

Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies, Vol. 6 November 2016

ISSN 2048-0601

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Gorbachev's *Glasnost* and the Debate on Chinese Socialism among Chinese Sovietologists, 1985-1999

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Abstract

Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost (openness) was a popular topic in 1980s China. Existing scholarship remarks that Chinese Soviet-watchers admired Gorbachev's programme as a model for China's democratisation in the 1980s. However, after 1991, because of their impact on China's pro-democracy movement, as perceived by the Chinese government, the same Chinese scholars consistently criticised Gorbachev and his liberalisation policies for being the fundamental catalysts in bringing down the USSR.

This paper suggests that the attractiveness of Gorbachev's glasnost policy to 1980s Chinese Sovietologists was not because it symbolised Western-style democracy; instead, they embraced glasnost as a type of government-led democracy. The impact of Gorbachev's policies after the mid-1980s can also be seen in Chinese scholars' use of them to support the reformist General Secretary Zhao Ziyang in his power struggle against the Party conservatives leading up to the Tiananmen Incident.

This paper further posits that Chinese scholars' scorn for Gorbachev after Tiananmen was not primarily owing to his role in promoting democratisation; rather, it was because of Gorbachev's soft line approach towards dissent when communism in Europe was on the verge of collapse. By drawing attention to Gorbachev's soft line approach, Chinese critics justified China's use of the Tiananmen crackdown and the brutal measures adopted by Deng Xiaoping to preserve socialist rule and social stability.

Key words: *Mikhail Gorbachev, Deng Xiaoping, Zhao Ziyang, Chinese Sovietology, Tiananmen, contemporary China, post-communism*

Introduction

Several previous scholars have noted the enormous impact that the last leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, and his political liberalisation policy known as *glasnost* (openness) had on 1980s China (Yan Sun, 1995: 242-246; Guan Guihai, 2010: 511-513; Shambaugh, 2008: 55-57). It has been reported that Gorbachev's programme inspired the former Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang's political reform proposal on the eve of the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 (Wu Guoguang, 1997: 306). He was held in enormously high esteem among Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s (Brown, 2007: 107). His enthusiasm for freedom and the reform of socialism were instrumental in stirring up the student protests in Tiananmen Square. Demonstrators used his example to pressure the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping into abandoning the authoritarian rule of the Chinese government (Lukin, 1991: 123). Moreover, the existing literature points out that Chinese Sovietologists admired Gorbachev's political reform as a model for China's democratisation in the 1980s. However, after 1991, because of their impact on China's pro-democracy movement as perceived by the Chinese government, the same Chinese scholars consistently criticised Gorbachev and his liberalisation policies for being the fundamental catalysts in bringing down the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Marsh, 2005: 105-106; Shambaugh, 2008: 57).

Having examined a range of academic and official articles published in China from the 1980s to the 1990s, I would first argue that the attractiveness of Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy to 1980s Chinese scholars was not because it symbolised Western-style democracy; instead, they embraced *glasnost* as a type of "democracy under socialism", and saw it as being equivalent to the "neo-authoritarianism" of Zhao Ziyang that championed pluralism under a strong government. Moreover, the impact of Gorbachev's policies after the mid-1980s can also be seen in Chinese scholars' use of them to support the reformist leader Zhao in his power struggle against the conservatives within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leading up to the Tiananmen Incident in 1989. This paper further posits that Chinese scholars' scorn for Gorbachev after Tiananmen was not primarily owing to his role in promoting democratisation; rather, it was because of Gorbachev's soft line approach towards dissent when communism in Europe was on the verge of collapse. By

drawing attention to Gorbachev's soft line approach, Chinese critics justified China's use of the Tiananmen crackdown and the brutal measures adopted by Deng Xiaoping to preserve socialist rule and social stability. Having said this, the wave of Chinese criticism was a short-term phenomenon. It gradually subsided after the mid-1990s as a result of the marked improvement in Sino-Russian relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and, most importantly, as a result of China's own reflections on the lessons already learned from the Sino-Soviet ideological disputes that had taken place under Mao Zedong.

With respect to primary sources, it should be mentioned here that this research is based wholly on the "national core journals" (*Guojiaji hexin qikan*) published in the People's Republic of China (PRC), and mainly on the following four categories of journals. The first are those journals focusing on research in the humanities and social sciences in general (*Shehui kexue yanjiu*, *Shijie jingjiyu zhengzhi*). Second are those journals dealing with problems of socialism or communism in the world (*Dangdai shijie shehui zhuyi wenti*, *Shehui zhuyi yanjiu*). The third group forms the core of this study; they concentrate on questions and issues relating to the former Soviet Union (later the Russian Federation and other Commonwealth Independent States after 1991) (*Sulian dongou wenti*, *Eluosi yanjiu*). Lastly, the research scope also includes relevant articles in various university journals (*Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan yanjiu shengyuan xuebao*, *Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao xuebao*).

Moreover, the paper examines the thinking of Chinese Sovietologists against the backdrop of political developments in the PRC from the mid-1980s to the 1990s. Therefore, in order for this research to be successfully located in the rich fabric of the intellectual activities of contemporary China and in the changing environment, the investigator also consulted China's Party newspapers and journals, such as the *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), *Guangming ribao* (Guangming Daily) and *Beijing Review* (English edition), and the writings and speeches of PRC officials, such as those of Deng Xiaoping and other contemporary Chinese leaders.

The use of the term "Sovietologists" (or Soviet-watchers) in this paper for those who study and research the state of the USSR is based on Christopher Xenakis' definition. Xenakis defines Sovietologists broadly, to include "political

scientists, economists, sociologists, historians, diplomats and policy makers, working in academia, government, private think tanks, and the media.” He uses the terms “Sovietologists”, “Soviet experts”, “foreign policy analysts”, “Cold War theorists”, and “political scientists” interchangeably, citing the examples of George Kennan, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Richard Pipes and Strobe Talbott (Xenakis, 2002: 4).

In terms of this elastic definition of the field and the diversity of scholars’ backgrounds, the situation in China is generally similar to the situation in the US as described by Xenakis. For example, as we shall see, although some Chinese scholars specialise in either Soviet or world communism, most of those mentioned and quoted in this paper are generalists rather than specialists in Soviet studies. Their articles often express more political zeal than scholarly expertise or analytical insight. Generally speaking, the descriptions by Xenakis of US Sovietologists could also be applied to the Chinese situation. Chinese Soviet-watchers are a diverse group, rather than representatives of a single school of thought or central theory. Their publications never imply a complete homogeneity of views. However, although their academic training is in different disciplines and by no means confined to Soviet studies, their research and publications are relevant to Sovietology in one way or another.

Chinese Perceptions of Gorbachev across the 1990 Divide

One thing that should be noted is that Chinese perceptions of Gorbachev from the mid-1980s onwards were quite evolutionary. Views changed not only in response to the ups-and-downs of Sino-Soviet (and later Sino-Russian) relations and China’s domestic political climate, but also in response to the political developments in Moscow. The existing secondary literature on Chinese Sovietology indicates that Chinese scholars began making positive comments about Gorbachev immediately after he assumed power in 1985 (Bernstein, 2010: 2; Rozman, 1987: 130-135; 2010: 455), but that soon after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 they had become completely hostile to the last Soviet leader and their criticisms did not stop until after the collapse of the

USSR in 1991 (Rozman, 2010: 460; Shambaugh, 2008: 57; Marsh, 2005: 105-106; Wilson, 2007: 271).

My reading shows, however, that most Chinese academic commentators on the USSR did not have positive views of Gorbachev either in 1985 or afterwards. Many scholars remained suspicious of Gorbachev and felt uncertain about his future manoeuvres and agendas. The main reason for China's lukewarm reaction to the Soviet leader during the early days of his administration was the tense Sino-Soviet relations at that time, notably the unresolved question of the three obstacles (the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, its large troop deployment along the border with China, and Moscow's support of the Vietnamese military intervention in Cambodia) plaguing the two countries. In 1985, the CCP regime expressed its concern regarding Gorbachev's reluctance to resolve these unsettled problems after he assumed power (*Beijing Review*, 6th May 1985: 13). In 1986, the Chinese Premier, Hu Yaobang, complained to journalists that: "Sino-Soviet relations have not made any headway since Gorbachev assumed power." (*Renmin ribao*, 20th June 1986: 1) At the same time, some Chinese Soviet-watchers also expressed their resentment of Moscow's insincere approach towards removing the three obstacles. They pointed out that this behaviour ran counter to the principle of New Thinking (Ma Baohua, 1986: 52; Xing Shugang, 1986: 36; Zhu Ruizhen, 1987: 29). Only around one year after Gorbachev took the helm did Chinese scholars start to review his policies more positively, when the problem of the three obstacles had started to be resolved and bilateral relations were gradually improving.

My findings also demonstrate that during and after the 1989 Tiananmen uprising, no major criticisms of Gorbachev appeared in Chinese academic writings. Instead, Chinese scholars still seemed to admire, and produce positive evaluations of, his programmes during this anti-liberal period in contemporary China. There are several reasons why Gorbachev was decidedly not a subject of ridicule in the eyes of Chinese scholars in the wake of the Tiananmen demonstrations. First, the Chinese leadership had by then taken stock of the Sino-Soviet frictions under Mao Zedong, and did not want to be at odds with a large and powerful country that had the longest land border with the PRC. When the Sino-Soviet summit meeting took place in May 1989, both

sides placed great emphasis on the principle of mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs and normalised relations between the two countries. Having learned from the lessons of history, they were committed to not letting ideological disagreements disrupt cordial bilateral relations (*Guangming ribao*, 19th May 1989: 1). All this is reflected in the main import of Deng's summit conversation with Gorbachev—putting the past behind us, opening up a new era, doing more practical things and indulging in less empty talk (Deng Xiaoping, 1994: 3.287). Harmony and rapport between the two nations would be the primary considerations, despite the fact that some officials and scholars might feel suspicious of Gorbachev's reform programmes.

Secondly, it was Gorbachev who mended Sino-Soviet fences after a protracted period of mutual distrust, repairing the relationship almost entirely on Chinese terms. Gorbachev may not have agreed in his heart with China's strategy of violence in handling the Tiananmen Incident (Ikeda & Gorbachev, 2005: 2), but even when he was pushed by Western reporters during his visit to Beijing in 1989, the Soviet leader refused to comment on the student movement (*Guangming ribao*, 18th May 1989: 3), and he did not encourage the Soviet media to criticise the Chinese government after he returned to Moscow (Marsh, 2005: 136-137). It may therefore have seemed ungrateful for the Chinese state to start criticising someone who had made a significant contribution to the Sino-Soviet rapprochement and who had adopted a neutral position when China was experiencing domestic problems.

Finally, in the wake of the Tiananmen Incident, China did not consider that Gorbachev and his liberalisation policies posed an immediate threat to its socialist system. In fact, the West was perceived as a much greater danger to the survival of the regime than the USSR (Xu Dashen, 1989: 5-6; *Guangming ribao*, 4th September 1989: 3), and the CCP saw the Soviet state as a much-needed partner with which China could confront Western power politics (*Beijing Review*, 3rd-9th September 1990: 11). After the Tiananmen Incident, many Chinese Party leaders were keen to maintain relations with Moscow, expressing their hopes that the USSR would still uphold the ideals of socialism (*Renmin ribao*, 27th April 1990: 4; *Renmin ribao*, 31st May 1990: 3). This was because international sanctions were already being imposed on China and the West was exerting pressure on the PRC to change course after Tiananmen. In

addition, by the 1990s the US had achieved “superhegemonist” status, forcing other countries to follow the Western model of development, and China suspected the Americans of having the intention of relegating China and various other nations to subordinate roles on the world stage (Kagan, 2008: 33).

Most importantly, this investigator has found that strong criticism of Gorbachev by China did not appear until early 1990, and not immediately after Tiananmen as existing secondary scholarship claims. After Gorbachev was elected President of the USSR, and after he initiated the process of terminating the power monopoly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) on March 15 1990, both the CCP and Chinese scholars became aware of the possible negative ramifications of such a move on the PRC, which has remained committed to one-party communist rule, and in a speech made immediately afterwards on March 18, the CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin issued the following warning:

Our Party is the ruling party, which means that the Party has an absolute leadership over the state organs. If we renounce this leadership, then the Party will no longer enjoy ruling party status. Therefore, all the state organs, including the People’s Congress, the government, the Supreme People’s Court and the Supreme People’s Procuratorate, should be under the leadership of the Party. Any thoughts on or practices involving weakening or undermining the authority of the Party are wrong. (Jiang Zemin, 2006: 1.112)

In reaction to the alarming announcement after the 28th CPSU Congress in July 1990 that the monopoly of communist power in the Soviet state had been officially abolished, in September of that year Jiang made the following more severe criticism:

After Soviet-American detente and the turmoil in Eastern Europe, there are indeed many communists in the world who have doubts about the future of socialism, and are even losing faith in it. But the reality has proved that this kind of thinking is terribly naïve. (ibid: 1.134)

One week after the August 1991 coup in Moscow, *Guangming ribao* published an article implicitly attacking Gorbachev and his liberal programmes:

Some thoughts against Marxism and Leninism are rampant in today's international society. They have crept into the communist parties of some countries and become the guiding principles of those parties. Those thoughts are the fundamental origin of the crisis of some socialist states. The opportunists inside the international communist movement flaunt the banners of 'diversity', 'universal human values' and 'democracy is the highest principle of socialism' to confuse the masses. They are in fact writing off the class struggle, socialism and proletarian dictatorship. They stand for using the Western model to replace the communist leadership and its theoretical premise of Marxism. (*Guangming ribao*, 26th August 1991: 3)

This behaviour of Gorbachev's in overturning the dictatorship of the communist party was absolutely unacceptable to the CCP. Chinese scholars began to sense the potential implications for China, which were far more ominous than the effect of the New Thinking and *glasnost* that had allegedly fuelled the student unrest in 1989 (Lukin, 1991: 123). At that time Beijing was confronting the perceived threat from the West of "peaceful evolution" (Shambaugh, 2008: 55), and the Chinese leadership similarly feared that the abandoning of socialism by the Soviet Union would reignite pro-democracy sentiments at home and challenge its legitimacy. Following this, the last Soviet leader was doomed to become the focal point of attack by the Chinese.

Some of the secondary literature authors argue that after 1991 most Chinese scholars focused on criticising Gorbachev and his liberalisation policies as the fundamental catalysts in triggering the collapse of the Soviet state (Guan Guihai, 2010: 509-514; Marsh, 2005: 111; Shambaugh, 2008: 81). In reality, Chinese Sovietology writings never excoriated Gorbachev in the 1990s, and the torrent of attacks had gradually subsided by the middle of the decade. One major reason for this may be the improvement in Sino-Russian relations after the tragic collapse of the USSR. Once in power, Russian President Boris

Yeltsin told Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen that China and Russia should not put the clock back to when both sides were at each other's throats, and the ideological differences should not become a barrier to normal bilateral relations (*Renmin ribao*, 26th November 1992: 1). With this overture from Russia, China decided to consolidate relations. During Jiang Zemin's visit to Moscow in September 1994, both sides confirmed the nature of their future new type of cooperation — "constructive partnership" (*jianshexing huoban guanxi*) (*Renmin ribao*, 4th September 1994: 1).

Moreover, after the collapse of the USSR, China wanted the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) on its borders to remain stable, otherwise grave problems would be created for the PRC. After the Cold War the CCP leadership not only needed good relations with Russia in diplomatic terms, but also expected to retain Russia and other CIS states as a counterbalance in resisting the Western notion of peaceful evolution, which they saw as an existential threat. Therefore, it was a rational decision for Chinese scholars after 1991 not to indulge in negative criticisms of the defunct Soviet socialism founded by the Russians in 1917, since this would arouse suspicions on the Russian side and ultimately harm the relationship. In a 1999 speech delivered to a conference commemorating the 50-year anniversary of the establishment of Sino-Russian relations, at which the Vice-Director of the International Liaison Department of the CCP, Cai Wu, and the Russian Ambassador, Igor Rogachev, were present, Li Jingjie, Director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), cited the main import of Deng Xiaoping's conversation with Gorbachev in 1989— "putting the past behind and embracing the future"—and made it clear to Chinese scholars that they should "no longer cling to the old scores of history" when they were conducting research into Sino-Russian relations in the future (Li Jingjie, 1999: 4). In another article published at the same time, Pan Zhengxiang, a scholar at the Chinese University of Science and Technology, retraced the sorry history of Sino-Soviet relations and asked Chinese scholars to take the lessons of the past into account in their future research. He instructed them to "uphold the notion of seeking common ground while preserving differences", and warned them "not to engage in open polemics and in criticising Party or state leaders on the other side by name" in order to "prevent a repetition in the 21st century of the historical tragedy" (Pan Zhengxiang, 1999: 46).

Lastly, Gorbachev and his liberal programmes were by no means the only, or even the most significant, factor in the USSR's dissolution, as Chinese analysts claimed after 1991. Since the mid-1990s, some Chinese scholars have traced the roots of the tragedy back to the administrations of Leonid Brezhnev and Joseph Stalin, arguing that conservative forces and the rigid communist system were the decisive factors in bringing it about, rather than the figure of Gorbachev alone (Huang Zongliang, 1993: 39-46; Zheng Yifan, 1995: 7-12; Zuo Fengrong, 1996: 57-63).

The Popularity of Gorbachev in 1980s China

As noted, Gorbachev's *glasnost* was a popular topic in 1980s China. Zhao Ziyang once said that Soviet *glasnost* had more impact than "Western values, concepts and political systems" in encouraging "China's intellectuals, youth and young workers to demand more democracy" in the 1980s (Bao Pu, Chiang & Ignatius, 2009: 261). When Zhao was in power in the mid-1980s, with Deng Xiaoping's approval, he organised and supervised the first political reform group since the founding of the PRC to design a proposal for the institutional restructuring of the CCP (*Renmin ribao*, 28th February 1988: 1). Wu Guoguang, former advisor to Zhao and the chief editor of the *Renmin ribao* in the late 1980s, has revealed that during this period of formulating political reforms, Zhao's aim was to learn from Gorbachev and implement economic and political reforms in China concurrently. The General Secretary always asked the staff to obtain the minutes of the CPSU Congress, at which Gorbachev had delivered his speeches, to give him inspiration for China's political reform (Wu Guoguang, 1997: 306). In addition, Zhao occasionally invited over the PRC ambassador to Moscow together with some well-known Chinese Soviet specialists to provide him with seminar talks on Soviet *glasnost* (ibid: 181). After he was removed from the leadership owing to his unwillingness to endorse the Tiananmen crackdown ordered by Deng Xiaoping, Zhao admitted that his thinking on political reform had been changed in 1985/1986, "aroused somewhat by events in the broader international environment and problems that had emerged in the Eastern Bloc" (Bao Pu, Chiang & Ignatius, 2009: 256-257).

After the mid-1980s, not only Zhao Ziyang, but also other CCP leaders, such as Tian Jiyun and Bo Yibo, expressed their admiration for Gorbachev's programme and their willingness to learn from the Soviet experience (*Renmin ribao*, 11th January 1988: 4; *Renmin ribao*, 13th July 1988: 1). This official recognition obviously stimulated intellectual interest. In a speech given to the National Social Sciences Congress in April 1988, CASS President Hu Sheng complained that China had not previously carried out much research on Soviet politics owing to the Sino-Soviet conflict, with the result that Chinese scholars lacked knowledge of recent developments, such as *glasnost*, in the Soviet Union. Hu urged Chinese people to conduct research into "Soviet political and economic structural reforms immediately", as "those reforms are analogous to what China has undertaken", stating that such comparative studies were "necessary and beneficial" (Hu Sheng, 1988: 6-7). At the same time, some Chinese scholars expressed their great appreciation for, and excitement about, Gorbachev and his political reforms. On hearing the Soviet announcement at the 27th CPSU Congress concerning the termination of the concentration of power in the hands of the Communist Party and the life-long tenure of the General Secretary, Gao Fang, professor of the history of communism at Renmin University, predicted that Gorbachev might become "a proletarian George Washington" and bring "a blessed message to socialism" (Gao Fang, 1988: 8). Zhao Yuliang, professor of economics at Beijing Jiaotong University, foresaw that Gorbachev's reforms would be "another epoch-making revolution comparable to the one under Peter the Great in Russian history" (Zhao Yuliang, 1988: 27).

The reasons for China's positive response to the Soviet *glasnost* and the positive impression of Gorbachev himself after 1986 were manifold. The most important of these was the extraordinary openness and budding democracy of the Chinese political environment after the mid-1980s. At a national symposium in 1986, Vice-Premier Wan Li had already called for the introduction of a "more democratic and scientific policy decision-making process" in the CCP (*Beijing Review*, 11th August 1986: 5). In 1988, one author publicly demanded the end of censorship in China (*Renmin ribao*, 2nd February 1988: 8). In the realm of academia, in 1986 the Editorial Board of *Shehui kexue yanjiu* (*Social Science Research*), funded by the Sichuan Provincial Academy of Social Sciences, published an article in which, after a re-examination of the

disastrous decade of the Cultural Revolution, it was suggested that China learn from the West in “instituting political democratization and allowing intellectuals to be critical of those in power” (The Editorial Board, 1986: 129). At CASS, a new policy issued in early 1989 encouraged scholars to “apply research methodologies that are not concerned with Marxist theory, as long as they abide by the Chinese Constitution” (*Renmin ribao*, 17th January 1989: 3).

Secondly, since the mid-1980s China had placed political reform high on the agenda. In 1986, Deng Xiaoping acknowledged that, “without political reform, economic reform cannot succeed” (Deng Xiaoping, 1994: 3.167). Back then, even the Party conservatives, such as Peng Zhen and Bo Yibo, also voiced their support for initiating political reform in China (*Renmin ribao*, 6th August 1986: 1; *Renmin ribao*, 13th July 1988: 1). In response to the official mandate, several articles suddenly appeared in various journals. The authors proposed that China should closely scrutinise the process of political reform in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and argued strongly that economic modernisation could not be realised without socialist democracy (Cai Yimin, 1986: 23-24; Ling Yunong, 1986: 12-13; Wu Qing’an, 1988: 26). Seen from the perspective of such scholars’ profound esteem for *glasnost*, those Chinese observers of the Soviet Union might either have been genuinely impressed by Gorbachev’s programme, or have wanted to speed up China’s own *glasnost* and seek to highlight the achievements of Soviet political reform in order to give the Chinese regime the extra push that was needed for the adoption of similar measures.

Chinese Understanding of Gorbachev’s *Glasnost*

Many Chinese scholars in their writings of the 1980s did not in fact conceptually equate Gorbachev’s *glasnost* and political reform programme with political democracy in the Western sense. After 1986, many articles attempted to demonstrate that Gorbachev’s reforms were a return to Lenin’s orthodox socialism. Some writers argued that the concept of *glasnost* originated from Lenin (Cui Shumei, 1988: 44; Li Liangrong, 1988: 96). Others appreciated Gorbachev’s efforts in either re-establishing the people’s right to participate in state affairs (Wu Raohui, 1987: 15; Gu Xuewu, 1988: 28), or in

reinstating democratic and humanistic socialism (Shi Shudong, 1987: 3; Zheng Jianxin, 1988: 26). They argued that both had been developed by Lenin, but later sabotaged by Stalin, and had not been fully revived by the Soviet leaders after Stalin. It might be correct, based on the opening speech of the 27th CPSU Congress in February 1986, to say that Gorbachev's reforms were a return to true Leninism (Gorbachev, 1987: 1.10); however, Chinese scholars had a tactical consideration in placing Gorbachev and Lenin in the same category. Since Gorbachev's programme of *glasnost* had spread to China, Chinese intellectuals were keen to learn from it and portray it as a lesson for China, in the hope that Gorbachev's thinking might stimulate further political change in the PRC after the initial economic reforms that were begun in 1978. It should be noted that a short-lived campaign against bourgeois liberalisation had emerged in the first half of 1987, after the 1986 student demonstrations and the forced resignation of General Secretary Hu Yaobang, who was accused of being sympathetic to bourgeois thinking (*Renmin ribao*, 17th January 1987: 1). Although the event was not large in scale and was nothing like the type of political persecutions that had taken place under Mao, however, Deng Xiaoping had made it clear in late 1986 that slogans against socialism and soft approaches towards bourgeois liberalisation would not be tolerated (Deng Xiaoping, 1994: 3.194). It is therefore understandable that Chinese scholars chose to use the less risky figure of Lenin to channel their arguments during this sensitive period, making their interpretations less vulnerable to attack. Quoting Lenin to boost Gorbachev's positive image might generate less political trouble and be more acceptable to the Party's old guard, who were not very familiar with Gorbachev's ideas.

Having said this, the fact that Chinese scholars cloaked Gorbachev in the mantle of Leninism suggests that their understanding of his ideas was still orthodox in nature. As already noted, the former CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang was a lover of *glasnost*. He was favoured and supported by many Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s as a patron of political reform (Goldman, 1994: 238-239). Although on the surface Zhao's ideas looked more liberal than those of the Party's old guard, however, in the eyes of Richard Baum, Zhao's thoughts on political reform still "stressed the need for strong, centralized technocratic leadership", and he was not an advocate of "Western-style liberalism, but of Chinese-style 'neo-authoritarianism'" (Baum, 2008: 113).

Indeed, after having been purged in the wake of Tiananmen, Zhao revealed that he would never have countenanced a multi-party system but had advocated a reformed one-party dictatorship. He said that “neo-authoritarianism is good for a developing country” (Zong Fengming, 2007: 153-154). The concept of “neo-authoritarianism” did not escape the attention of Chinese scholars in the 1980s. A 1989 article in *Jingjixue zhoubao* (*Economics Weekly*) stated that, “China needs a new kind of Gorbachev-like strongman.” (*Jingjixue zhoubao*, 12th March 1989: 22) Zhao Liqing, associate researcher at the Central Party School, openly remarked that “present-day China needs democratic authoritarianism”. In his opinion, for the sake of economic modernisation, “circumscription of personal freedom is essential”, and “a powerful government with sufficient authority” would be the best type of government to ensure the social and political stability necessary for reform. According to the author, China should consult Gorbachev’s political reform model (Zhao Liqing, 1989: 36-38). It is interesting to note that some 1980s Chinese scholars tended to regard Gorbachev’s *glasnost* as a kind of government-led protection of citizens’ rights and supervision of bureaucratic conduct. They expressed the hope that some such guided democracy, whereby the people would gradually be given more say, would be introduced, while popular participation would be within limits fixed by the Party. According to their definition, this was “democracy under socialism”, which, in their understanding, was equivalent to Zhao’s concept of neo-authoritarianism that champions pluralism, diversity and efficiency under a strong government (Xiao Gu, 1988: 8; Zhao Longgeng, 1988: 14; Zhang Wei, 1989: 68).

Similarly, many Western scholars made it clear that Gorbachev’s *glasnost* was not the same as Western democracy (Sallnow, 1989: 42; Walker, 1993: 97; Gooding, 2001: 216). His goal was either “a democratized one-party system” (Lewin, 1991: 151) or “a more enlightened dictatorship” (Laqueur, 1989: 43). With regard to the Chinese understanding of *glasnost*, we need to compare the Chinese concept of *gongkaixing* (transparency) and the English idea of *openness*. The meaning of *gongkaixing* is a little different from that of *openness*. *Gongkaixing* conveys the impression that political transparency will be circumscribed by the top echelons of government to a certain extent. It is an authorised openness, not a complete openness; in other words, *gongkaixing* is openness licensed by the central government, rather than a

fundamental political right of the citizens of a country. This difference is equivalent to the difference between rule by law and the rule of law. Lowell Dittmer profoundly captures the subtle difference between the Chinese and Western concepts:

The concept of “publicity” (*gongkai*) in contemporary China is derived from the age-old concept of the “public” (*gong*). In the Confucian classics a prominent polarity exists between the terms of “self” (*zi*) and “public” (*gong*), which is linked to an opposition between selfishness (*zisi*) and selflessness (*wusi*). The juxtaposition corresponds to the Western “public-private” distinction, though it is more invidious. Selflessness is lauded for having the interests of all the people in mind, as selfishness is condemned for a cognitive or even a moral failure to perceive the self in terms of a more comprehensive social organism to which the person’s fate is inextricably connected. The Western concept of the “private” is less pejoratively defined than the Chinese, with a strong strain going back at least to Adam Smith construing the private sector as making an almost necessarily positive contribution to public welfare. Private interests per se are sanctioned by the free market model in economic thought, by social contract theory in politics, and by the adversary tradition in jurisprudence. The public is, to be sure, also positively evaluated in the West (e.g., “public interest”, “public weal”), but even though it is favourably evaluated it has subtly different connotations from the Chinese concept. (Dittmer, 1994: 110-111)

Seen from these perspectives, *glasnost* seems to be akin to Chinese traditional thinking on political philosophy and statecraft. Chinese scholars’ interpretation of *glasnost* appeared to converge with the substance of Zhao Ziyang’s neo-authoritarianism.

The Use of Gorbachev

While Soviet political reform had been making headway since 1985, Zhao Ziyang's political reforms had remained a work-in-progress since the mid-1980s, and were stillborn on the eve of the Tiananmen Incident. Zhao's reform proposals included the separation of the Party and the state, the introduction of the rule of law, and permission given to other parties to compete with the CCP in rank-and-file elections (Wu Guoguang, 1997: 94-107). The CCP General Secretary once revealed that the slow progress of his political reforms and the difficulty of putting them into practice were mainly the result of Deng Xiaoping's orthodox thinking and his interference preventing any bold experimentation (Zong Fengming, 2007: 33). After the 13th Party Congress in 1987, Zhao's plans for political reform were warmly welcomed by Chinese scholars (*Renmin ribao*, 5th March 1988: 5; Gao Fang, 1988: 10). However, after seeing that Zhao had not translated many of his promises into practice, from 1988 onwards the attitude of Chinese scholars became more demanding. Xiao Gu and Yang Xinyu (both professors of Russian language at Fudan University) insisted that the Chinese government should learn from Gorbachev and implement political and economic reforms simultaneously (Xiao Gu, 1988: 10; Yang Xinyu, 1988: 41). After criticising the absence of democracy from post-Mao politics, Xu Hongwu, professor of Marxism-Leninism at Beijing Normal University, requested that China take notice of Gorbachev, and argued that "apart from *glasnost*, there is no way for China to introduce democratic politics" (Xu Hongwu, 1988: 23). Zhou Yuansheng, a PhD law student at Renmin University, remarked that it was essential for the PRC to establish "*glasnost* with Chinese characteristics" (Zhou Yuansheng, 1988: 26).

The reason why Chinese scholars zealously supported Zhao's proposals and consistently pressed for further political reform activity might have been as a result of the intensification of the power struggle between Zhao and the conservative forces in the CCP leading up to the Tiananmen Incident. Firstly, if one compares Zhao's report to the 13th Party Congress and Deng's conservative approach to political reform, one finds they are similar in substance (Zhao Ziyang, 1987: 3-77; Deng Xiaoping, 1994: 2.319-341). However, Zhao's speech to the Congress was largely for public consumption. The report needed Deng's prior approval before it was delivered, and thus it

may not reflect Zhao's real intentions in political reform. In his publications, Wu Guoguang reveals that Zhao's agenda was more radical than the 13th Party Congress speech suggested (Wu Guoguang, 2008: 38), and the CCP General Secretary even said that China's future political reform should go one step further than Gorbachev's *glasnost* (Wu Guoguang, 1997: 314). Zhao also recalled that the political reform report presented at the Congress would have been more open and liberal if Deng had not interfered so much during the writing process (Bao Pu, Chiang & Ignatius, 2009: 208).

Moreover, unlike Zhao and his followers, some key CCP leaders did not favour the direct adoption of Gorbachev's programme for China even before Tiananmen. Both Foreign Minister Qian Qichen and Premier Li Peng were cautious about any radical approach towards reform, claiming that Gorbachev's political reform model was unsuitable for China, on the grounds that the two countries had very different social, political, economic and geographical conditions (*Beijing Review*, 10th-16th April 1989: 14; *Beijing Review*, 17th-23rd April 1989: 12). As the power struggle in the higher echelons of the Party escalated in the period before the student demonstrations, some Chinese scholars seemed to position themselves on the side of the reformers in an effort to weed out the conservatives. David Shambaugh reveals that the time when Chinese scholars were commending Gorbachev's *glasnost* "was precisely the time that Zhao Ziyang and his advisers were pushing political reform", and that it also coincided with "a fierce intraparty debate within the CCP, and considerable swelling opposition to Zhao and his reforms" (Shambaugh, 2008: 56). Prior to the Tiananmen Incident, CASS researcher Wang Yizhou stated unequivocally that China should learn from Gorbachev's political reforms how to "overcome the inertia, conservatism and dogmatism among the bureaucracy", and "get rid of the politics of septuagenarians" (Wang Yizhou, 1989: 24). Shen Yiming (a researcher at Qinghua University) argued that through Gorbachev's *glasnost* socialist pluralism had spread all over the world (Shen Yiming, 1989: 21). He boldly commented:

We should not exclude the possibility that there could be several Marxist parties existing side by side in a socialist state. Although the struggle to achieve political pluralism is extremely fierce, however, political pluralism will be an

irresistible trend nonetheless, as long as the ruling party starts to admit its weakness and gives way to a more correct reform line; therefore, a healthy pluralist political mechanism will finally emerge. (Shen Yiming: 22)

The Abuse of Gorbachev

Some of the secondary literature suggests that after 1991 Chinese scholars tended to blame Gorbachev's programmes, such as *glasnost* and liberalisation, as the fundamental cause of the downfall of the USSR because those scholars felt extremely nervous about the negative implications of these policies for China (Guan Guihai, 2010: 509-514; Rozman, 2010: 464; Wilson, 2007: 272). Firstly, a perusal of the primary documents in which Chinese scholars expressed their criticisms after March 1990, when Gorbachev was launching his process for ending the CPSU monopoly, reveals that most scholars did *not* oppose Gorbachev's political reform of socialism. Some disputed Gorbachev's notion that political reform should precede economic reform, and remarked that the former should serve the needs of the latter (Xu Zhixin, 1991: 14; Zhang Jindou, 1992: 17; Tong Baochang, 1993: 12). Others criticised Gorbachev's programme for being too Western-oriented, and in particular criticised his termination of the CPSU power monopoly as an incorrect method of political reform (Yan Shuhan, 1990: 5; Wei Cizu, 1991: 17; Jiang Changbin, 1993: 53).

Secondly, this paper further posits the view that Chinese scholars' scorn for Gorbachev after 1990 was not primarily as a result of his role in promoting democratisation and changing the nature of socialism; rather, it was because of Gorbachev's soft line approach towards dissent when communism in Europe was on the verge of collapse. In fact, what Zhao Ziyang and Gorbachev shared was that both the CCP and Chinese scholars would have had difficulty in claiming that their ideas on reform were in contravention of socialism. Firstly, according to their own words, neither of the communist leaders had ever thought of recommending the overthrow of the socialist systems operating in their respective countries. After being purged, Zhao revealed that

what he had wanted was democracy under the CCP and rule of law in a socialist China (Bao Pu, Chiang & Ignatius, 2009: 257). In his official speeches Gorbachev always emphasised that his goal was “socialist democracy”, which involved “self-control” and “the unity of rights and duties” (Gorbachev, 1987: 2.169-170). Secondly, at the 1987 13th Party Congress, Zhao expressed a firm resolve to shatter the “current political structure, which took shape during the revolutionary war years”. According to him, the system was “no longer suited to our drive for modernisation in economic, political, cultural and other fields under conditions of peace, or to the development of a socialist commodity economy” (Zhao Ziyang, 1987: 59). The revolutionary “political structure” Zhao was referring to was none other than the institutions created by Mao after 1949, of which unpleasant vestiges remained even after 1976. As noted, many Chinese scholars approved of Gorbachev’s endeavours in re-assessing past errors and returning the Soviet state to the fundamental ethos of Leninism. These efforts by Gorbachev corresponded to Zhao’s proposal to transform the socialist state that had been created through war and revolution into a state designed to achieve construction and modernisation. This notion was a shared consensus among the CCP leadership even after Zhao’s purge, and was consistently implemented both in and after the 1990s (Deng Xiaoping, 1994: 3.314; Jiang Zemin, 2006: 1.217). In actuality, although in the eyes of Chinese communists writing after the 1990s both Zhao’s political reforms and Gorbachev’s *glasnost* had some negative impacts, however, the CCP indictment of Zhao, as State Council spokesman Yuan Mu intimated, was not because Zhao had suggested dismantling Party rule as part of his political reforms, but because of the mistake Zhao made in “supporting the turmoil and splitting the Communist Party Central Committee”. Zhao’s removal was thus “only a measure of Party discipline” (*Beijing Review*, 24th-30th July 1989: 5). The statement points to the cause of Zhao’s purge as being his refusal to endorse the CCP’s decision to use force to put down the Tiananmen demonstrators, which, in Deng Xiaoping’s eyes, was not only injurious to state interests but also a betrayal of socialist principles.

Zhao’s biggest failing, manifested in his disagreement with the method of suppressing the Tiananmen protests, was his toleration of dissent and his respect for human rights, which were similar to Gorbachev’s “humanistic socialism”, a characteristic that was attacked by some Chinese scholars after

1991 as being too soft and compromising towards the anti-communist upheavals in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (Lu Houming, 1992: 51-56; Zhang Zesen, 1993: 66-67; Chen Kairen, 1994: 40). Zhao's liberal attitude towards dissent was well known even before the Tiananmen Incident. He once remarked that the campaign against bourgeois liberalisation should not be too excessive, and that the people who had committed mistakes in the eyes of the Party should be allowed to "keep their posts and give full play to their professional knowledge" (Zhao Ziyang, 1987). Similarly, one of the aspects for which Gorbachev was heavily criticised by Chinese scholars was his neglect of Marxist class struggle and his sympathy for the enemies of socialism. Many scholars explicitly questioned why the Soviet leader did not send troops into Eastern Europe when the communist powers there were being overthrown, and crush domestic anti-socialist forces when the Soviet state was under threat (Zhou Xincheng, 1991: 17-20; Tong Baochang, 1993: 12; Ma Yan, 1997: 12-13; Wu Wei, 1999: 5).

Therefore, to some extent, the all-out post-1990 Chinese criticism of Gorbachev had more to do with the Soviet leader's renunciation of the use of force in suppressing the anti-socialist movement than with his political reforms. These criticisms could be considered as a surreptitious way of justifying the CCP's brutal suppression of the Tiananmen demonstrations, which was seen as an effective and prompt method of defeating anti-party forces. Judging from the publication dates of the writings, in the wake of Tiananmen, Chinese scholars had few criticisms to make of Gorbachev. However, after the Soviet economy deteriorated and domestic turbulence began to unfold in 1990, coinciding with Gorbachev's announcement of his decision to terminate the power monopoly of the CPSU, many Chinese scholars stopped praising Gorbachev, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 their criticisms intensified. The contrasting pictures of post-1989 China and the post-1990 USSR (or Russia after 1991) led some to conclude that Gorbachev's failure was not caused by socialism, but because he had not taken a firm and clear stance on socialism. They argued that the chaotic situation in many post-socialist states demonstrated the disastrous outcome for a country of renouncing socialism (Shao Huaze, 1990: 2; Li Dezong, 1992: 42; Cai Song, 1995: 65), while the fact that China had survived demonstrated the positive outcome of taking a firm stance to support the continuation of socialism in the country. Their

criticisms of Gorbachev in hindsight might have given the public the impression that soft approaches and lax ideologies brought about nothing but tension and mayhem in a socialist country, whereas tough measures ensured order and stability. Through their attacks on Gorbachev's relaxed attitude, the criticisms served to justify not only the CCP's violent crackdown on the Tiananmen protesters, but also Deng's post-Tiananmen announcement of his intention to maintain stability in China (which was synonymous with retaining the CCP's monopoly of power) at any cost (Deng Xiaoping, 1994: 3.315).

Conclusion

The existing secondary literature seems to have exaggerated the impact of Gorbachev on 1980s China. Previous scholarship suggests that after the mid-1980s Chinese Soviet-watchers identified Gorbachev's concept of *glasnost* and his political reforms with Western democracy, and used Gorbachev and his ideas to push the Chinese regime towards political democratisation on the eve of the Tiananmen Incident. This paper, however, has shown that 1980s Chinese scholars interpreted *glasnost* in a way designed to serve their own purposes, and that this interpretation was quite different from democracy in the Western sense. The Chinese definition of *glasnost* remains circumscribed by China's own mentality and history, reflecting the traditional Chinese understanding of human values and political culture. Moreover, few Chinese scholars used Gorbachev and his programmes to put pressure on the CCP to introduce some form of political Westernisation. Instead, most scholars manipulated the symbol of Gorbachev to support the reformist wing led by Zhao Ziyang in their factional warfare against the Party conservatives leading up to Tiananmen. In short, Chinese scholars did not regard Gorbachev and his programmes as having the potential to transform the political landscape of the PRC; rather, they perceived Gorbachev and his agenda as a tool that could be used to define, create and legitimise a reformed communist system on their own terms. The attractiveness of Gorbachev's *glasnost* to Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s, as claimed by the secondary literature, is thus more of a myth than a reality.

Moreover, in contrast to the secondary literature, which suggests that Chinese criticisms of Gorbachev after Tiananmen were to do with his role in embracing democratisation and the disruptive repercussions this brought to China, this paper has shown that the negative attitude of Chinese intellectuals towards the last Soviet leader after 1989 was more the result of Gorbachev's failure to use tough measures to prevent socialism in Europe from collapsing than anything else. Their criticisms of Gorbachev served to justify the Chinese government's brutal crackdown on civilian protests and to glorify the party's role as a bastion of state unity and stability. Many Chinese scholars were seemingly mounting efforts in defence of Deng's iron-fist policies, which had successfully preserved socialist rule and propelled China down the road to prosperity since the 1990s. They compared this with the faltering Soviet state that would eventually lurch into disorder and break down under Gorbachev's liberalisation and hands-off approach. The conclusion was that strong authoritarian rule that ensured political stability was far preferable.

Nevertheless, in and after the mid-1990s, as a strategic partnership was created between the PRC and Russia after the end of the Cold War, and with the increasing amount of bilateral economic and security cooperation, Chinese scholars reduced their criticisms of Gorbachev. Moreover, Chinese Soviet-watchers took account of the bitter lessons learned from the Sino-Soviet hostilities that had taken place under Mao Zedong, in which name-calling and exchanges of verbal attacks had severely damaged relations between the two countries. They made it clear that this tragedy should not be repeated, and this understanding also restrained them from excessively criticising the last Soviet leader.

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