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# Chinese Observations of Soviet Nationality Affairs in the Mao and post-Mao Eras

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## Abstract

Over the years, China's nationality policy tended to imitate the Soviet Union while also retaining its uniqueness. Existing scholarship has described three deviations the CCP made vis-à-vis the Soviet model: denying national self-determination, rejecting the supra-national union of nation-states, and undertaking constructivist classification of ethnicity. These features took shape around 1949. In this article, I survey China's observations on Soviet nationality affairs from 1949 to 1991 and provide a perspective for understanding how these deviations from the Soviet nationality model both crystallized and varied. My findings show that after 1949, Soviet studies in China lacked a coherent agenda for studying the nationality question. The experts gathered rich materials but subordinated nationality questions to themes such as revolution, a centrally planned economy, border disputes, geopolitics, and ideological indoctrination. They also tended to reduce ethnopolitics to class struggle and economic modernization. Such systematic evasion of nationality questions persisted until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The USSR's disintegration caused China to recognize the resilience of ethnicity and nationality, while before 1991, Soviet studies in China had lacked any systematic reflection on the Soviet nationality model.

**Keywords:** nationalism; Soviet Union; China; intellectual history

Throughout its history, the nationality policy of the People's Republic of China has imitated that of the Soviet Union. However, the depth of this imitation remains to be determined, as well as the extent to which China retained its uniqueness. Existing scholarship has suggested three deviations the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) made vis-à-vis the Soviet model: denying the minorities' right to national self-determination; declining the Soviet supra-national union of nation-states in favor of a "Chinese celestial nation" framework; undertaking a more constructivist classification of ethnicity, and a softening of Stalin's four criteria of the nation by introducing a historical-popular dimension. Each of these explorations was institutionalized around 1949 when the CCP came to power on the national stage.

This article provides a perspective for understanding how the distinctions continued, crystallized, and changed by surveying China's observations on Soviet nationality affairs from 1949 to 1991. The author's main finding is that after 1949, Soviet studies in China lacked a coherent agenda or stable sub-area in tracing the nationality question. The experts (actually, many were temporary cultural workers) on the Soviet Union gathered rich materials on nationality issues and often referred to nationality questions. However, they subordinated nationality affairs to more politicized themes such as revolution, the central planned economy, border disputes, geopolitics, and ideological indoctrination. They also failed to recognize crucial concepts such as race and ethnicity. This often transpired in literary studies and military studies. When Soviet leaders of the 1960s and 1970s were softening primordialism and centralizing the USSR like a traditional nation-state, the polemics

in Moscow drove Chinese scholars back to the Soviet model of the 1920s. This even deviated from the CCP's longstanding effort to demarcate a national path of ethnoterritorial federalism. In sum, we could say that Chinese scholars overlooked nationality affairs. When drafting a position, they either respected the Soviet model as a good one but inappropriate for China, or criticized it as an evil setup designed for the oppression of non-Russians. Neither approach had much affection for the unique nationality policy that the CCP revolution had formulated. The systematic evasion of nationality questions ceased after the collapse of the Soviet Union when China and the entire world came to recognize that ethnicity and nationality had never faded away.

This article traces how the Chinese observed the Soviet Union's nationality issue from 1949 to 1991, the period between the founding of the People's Republic of China and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is based on materials from libraries, secondary book markets, and private collections. The article is divided into two parts. The first part is the background, including existing literature's discussions on differences between China and the Soviet Union, and China's institutions and staff in Soviet studies. The second part elaborates on the five windows through which Chinese experts observed Soviet nationality questions since 1949: 1) the formation of the Soviet Union, 2) economic geography, 3) Russia's historical expansionism, 4) geopolitics and grand strategy, 5) the invention of tradition, and the collapse of the USSR. The conclusion reveals how Soviet studies in China showed limited affection for the CCP's nationality policy. Soviet studies evaded nationality questions because the CCP and the entire Cold War world had reduced ethnopolitics to class struggle and economic modernization. Yet, the Russocentric perspective had shaped popular opinion in China against the small nations of the former USSR.

### A Broader Conceptualizing of the Nationality Question

Before examining how Chinese scholars have pursued the nationality issue in the Soviet Union, we must define conceptually what the nationality issue means, and from where it can be observed. The fact that the nationality question has become an issue is related to nationalism, an ideology that seeks congruence between political domain and cultural boundary or between state and nation. This principle looks simple and straightforward, yet its implementation provokes complex politics. While ethnicity is relatively "objective" in terms of mutual differences in people's history, place of residence, religion, and language, the question of whether and how to integrate ethnicity into the nation is not so objective. Politics springs up on the standards of the recognition of nations – why some groups are recognized as nations and others are not. When ethnic groups are transformed into nations, they influence the international relations and geopolitics between major powers. An ethnic group can be integrated into an existing nation-state, become a nation-state itself, or in instances when it would be irrational to incorporate other groups into an existing nation-state, it can become an imperial polity. Because of these transnational processes, nationalism is a breeding ground for great power competition. In identifying the nation, nation builders inevitably invoke cultural legacies from the past.

### *Theoretical Backgrounds: The USSR's Influences on China*

There is no doubt that China's nationality system was informed by that of the Soviet Union, but how and to what depth remains to be probed. China inherited the Soviet regime of ethnic territorial federalism and the "affirmative action empire" (Martin 2001). Ethnic minorities, though not all of them, were recognized as "nations." The recognized nations were assigned territories as their "autonomous units," where indigenous cadres staffed the administrative apparatuses. Ethnic minorities also enjoyed preferential treatment in education, financial assistance, and developing their "national" literature, dance, and songs (Connor 1984). Meanwhile, the differences were significant – hitherto, China has yet to see the "revenge of the past" (Suny 1993), i.e., it has not repeated the Soviet path of disintegration along the territorial lines of ethnic autonomous areas.

After the initial vision of establishing a “Soviet federation” in the 1920s, the CCP dampened its advocacy for “national self-determination” (Liu 2004). Rather, China retained unified sovereignty in the name of the Chinese Celestial Nation (*Zhong-hua min-zu*), not a union of socialist nation-states as in the Soviet model. When titling ethnic territorial units, China juxtaposed the names of regions and ethnicities – for example, “Ningxia-Hui” and “Xinjiang-Uyghur” autonomous regions. In contrast, the Soviet Union titled union republics with titular nations. One explanation for these differences is the strength of borderland sovereignty at the moment of the communist revolutionary takeover. Russia’s borderlands had numerous preexisting sovereigns and proto-states during the Civil War, which the Bolsheviks were reluctant to admit. In contrast, China and India did not have such proto-states at borderlands when they achieved independence (Matsuzato 2017, 1054–1057).

China’s ethnic classification differed from the Soviet Union’s as well. Though in the Northwest, the demarcation of autonomous regions bore the imprint of Soviet ethnic territorial federalism; the ethnic classification in Southwest China played a significant role in defining China’s nationality policy. When recognizing an ethnic group as a “sub-nation,” China’s standards were more flexible, incorporating a subjective dimension whereby the masses must accept the classification assigned to them. Stalin’s four-criteria definition of the nation was softened, with a bottom-up historical-popular perspective introduced. This differed from the Soviet ethnic classification, which bore primordialism. One explanation for this difference was that the two communist polities were exposed to different intellectual atmospheres. The Soviet Union of the 1920s inherited knowledge from the ethnic notions circulating in Europe (Hirsch 2005). In comparison, China’s ethnic classification came from the mixture of the British missionaries in Southeast Asia during the 1940s and the CCP’s revolutionary survey methods. China’s approach to assessing a population’s ethnic potential allowed the CCP to identify more sub-nations. By Soviet standards, most of these sub-nations would have been recognized as tribes or clans (Mullaney 2011).

Therefore, the extent to which the Soviet model influenced China’s nationality policy is debated. Preexisting literature, as reviewed above, has pointed out that China navigated a unique path to modify and soften the Soviet system. This exploration started in the middle of the CCP’s revolution in the 1930s and began to institutionalize after 1949 when the CCP seized national power. This article extends the discussion into Soviet studies in China after 1949. The author finds that, lacking a coherent agenda and sub-area, China’s observations on the Soviet nationality affairs were scattered across multiple themes, with five major ones: 1) the formation of the Soviet Union as part of the CCP’s consistent passion in the history of the October Revolution; 2) economic geography, first worshiped as a model plan of development and later Moscow’s instrument in the eyes of the CCP in controlling the Soviet empire; 3) Russian historical expansionism, which the CCP denounced to allude to the Soviet “new Tsars” and their anti-Chinese behaviors; 4) the invention of tradition, as a reference source from which the post-Mao CCP drew insight on how to implement patriotic education; and 5) the collapse of the Soviet Union, a path the CCP would strive to avoid. As Table 1 summarizes, each theme is relevant to the nationality question and accordingly represented in Western scholarship, often by canonized works and concepts. At the same time, the CCP’s frames of, and interests in, these topics were different and often irrelevant to nationality affairs.

### ***Soviet Studies in China: Its History, Institutions, and Staff***

The study of Russia and the Soviet Union in China has a long history, partly because Russia was the first “European” power that China encountered. Yet, regarding specialized research institutions and staff, Soviet studies in China developed slowly. During the Sino-Soviet honeymoon, there was no Chinese research institution devoted to Soviet studies. Corresponding to this, the CCP opposed the Soviet Union establishing any special institutes targeting China as a mark of the Moscow-Beijing friendship (Wolf 2003, 445). It was as late as 1964 that China’s first Institution of Soviet Studies came into being, established within Renmin University of China, and later transferred to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Following the first model, major cities and military districts

**Table 1.** Five Windows into China's Observations on Soviet Nationality Affairs

Topics of Soviet Studies in China from 1949 to 1991	The CCP's Frame and Interests	Relevance to Nationality Affairs in Western Scholarship
The formation of the USSR	The Bolshevik Revolution	Affirmative Action Empire
Economic geography	Instruments for Economic Planning; the Soviet Empire's means to oppress non-Russians	Empire of Nations; Ethnic territorial federalism versus economic expediency
Historical expansionism	Dynastic/Soviet Tsars and their seizure of Chinese territories	The Russian empire and its rivals; Russia's internal colonization
The Invention of Tradition	History-based patriotic education	The rise of Russian nationalism; post-communist nation-building
The Collapse of the USSR	Collapse out of decentralization, or over-centralization?	The revenge of the past, nationalist tides in the disintegration of the Soviet Union

founded institutions of Soviet Studies in the form of translation and research groups. These groups became research centers within major universities at the turn of the 1980s (Zhuang 2022, 233). These research centers were geographically concentrated in North, Northeast, and Northwest China, as well as in the East, affiliated with Peking University, Beijing Normal University, Heilongjiang University, Jilin University, Liaoning University, Harbin University of Technology, Northeast Normal University, Shaanxi Normal University, Lanzhou University, Xinjiang University, Shanghai University of Foreign Studies, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Shanghai Normal College, Anhui University, and many others (Zuo 2022, 4-5). These institutes began to publish scientific journals, from which this article draws primary materials. The major ones included *Soviet and Eastern European Studies*, *References for Soviet Studies*, *Soviet Union and Eastern Europe Today*, and *Selected Translation of Historiography* (Liu 2021, 37-39). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these institutions and journals changed their titles from "Soviet" to "Russian, Eastern European, and Central Asian," as was done in the United States.

The research staff was recruited from a wide range of backgrounds: translators and journalists who had mastered foreign languages, discredited intellectuals in the labor camps, international students back from the Soviet Union and East Germany, and unemployed college graduates who had failed to find jobs because of their alleged anti-CCP opinions (Zheng 2015, 3-4, 10, 62). These groups had multiple ways of gathering foreign books: purchasing them from abroad, borrowing them from large libraries and military intelligence agencies, burglarizing old intellectuals' homes, and sometimes receiving donations from senior Party members. For example, Trotsky's books came from the donation of Liu Renjing, a Trotskyist who visited Trotsky in Turkey and received books as gifts from him (Zheng 2015, 22, 35-38). Paralleling the "Grey Papers" were the "Yellow Papers," a series of translated books, mainly literature and literary theory. This series, started in the early 1960s, was disrupted in the first years of Mao's "Cultural Revolution" and resumed in the mid-1970s. Most Soviet literature of the 1960s and 1970s was translated into Chinese through this series. Translators were summoned from the "translation battalion" of labor camps, mostly former researchers and writers who knew the Russian or English languages. Prestigious publishers would organize their translations under their pseudo-branches (Shen 2007, 3-4, 8-11).

Regarding training, most research staff and translators came from five backgrounds: politics-ideology, economics, international relations, the military, and literature. They completed disciplinary and language training in a crash learn-by-doing manner. In terms of analytical perspective, a vulgar class perspective with a mechanical understanding of the relations between politics and the economy was predominant. At the same time, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and geography, which

required subtle knowledge and methods, were excluded. Meanwhile, sociologists, ethnographers, and anthropologists – the scholars most relevant to the nationality question – were absent from Soviet studies after the Sino-Soviet split. After the institutional reorganization in 1952, sociology and anthropology departments were abolished in China. Former sociologists, ethnographers, and anthropologists regathered at the Central College of Nationality Studies, an institution based in Beijing with the mission of training ethnic-minority cadres (Pan 2009, 81–82). To conduct ethnic classification, these scholars, such as Fei Xiaotong, Lin Yaohua, and Wu Wenzao, had extensive contact with Soviet ethnographers. The leading advisor was Nikolai Cheboksarov, a professor at Moscow University and director of the Research Office on Asia, Austria, and Oceania at the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union. Working closely with Soviet trainers, the Chinese ethnographers concluded that Stalin's four criteria of nationality were economically deterministic, according to which even the Han were not a nation, but a tribe. These scholars also translated Soviet ethnography as teaching materials. However, even this work ceased as Mao's political campaigns unfolded. They traveled outside of Beijing to conduct surveys, changed fields to statistics or demography, and many lost their jobs in counter-intellectual movements (Pan 2009, 132).

### Five Windows into China's Observations of Soviet Nationality Affairs

I have collected materials from Chinese libraries and secondary book markets. These materials were numerous, and it would have been impossible to include them all in this article. China traced the dynamics of the USSR for almost forty years. The publication of these trends continued, even during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a period when most scholars had stopped working. However, the information these vast materials contain is limited, restrained by their producers' ideological biases, inability to travel overseas, and lack of linguistic skills. Therefore, I used the snowballing method for the analysis in this article. I read through all available materials until no new information was emerging, even if the details continued to increase. I maximize the source categories according to ideological perspective, author background, and discipline to minimize any systematic bias. The cited materials fall broadly into two categories: translated works and works by native authors. Many materials are adapted from the translations of authors in the Soviet Union, the United States, Japan, and sometimes Western Europe. The original authors of these materials come from a wide range of professions, including historians, Sovietologists, journalists, distinguished individuals who had the opportunity to study the Soviet Union in-depth, diplomats, and military analysts. No line was drawn between translated and original writings. Russian and English sources were used extensively in the writings of Chinese authors, which made sense because China lacked the financial resources to support scholars conducting research in the Soviet Union. For example, Russian travel notes, books by Soviet scholars on medieval Russian history, critical works by pre-revolutionary historians, and most updated conference papers on archeology and medieval social history could be translated or quoted from original sources.

### *The Formation of the Soviet Union*

The first and earliest window through which Chinese scholars observed the USSR was the history of the Soviet Union's formation, which was broadly defined as extending from the Revolution of 1917 to the completion of Sovietization under Stalin in all peripheral regions. One major source is the pamphlets, documents, reports, and encyclopedia entries on non-Russian national republics, which detailed how they had come into being and transitioned into Soviet socialism. The bulk of these materials were translated from Russian during the Sino-Soviet Honeymoon in order to imitate the "Big Brother's successful model." While a romanticized image of the USSR's "national self-determination" had circulated in CCP propaganda since 1921, this was the first time for Chinese scholars to see details on how this system had come into being and was operated in practice. Yet, at

this moment Russian historiography on the USSR's formation was dominated by the worship of personality. A documentary history translated from the USSR was in fact a sheer celebration of Stalin's role at the turn of the 1920s. Stalin's core theses on nationality policies were repeated from carefully selected documents, such as that the power of self-determination could not fall into the hands of the upper-class non-Russian elite, and that a nation had to be associated with not with a territory per se, but a territory congruent with a culture (ASSU 1954, 81, 93–94, 195). A more informative book was a documentary history of the USSR's Commissariat of Nationality Affairs. It detailed several logics behind the decision to reorganize the Russian empire into the Soviet Union: non-Russians bore distrust of Russians and thus significant positions on civilian affairs at the empire's periphery had to be occupied by non-Russians; since reactionary nationalists had been propagating their ideas through national languages and many non-Russian peoples did not know Russian, the Soviet state had to summarily found schools and propaganda systems in their own national languages as well; to resist the Whites' "one indivisible Russia" plan, the Bolsheviks had to draw distinctions for the sake of drawing distinctions; the founding of the USSR was not without struggle and the definition of nationality was discretionary, in that the tendency toward independence in Tatar-Bashkiria was suppressed and national republics of Kuban-Black-Sea, Dersk, and Mountaineers were all merged into the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Pensikina 1950).

This period of translation was characterized by a special interest in the Sovietization of Asian and ethnic groups with small populations, which was relevant to China's ongoing land reforms in peripheral regions. Produced in Stalin's later years, these materials were overshadowed by the Bolsheviks' infighting after Lenin's death, which, unintendedly, had leaked information on the ethnopolitics of these events. For example, in a pamphlet on Kazakhstan it was alluded that there had been a debate between Trotsky and Stalin over whether land reform had hurt Russian and Ukrainian settler-peasants, and thus had been counterproductive. It was also conceded that tribal ties had not dissipated: landlords still distributed their properties to peasants before these assets were expropriated by the Soviet state, which created the image of a benign father (Kuchgan 1955, 35, 102). The general tone was double-faced. Soviet authors amassed evidence to demonstrate that these Asian nomad nations were "normal," as they had undergone a feudal stage as European nations had done, and thus bore the potential to move up to higher social stages. Meanwhile, Soviet authors argued against "nationalist romanticization of nomadic people's past." It was explicit that equality, common land, and collective labor were lies, which had camouflaged chiefdoms' hierarchical power and exploitation. "Nomadic ways of production were not as romantic as feudal scholars had imagined, but rather an immense obstacle to the division of labor" (Potapov 1957, 29–30, 37–39, 122–123).

The linguistic issue was of interest to Chinese philologists who had been seeking ways of dealing with dialects and non-Han languages. In comparison with highly ideologized areas such as Stalin's role in early state formation and non-Russians' relation with Germany and Poland, the linguistic issue seemed more scientific. Certainly, this area was not free of politics, especially after Stalin's negative comment on Marr's argument that language was a part of the superstructure. One example was a collection of Soviet philologists' articles which was translated in 1956. This book shows complicated fusion between politics and linguistics, and probably confused Chinese readers as it indicated immense discretion in judging whether a school or approach was politically correct. Many attempts were judged as politically mistaken: Soviet states had added a lot of Russian vocabulary to "modernize" the Central Asian and Caucasian languages while eliminating a considerable amount of Persian and Arabic vocabulary from them; it had been a mistake to develop the languages of North Russia's peoples without drawing comparison to Finish and Udmurt, but the structure should have eventually been completed with reference to the Russian language; the rootless cosmopolitans denied that language-building had to follow any direction, which on the one hand blocked Russian's dominance, while at the same time uncritically absorbed outdated vocabulary from feudal rulers and theologians (Diadiev 1956, 8, 18, 24, 39–40, 42–45, 50–58). A book on Soviet



language policy noted that the USSR exercised four differentiated policies for non-Russians: 1) preservation of the national language with slight adaptation (Baltic nations), 2) Latinization (Caucasian and Central Asian nations), 3) borrowing non-Russian languages that were close to a nation's native speaking language (for example, Azerbaijan borrowing Georgian, Siberian nations borrowing Tungusic), and 4) creating written script from scratch (hunting tribes on the Arctic coast). The author also found that bilingual education was enforced in a differentiated manner – for tiny nations whose written language was primitive, native language instruction was confined to basic alphabet books, whereas for tiny nations whose languages had larger populations of native speakers, the study period could be extended to four years; titular nations usually had the option of offering full educational programs in their native languages (Fu 1957).

A significant source for this period was “Selected Translations on Nationality Affairs” (*min-zu wen-ti yi-cong*). This series, published irregularly from 1954 through 1959 by the Central College of Nationality Studies, was compiled by former sociologists, anthropologists, and ethnographers. The translators included Fei Xiaotong, Lin Yaohua, Wu Zelin, Wu Wenzao, and other scholars who had quickly learned the Russian language. These individuals had lost their jobs due to the abolishment of their academic disciplines. Hence, they had switched to translating Soviet sources to sustain their careers. This series' content consisted of secondary sources on theories and methods, recent research trends in the Soviet Union, and Soviet scholars' opinions on contemporary Western “bourgeois” ethnography and anthropology. Each issue had a theme. For example, the first issue of the journal in 1954 was a comprehensive introduction to Soviet theories on the nationality question. The substances were heavily Stalinist, covering the relationship between nation and class, Stalin's thought on linguistics, the differences between nation and clan, and the status of ethnos in ancient world history. A 1956 special issue focused on the history and methods of Soviet ethnography. For example, it elaborated on the differences between “economic-cultural types” and “historical-ethnic circles.” It also detailed how ethnography had been used in surveying Soviet factories and collective farms. Indeed, no translators were able to visit Soviet non-Russian regions to inquire about the historical process of the Russian Civil War.

Interest in the formation of the USSR did not dissipate. In the mid-1960s, it returned wearing a new mask: denouncing Khrushchev's de-Stalinization. In the USSR, producing evidence that Stalin had opposed Lenin was in fashion at the time. The CCP countered this trend demonstrating China's determination to defend the communist orthodoxy. In a chronicle titled “Excerpts of the Revisionist Words on Nationality in Soviet Newspapers,” the compilers devoted a whole section to Stalin's activities in the USSR's formative period. They outlined several “mistaken” arguments held by Soviet anti-Stalin scholars: “nations” could emerge before the rise of capitalism, a conclusion the Soviets drew in their export of revolution to Asia and Africa; Stalin had raised harsh prerequisites, which prevented many autonomous republics from being elevated to union republics; Stalin had consistently underestimated the socioeconomic level of the nations in the Caucasus, which deviated from Lenin's optimistic outlook of the industrialization of Azerbaijan and the general developmental potential of the Caucasian region (INS-CAS 1964, 65-88). Later in the same chronicle, the compilers criticized the subjective trend of Soviet academia shown in the “Soviet Nation” concept. “Soviet revisionist scholars claimed that Stalin's four criteria have been outdated, or at least should be reexamined in a shifted landscape of technology and social development” (ibid., 131-133). This work, rare in the sense of its exclusive focus on nationality affairs, indicates a subtle mechanism: the polemics with which the Soviet Union drove China back to the primordialism with which the CCP had felt uncomfortable, at a moment when even the Soviet Union was seeking to moderate such primordialism.

### **Economic Geography**

China's knowledge of the Soviet Union's nationalities was attained through studying economic geography. This stream started early, during the Beijing-Moscow honeymoon. The Honeymoon

period saw en masse translation of Soviet pamphlets that overviewed each ethnic zone's economic conditions. The collective voice of these pamphlets was to highlight that the Soviet Union was the developer of the rich natural resources that had slept underground before 1917, and the protector of these resources from imperialist burglary. A pamphlet on the Autonomous Republic of Bashkiria, originally authored by Russians, reviewed the history of this region from the rebellion of Yemel'ian Pugachev to present (Garin 1949). At the center of the narrative was oil storage. Oil had been discovered during Tsarist times but had remained underexploited because the region had been preserved as a military base before 1917. It has been claimed that adventurers financed by British oil enterprises had been approaching Bashkiria, and without the revolution this region would have fallen to British imperial rule. Another pamphlet on the tribal and hunting nations on the Arctic coast claimed that these nations, under Soviet socialism, would never repeat the tragic history of the North American aboriginal peoples. Similarly, it was narrated that US fishing boats had been plundering these nations' resources for centuries, and the arrival of the Soviet state had eradicated this criminal activity. By establishing collective farms, schools, veterinary clinics, and libraries, the Soviet regime had helped local people skip the miserable capitalist stage and learn to develop resources to their advantage (Iakubovskaia 1955). An encyclopedia entry on Komi detailed how the Revolution of 1917 had ended the region's isolation from other parts of Russia, which had transformed Komi into a base of coal, oil, and gas that maintained a stable supply to Leningrad during World War II. It was also mentioned that in the economic planning, this region had been divided into two parts and assigned different economic functions, yet no conspiratorial conclusion was inferred (Shchishkin 1956, 18–19).

A pamphlet on Azerbaijan stated that before revolution, foreign capital had dominated Azerbaijan's oil extraction and refining. Without concern for the local environment or public health, foreign capitalists had used inefficient technology and invested little in training Azerbaijanian technicians. The external dependency also rendered Azerbaijan's oil industry vulnerable to fluctuations caused by geopolitical vibrations. As the author argued, it had been during the Soviet period that clean technology had been developed and Azerbaijan had become a member of an all-Union complex that enjoyed the entire country's capacity for scientific research, resources, and manpower training (Mekhtiev and Peng 1957, 78–84). A book authored by the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union included a map dated to the eve of the Great War in which over seventy percent of Russia's coal was produced in Donbas, while over seventy percent of the capital in Donbas was controlled by foreign companies. The book claimed that the Fourth and Fifth Five-year plans had prioritized investment in non-Russian peripheries to "bring these regions to industrial civilization" (ASSU 1958, 31–38, 70).

The information gathering on Soviet economic geography continued, despite the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s. During Mao's "Cultural Revolution," the Soviet Union's strategy of regional development became a target of Chinese ideologues' attack, as evidence appeared that the Great Russians were exploiting and imprisoning non-Russians in the name of achieving inter-regional economic integration for the sake of all peoples within the USSR. Depictions of this period repeated a monolithic narrative that the USSR exercised a crude economic determinism to bind all nationalities together. Excerpts were drawn from local Soviet newspapers, for example, to show that Moscow had forced the Baltic republics to scatter links of production to multiple republics, to prevent any nation's self-sufficiency. Additionally, there was a conspiratorial argument that "the rich hydro-electrical resources and oil shale in the Baltic remained unexploited, and Moscow refused to introduce any automation... labor-intense industries are the most conducive for immigration of Russians and Ukrainians" (NCA 1972, 48–50, 92, 164–165). A book published in 1974 reviewed the USSR's economic development since 1954 and argued that the post-Stalin Soviet leadership had intentionally homogenized non-Russian republics' industrial structure so as to engineer economic dependency on other parts of the USSR, such as forcing Uzbekistan to abandon the textile industry, Moldavia to only grow fruit, and the Baltics to specialize in animal



husbandry. This book also mentioned that the USSR lacked the capacity to properly coordinate mutually conflicting goals, and thus had caused economic disasters (FU 1974, 37, 93, 221).

Scholarly research on Soviet eco-geography was resurrected in the 1980s, in accordance with China's transfer of attention from revolution to development; a fourteen-volume collection of the Soviet government's resolutions on economic development was translated and published from 1984 to 1989 (RUC 1984–1989). During this period, Chinese scholars focused on the Soviet Union's strategy of regional development, particularly in the Siberian, Far Eastern, and Pacific zones. Part of the reason for this was that China still viewed the USSR as a model for a scientific planned economy. It was also of interest to China whether the USSR's economic expansion into Siberia and the Far East could provide opportunities for cooperation and profits. A lot of materials were drawn through translation. For example, through a Japanese prism, China sensed that an acute resource shortage in the European territory was driving the USSR to develop Siberia. Moscow manipulated this move as an opportunity to obtain investment and technology from Japan, which aroused the latter's alert (Xiboliya yu yuandong 1979/08: 4–7). Observers also noticed that the strategy of transferring economic focus eastward accentuated Russia's demographic shortage in its European region, in that the supposedly available labor from Central Asia proved un-mobilizable and the transfer was dependent on moving the Slavic population eastward (Xiboliya yu Yuandong 1980/07: 6). Most Chinese experts saw the difficulties such transfer was encountering: "As the economy transferred eastward, the cost of extraction and transportation rose"; "the Soviet central leadership lacked authority to coordinate ministerial and regional departments"; "machinery and facilities could not meet the requirement of Siberia's climate and massively broke down before they were put into use" (Xu 1989, 201–42). As Sino-Soviet relations normalized, optimism was revived, with the expectation that China could participate in developing Siberia and the Far East through its labor force, and in exchange acquire the USSR's and Japan's technology for upgrading the outdated enterprises in the Northeast (Sulianwenti, hereafter SLWT 1989/02, 8).<sup>1</sup>

### **The History of Russian Expansionism**

A third window through which Chinese scholars understood the USSR's nationality question was research on Tsarist Russia's history of expansion. Traditionally, the pre-1917 history was a weak link in Russian-Soviet studies in China. Scholars knew little of Russia's history before the Bolshevik Revolution, and even less of medieval Russia. Even nowadays, research on Russia from 862 to 1613 is still the weakest part of Russian historical studies in China (Zhuang 2022, 232). During the 1950s and early 1960s, Chinese research on pre-1917 Russia mainly relied on translations. The translators of this period had a disproportionately narrow focus on the history of political economy and the workers' movement. Translated works included the memoir of Sergei Witte, Anna Pankratova's studies on the Decemberists, and the history of the 1905 Revolution. A few exceptional Chinese historians sustained a debate on the origin of the Rurik state. However, lacking access to updated archeological sources, they relied on the heavily tailored *Primary Chronicle* (Povest' vremennykh let). Influential historians such as Vasili Kliuchevskii and Boris Mironov were not translated until the 1990s (Zhang and Zhou 2015, 109–111). As the Chinese scholars knew little of the overall map of Russian historiography, they often resorted to scholars who were not specialized in the periods of interest. With this in mind, it is not surprising that Arkadi Sidorov, a historian specializing in economic history during the First World War, was translated and cited as an expert on general Russian history. At the same time, his major work, *The Financial Situation of Russia in the Years of the First World War*, remained untranslated into Chinese.

It was only after the Sino-Soviet split and during Mao's "Cultural Revolution" that China began to produce historical studies on pre-1917 Russia on a large scale. These materials were mainly written by Chinese historians, either specialists on world history or historians who studied borders, and occasionally translated from Western specialists on Russian history. The filtering of materials followed a utilitarian standard. Every book started with Ivan III or Ivan IV, while the history of Kyiv

Rus, Vladimir's Baptism, Mongolian conquest, and cultural connections with Christianity and Byzantium were all omitted. A textbook published in 1976 summarized five characteristics of Russia's expansionism: 1) persistence regardless of changes in regime or ruler; 2) a focus confined to Europe, while at the same time maintaining expansionist activities in other regions as a shield for the offensive in Europe; 3) a shortage of ocean strength; 4) no hesitance to backtrack and compromise when goals could not be achieved; 5) claiming to be the liberators of small and weak nations but in actions safeguarding and exporting a reactionary political system (PKU and SA 1976, 181–187). This book outlined how each major region had joined Russia, including Finland, Poland, the Baltics, Ukraine, Caucasia, Siberia, Kazakhstan, Central Asia, the Far East, and Russian America. Later on, a volume was published that included articles on Russian history appearing in the Chinese journal *Historical Research*. The authors reached several conclusions: economically backward Russia could seize territorial possessions from adjacent powers – and even intrude on the core area of Europe – because it had strategically manipulated the divisions between major European powers, as well as these powers' shorthand in the East; Russia's expansionism involved an economic incentive, using the Tsarist state machinery to find markets and raw materials for the native merchant class; Russian rulers, who claimed to have liberated the Slavs, Eastern Orthodox, and oppressed peoples, were along the same track as their European rivals in boosting bourgeois nationalism and racism. This book, which embodied Chinese professional historians' expertise, considered Russia to be a Europeanized country, on that was not only familiar with the rules of the game of geopolitics, but also had a voice in drafting them (CASS 1978, 72–87, 146, 184–188).

Attacking the Soviet Union's historical discourse was a focus of Chinese scholars as well. The book *A Critique of Soviet Revisionist Historiography* detailed and refuted six major discourses popular in the USSR. The authors viewed the following theses as lies fabricated by Moscow to defend the USSR's aggression: 1) Russia's expansion had forced previously insulated nations into the cubicle of modern civilization; 2) the success of the Tsar's expansion had stemmed from Russia's strength in Europeanized state-building, rather than lies, blackmail, and other chicanery; 3) Russia's annexation had categorically differed from Western colonialism, never engaging in crimes such as the slave trade or racial cleansing; 4) many annexations had been voluntary, proposed by non-Russian peoples in order to gain protection and stimulate development; 5) Russia had been reclaiming its own territories which had been occupied by foreign powers; 6) Russia's rapid expansion reflected the Tsars' tradition of heroically fighting for Russia's greatness (Unnamed 1977).

To further exemplify the USSR's "mistaken" historiography, China translated a volume from Russian on Soviet archeology in Siberia. This volume included articles and memoirs from Soviet contributors to the multi-volume *General History of Siberia*. The articles were selected providing they embodied one or more of the following theses: Russia's occupation of Siberia had forever terminated the mutual attacks among Siberian tribes and khanates, breaking the region's insulation from European modernity and protecting them from barbarian invasion from China's Mongolian-Manchurian rulers; Eastern Siberia and the Far East had previously been a high civilization, the development of which had been independent of China; ancient kingdoms such as Balhae, Goryeo, and Heishui Mohe had merely served as Chinese emperors' mercenaries, but they were not China; the Jurchen people as a separate nation bearing independent religious traditions and administrative institutions had achieved glory in subordinating China's arrogant and corrupt dynasties (Unnamed 1980, 5, 202–203, 332, 351–352).

Chinese scholars devoted resources to studying the relation between Tsarist Russia and China in border areas, under the general theme of "Russia's annexations of Chinese territories." This topic became popular at the turn of the 1980s, as China's attack on the USSR switched from "traitors of Marxism" to chauvinism. Special volumes were written to outline how Russia had penetrated Mongolia, Xinjiang, the Northeast, and Tibet in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The common goal of these materials was to demonstrate that Russia was feeble. No matter how successful its expansionism had been, Tsarist Russia could not expand any further after it

encountered China. In a book on Tibet, Chinese authors depicted Tsarist Russia, with a tone of mockery, as a thief with excessive ambition but short of strength: Peter I, believing rumors relayed by precursors sent to Siberia, vowed to occupy Tibet to mine its gold to finance Russia's war with Sweden; a small team of Russian adventurers attempted to penetrate Tibet from the north but were captured and beaten by local mountaineers; Russia sent monks from Southern Siberia to study in Tibet so as to have agents in the inner circle of ruling lamas, but pressured by Britain, it had to withdraw its support for Tibet's self-determination (Li 1980, 7–18, 23–30).

Russia's occupation of Outer Mongolia was presented by Chinese historians as an arduous plot replete with failure as well (Unnamed 1979). During the collapse of the Qing Empire, Russia used its tiny forces for a sudden attack, and then created a puppet state in Kulun (Urga). This puppet state then provided resources to deliver Russia's (mostly indirect) control to the remainder of Outer Mongolia. Lacking overwhelming superiority, in the ensuing years Russia achieved full control through an eventual course that mixed fraud, blackmail, diplomatic trickery, and small-scale attacks. For example, Russia founded a puppet state at Hulunbuir and then colluded with Japan to block any other state from exerting influence on Mongolia. Similarly, in a pamphlet (Unnamed 1978) that reviewed Russia's encroachment on Qing territory in Central Asia, it was demonstrated that Russia lacked sufficient forces for direct confrontation with China, even though the Chinese state it faced was the feeble and corrupt Qing government. Russia's strategy, as the Chinese scholars summarized, was to start with settlement building in the areas where sovereignty was clear but China's control was thin, and then cause havoc to pressure the Qing government to step back. However, if the Qing officials were hardliners, Russia was unwilling to move forward (Shchishkin 1956).

### **Patriotic-Traditional Education**

Revolution and tradition are in a constant battle, in the form of the former's struggle to change the latter before absorbing it. Learning from the Soviet Union to study and teach history became a major part of the CCP's nation-building project. The 1950s was a period when Chinese intellectuals were sincerely interested in how the Soviet Union had narrated the past of a multiethnic polity. The Chinese government translated a corpus of the USSR's non-Russian literature – this period was characterized by special attention to the tiny nations and ethnic groups. A volume titled the “Soviet Fairy Tales” included short stories from twenty-three nations, not only titular ones such as Ukraine, Transcaucasia, and Central Asia, but also Altai, Ossetia, Dagestan, Tartar, Karelia, Karabakh, and Udmurt (Meng 1949). A volume translated in 1955 by the Chinese Children's Press, further expanding ethnic representativeness, incorporated northern tribal and hunting nations of Russia into their animal-themed children's literature (Wu 1955).

Unfortunately, China's interest in the non-Russians' past from the 1950s, which heavily depended on translation from Russian, happened to encounter Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan campaign. The materials translated in this period usually bore the political goal of denying non-Russians' cultural overlap with the nations who resided outside of the USSR. In 1959, the massive volume *A Historical Outline of the Soviet Nations' Philosophical, Social, and Political Thought* was published in Chinese. It claimed that over the millennia, non-Russians had developed advanced culture independently, without Russian aid. Armenian medieval writers had been forced to write in Persian but had no attachment to it. Central Asians had recurrently formed their states from ruins in uncompromised resistance to the Mongolian and Timor empires. Ukrainian theologians had denounced oppression from Polish Catholicism, stating that Ukraine had been bullied by Lithuanian, Tartar, German, and Crimean aristocrats due to its political isolation from other Slavic peoples (ASSU 1959, 70–76, 100–109, 196–204).

In accordance with the anti-cosmopolitan filter, a stable theme of the Soviets' research on non-Russians' past was to fit these nations' histories into a simplified Marxist formula, to show that these peoples, like nations of the world's most developed region, bore the endogenous capacity to

move from the lower stages of social development to the higher stages. As Soviet scholars stated, this “fact” was powerful evidence to counter racist and fascist discourses that claimed that only a few biologically superior nations were able to evolve: “it’s unbelievable that our nations’ ancient cultural treasure, as bourgeois scholars cheated, was stolen from Persia, Arab lands, and Europe, the so-called higher civilizations” (ASSU 1958, 129–134). What Chinese readers also saw was harsh containment of the celebration of non-Russians’ past. Romanticizing Russia’s historical foes was forbidden, with some peripheral scholars criticized for excuses such as “camouflaging the bourgeois origin of Armenian Enlightenment writers,” “depicting ancient Central Asian rulers as progressive dukes,” “mistakenly framing medieval Azerbaijani and Tadjik poets as Turkish and Persian literary heroes” (ASSU 1958, 129–34). It was also learned from Soviet scholarship that class narrative was the glue to link together the logical cracks in the multinational discourse – as the Soviet Union attempted to celebrate each nation’s past, the historical conflicts between nations became a problem that only a class narrative could downplay. For example, in an encyclopedia entry on Belarus, while the conflicts with Lithuania were framed as war against Lithuanian feudal aristocrats, the war with Sweden was framed as the union of Belarussian, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian toiling masses (Dement’ev 1957, 23–34).

Chinese scholars, bound to write history in a Han-centric perspective, were interested in studying Soviet historians’ writings on Russian history. It seems that the first translations caused no uproar in China – in the 1950s, the Soviet Union was undergoing a transition from Stalin’s Russocentric narrative to a post-Stalinist multinational narrative. The official interest, in accord with China’s revolutionary pragmatism, was in narrow knowledge that was “useful” for economic development, with little concern over culture, religion, or ethnicity. A volume translated in 1950 collected Stalin’s speeches on historical research, which cited that “historians should seek the particular rules of economic development in each stage of society, rather than abstract laws” (Sidorov and Qiu 1950). A collection compiled by Arkadi Sidorov was translated into Chinese in 1957, which included Soviet historians’ presentations at a conference in Rome. The discourse of late Stalinist years remained, celebrating medieval Russia as a heroic guard of European agricultural civilization against Asian nomads, and argued that the three Slavic nations, of the same ethnic origin, had been amalgamated in the common resistance to the Byzantine Empire (Sidorov et al. 1957, 57–68, 96–97).

Later on, as Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, Chinese readers gained access to more information on the struggle within the Soviet historical circle. An edited volume published in 1964, when Khrushchev had been toppled, translated Western scholars’ most updated research on Soviet historiography, Marxist as well as non-Marxist. This book provided details on Stalin’s revolution in history, on how the ideological campaign had forced historians to switch from a pre-1917 revolutionary Russophobia to celebrating Tsars, governors, and generals in Russian history. The book also detailed the brutal ideological campaigns against Mikhail Pokrovsky for his alleged negligence of non-Russian peoples, which had been camouflaged under a Marxian tone of countering Russian chauvinism. It is also from this book that Chinese observers knew that after Stalin’s death, the celebration of non-Russians’ historical resistance against Russian imperialism had been resurrected, though the discourse of framing the Tsar’s annexation as a “necessary evil” continued in parallel (Lü and Huang 1964, 15–20, 63–64). The tracking of the Soviet historiography did not cease during Mao’s Cultural Revolution. A pamphlet was published in 1974 reporting the updated research in Soviet historiography of Medieval Russia. It explained that history in the USSR was undergoing a conservative turn, with focus transferring to the feudal system of ethnic Russians, in transnational comparison with contemporary Europe, as well as other adjacent nations (Tao 1974).

Apart from medieval history, a major window through which Chinese scholars could have tracked the conservative turn in Russian nation-building was literature, but this thread does not appear to have captured Chinese observers. Apparently, the Russian conservative nationalism was not clear to Chinese translators. They continued to interpret Soviet literature from a prism of social

problems. Soviet writers' invoking of religion, rural traditions, and love for nature, in the eyes of Chinese interpreters, at most, reflected the crisis of Marxist-Leninist ideology in a socialist society where people had been skeptical of the system's efficiency. A book on contemporary Soviet literature published in 1988 introduced Daniil Granin's novels on preserving historical heritage, where the Chinese author interpreted the old veteran's confession on revolutionary vandalism as resistance to factory bureaucrats' urban planning that had neglected the protection of the old city (Jia and Gao 1988, 145–146). Valentin Rasputin's novels were introduced as critique of the moral degeneration and capitalist money worship among rural residents that had led to destructive fishing, crime, and ecological degradation (SLWT 1986–02, 15–16).

Interpretation so dismissive of traditional values was consistent with the conventional lack of knowledge on the Orthodox Church and the pre-Petrine period. Religion, a theme infused with nation-building in English scholarship, was, unsurprisingly, the blind spot of Chinese observers of the USSR. The only book published on religion in the USSR was a translation of Soviet documents and resolutions on atheist education. All of the documents included pertained to how the Soviet government had campaigned against religion, rather than interpreting Russia's religions from within. This documentary history emphasized the revolution of 1917 and the Khrushchev reign, two periods characterized by radical atheist campaigns. The Stalin period was briefly outlined, with a few texts displayed, suggesting that atheism had undergone moderation, but the reconciliation during World War II was omitted (CASS 1979). China of the 1980s would have to wait another two decades for research on Russia's religions to emerge: Julius Hecker's *Religion and Communism*, a dissertation written in 1933, was not translated until 1999 (Hecker 1999), while N. Nikol'skii's *A History of the Russian Church* was published in 2000 as part of a series titled "Books on the Soviet Union" (Nicol'skii 2000). China's specialists on religion in Russia, most of whom had been educated in the discipline of philosophy, studied the USSR's philosophy of science and the "socialist new man," and switched to the topic of religion after 1991.

Other scattered observations and comments suggested that Chinese observers of the 1980s had limited knowledge or interest in the revival of traditional culture in the USSR. Most Chinese visitors who traveled to Russia expressed admiration for historical museums and heritage, speaking positively of the Soviet state's commitment to patriotic education about the nation's past. However, observers only visited historical sites related to two events, the October Revolution and World War II, occasionally also including the Borodino Operation of 1812 (WU 1986). Visiting Pushkin's and Tolstoy's museums was an obligation as well. For the other sites, Chinese visitors either overlooked what they were seeing or had no comprehension of the sites' historical context, such as cathedrals built in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries or the historic towns in the "golden circle" (SLWT 1986–02, 10–12). For example, a visitor to Pskov mentioned that this city had been at the center of Russia's war with foreign nations, but did not elaborate. Such a contrast was a reflection of Chinese visitors' lack of knowledge or interest in Russian religion and medieval history (SLWT 1989–04, 30).

A final area where Chinese observed the reinvention of tradition in the USSR was Soviet nations' folk customs, such as birth customs, cuisine, marriages, funerals, holidays, and festivals. But they were merely characterized as exotic trivia (SLWT 1987–05, 52; 1987–06, 48). A journalist who had visited South Caucasia, seeing the servicemen wearing the costumes of medieval warriors, expressed his admiration that the Soviet government was committed to preserving non-Russian nations' cultural heritage (SLWT 1985–02, 8). Another visitor to Estonia introduced a university in Tallin founded in the fifteenth century. Listing the great scientists who had previously worked at this institution, the author concluded that Soviet educators had been self-conscious in celebrating non-Russians' cultural achievements in the past (SLWT 1984–02, 71).

### **The Dissolution of the Soviet Union**

Predicting the USSR's collapse started as early as the Mao era. The early estimation was ideologized, framed in a radical assertion that, as the common foe of China and the world, the Soviet empire



was destined to implode from below in the turmoil of revolution. An exemplar of this discourse was the publication of *Our Soviet Ukraine* by Peter Shelest in Chinese in 1974, which was translated by a group in a labor camp. Tapping into Shelest's recent removal from Ukraine by Brezhnev, this volume was to showcase that the USSR's national oppression had been so intolerable that it had even provoked reactions among ruling elites. An editorial note on Ukrainian Communists was added as an appendix to the translation, which denounced Shelest for "celebrating Ukraine by denying the entire Soviet context," "mistakenly romanticizing the pre-revolutionary period," and "blurring the boundary between the toilers and feudal exploiters" (Shelest 1974, 350–351). Despite the war-like relations with Moscow, it was integral to China's discourse that under Lenin and Stalin's leadership, Soviet interethnic integration had been successful, and that it was the precondition for the victory over the Nazis (Ruan, Li, and Wang 1979).

After Mao's death, ideological claims that Soviet hegemony was unsustainable persisted but were gradually displaced by a scholarly discussion of the Soviet Union's impending disintegration, as had happened to most historical multinational empires. In 1978, an edited volume was published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, with translated writings of US journalists, Sovietologists, as well as observers of Western Germany and dissidents exiled from the USSR. This volume concerned Brezhnev's Sovietman-making "New Historic Human Community" project. The volume offered several conclusions on the USSR: Moscow was switching from Russifying and homogenizing each union republic to increasing their ethnic diversity, so that each union republic could be a small Soviet Union; the Soviet authorities had lacked resources and manpower to Russify the empire, which manifested in the shortage of Slavic soldiers for military service and Russian teachers for the educational system; interethnic tension was growing as a result of the state-directed migration, which caused local inflation and speculative business; non-Russians felt depressed and morally degenerated, as there had been acute shortages of resources and most had been allocated to support and protect Russians' historic heritage and customs (Ruan, Li, and Wang 1978, 54–59, 95, 103–116, 201–208).

Chinese scholars recognized that the USSR's international integration was encountering obstacles as well. In a handbook titled *Soviet Nationality Overview* published in 1981, two specialists affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences mapped Khrushchev's and Brezhnev's policies of constructing transethnic "Soviet men." Collecting information from Western news, they mentioned that under Brezhnev's rule there had been unsuccessful efforts to relinquish Georgian language teaching in South Caucasia, which had provoked fierce resistance. The authors also recorded the radical reforms of abolishing union-level ministries of the interior and justice as evidence that leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union under Khrushchev had seriously considered melting all of the union republics into a unitary Soviet nation-state (Zhao and Jin 1981, 5–8, 12). The book also provided a long appendix, which chronicled the founding and rescinding of non-Russian republics, including Karelia, Udmurt, Bukhara, Khorezm, Chechenia, and Crimea. This conveyed the impression that the nations of the USSR had been arbitrarily engineered, rather than formed in strict congruence with ethnic boundaries (Zhao and Jin 1981, 189–192).

The nationality question received consistent attention under Gorbachev's perestroika. Chinese scholars, based on news updated from the Soviet Union, tracked the eruption of the nationalist volcano. This was the first time since the 1950s that China's observation of the USSR had retained a peripheral perspective. Gorbachev and the Union center's speeches were never missed, but local violence was widely reported as well: the Turkic population in Central Asia appealed to return to their pre-deportation homeland on the grounds that they were suffering endemic disease and death, as well as violent exclusion by local Uzbeks and Kazakhs (Liu 1990, 37–38). The sufferings of refugees who migrated to avoid ethnic cleansings and persecution were of attention as well (Liu 1990, 20–25). Non-Russians' outrage against environmental pollution and ecological disasters caught the attention of Chinese observers as well, as occurred in Erevan and Kyiv (SLWT, 1988/01, 47–50).

However, by the collapse of the Soviet Union, most observers were optimistic. They believed that the Soviet Union had tight economic integration, which made any separation financially tenuous – this argument was corroborated by Lithuania’s regression after Moscow cut off its supply of gas and electricity (Zhang and Li 1993, 772). It was also argued that most separatist movements were local and isolated from each other; they were interpreted as emotional expression of discontent, rather than genuine will to leave the Soviet mansion. Observers also countered with their final hope in the “still intact and functional” Soviet state machinery, which would strike a fatal blow to secessionists when necessary (SLWT, 1989/04, 14–16). Observations were also drawn due to the fact that on the Northern Arctic and Far Eastern coasts, local people increasingly spoke the Russian language, as industry and migration were extending into these peripheries (ibid., 34). The most optimistic prediction was that the USSR would transition to a European-Community-like commonwealth to optimize the use of the superpower’s copious natural resources (CASS 1991, 12–13).

The epilogue of studies on the nationality question in China was a campaign of drawing lessons from the USSR’s collapse. After the final disintegration, China underwent the bloody crackdown of 1989, which led to a turn to politically conservative learning from the USSR’s failure in intellectual circles. The general tone was a fundamentalist Leninist one – the Soviet leaders did not closely follow Lenin’s policy to build a genuine socialist federation, but rather lapsed into Russian chauvinism to undermine non-Russians’ interest. This was in perfect opposition to American scholars’ conclusions, as represented by Ronald Suny’s *Revenge of the Past* and Terry Martin’s *Affirmative Action Empire*. At a conference organized at the end of 1991, attendees drew a conclusion: the USSR, impatiently promoting the formation of a unified Soviet Nation, had underestimated the complexity of the nationality question; the modernization process had accentuated tension between nations, especially in terms of resource extraction and environmental pollution; forcing non-Russians to learn and use the Russian language had been a mistake; non-Russians had not secured equal opportunities to engage in economic development and general human development; non-Russians had suffered national oppression in the form that they did not build the capacity for economic autonomy (CASS 1991).

PRC scholars’ learning from the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a contested field, by itself a sub-battlefield in the ideologized debate on China’s nationality policy. The learnings can be roughly divided into two conflicting camps. The first camp took shape in the 1990s and dominated the decade. Its advocates were the established specialists on nationality questions (many of whom were not Soviet Union specialists though). The general lesson drawn by the scholars of this camp was that the Soviet Union had disintegrated because Soviet leaders, from Stalin to Brezhnev, had failed to obey Lenin’s theory of national self-determination. The core argument was that Soviet leaders had not exerted enough effort to contain Great Russian chauvinism and instead had often fueled it. This mistake caused widespread discontent among non-Russians, which Gorbachev and the West exploited to dissolve the USSR. A representative volume of this line, published in 1997, compared the Soviet and Chinese nationality policies based on political structure, economic development, and linguistic education. This volume argued that China, despite its unitary structure, was far more consistent and thorough than the USSR in obeying Lenin’s theories on nationality. The author also argued that the CCP had exercised caution, never reducing the nationality question into class struggle and not being idealistic like the Soviets and believing that nations would disappear (Guo 1997, 59–66, 88–89). The author argues that the Soviet Union had lapsed into hyper-centralization at the expense of non-Russians’ autonomy because the country had remained involved in primary international contests, while China’s strategy of hiding behind the front had allowed breathing space for non-Han minorities (Guo 1997, 242–243). Another important book, an edited volume with contributions from experts on the USSR, contained a transnational comparative perspective. By overviewing the situations in former union republics, the authors drew the causal inference that the regions that remained stable after 1991, such as Kazakhstan under Nazarbayev, were those in which the union center had treated non-Russians well, while those trapped in civil wars had been the victims of Russian chauvinism (Hao and Ruan 1993, 189–200).

The second camp came into being later, in the 2000s, and has persisted in contestation with the first camp up to this writing. Questioning previous learnings, scholars of the second line espoused that the USSR had disintegrated because it had provided non-Russians with real autonomy, which made the socialist state a self-defeating cultivator that continually bred political nationalism. This opinion ignited the debate over “whether China should turn from the Soviet model of ethnofederalism to the US model of a melting pot” in which the debate on the “second generation of nationality policy” unfolded, involving famous scholars such as Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe. Unlike the scholars of the 1990s who had relied on original Russian materials (but very official ones: Lenin’s and Stalin’s published volumes, *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*), advocates of the melting-pot model had the advantage of accessing US historians’ contemporary works. In a published reading note, Ma Rong, the representative scholar of the second camp, echoed Ronald Suny’s *The Revenge of the Past*. Ma Rong summarized several crucial opinions from Suny’s volume: the USSR’s ethnofederalism had originated as expediency, out of the Bolsheviks’ compromise with non-Russians; the Soviet regime had been over-optimistic, believing that ethnic identities would dissipate as modernization unfolded; Russians had felt victimized and thus supported the dissolution; non-Russian elites had become interest groups, maintaining their lobbying power and continuing to decentralize the Soviet state (Ma 2010, 12–19). The empirical approach emerged in the late 2010s when Chinese scholars gained access to the Russian archive on nationality affairs. In a vast volume published in 2015, Zuo Fengrong and Liu Xianzhong, specialists in Russian history and politics, examined the historical formation and decline of Soviet ethnofederalism. The book’s central thesis was similar to Ronald Suny’s and Terry Martin’s work. Yet, the authors speak highly of Vladimir Putin’s “ethnic de-politicization,” recommending this policy as a reference point for China’s nation-building to eliminate the Soviet model’s negative legacies (Zuo and Liu 2015). As the USSR has become a politically sensitive topic, studies on the Soviet nationality question have dissipated in recent years.

## Conclusion and Discussion

In this article, I have surveyed Soviet studies in China post-1949 and probed how a discourse that evaded nationality affairs developed and varied. China’s specialists on the Soviet Union lacked a coherent agenda for nationality studies. They observed Soviet nationality questions, often unconsciously, from windows such as the October Revolution, economic planning, Russia’s historical expansionism, geopolitics, and patriotic education. The systematic negligence of nationality questions persisted up through the 1990s. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a shock, reminding China and the entire world that ethnicity and nationality had yet to die.

With this article, I am not arguing that Soviet studies shaped China’s nationality policy. Instead, the causal direction, if it exists, would be complex. A more reasonable approach would be to read the surveyed materials as a reflection of China’s overall political and intellectual atmosphere. The ignorance and reduction of nationality questions stemmed from multiple sources. In the educational system’s imitation of the Soviet Union in 1952, China lost its sociology, anthropology, and ethnography – the disciplines that were most relevant to studying the nationality question. In the early 1950s, experts from these disciplines quickly mastered the Russian language and cooperated with Soviet ethnographers in surveying China’s borderlands. They would have suggested more profound distinctions from the Soviet model of ethnic classification if only they could have continued their work.

From the mid-1950s onward, the study of Soviet nationality affairs was scattered across research circles in international politics, finance and economics, literature, and even military intelligence. Most experts were intellectuals who had fallen into political disgrace. They worked from labor camps, assigned to provide evidence in support of the CCP’s polemics with Moscow. Until the 1980s, there were few stable research institutions in the Soviet Union. Rather, these scholars studied the USSR within various “groups of translations” and “writing groups.” For these “experts,” the most important threads were class struggle, political economy, international communism, and

border disputes, while they thought little of race, ethnicity, or nationality. Thus, it was not surprising that their observations bore consistent crude thoughts of economic determinism, which led them to ignore religion, medieval Russia, primitive tribes, and many other issues. Globally, the world of the Cold War highlighted class and reduced all else to class, including nationality and ethnicity. China's observers would have heard the echo from the outside even if they had focused on the USSR's nationality affairs. This occurred in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to deny the influences of Soviet studies in China altogether. China's knowledge of the USSR was characterized by systematic bias, which shaped popular opinion. The bias followed a pattern: small nations and vulnerable ethnic groups tended to be overlooked. In the eyes of Chinese observers, the Soviet nationality model was primarily an instrument of economic development, and minorities were usually described as passive victims or benefactors of great power politics. This great-power-centric view would persist in China even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Russia's conflicts with the former Soviet and socialist states intensified, the Chinese public often sided with Russia against small nations such as Poland, Georgia, and Ukraine. This trend gained new momentum amidst Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Many Chinese netizens and intellectuals sided with Russia to mock Ukraine. The biased intellectual thread cultivated such popular statements and the power-obsessed mentality. Ultimately, this can be traced to China's protracted study of the USSR, which entered textbooks, media, and popular culture. The negligence of national affairs and the dominance of a Russocentric perspective were the two sides of one coin.

**Disclosures.** None.

## Note

- 1 *Sulian wenti cankao ziliao* (References for Soviet Studies) was published by Shanghai University of Foreign Studies.

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