

## “China Learns from Eastern Germany?” A Glimpse from the Berlin Archives

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**X**iang Sulian *xuexi*—learning from the Soviet Union—was a popular slogan in the 1950s, and has become a paradigm in studies of the early PRC (as well as a book title).<sup>1</sup> The focus on the Soviet Union, however, or on Sino-Soviet relations, risks to obscure a more complex tapestry of transnational dynamics within the socialist world. The PRC, after all, built ties not just with the “big brother,” but also with the other “people’s democracies” in Eastern Europe and East Asia. While Moscow remained the nerve center of this diplomatic network, the dynamics of bilateral ties complicates our understanding of how the young PRC positioned itself within this brave new world, what it expected from the engagement with the world beyond its borders, and how the socialist world shaped internal developments in Mao’s republic.<sup>2</sup>

My research focuses on the PRC’s cultural encounter with the socialist world in the 1950s and has led me to the archival holdings of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) in Berlin, and especially those housed in the political archive of the foreign ministry (Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Bestand Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR, hereafter MfAA). What makes the MfAA attractive for researchers is not only the ease of access and reproduction (unlimited microfiche duplicates can be ordered for 1,75 Euro a piece), but the near total openness of the archives of a state no longer extant. Based on comparative research in the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, my best guess is that the latter makes available somewhere between one and ten percent of its holdings—a tiny fraction of the material that must exist. In particular—as I will detail below—the MfAA holdings contain drafts and background communication, internal reports and assessments that provide a much less scripted, a more complex and nuanced view of the early PRC’s external relations. Research in archives of the former socialist nations of Eastern Europe therefore provides a valuable corrective for our understanding of the PRC in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup>

How did cultural cooperation function in the socialist world? Starting from 1951, the PRC signed cultural cooperation agreements with all its partners. These agreements were published in collections of legal texts,<sup>4</sup> but are brief and unspecific. The agreements were translated into practice through work plans (*gongzuo jihua* 工作計劃 or *zhixing jihua* 執行計劃) that were negotiated on an annual basis and laid down, in great detail, dozens of activities in the broadly conceived field of culture (including education, scientific research, literature and art, as well as journalism). The work plans were never made public, and can be found only in archives. Starting from 1953, the work plans for the Sino-German cultural cooperation agreement run to twenty-plus

pages each, with fifty or more articles that cover all conceivable activities and involved hundreds of people. Writers visiting other nations, exchanges of scientists and university teachers, visits of orchestras and Peking opera troupes were all sponsored through the mechanisms provided by the annual work plans. They created a vast transnational stream of people, books, films, and ideas—a fluid domain that mostly remained off the public radar and that pierced the surface only in occasional press reports.

More importantly, the MfAA documents present a dynamic, rather than a static image of these activities: They contain not only the final product—the work plans—but multiple drafts, back and forth communication between embassies and foreign ministries, meeting records, marginal notes, second guessing and internal complaints about the other side, and many more. The activities that the work plans were supposed to jump start can be traced through diplomatic correspondence (also available in the MfAA holdings), but they were also checked regularly through progress reports and final reports compiled after the completion of one year’s work plan. These reports, honest and sometimes blunt as they are in discussing successes and failures of planned initiatives, are a most valuable reality check. The progress and final reports in turn became the basis for the negotiations of the next year’s work plan.

What makes the PRC’s cultural cooperation agreements with the “people’s democracies” especially interesting is the absence, for the first half-decade, of a similar agreement (and corresponding work plans) with the Soviet Union. While the PRC engaged extensively with the Soviet Union in the field of cultural exchange, only in 1955 did the two nations sign a cultural cooperation agreement, beginning regularized planning and administration of their cultural cooperation. The Soviet Union was, in fact, the last nation of the socialist bloc to sign a cultural cooperation agreement with the PRC (apart from Yugoslavia, with which the PRC established relations only after 1956). The patterns at work in the case of cultural exchange stand on its head the assumed centrality of the Soviet Union as a pacesetter for anything and everything in the socialist world. While the Soviet Union laid down the overall “line” of East bloc policy toward China, the socialist nations of Eastern Europe had—at least in the field of cultural cooperation—leeway to search for a suitable institutional framework. The Soviet Union was integrated into what was evolving into a well-functioning system only with a remarkable delay.

These findings have important implications. First of all, they demonstrate the limits of a Soviet-centric approach to the PRC and its international positioning. Not all transnational

initiatives in the socialist world were initiated in the Soviet Union, and it may be necessary to rethink the role of Moscow within the socialist bloc. The PRC, and Mao in particular, had all along been hesitant to rely overly on Stalin and the Soviet Union; the precarious nature of the Sino-Soviet relationship is well documented and its eventual disintegration vindicated those in Beijing who had long harbored suspicions of their northern neighbor.<sup>5</sup> The focus of much existing scholarship on Sino-Soviet bilateralism hence appears less critical of the Soviets than many Chinese decision makers in the 1950s were. The PRC’s multi-faceted and multi-layered relationships with the socialist nations of Eastern Europe offer a corrective lens to this picture.

Secondly, the prominence of the PRC’s relations—cultural, political, economic, etc.—with the full range of nations in the socialist world suggests the importance of lateral connections in a global Cold War world in which the PRC interacted with multiple partners. The Soviet Union clearly dominated political processes across the socialist world, and was deeply involved in routine decision making of the socialist democracies (and especially the GDR). The evidence from the field of cultural cooperation, however, suggests not so much a hub-and-spoke model, with the Soviet Union as the gravitational center, as an elaborate network with multiple nodes. This network (or multiple overlapping networks) offers a decidedly more complex perspective on the PRC’s international engagements. Lateral connections, between nations ordinarily conceived to be at the periphery of the socialist world, could set precedents, create new modes of engagement, and experiment with novel strategies of cooperation. Within—or below—the larger political framework set by Moscow, diplomatic initiatives along lateral lines diversified the PRC’s transnational interactions and offered opportunities for innovation and creative departures from set paths. The full dynamics of the early PRC’s transnational engagement remain to be explored.

What, then, does this mean for our understanding of PRC history in general? As my own work on cultural cooperation shows, foreign archival holdings such as those of the MfAA document not only high-level diplomacy, the political and military aspects of the alliance, which may indeed be the most Soviet-centric aspect of the overall history of the socialist world. Rather, they also shed light on activities involving thousands of intellectuals, writers, translators, journalists, and scientists—educated urban Chinese who helped to shape the identity of New China, both at home and abroad. The cultural exchange programs documented in the archives of the former GDR had direct impact on everyday life and grassroots practices in socialist China. In this way, they help us to both decenter and refocus PRC historiography—not to reject a widely accepted China-centric approach, but to link these insights to a broader transnational framework that allows movements up and down the scale of historical focus. Foreign archives cannot replace Chinese archival documentation, but they offer corrective lenses to help alleviate distortions of the historical record.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas P. Bernstein, and Hua-yu Li, eds., *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949-Present* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> For efforts to conceptualize this transnational space see William C. Kirby, “China’s Internationalization in the Early People’s Republic: Dreams of a Socialist World Economy,” *The China Quarterly* 188 (2006): 870-90; and Nicolai Volland, “Translating the Socialist State: Cultural Exchange, National Identity, and the Socialist World in the Early PRC,” *Twentieth-Century China* 33:2 (2008): 51-72. Compare also Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> While German-language documents constitute the majority of the MfAA holdings, they also include Chinese sources such as agreement drafts (and the occasional document in Russian) that are extremely valuable in complementing the documentation available in Chinese archives.

<sup>4</sup> See Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaobu 中華人民共和國外交部 ed., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo tiaoyue ji 中華人民共和國條約集* [Collected treaties of the People’s Republic of China] (Beijing: Falü chubanshe, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> See Zhihua Shen and Danhui Li, *After Learning to One Side: China and its Allies in the Cold War* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, and Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, and Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).