP had concluded that the CPSU was fundamentally mistaken in its line. It was mis-leading rather than "correctly" leading the world communist movement.

From the very beginning Mao understood that he was challenging CPSU leadership within the world communist movement. When ordering publication of an ostensibly "internal" statement on Stalin in 1956 he told his Politburo comrades that that statement was "nominally directed internally, but in fact is directed internationally. We cannot say we want to influence the international situation. One must understand that the Soviet Union has set up its own sausage stand and is not willing to see China sell sausage" (p. 68). Until 1963, Mao did not try to put the CPSU's "sausage stand" out of business, but pushed them to sell a more "correct" brand of sausage by threatening to set up the CCP's own stand. Mao imagined that he was emancipating the world communist movement from CPSU "big power chauvinism." Once that blight was removed, Mao believed, the prospects for world revolution would be much brighter. The world communist movement would advance much more quickly toward the bright future. Revolution and socialism would spread rapidly making socialist China more secure and prominent in the world.

Mao opposed the CPSU's "self proclaimed big brother position" (*laozi dang zizhu*) within the world communist movement. He proposed to replace CPSU domination of that movement with a more consultative decision-making process, with other communist parties on a more nearly equal footing with the CPSU. The CPSU should no longer be able to dictate the line of the world communist movement, Mao felt. He believed it should relinquish the power it heretofore enjoyed to convene meetings

5. I recognize the irony here that I revert to the same category of national interest used by Barnett and Clubb which I criticize immediately above. Again, the difference seems to be an approach which puts us inside the CCP's own Weltanschauung and decision-making process and one which stands outside that process but provides useful categories for interpreting it.

unilaterally, set the agenda for those meetings, determine the line of the international movement, interfere in the internal affairs of other parties, and condemn and discipline wayward parties as it wished. Mao was not proposing equality of standing and voice for all parties. Rather, he proposed (in effect though not explicitly) joint CPSU–CCP direction of the world communist movement. When Khrushchev explicitly proposed such joint leadership to Mao in August 1958 Mao rejected it. Only the CPSU had the power to exercise leadership adequately, Mao insisted. Yet in terms of decision-making within the communist movement, Mao insisted that the CPSU could not act without Chinese agreement. The decision-making procedure advocated by Mao and the CCP between 1957 and 1964 was that the CCP and the CPSU should first meet to discuss crucial issues. After and only after agreement was reached between those two parties would that agreement be passed on to larger communist party conferences to provide a basis for “genuine,” “principled” unity.

Whatever Mao's self-understanding of his challenge to the CPSU, that challenge in fact meant that Moscow could no longer set the line for the world communist movement. On issue after issue during the “ten-year war of words” surveyed by Wu, Moscow tried and failed to impose its views: regarding Stalin and destalinization, on relaxation of tensions with the United States, on nuclear weapons, nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation, on the transition to socialism, on relations with India, on the limits of permissible behaviour for the East European socialist countries, and on many other issues.

Mao's model of how decision-making in the world communist movement should work was the Moscow conference of late 1957. In the months leading up to, and even during the initial stages of the Moscow conference, the CPSU committed a number of ideological errors, Mao felt. When Mao went to Moscow to attend the conference, Khrushchev gave him a draft declaration containing these erroneous views. Mao rejected Khrushchev's draft and gave the Soviet leader a Chinese draft resolution. Khrushchev accepted it and the Chinese draft became the basis of the subsequent convention declaration. Mao also proposed letting all other communist parties at the Moscow conference see and comment on the draft resolution. Khrushchev objected because many of those parties were not very important in their home countries. Mao insisted, however, and again Khrushchev gave way. Representatives of 68 parties participated in drafting the final resolution, which enunciated militant views acceptable to the CCP (pp. 93–99).

The 1957 Moscow conference was a successful example of “unity through struggle” – a theme that emerges repeatedly in Wu's account. According to this concept, “correct principle” was the only acceptable basis for unity. Unity on the basis of “unprincipled compromise” was a “betrayal” of principle and would lead to defeat. When confronted by incorrect CPSU views within the world communist movement, the CCP, with its correct view, must struggle against the incorrect CPSU views causing that party to drop its wrong views and embrace at least a

minimally correct stance. The CPSU would then “lead” the world communist movement in the correct direction with the full support of the CCP. Such CCP support was contingent, of course, on the CPSU leading only in directions agreed upon bilaterally. For the CPSU to set out in a direction not in accord with bilaterally agreed upon principles, was “betrayal” of the CCP and of “correct principles.”

Mao’s and the CCP’s decision in early 1960 to launch a polemical struggle against Khrushchev’s “revisionism” was an attempt to repeat the successful 1957 experience of “unity via struggle.” Following discussions with Khrushchev in September 1959 (just after Khrushchev’s epoch-making visit to the United States), the CCP Politburo concluded that the Soviet leader fundamentally misunderstood the essence of American imperialism and confused enemies and friends. This was due, Mao concluded beginning in late 1959, to Khrushchev’s “bourgeois class nature.” Khrushchev believed Eisenhower wanted peace and that the socialist countries should strive to reduce tension with the United States. To correct these “errors” and create a basis for unity with the CPSU, the CCP decided, in January 1960, to launch a “struggle with him [Khrushchev], to make him good” (*lizheng ta bian hao*) (p. 241). “Appropriate internal criticism [i.e. within the confines of world communist movement meetings] is necessary regarding a few major problems [the essence of US imperialism, Marxism-Leninism, etc.] It is necessary to make known our positive principles.” But the object of the struggle was unity. Mao’s objective was to “set out from a desire for unity, go through struggle and criticism, arrive at unity on a new basis” (*cong tuanjie de yuanwang chufa, jingguo douzheng, piping dadao xin de jichu shang de tuanjie*) (p. 241). The explicit target of the polemic would be Yugoslavia, Mao directed, but the real target would be Khrushchev’s revisionism (pp. 236–247). The CCP decision of January 1960 led to the publication of a series of polemics in April on the centenary of Lenin’s birth.

When making the critical decision in January 1960 to initiate “struggle” against Khrushchev, Mao was of the opinion that the Soviet leader would change in response to CCP criticism. While acknowledging the possibility of a “complete split” with the CPSU, Mao did not feel that that possibility was very great. Khrushchev “was not a systematic opportunity,” Mao concluded, but was “easily changeable.” The Soviet leader had already twice changed his position in response to CCP criticism – in 1956 over the question of Stalin, and again during the 1957 Moscow conference (p. 245). A Politburo meeting concluded that the possibility of Khrushchev becoming a “complete revisionist” and “openly splitting the socialist camp” was “relatively small” and “not very great.” A number of factors militated against such an open rupture. The “Marxist-Leninist” forces within the CPSU were still fairly strong. Many communist parties sympathized with the CCP or feared an open CPSU–CCP split and would therefore pressure Moscow to avoid a split. National liberation movements in the Third World would continue to grow in spite of Khrushchev’s efforts to throttle them, and those movements too would

push Moscow to maintain unity. And the CPSU would need the support of a "major party" like the CCP and of a "big country" like China (pp. 239–240). Because of such considerations, polemical "struggle" against Khrushchev was not likely to lead to a complete split, Mao concluded. We will return later to the gross miscalculation involved here, but it should be noted that, while providing this crucial information, Wu Lengxi nowhere suggests, even obliquely, that CCP leaders made a mistake or miscalculated. In his entire 940 pages, it is only in dealing with Mao's emphasis on class struggle under socialism as a factor leading to his initiation of the Cultural Revolution that Wu suggests Mao made a mistake. Elsewhere Wu provides a purely descriptive account of what Mao said and ordered, avoiding any judgement on the prudence and effectiveness of those decisions.

Mao's Erroneous Attribution to Khrushchev of a Desire to "Control China"

The major episode which falls clearly outside the context of rivalry for leadership of the world communist movement involves the Soviet proposal in the spring of 1958 for establishment of a naval communications station on the China coast and creation of a PRC–USSR joint submarine fleet. Analysts have long understood the significance of this episode; it figured prominently, for example, in Barnett's analysis.⁶ Wu Lengxi's memoir corroborates the established view that that episode was a watershed marking the beginning of the steep downward slide of Sino-Soviet relations. Wu provides a new and detailed account of the initial meeting on 21 July 1958 at which Soviet Ambassador Pavel Yudin first proposed to Mao creation of a Sino-Soviet "joint fleet" of submarines. Previous scholarship on this issue has relied on a transcript of a discussion between Yudin and Mao the next day, 22 July, published in Beijing in 1994.⁷

The significance of Wu's account of the initial 21 July meeting is that it conveys Mao's initial, swift and strongly emotional reaction to the Soviet proposal, thus offering insight into the psychological dynamics of Mao's reaction. Wu's account dovetails with the memoirs of Li Zhisui, Mao's personal physician from 1954 to 1976, to suggest that "China's" decision – that is Mao's decision – at this juncture was not rational. Stated bluntly, the available evidence increasingly suggests that Mao's handling of the Soviet proposals of mid-1958 was irrational. His decision at this crucial juncture certainly did not serve China's national interests of becoming powerful and rich. If anything, Mao's behaviour falls into

6. Barnett, *Major Powers*, p. 346, nn. 42 and 43.

7. *Mao Zedong waijiao wenxuan (Mao's Diplomatic Writings)* (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1994), pp. 322–333. Two English translations of the document are available in Odd Arne Westad, *Brothers in Arms, The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945–1963* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 347–356, and "The Cold War in Asia," *Cold War International History Project, Bulletin*, No. 6–7. (Winter 1995/1996), pp. 155–59.

the category that Barbara Tuchman called “the pursuit of policy contrary to self interest,” or more simply, “folly.”⁸

Again some context is necessary. In November 1957 Defence Minister Peng Dehuai led a high level military delegation to the Soviet Union to discuss implementation of an earlier agreement regarding expanded Soviet assistance to China’s military modernization, including nuclear weapons, missiles, jet aircraft and nuclear-powered submarines. Khrushchev agreed in principle to Peng’s request, and the two leaders then agreed on increased Sino-Soviet military co-operation in the Far East in the air and naval areas.⁹ Early in 1958 Soviet naval officers began providing their PLA counterparts with limited information about Soviet advances in submarine technology, and suggested that China might request Soviet assistance in this regard.¹⁰ Then in April, Soviet Defence Minister Radion Malinovskii proposed to Peng Dehuai a joint effort to build a long-wave radio station on the Chinese coast to communicate with submarines operating in the Pacific. (Long-wave radio transmissions better penetrate water to reach submerged boats.) Out of these talks emerged a Soviet proposal for construction of a long-wave radio station on the Chinese coast for use in communicating with Soviet submarines in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The Soviets proposed that they contribute 70 million and China 40 million rubles towards the radio station. Negotiations ensued, with Mao insisting, in June, on Chinese ownership.¹¹ Late in June Zhou Enlai wrote to the Soviet government requesting Soviet assistance in the design and construction of nuclear submarines. In the words of John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, Zhou’s letter, coming as it did in the context of prolonged negotiations over the radio station proposal, “led Moscow to assume that the Chinese were ready to deal” and that the Soviet Union had only to devise a compromise.¹² Eventually the Soviets abandoned the radio station project in favour of reliance on new satellite communication technology, but it was still on the table in July 1958 when Yudin met Mao.

During his 21 July meeting with Mao, Ambassador Yudin implicitly linked China’s request for naval modernization assistance to a new Soviet proposal for establishment of a joint Sino-Soviet submarine fleet. On that day Yudin first briefed Mao and other top CCP leaders on Soviet policy towards the Middle East and Yugoslavia before turning to the notion of a Sino-Soviet “joint fleet.” By Wu Lengxi’s account, Mao became extremely agitated by Yudin’s proposal. He did not let Yudin finish, but interrupted “with astonishment” – “What! Are you proposing a ‘joint

8. Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly, from Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine, 1989).

9. Liu Xiao, *Chushi Sulian ba nian (Eight Years as Ambassador to the Soviet Union)* (Beijing: Dangshi ziliao chubanshe, 1986), p. 60. An essay on Liu Xiao’s memoir appeared in *The China Quarterly*, No. 122 (June 1990), pp. 303–307.

10. John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *China’s Strategic Seapower, The Politics of Force Modernization in the Nuclear Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 13.

11. *Mao Zedong waijiao wenxian*, pp. 316–17 and 634. English translations are available in “The Cold War in Asia,” pp. 154–55.

12. Lewis and Xue, *China’s Strategic Seapower*, p. 13.

company'?" China had requested Soviet assistance in naval construction, but had not imagined setting up a "joint company" with the Soviet Union, Mao told Yudin. After Yudin finished his presentation, Mao returned to the "joint fleet" issue and "wouldn't let it go" (*zhuazhu ... bu fang*). Yudin tried to explain the geographic constraints confronting the Soviet navy in accessing the high seas, but Mao would have none of it. China would not accept any conditions on Soviet assistance in China's development of nuclear submarines, Mao said (pp. 158–161). "Their real purpose is to control us," Mao later told Li Zhisui.¹³

By Wu's account, as soon as he heard the Soviet proposal, Mao concluded that it was an attempt to "control China." The swiftness and firmness of his determination is significant. As shown below, Mao completely dominated China's foreign policy process. Once he decided on a position, other top leaders supported that stance. No one dared to oppose Mao's judgements in this regard. Thus, when Mao concluded within moments of hearing Yudin's proposal that, in the words of a later authoritative CCP statement, it embodied "unreasonable demands designed to bring China under Soviet military control"¹⁴ (emphasis added), Mao had just determined China's policy line towards handling that issue. The institutions charged with dispassionately assessing China's interests and the policies best designed to serve them, the foreign and defence ministries, were not involved in making this crucial decision. The decision was Mao's alone. The emotional nature of his swift judgement here is also significant. He became angry and emotionally agitated by Yudin's proposal. This suggests the issue touched underlying elements of Mao's personality.

Ten days later Khrushchev arrived in Beijing to try to smooth over the issue. Deng Xiaoping was present at Mao and Khrushchev's initial meeting on 31 July and later gave Wu a full account of the meeting – which Wu conveys. A detailed and previously unavailable account of this meeting is another major contribution of Wu's memoir. The meeting was very tense from the beginning. Mao was impatient and continually interrupted Khrushchev, focusing insistently on the Soviet "joint fleet" proposal. Khrushchev explained that the Soviet proposal had grown out of a Chinese request for Soviet assistance in acquiring nuclear submarines. Mao rebuffed that by saying that China had asked for help regarding nuclear submarines, not in establishing a "joint fleet" of submarines. Khrushchev said that the Chinese characterization of the Soviet proposal as an attempt by Russian nationalism to injure China, hurt his feelings and implied that the Chinese comrades did not trust their Soviet comrades or understand Soviet policy. To this Mao "became even more angry," according to Wu. "Hurt your self-respect? Who hurt whose self-respect?" Mao replied. Khrushchev then withdrew the joint fleet

13. Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Memoirs of Mao's Personal Physician* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 261.

14. "The origin and development of the differences between the leadership of the CPSU and ourselves," *Renmin ribao*, 6 September 1963, in *The Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), p. 77.

proposal (pp. 163–67).¹⁵ In 1960 Mao would point to Khrushchev's dropping of the joint fleet proposal as still further evidence that the Soviet leader could be easily turned around, and would, therefore, respond positively to the anti-revisionist polemic being launched against him.

In assessing the rationality of Mao's judgement regarding Moscow's radio station and joint fleet proposals, it is necessary to distinguish between the possible consequences of the Soviet proposal, and Soviet motives attributed to that proposal. While Mao certainly believed the proposal would have the consequence of "controlling China," it seems to me that the speed and emotional nature of Mao's reaction derived from attribution of motives to the proposal. Moreover, it was Mao's judgement about Khrushchev's motives that made Soviet proposals especially objectionable and requiring firm rebuff. A determination that Soviet motives were good but that the proposed policies would have had unacceptable consequences would have pointed towards a very different sort of Chinese reaction. It was Soviet motives which were significant to Mao. They indicated Khrushchev's "bourgeois class nature" and were leading the Soviet leader to collaborate with American imperialism to "control China."

It is now fairly clear that in attributing to the Soviet "joint fleet" proposal of 1958 a desire to "control China," Mao was simply wrong. The "joint fleet" proposal originated with the Soviet navy supreme command as part of Admiral Gorshkov's efforts to expand Soviet submarine warfare capabilities. A debate within Soviet military circles had recently been settled in favour of submarines and against surface ships. Increased numbers of ever more advanced submarines (based on captured Nazi technology) were rolling out of Soviet shipyards. To utilize those new boats, the Soviet navy needed forward-based radio transmitters plus facilities for forward basing and repair in time of war. Admiral Gorshkov concluded that a base on Hainan Island would best meet Soviet naval requirements in the Pacific. Khrushchev anticipated Chinese agreement to the proposal when he ordered Yudin to broach the matter with Mao. Increased Soviet naval strength in the Pacific would, after all, protect China as well as the USSR.¹⁶

Russian scholar Constantine Pleshakov, working with declassified Soviet archives, has also derived the "joint fleet" and radio station proposals from a "peace through power" strategy of enhancing Soviet submarine capabilities in the Pacific Ocean by overcoming the very real geographic constraints confronting the Soviet navy. Petropavlovsk (then the main Soviet submarine base in the Pacific) was at the end of an extremely remote peninsula, dependent on supply by sea and thus virtu-

15. Wu's account of the Khrushchev–Mao talks between 31 July and 2 August 1958 also helps clear up another long-standing mystery – whether Mao gave Khrushchev any indication of China's forthcoming bombardment of Quemoy. According to Wu, those "bilateral Sino-Soviet meetings absolutely did not touch on the matter of China's bombardment of Jinmen which began three weeks later. There was not one word of this" (pp. 172–73).

16. Sergei N. Khrushchev, *Nikita Khrushchev and the Creation of a Superpower* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), pp. 267–68.

ally useless in time of war. Soviet submarines leaving Vladivostok had to cross American-controlled straits to leave the Sea of Japan before they could reach the Pacific Ocean where United States and allied shipping would operate. If these geographic constraints could be eliminated by co-operation with China, the socialist Eurasian bastion would be more secure against an American threat.¹⁷ Mao concluded that this geopolitical argument was merely a pretext to justify a proposal with far more sinister purposes. During his 22 July meeting with Yudin, Mao rejected the proposition that Soviet submarines needed Chinese ports to access the high seas securely. "You can reach the Ocean from Vladivostok through the Kurile Islands. The condition is very good."¹⁸ Even on these narrow grounds, Mao was wrong. The shallow or narrow passages through the Kurile Islands, and between Japan's Hokkaido and Honshu Islands, would make detection by the US Navy of Soviet submarines relatively easy – as any expert in submarine warfare could have told Mao. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, for example, when Soviet–American war seemed imminent, Moscow ordered all its submarines to the high seas lest they be destroyed in port by American attack. When Soviet submarines in the Far East left the Sea of Japan, the US Navy was confident it had detected well over half of them.¹⁹ Such a rate of attrition was not sustainable. The Soviet navy needed bases in China, beyond the island chain control of the US Navy, to counter the United States. Not to control China.

Nor is there any evidence that Khrushchev intended, or even imagined, that he could "control China." There is, however, considerable evidence that the new Soviet leader was bending over backwards to make Moscow's Chinese allies "feel comfortable within the confines of the Soviet bloc," to use Pleshakov's formulation. In judging the rationality of Mao's crucial 1958 determinations we must consider that Khrushchev was, in fact, dealing with China in an extremely generous fashion. The Soviet Union under Khrushchev had repeatedly agreed to major increases in the number of Soviet-assisted projects in China, adding 55 additional projects in 1956, 45 in 1958 and another 35 in 1959. By February 1959, the Soviet Union was assisting 291 projects in China. These facilities spanned the range of infrastructure and heavy industry, involved a truly massive transfer of technology to China, and formed the backbone of China's modern industry.²⁰ Khrushchev also agreed to alter in 1954 the terms of the Sino-Soviet alliance of 1950 in accord with Beijing's requests and in line with China's interests. He agreed to abolition, without Chinese compensation, of Soviet lease-holdings at Lüshun and Dalian, to abandonment, again without Chinese compensation, of Soviet

17. Constantine Pleshakov, "Nikita Khrushchev and Sino-Soviet Relations," in Westad, *Rise and Fall*, pp. 226–245.

18. Minutes of the Mao–Yudin meeting, in "The Cold War in Asia," p. 158.

19. Communication with author by RADM (US Navy, ret.) Eric Mac Vadon. MacVadon was a Lieutenant serving with the US Navy in the region at the time of the 1962 crisis.

20. Chu-yuan Cheng, *Economic Relations Between Peking and Moscow: 1949–1963* (New York and London: Frederick Praeger, 1964), pp. 28–29.

special rail rights across Manchuria, and to abolition of the exploitative joint stock companies in Manchuria and Xinjiang. Khrushchev also agreed to terminate secret codicils to the 1950 treaty that granted the USSR an exclusive, privileged position in China's north-east.²¹ In 1956, the new Soviet leader had accorded China a major role in the socialist camp, that is in Eastern Europe, Moscow's own crucial sphere of influence. During the 1957 Moscow conference, Khrushchev accorded Mao and the CCP a privileged position among foreign communist parties. Only Mao and the CCP delegation were housed in the Kremlin. Only Mao was not required to submit for prior CPSU clearance his speech to the conference. Only Mao was allowed to deliver his speech seated rather than standing. Only the CCP was allowed to receive and "exchange views" with the leaders of the various communist parties in Moscow for the conference.²² In effect, Khrushchev treated the CCP as co-equal with the CPSU. The USSR was also assisting China with the largest and most effective military modernization programme in China's modern history (at least until the 1990s). Under Khrushchev a large number of wide-ranging agreements were concluded in the area of nuclear energy co-operation. As a result of these, Chinese specialists were involved in Soviet nuclear weapons development efforts. Khrushchev had agreed in October 1957 to assist directly China's manufacture of nuclear weapons. The Soviets were apparently ready in mid-1958 to help China acquire nuclear-powered submarines – if China was willing to reciprocate by helping the Soviet navy strengthen its capabilities vis-à-vis the United States in the Pacific.

Still another consideration in judging the rationality of Mao's angry rejection of Moscow's mid-1958 proposals is that China had ardently sought military alliance with the USSR in 1950, and was using that alliance for nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis the United States at the very time Mao was rejecting the proposals. Under its 1950 treaty with the USSR, Beijing had pledged "to undertake jointly ... all necessary measures at [its] disposal for the purpose of preventing a repetition of aggression and violation of peace on the part of Japan or any other state which should unite with Japan, directly or indirectly, in acts of aggression." Beijing had also declared its "readiness in the spirit of sincere co-operation to participate in all international action aimed at upholding peace and security throughout the world, and will do all in their power to achieve the speediest implementation of these tasks."²³ China professed to be Moscow's "sincere" ally. Soviet naval forces in 1958 faced a very real problem which China could help solve. Mao had himself declined the Soviet offer of co-leadership on the grounds that only the USSR had the economic and technological strength adequate to counter the United

21. Yang Guisong, *Zhong-gong yu Mosike de guanxi (1920–1960) (Chinese Communist Relations with Moscow, 1920–1960)* (Taipei: Dong da tushu gongsi, 1997), p. 645. Yang is a specialist on Sino-Soviet relations with the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing.

22. *Ibid.* p. 650.

23. The text of the February 1950 treaty is available in Aitchén K. Wu, *China and the Soviet Union* (London: Methuen, 1950).

States (pp. 130–33). And yet Mao angrily and suspiciously rejected, in late July 1958, a quite sensible Soviet proposal. Mao became angry at Moscow for proposing a joint PRC-USSR submarine fleet and concluded it was inspired by a desire to “control China.”

China may well have opted to reject the Soviet proposals. I am not challenging the rationality of that decision in itself. Rather, it was the sinister interpretation that Mao put on the proposals and the acrimonious manner in which he handled the issue that were the problem. The Soviet proposals, Mao concluded, were manifestations of a conspiratorial strategy designed to “control China.” Had Mao – had the PRC – handled the proposals in a cooler, more rational fashion, Soviet economic and military assistance to China might well have continued. China might not have had to experience the extremely dangerous period of confronting simultaneously both the USSR and the United States.

The usual rationalization of Mao's 1958 decision is in terms of China's humiliation by foreign powers in the century beginning in 1839, and in the deep nationalist sensitivities arising out of that experience. I would not deny that these factors played a role, but it seems to me that we must also look at more idiosyncratic factors having to do with the mind, even the mental balance, of Mao Zedong. It might also be possible to formulate a domestic politics explanation of Mao's Soviet decisions, focusing on the utility of an international anti-revisionist struggle for the “continuing of the revolution” domestically. Such an explanation would not be mutually exclusive with one focusing on the mind of the leader. Rather, a link could be provided by demonstrating how the idiosyncratic compulsions of a dominant leader met the requirements of a particular political movement. In other words, Mao's paranoia and troubled relations with authority may have led him to unleash an international anti-revisionist movement which helped carry the Chinese revolution to its next stage – while destroying the Sino-Soviet partnership.

The Psychology of Mao Zedong

Li Zhisui has given us our best insight into Mao's psychology. Li studied medicine at a modern-style medical school in China. His training did not include psychiatry, but did include some study of what were then called mental hygiene issues. In the course of long and close association with Mao, Li observed periodic bouts of insomnia, headaches, anxiety attacks, depression, impotence and bad temper. Li concluded that these symptoms became worse when Mao was involved in intensifying political conflict. Li also detected “irrational suspicion” in Mao, a suspicion that led him to suspect without good reason plots against him. That “paranoia” began in “early 1958,” Li observed, and grew over the years.²⁴ After meeting Khrushchev in July 1958 Mao told Li Zhisui that he had intended to “stick a needle up [Khrushchev's] ass.”

In a detailed study published in 1976, Lucian Pye concluded that

24. Li Zhisui *Private Life*, pp. 109–110, 232–34.

Mao's personality drove him into conflictual and adversarial relations with one after another key people at each stage of his life. Whether Mao's enemy was his father, teacher, headmaster or other CCP leaders, he would draw his main "foe" into conflict with himself and focus his psychic energies on elaborating that conflict. While idealizing "brotherly" relations, Mao was incapable of such and was prone to feel slighted when he sensed his voice was being ignored.²⁵ Mao's compulsive desire to clash with Khrushchev in 1958 falls into this pattern. It was also linked to questions of authority, Mao's own and that of Stalin's successor, Khrushchev. Throughout Mao's career as a revolutionary up to 1953, paramount authority within the world communist movement was represented by Stalin. Even though Mao felt Stalin was wrong on a number of important issues, requirements of political expedience necessitated that he submit to Stalin's authority – or at least that Mao and the CCP *appear* to submit to that authority.²⁶ Mao quickly seized on Khrushchev's 1956 destalinization drive as an opportunity to blame Stalin directly for "errors" in the 1920s and 1930s. Previously the CCP had been able to blame only, and inaccurately according to Mao, leaders of the CCP (p. 12). Over the coming months and years, Mao led his comrades in criticizing Stalin's "mistakes."

By 1958 Khrushchev was successor to the mantle of Stalin's authority. As leader of the CPSU, Khrushchev was leader of the socialist camp and the world communist movement. Yet Mao clearly felt himself superior to Khrushchev. Mao, not Khrushchev, was the true successor to Stalin, the guardian of Stalin's "Marxist-Leninist principles" and the bearer of the historical duty to guide the world communist movement along a "correct" path. The rejection of the Soviet proposals of mid-1958 clearly accorded well with Mao's feelings about authority, his and Khrushchev's, within the world communist movement. In other words, Mao's abrupt and acrimonious rejection of the Soviet proposals in 1958 arose, to a significant degree, out of the idiosyncratic structure of his personality, of his need to rebel against Khrushchev's authority, rather than out of a rational analysis of what China's national interests required in light of the Soviet proposals.

The importance of Mao's mental balance was increased by his absolute domination of China's foreign policy decision-making process. Wu Lengxi's memoir provides many examples of this. Time and again at Politburo or Standing Committee meetings Mao would set out his views towards the beginning, after which other leaders would chime in with their support. On other occasions Mao would keep quiet for a while, allowing other comrades to expostulate on the issue before them. At some point, however, he would make his views known. These views would then be quickly adopted as a decision. Examples of this include: interpret-

25. Lucian W. Pye, *Mao Tse-tung, The Man in the Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 309.

26. Scholars of pre-1949 Sino-Soviet relations will find on these pages in Wu's memoirs considerable detail about already well-known disputes between Stalin and Mao: pp. 12–14, 65, 146–47, 314–334, 851. Wu's memoir lacks an index.

ation of Khrushchev's "secret speech" to the 20th CPSU Congress (pp. 3–8); criticism of Stalin's various "errors" towards China and the balance of Stalin's "errors" versus his "contributions" (pp. 18, 22–24, 71–72); the response to events in Poland in 1956 (p. 35) and to the Hungarian uprising of the same year (p. 51); the response to Khrushchev's June 1960 speech to the Romanian Communist Party responding to an earlier Chinese polemic (pp. 288–291); the "bourgeois class nature" of Khrushchev's line and consequent "class struggle" nature of the conflict with him (pp. 290–91, 460–65); the tough-it-out response to Soviet withdrawal of advisors in mid-1960 (p. 337); the response to the September 1961 CPSU draft proposal on the general line of the international communist movement (p. 460); the response to the March 1963 CPSU letter on the general line of the communist movement (pp. 559–568); the response to the CPSU letter of March 1964 (pp. 728–732); and the response to Khrushchev's ouster in September 1964 (pp. 837–850). By March 1966 it had reached this situation: when Mao did not reply within four days to a Politburo recommendation that the CCP not participate in the CPSU's 23rd Congress, Peng Zhen proposed convening another meeting to adopt and forward to Mao the opposite recommendation. In the end Mao simply decided the issue and the Politburo Standing Committee "agreed with Chairman Mao's opinion" (pp. 934–38).

The Misfortune of Non-Critical Scholarship

Wu Lengxi does not recount even one instance of opposition to Mao's views. Occasionally there would be different views expressed between other CCP leaders, but in no instance was there variance from views laid out by Mao. In Wu's account, there is always complete unanimity as the CCP "upholds principle" and responds to CPSU "provocations" and "betrayals." This points towards a grave flaw in Wu's account – it is entirely uncritical. Wu must be given the highest marks for providing a rich and frank account of CCP deliberations. Yet he does not identify instances in which things did not work out as Mao and his comrades expected. Only at the one point mentioned earlier does Wu address even in passing mistakes made by China's leaders, misunderstandings of a situation, or Chinese moves that did not work out as intended. Critical scholarship highlighting precisely such mistakes is the lifeblood of modern academic analysis, and plays a vital role improving the humanness and effectiveness of government. In modern political systems, critical analysis of government policy helps educate officials about the pitfalls they need to avoid, about what works and what doesn't, and about the mis-steps of their fore-bearers in office. In spite of the fact that Wu Lengxi was at the very centre of and observed first hand this critical decade of China's foreign relations, in spite of the fact that he had probably unsurpassed access to data, he has no useful advice to offer China's leaders and its people about how China can more effectively make its way in the world. That is unfortunate for China and for the world.

An informed and critical reader can discern multiple mis-steps by Mao in Wu's account, although Wu does not flag them. Two major ones have already been noted: in July 1958 when Mao interpreted Moscow's "joint fleet" proposal as an attempt to "control China," and in January 1960 when Mao initiated a polemical "struggle" against Khrushchev anticipating that this would not lead to a "complete split" with Moscow. Nor did China's leaders apparently calculate that "struggle" against Khrushchev within the world communist movement would lead to a deterioration of state-to-state relations. There was, by Wu's account, no discussion of such a possibility when the January 1960 decision was made. Nor, for that matter, did CCP leaders have a realistic understanding of the significance of control of the world communist movement to Moscow. They imagined, rather, that they could deprive Moscow of a major instrument of Soviet global power without Moscow taking umbrage. This was a romantic and idealistic, rather than a realistic, approach. There was also, by Wu's account, amazingly little consideration given to the costs to China's development and people of the various "correct" policies adopted towards Moscow. In the aftermath of the mid-1960 suspension of Soviet aid to China, for example, the Politburo met and decided to accelerate repayment of all China's outstanding debt to the Soviet Union. This was scheduled for repayment over 16 years, but the Politburo decided to accelerate repayment to five years. Trade small groups were set up across the country to extract goods to repay that debt. Mao dismissed possible hardships that might result with these words: "The Yan'an period was hard too, but eating hot peppers didn't kill anybody. Our situation now is much better than then. We must tighten our belts and struggle to pay off this debt within five years" (p. 337). China was then in the midst of a gigantic famine that claimed perhaps 20 million people between 1959 and 1962. Children were among the hardest hit.²⁷

In terms of China's pursuit of national wealth, security and power – that is, in terms of China's national interests – Mao's Soviet decisions of 1958–60 had disastrous consequences. Soviet economic assistance to China ended. So too did Soviet assistance to the PLA's modernization. The PLA slid quickly from having a very impressive drive for modernization in the 1950s to a steadily greater technological inferiority vis-à-vis China's rivals in the 1960s. China's people henceforth paid the full cost of the development of nuclear weapons, missiles and submarines. The termination of Soviet economic assistance interacted with the irrationality of China's economic policies of the Great Leap Forward to cast the Chinese people into dire poverty. Mao's simultaneous alienation of the Soviet Union and the United States meant that China was confronted with the combined hostility of those countries. This contributed significantly to the decision to relocate industry to the "third front" interior provinces, a move that imposed further heavy and long-lasting burdens on China's economic development. It also meant that until Beijing's rapprochement

27. Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), p. 583.

with Washington a decade later, China would confront Soviet-American “nuclear blackmail,” with first one superpower and then the other toying with solicitation of the other's support for a pre-emptive strike against China. The fact that such a strike did not materialize should not obscure the recklessness involved in exposing China to such a situation. Mao's Soviet policies at the 1958–61 juncture fit well, it seems to me, Barbara Tuchman's definition of folly – the pursuit of policy contrary to interest.

The saddest, and perhaps even dangerous, question raised by Wu Lengxi's memoir has to do with the inability of China's scholars and retired officials, at least those publishing in non-classified sources and in the PRC, to speak frankly about the mistakes of China's leaders. As China grows in power over the coming decades, it may be a great tragedy for the world that its people have not become accustomed to recognizing the pursuit of folly abroad by their leaders. This may well be the result if China's scholars and ex-officials continue to be unable or unwilling to educate China's people frankly about the mistakes and miscalculations of their leaders.