



THE CHINESE DEBATE ABOUT GORBACHEV'S NEW THINKING, 1985-1999

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Chinese scholars' evolving perceptions of the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's foreign policy that was defined by his concept of New Thinking, from the mid-1980s to the end of the 1990s.

The existing secondary literature seems to indicate that Chinese scholars began making positive comments about Gorbachev immediately after he assumed power in 1985, but that soon after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 they had become completely hostile to him, and that their criticisms did not stop even after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

First, the paper is going to show that most Chinese commentators took a dim view of Gorbachev upon his assumption of the leadership in 1985. Only around one year after he took the helm did Chinese scholars start to view his policies more positively, when Sino-Soviet relations were gradually improving.

Second, it will demonstrate that strong criticism of Gorbachev by Chinese scholars did not appear until early 1990, and not immediately after Tiananmen as existing secondary scholarship claims. After Gorbachev was elected President of the Soviet Union, and after he initiated the process of terminating the power monopoly of the Soviet Communist Party on March 15, 1990, both the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese scholars became aware of the possible negative ramifications of such a move on China, which has remained committed to one-party communist rule.

The main argument of this research is that changing Chinese views on Gorbachev and his foreign policy were not only shaped by the ups-and-downs of Sino-Soviet (and later Sino-Russian) relations. More importantly, views changed in response to China's domestic political climate and the political developments in Moscow.

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INTRODUCTION

The breakup of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 has had a profound impact on China. The Soviet dissolution has had a variety of significant repercussions on Chinese politics, foreign policy, and other aspects. However, many myths about Chinese post-mortems on the Soviet Union have been circulated and perpetuated by a body of secondary literature. Some issues have been unclear or misunderstood in previous studies, and one of these inaccuracies has to do with the Chinese perceptions of the role of the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

The existing secondary literature indicates that Chinese scholars began making positive comments about Gorbachev immediately after he assumed power in 1985 (Bernstein, 2010; Rozman, 1987, 2010), 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 even after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, owing to his impact on China's

pro-democracy movement and his role in promoting democratisation as perceived by the Chinese government (Shambaugh, 2008; Marsh, 2005; Wilson, 2007).

In order to clear up misunderstandings about the Chinese views on Gorbachev, the researcher has re-examined the issue by choosing a case study of the changing Chinese perceptions of Gorbachev's foreign policy characterized as the "New Thinking," from 1985 to 1999. It should be noted that according to Gorbachev, the New Thinking symbolises his new initiatives in domestic as well as international politics (Gorbachev, 2000). However, as we will see in this article, Chinese scholars mainly use the New Thinking as a term to define Gorbachev's foreign policy.

First, this study found that most Chinese academic articles concerning the USSR did not present positive views on Gorbachev in and after 1985. Many of them remained suspicious and wary of the new Soviet leader, and some of them even challenged the sincerity and feasibility of his policies. Chinese scholarship remained critical of Gorbachev's agenda until the end of 1987. This is when three major obstacles (the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; its large troop deployment along the border of China; and Moscow's support

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of Vietnamese military intervention in Cambodia) plaguing Sino-Soviet relations began to resolve and bilateral relations gradually improved.

Second, this investigator has found that a full-fledged Chinese attack on Gorbachev did not appear either in the wake of the Tiananmen Incident or after the Soviet disintegration, as existing secondary scholarship claims. Instead, strong Chinese criticisms emerged in early 1990, when Gorbachev was elected as the President of the USSR and initiated the process of terminating the power monopoly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in March 1990. After that, China became aware of the negative ramifications of such a move against China's communist one-party rule.

Third, the research also concludes that Chinese writings never excoriated Gorbachev in the 1990s, and the torrent of attacks had gradually subsided by the middle of the decade, as a strategic partnership was created between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia after the end of the Cold War, and with the increasing amount of bilateral economic and security cooperation.

With respect to primary sources, it should be mentioned here that this research is based primarily on the "national core journals" (*Guojiaji hexin qikan*) published in the 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 scholars 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.

Changing views on Gorbachev's new thinking in the 1980s

From Gorbachev's assuming power in early 1985 to 1987, many Chinese commentators remained suspicious of the Soviet leader and felt uncertain about his future manoeuvres and agendas. The main reason for China's lukewarm reactions to the New Thinking during the early days of the Gorbachev administration was the tense Sino-Soviet relations at that time, notably the unresolved question of the three obstacles (as noted above) 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 (Jie, 1985). In 1986, CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang complained to journalists that, "Sino-Soviet relations have not made any headway since Gorbachev

assumed power." (*Renmin ribao*, 1986) At the same time, many Chinese scholars also expressed their resentment against what they saw as Moscow's insincere approach towards removing the three obstacles. They pointed out that this behaviour ran counter to the principle of New Thinking (Jin, 1985; Huang, 1985; Zhu and Shan, 1986).

After the end of 1987, owing to the gradual improvement of Sino-Soviet relations, Chinese scholarly writings tended to display a more positive attitude to Gorbachev's foreign policy. Since then, many Chinese scholars started to view Gorbachev's foreign agenda as a genuine gesture accorded with the interests of both the Soviets and the peoples of the world (Ma, 1987; Yan, 1988; Ji, 1988).

In his 1989 article, Dong Bainan, a researcher at the Shanghai Institute of International Affairs, delineated the evolution of Sino-Soviet relations in the second half of the 1980s. According to him, there were two stages of development since Gorbachev's rise: the first was from March 1985 to 1986, when the Kremlin stubbornly refused to acknowledge the three obstacles, and Sino-Soviet relations were still in a stalemate. From 1987 and 1988, when Moscow began to discuss the issue of border demarcation with Beijing and withdraw troops from Afghanistan, to early 1989, there appeared a strong potential for settling the deadlock between the two countries (Dong, 1989). As we have seen in those articles presented above, evolving attitudes to Gorbachev and the New Thinking roughly correspond with the changing climate of Sino-Soviet relations described by Dong Bainan.

The researcher's findings also show 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, the New Thinking during this anti-liberal period in contemporary China (Qiu, 1989; Gu, 1990; E, 1990). 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, between 1989 and 1990, the Chinese official view still considered that the Soviet Union was "with us" and there was no direct attack on Gorbachev. 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, 1989; *Guangming ribao*, 1989).

Second, the Sino-Soviet relations had been in tension since the 1960s. Deng Xiaoping had been waiting eagerly for the Soviet response to remove the three obstacles for the eventual normalisation of bilateral relations (Deng, 1995, vol 3). When the Sino-Soviet summit meeting finally 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 the relations between the two countries. Having learned the lessons of history, they were committed to not letting ideological disagreements disrupt cordial bilateral relations (*Guangming ribao*, 1989). All this is reflected in the main import of Deng's summit conversation with Gorbachev – putting the past behind them, opening up a new era, doing more practical things, and indulging in less empty talk (Deng, 1995, vol 3).

Third, it was Gorbachev who mended the Sino-Soviet fences after a protracted period of mutual distrust, repairing the relationship almost entirely on Chinese terms. Gorbachev may not have personally agreed with China's strategy of violence in handling the Tiananmen Incident (Ikeda and Gorbachev, 2005), 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 movements (Xin, 1989), and he did not encourage the Soviet media to criticise the Chinese government after he returned to Moscow (Marsh, 2005). 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.

Fourth, the Chinese leadership had by then taken stock of the Sino-Soviet frictions under the deceased leader 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. Harmony and rapport between the two countries would be the primary considerations, despite the fact that some officials and scholars might feel suspicious of Gorbachev's reform programs.

Because international sanctions were already being imposed on China and the West was exerting pressure on the PRC to change course after Tiananmen, the CCP also saw the Soviet state as a much-needed partner with which China could confront Western power politics (Hsueh, 1990). 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 cause of socialism (Shen, 1990; Wen, 1990). 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. The unexpectedly quick American victory in early 1991 in the Gulf War further exacerbated Beijing's sense of vulnerability (Kagan, 2008).

Last, according to Yan Sun, under the pressure of mounting domestic tensions leading up to Tiananmen and facing the prospect that international communism was in deep crisis everywhere in the world, the CCP leadership saw the compelling need to expedite the process of normalising China's relations with the Soviet Union. From their perspective, a new and cooperative relationship with the world's largest socialist country would help the CCP to showcase the fact that Beijing and Moscow were joining force in reforming socialism, while at the same time allowing the Party to present the rapprochement as a great diplomatic achievement for the Chinese people. Both effects, as the CCP leadership hoped, would enhance the regime's position in dealing with the deepened legitimacy crisis that it was facing. However, after the Tiananmen Incident, the Chinese communist state immediately faced its gravest crisis in its 40-year history. The image that Beijing had built during the years of reform and open door was shattered almost overnight. Moreover, the tragedy became a defining moment in which international communism lost any moral strength that it once might have possessed (Sun, 1995). Therefore, it was wise for Beijing to avoid criticising Gorbachev at this critical juncture. It would certainly have eroded further the legitimacy of the

CCP regime and the cause of international communism, and would have brought the roof crashing down on the whole show should the Chinese leadership have chosen to oppose Gorbachev publicly.

Chinese perceptions of Gorbachev across the 1990 divide

The investigator has found that China's strong criticism of Gorbachev did not appear until early 1990, and not immediately after Tiananmen as existing secondary scholarship claims. Views changed not only in response to the ups-and-downs of Sino-Soviet relations and China's domestic political climate, but also in response to the political developments in Moscow.

After Gorbachev was elected President of the USSR and initiated the process of terminating the power monopoly of the 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. In a speech made immediately afterwards on March 18, 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, 2006, vol 1).

In reaction to the alarming announcement after the 28th CPSU Congress in July 1990 that the monopoly of communist power in the Soviet Union had been officially abolished, Jiang made the following more severe criticism in September of that year: After Soviet-American détente 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 (Jiang, 2006, vol 1).

One week after the August 1991 Coup in Moscow, *Guangming ribao* published another article that came just short of openly attacking Gorbachev and his liberal programs:

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 value,' 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 (Zhang, 1991).

As demonstrated, both Chinese officials and intellectuals showed little difference in their perspectives on Gorbachev before and after the Tiananmen Incident. It was only after early 1990, when Gorbachev started the process of constitutionally terminating the one-party system in the Soviet Union, that the CCP became nervous. After that point, Chinese

scholars began to sense its potential implications for China, which were far more ominous than the effect of the New Thinking and *glasnost* (openness) that had allegedly fuelled the student unrest in 1989 (Lukin, 1991). Gorbachev's slogans of plurality and universal human value would not cause concern for the Chinese socialist regime, as many Chinese scholars generally agreed with these ideas before the middle of 1990 (Yang, 1990; Gu, 1990). However, this behaviour of Gorbachev's in overturning the dictatorship of the communist party was absolutely unacceptable to the CCP. At that time Beijing was confronting the perceived threat from the West of "peaceful evolution," and the Chinese leadership similarly feared that the abandonment 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 (Huang, 1990; Yuan, 1991; Wang, 1992).

Having said this, Chinese 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 the visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen that China and Russia should not turn back the clock to when both sides were at each other's throats, and suggested that ideological differences should not become a barrier to normal bilateral relations (*Renmin ribao*, 1992). With this overture from Russia, China decided to consolidate relations. During Jiang Zemin's state 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*, 1994).

Second, Chinese scholars' analyses show that many aspects of Gorbachev's New Thinking, such as peaceful co-existence, respect for sovereignties, emphasising equality, and a refusal to export revolution and ideology, bore a strong resemblance to Deng Xiaoping's vision of international policy making (Shen, 1988; Zhao, 1990; Huang, 1990). Indeed, some Chinese scholars concluded that the foreign policies of Gorbachev and Deng were almost identical with each other, and that they both made major contributions to Marxist-Leninist theories of international relations (Qiu, 1989; Jia, 1989). Apart from China's disagreement with Gorbachev's political democratisation and a fear of the impact of *glasnost* on China, the CCP regime in fact accepted Gorbachev's concept of New Thinking – as this was seen to be in accordance with China's long-time principle of regulating foreign relations. Most Chinese scholars included in this research are establishment intellectuals in the PRC, and thus might have felt obliged to change suit and heed the Party call to criticise deviationist tendencies after the turmoil in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. However, if those scholars displayed their exorbitant criticisms of the New Thinking, such negative views might seem to be self-contradictory to their positive comments not long before.

Third, although the CCP regime had concerns about the fate of Chinese socialism after the crumbling of the USSR, the disintegration of the Soviet Union ended up benefiting the PRC more than anything else. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Incident, the Chinese government still worried gravely about potential attempts of the West to relegate China to a subordinate role in the post-communist world (Deng,

1995, vol 3). However, the CCP leadership increasingly realised that the downfall of European socialism and the weakened USSR would offer the PRC a better chance to restore what it saw as its rightful place, in a multipolar world no longer controlled by the superpowers (Deng, 1995, vol 3: p.341).

Fourth, after the Soviet collapse, Russia and other succeeding states to the USSR seemed unlikely to be in a position to sustain armed forces and its past superpower status; therefore, the main potential threat to Chinese security had been removed. China wanted the Commonwealth Independent States (CIS) on its borders to remain stable, for otherwise grave problems would be created for the PRC. Because of the CCP's efforts to normalise Sino-Russian relations in the early 1990s, both states achieved arms control, border settlement, and trade resumption in the post-Soviet era (*Renmin ribao*, 1994). The prospect of bilateral relations after 1991 looked far brighter than in the pre-1991 time. 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.

In addition, Chinese leaders in the 1990s tried hard to secure the border demarcation with the surrounding Soviet successor countries (Russia included). They sought to further trade relations with those states and take advantage of their rich energy resources to sustain China's fast-growing economy. They also wanted to cooperate with the CIS states to combat religious extremism and national separation in China's north-western territory (Jiang, 2006, vol 2). 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.

Indeed, from the mid-1990s onwards, some Chinese scholars took into account 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. 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, 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, 1999). 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, 1999)

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this article has studied the analyses of Chinese scholars on Gorbachev's foreign policy characterized as the New Thinking against the larger context of PRC's political setting in the 1980s and 1990s. As we have seen, after Gorbachev's ascension to power in March 1985, Chinese scholars generally expressed reservations about his new foreign direction. However, after 1987 they became quite positive to the foreign agenda of the new Soviet leader. The researcher's findings show that in and after 1989, Chinese scholarly writings still spoke highly of the Soviet leader. Only around 1990/1991 did Chinese scholars slowly turn hostile to Gorbachev's foreign policy. From the mid-1980s to the end of the 1990s, Chinese perceptions of Gorbachev's New Thinking were changing in sync with Sino-Soviet relations, as well as with the ups-and-downs of the political climates in both countries.

The shift of Chinese perceptions of Gorbachev across the 1990 divide had little to do with the barometer of Sino-Soviet relations at the time. In fact, both countries had achieved rapprochement and ended past conflicts while still under the Gorbachev administration. After Gorbachev's abolition of the CPSU power monopoly in March 1990, the CCP regime interpreted that such a move would pose a threat to China's own communist dictatorship. Following this, Chinese scholars looked at Gorbachev's behaviour with great anxiety and started to explicitly attack his foreign policy after early 1990. Nevertheless, Chinese scholars reduced their criticisms of Gorbachev 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. Moreover, some Chinese scholars took account of the bitter lessons learned from the Sino-Soviet hostility 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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