Lessons learned in China from the collapse of the Soviet Union

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Preface

According to one account, published in the international press, in the late 2000s, long after leaving formal office, former President and Party Secretary Jiang Zemin summoned scholars to Zhongnanhai, the central leadership compound, in order to discuss why precisely the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had collapsed almost two decades before.

His attempt to fully understand why this event had happened was only the latest in a series held in China, the first of which happened only a matter of weeks after Boris Yeltsin had stood on tanks before the State Duma in Moscow and managed to avert civil war by announcing elections and a new government. August think tanks like the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Beijing and Tsinghua Universities had all expended effort and time on trying to understand why precisely Communism in the former Soviet Union had failed. There remains a lack of consensus to this day over whether the most critical issue was lack of economic reform, over-hasty political reform, issues intrinsic to the structures and cultures of power within the USSR, or failures of consensus within the leadership. The one point upon which most Chinese intellectuals, politicians and officials seem to agree is that, contrary to mainstream opinion in the West, the collapse was not a good thing, and the results were to cost Russia and the states created out of the ruins of the USSR dearly.

This paper, the fourth in the University of Sydney China Studies Centre Policy Paper series, looks at the story of the fall of the USSR through Chinese eyes by the use of Chinese government documents and analysis, and in particular the issue of what the lessons learned in China were from the events in Moscow and elsewhere in the USSR up to 1991. A Greer Meisels, in her conclusion, shows that the CCP had drawn active and important lessons from the collapse of the Communist Party in the USSR, the most salient of which were probably in the areas of governance. The one lesson that the Chinese have not sought to draw however is that Communism has a form of governance or an ideology is necessarily doomed. For them,
they can and must avoid the mistakes made in the USSR. Thus the effort made into understanding what precisely happened, and how events unfolded.

This paper shows, with great clarity and learning, that while those living in liberal democracies might think the fall of the USSR is history, for China it has active importance and meaning. One of the great paradoxes of our time is that the world’s second biggest, and most dynamic economy, happens in name at least to be governed by a system which had been written off two decades ago. This is no cause for celebration in China however. The USSR Communist Party was in power for 73 years. For the Communist Party of China, as they come closer and closer to this landmark anniversary in 2022, they will continue to be weighed down by the question of whether, finally, they can succeed where the USSR failed. This paper helps hugely in understanding what their chances of success are.

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I. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was one of the most pivotal events of the 20th century. Communism, as an ideology and as a form of government, and its manifestation in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and its Soviet satellites (particularly in Eastern Europe), was an “evil” which the Western world, led by the United States during the Cold War, could rally against. It was also a “model” which other communist countries and governments, particularly the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), could use to bolster and legitimize their own communist experiment. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that when Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union’s decay led to outright collapse, few countries were as concerned by these events as the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In fact in China, the process of trying to understand the reasons for the Soviet Union’s demise, referred to in Chinese as Sulian Jiieti (苏联解体), continues to be widespread and is still conducted with a prolonged sense of urgency.1 After all, the Soviet Union was the birthplace of the world’s first and, to date, longest socialist experiment and, as such, China’s own modern political history and development were deeply influenced by it. Further, Communism’s collapse undermined CCP claims that it was the morally and administratively superior sociopolitical system which would one day triumph over Western-style democracies, and weakened the CCP’s built-in base of support in Eastern Europe leaving it with few “true” communist brothers.2 How would the CCP be able to convince the Chinese people that the mantle of “international communism” was still alive and well?

The 20th anniversary of the Soviet Union’s collapse arrived in 2011, and so it seems to be an appropriate time to step back to analyze some of the different schools of thought that emerged in China during, and soon after, the tumultuous years of 1989 to 1991. In fact,
During 2011 there was a rash of new articles and books on the topic. After reviewing a large number of these new materials one thing seems clear; there is not one uniform view in China about the reasons behind the Soviet collapse. The entire world (China included) seemed to have been blindsided by this series of events, and therefore much of the theoretical analysis is retrospective in nature. Taken to its extreme, this has led to a school of thought which some call “retrospective determinism.” These determinist scholars, many of whom can be found in the West, have formed a sort of Greek chorus that echoes a common refrain that the collapse was “inescapable” or “inevitable” or “a product of the Communist system itself.” Yet this determinism does little to assuage the fears of the CCP.

This paper explores some of the most influential ideas that emerged in China regarding the Soviet Union’s collapse. This also sheds light on some of the entrenched ideological biases that existed during the latter years of the Deng Xiaoping era – biases which reflect the fragmentation that exists within the Chinese system. Most notably, Chinese elites and intellectuals were using the Soviet collapse as a lens through which to analyze China’s own reform and opening up policy. Furthermore, rather than simply identifying these various schools, it is important to determine if and how these different “lessons learned” about the Soviet collapse influenced or shaped the CCP’s own policy decisions. Of course, barring receipt of transcripts of high-level Politburo or State Council meetings, it is difficult to determine precisely what prompted some of these policy shifts. Be that as it may, it is still a useful exercise to begin to tease out connections between learning and policy experimentation, and the final section of this paper will attempt to do so.

II. Dominant Schools of Thought in China

Blame the Man

Everyone loves to play the blame game, especially when they can point to a particular
person and deem him or her the root of all that is evil. For many in China in the late 1980s, the early 1990s and even today, assessing blame for the Soviet Union’s collapse begins and ends with a single individual, Mikhail Gorbachev. This view seems to resonate most strongly with China’s more conservative leftists, people such as Chen Yun, Deng Liqun, and Wang Zhen, just to name a few. These people have repeatedly characterized Gorbachev’s two major reforms, glasnost (公开性 or 公开化) and perestroika (改革) as great betrayals. During the height of Gorbachev’s reform efforts, there were people who argued that “within the CCP and within China intense ‘ideological struggle’ would be waged against Gorbachev’s ‘revisionism.’” Of course, since the Communist Revolution of 1949 few, if any, labels are more dreaded than “revisionist.” But even worse than glasnost and perestroika was Gorbachev’s concept of “humanistic democratic socialism” (人道自由主义).

Discussions of this idea permeated many of the debates and diatribes about Gorbachev, and it was a very clear theme in the documentary series, “History Lessons from the Collapse of the Soviet Union” or “苏共亡党的历史教训.” This six disc, eight-part series, created in 2006 by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Arts and Drama College, outlines the reasons for the demise of the Soviet Union and very clearly points its most judgmental finger at Gorbachev, the man. In the documentary’s introduction, the creators mention that there are several competing reasons to explain the Soviet Union’s collapse, ranging from economic dimensions to leadership issues and pressure from the outside world. However, even with this range of opinions, the filmmakers seem intent on insisting that Gorbachev’s humanistic democratic socialism was essentially “revisionism” in sheep’s clothing, and therefore the decisive factor that caused the disintegration of the Soviet Union. For the sake of brevity, the argument can be summarized in the following way: Gorbachev betrayed socialism, and even with other internal and external factors, the collapse would never have happened without him. Why is this particular evaluation of these events so important? This documentary series
was not meant for public consumption and was to be shown only to high-level CCP members. It was also not intended to be distributed outside of China. Therefore, this series’ analysis can be considered one of the most authoritative to date and may have had the greatest impact on CCP cadres’ thinking about the impetus behind the Soviet collapse. Accessing this series is still quite difficult both within and especially outside of the PRC, but fortunately there has been an increasing amount written about it, and some of the most comprehensive analysis can be found in an edited volume called, *Winds of History: Chinese Scholars’ Analysis of the Soviet Union’s Collapse and an Evaluation of Soviet History*, (历史的风: 中国学者论苏联解体和对苏联历史的评价).\(^{10}\)

These “Blame the Man” sentiments were not confined to discussions occurring during and immediately after the Soviet Union’s collapse. During the period of upheaval in Eastern Europe, particularly after the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, the CCP called mid- and high-level officials into their offices to receive an “internal memorandum” on the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe.\(^{11}\) The memorandum ostensibly blamed Gorbachev for a “subversion of socialism,” while also stating that China’s breed of socialism was “homegrown” and therefore less prone to collapse than Romania’s, a communist system it claimed was actually an offspring of the Moscow-imposed system.\(^{12}\)

Even as recently as 2011, the “Blame the Man” school of thought seemed to be en vogue. On March 1, 2011, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) released a new book, *Preparing for Danger in Times of Safety: Recollections on the 20-Year Anniversary of the Collapse of the Russian Communist Party* (居安思危: 苏联亡党二十年的思考), which concludes that the root cause of the collapse of the CPSU was not the Russian socialist system itself, but rather the corruption of the Russian Communists. The author, Li Shenming, who had been Wang Zhen’s secretary at the Central Military Commission beginning in 1983, takes a rather conservative view of the reasons behind the Soviet Collapse.\(^{13}\) This is not
surprising since he was a protégé of Wang’s, a man who had a penchant for inflammatory oration, often cautioning that China should never deviate from Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought and, by extension, downplaying Deng Xiaoping’s ideological innovations. The book discusses the problem of unchecked and uncurbed corruption in the Soviet Union which began in the late 1970s and the early 1980s and led to a sort of “elite class” that eventually gained control of the various organs of government. But it also toes the “conservative” line that, at the end of the day, Gorbachev’s bastardization of Marxist-Leninist thought and his subversion of socialism led to the Soviet Union’s demise.  

**Blame the System**

**Jiang Zemin:** Why do you think Soviet Russia collapsed?

**Shen Zhihua:** Why does the politburo think it collapsed?

**Jiang Zemin:** We used to say it was because of Gorbachev. What do historians think?

**Shen Zhihua:** Yes, there are some historians who believe so, but they tend to be the ones who are more political than empirical. The Bolsheviks had been around for 93 years, Soviet Russia for 74 years. I don’t think the problem was a single person or event.

Certainly there are few individuals who would say that Gorbachev was totally blameless in the events leading to the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union. However, there is an influential second camp, comprised of more liberal or reform-minded individuals within China, who see the impetus of the collapse as systemic – not a flaw in the socialist model itself, but rather in how it was executed in the Soviet Union. Before underscoring the various components of this camp, it is important to understand the context in which their arguments were framed. First, it seemed critical that China should differentiate itself from the Soviet Union, not only in terms of its leadership decisions, but in terms of its own national conditions, (国情). The primary lesson that was drawn from this study of the national condition was the need for gradualism in reforms and, above all, the need to stay with socialism and Marxist-Leninist ideology, as opposed to pursuing what was perceived by many in China as the Soviet Union’s wholesale and radical abandonment of it. Second, as
some Western scholars like Gilbert Rozman have pointed out, in the second half of the 1980s, both countries were struggling with issues surrounding reform and the dismantlement of so-called “traditional socialism.” However, whereas China’s leader, Deng Xiaoping, placed priority on China’s economic system, Mikhail Gorbachev increasingly focused on political reform, since his economic reform model, perestroika, failed to deliver.17

In this long-standing debate over the reasons behind the Soviet upheaval, some have concentrated on domestic causes such as economic stagnation and bureaucratic ossification, and others make what could be considered an international relations argument. For example, Guan Guihai categorized some of these “blameworthy” systemic problems as follows: obsolete thinking and theories, an inappropriate economic system and development strategy, an ossified political system, and an unsuccessful ethnic policy.18 Other analysts cited long-term Soviet decline, mismanagement, excessive dogmatism, bureaucratic inefficiencies and inappropriate foreign policies. These problems were certainly not solely the result of Gorbachev-era policies, but like a cancer that had been allowed to metastasize, spread over time throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Unfortunately by the time Gorbachev attempted to adopt his reforms, the damage to the system was so widespread that there was little that could be done. One could see why this “Blame the System” idea would gain traction with reform-minded Party members in China. After all, many of Deng’s reforms were an effort to combat just this sort of stale, stagnant thinking.

Another influential book written by four scholars from CASS titled, The Collapse of a Superpower – An Exploration of the Reasons for the Dismemberment of the Soviet Union (超级大国的崩溃: 苏联解体原因探析), while certainly not acquitting Gorbachev of any blame or wrong-doing, concludes that Gorbachev’s seemingly “rightist” reforms were precipitated by the exceedingly long dominance of “leftist” ideology within the CPSU. The book points to what could be called “the usual suspects” when it comes to deleterious
systemic forces: overly-centralized economic decision-making, stagnant socialist ideology, discriminatory policies toward national minorities, and a preoccupation with trying to achieve hegemonic dominance on the world stage vis-à-vis the United States, which meant not only sinking billions of dollars into its military complex, but also perpetuating the country’s over reliance on heavy industry while under-developing light consumer goods and services industries. It also concludes that the Party must continuously reform and draw support from the people. Country unity should always be China’s preeminent concern and Party-building is one of the most important components in this endeavour. However, unity can only be achieved by strengthening the Party while simultaneously adapting to the times.\textsuperscript{19}

**Blame the West**

The “Blame the West” camp differentiates itself from the previous two because it seems particularly consumed by fear of the United States’ policies and influence in the region – fears that continue to echo today. In fact, as authors such as John Garver have argued, “one of the overriding concerns guiding CCP policy towards the Soviet Union during 1990 and 1991 was fear of increasing United States global dominance, which CCP leaders feared Washington would use to step up pressure on China.”\textsuperscript{20} Even prior to the hitherto discussed period of socialist upheaval and collapse, much had been written in China about the need to oppose bourgeois liberalization and the United States’ policy of “peaceful evolution” (和平演变). An article by the *Ban Yue Tan’s* Political and Cultural Editorial Office dated February 25, 1987, transcribes a Q&A session on “Opposing Bourgeois Liberalization.” In response to a question regarding why China should oppose bourgeois liberalization, the authors contend that it “seeks to change ‘the line’ and the existing policies, to oppose the four cardinal principles, and to realize ‘total Westernization.’… If this is allowed to spread unchecked, more people … will lose their bearings, our country will become a country full of turmoil …”\textsuperscript{21} The supporters of this particular camp used opposition to bourgeois
liberalization to stymie broadening and deepening the reform agenda, and critics of this campaign saw the antibourgeois liberalization movement of 1989 as one which “severely limited the continuation of reform … causing problems that urgently needed to be reformed to be stifled by political correctness.”

In addition to this fear of bourgeois liberalization, countless speeches, articles and papers by left-leaning conservatives contesting the United States policy of “peaceful evolution” were produced. On September 8, 1989, Chen Yun, Chairman of the CPC Central Advisory Commission, architect of China’s “birdcage economy” and, as de facto head of the conservative wing of the CCP, one of Deng Xiaoping’s adversaries, stated that Western imperialist powers were trying to “promote peaceful evolution in socialist countries … It is the time now that we must give special attention to this important issue.”

In September 1991, Deng Liqun, the prominent leftist, wrote a fourteen-page essay assailing peaceful evolution. He discussed the importance of staying on the socialist path and upholding Mao Zedong ideology, while railing against the so called capitalist class or bourgeoisie (资产阶级) who had been trying to make inroads within the Party leadership.

Additionally, in the December 23, 1991, edition of Hong Kong’s Wen Wei Po, an article entitled “Rumors Concerning Party Plenum Critiqued” said:

Because violent changes took place in East European countries and the Soviet Union, they [international anti-China forces] have become more eager to change China’s socialist system. They are expecting the sharpening of a “power struggle” between top CPC leaders, leading to top-level personnel changes, so that China can change its color.

Still another early assertion of this cause of the Soviet collapse appeared in another Hong Kong paper, Ta Kung Pao, in December 1991:

The strategy of peaceful evolution created an opportunity for foreign forces, led by the United States, to meddle in, interfere with, and eventually dominate the political and economic affairs of the Soviet Union, and opened the door for them to impose their own political, economic and social values.

This “peaceful evolution” line can not only be seen as exemplifying the philosophy of
the “Blame the West” camp but also serves as a manifestation of the elite factionalism which
marked this period. For example, though the “Blame the Man” camp is most often associated
with the more conservative, leftist members of the CCP, this same group of people is often
the most vociferous on the issue of “peaceful evolution.” This faction saw Deng Xiaoping’s
reform policies as a blatant manifestation of Western ideology. For example, one of the true
“ultra-conservatives” of his day, Deng Liqun, spoke of a clear and present danger to the
survival of socialism. He even went so far as to say that Deng Xiaoping’s reform program
was “itself a banner for peaceful evolution in China.”

III. Policy Implications of China’s Lessons Learned

After analyzing the Chinese explanations for the Soviet collapse, we are left with the
task of determining to what extent these “lessons learned” influence CCP policymakers and
policy to this day. Obviously, one of the major outcomes within China’s elite political circles
was that Deng Xiaoping and the reformist agenda were declared the de facto winners. Deng’s
reform and opening up policies continued and became further engrained and solidified both
in word and deed by his successor, Jiang Zemin. However, in addition to this “factional”
win, there were some very real policy shifts or, at the very least, policy adjustments, that took
place due to the Soviet Union’s collapse.

This section will therefore try to connect each of “The Three Blames” to a set of
contemporary policies or attitudes seen in China today. Some of these, such as China’s
replacement of the Soviet model of multinational state-building with its “one nation with
diversity” policy and its institution of the patriotic education campaign to try to shore up CCP
legitimacy, tie more directly to the lessons learned from the Soviet collapse, whereas others
have a more tangential relationship. Even in these instances though, a case could be made
that the CCP has been engaged in a continual learning process – defined by pragmatic
adaptation – and culminating in a type of policy-planning plasticity. This has allowed it to
adjust to new external and internal situations. Scholars such as Heilmann and Perry seem to agree, writing that the CCP has developed an “adaptive pattern of authoritarian rule capable so far of withstanding challenges … which would surely have undone less robust or flexible regimes.”

This could help explain why the CCP survived when so many of its “comrades in arms,” fell.

**What have we learned from “Blame the Man”?**

Regardless of whether they are liberal reformers or conservatives, few members of the CCP would choose to be branded as “another Gorbachev.” Why? First, the “Blame the Man” camp is still alive and well, and Gorbachev is still considered by many to be the main cause of the Soviet Union’s collapse. Today’s version of this particular “blame game” can take many different forms. For example, one could see the recent events surrounding the fall of Bo Xilai as an example, though almost in reverse. Bo was being “blamed” by the CCP as representing too much of an “old-school approach” which promoted nostalgic (some might say reactionary), Maoist, patriotic values as manifest in his “red culture movement.” He was also considered an economic threat to the centre due to what came to be known as his “Chongqing model.” In essence, Bo Xilai used state resources to spur collective consumption. This model also led to “a number of prominent domestic and international manufacturers whose production was previously concentrated in coastal provinces … [to] establish plants in Chongqing.” Because of these and other factors, the then Vice President, Xi Jinping “did not intervene to save a figure who had become too much of a tall poppy in a highly conformist regime.”

Any attempt to “turn back the clock” is met with great scepticism today. An article in the *Renmin Ribao* states, “There are risks in reforms, but the entire Party will be in danger if there is no reform. Simply maintaining the status quo to avoid criticism will lead the Party and the country into a dead end. In addition, sidelining reforms in the face of some systemic or technical obstacles could lead the Party into a bigger crisis.”

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Of course Bo Xilai is only the most recent target of a political “purge.” Beginning in the Maoist era, purges have been a popular way to quickly dispatch an “enemy of the state” or political rival.\textsuperscript{34} In this sense, his purge could also be a manifestation of “tribal politics.” Both Bo Xilai and Xi Jinping are CCP royalty and, as with all dynastic families, sometimes Bo and Xi acted as allies, and other times as foes. Therefore, given Bo Xilai’s apparent popularity at the time, and his Party “street credibility,” he could have been seen as a potential political risk to the rising Xi.

However, in the media, and from a variety of government mouthpieces, one of Bo’s most serious crimes revolved around corruption. Corruption, run amok, can be extremely detrimental to the government, and can eat away at the core of its authority. The CCP cannot allow this to occur since the immutability of its authority is at the centre of its claim to legitimacy. If the Party leadership is seen as corrupt and a wedge is driven between the people and their government, regardless of economic improvements, its credibility will be severely damaged. This may be why Xi Jinping has been so vocal about his commitment to fight graft and why, during his opening speech at the 18th Party Congress, President Hu Jintao opined, “If we fail to handle this issue well, it could prove fatal to the party, and even cause the collapse of the party and the fall of the state.”\textsuperscript{35} Accordingly, after seeing how a lack of support amongst the people and other Party members doomed Gorbachev, his followers, and ultimately the entire Soviet empire, removing individuals from power who may generate antagonism toward the Party and damage its legitimacy continues to be an effective weapon in the CCP’s arsenal.

**What have we learned from “Blame the System”?**

At various points throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the Soviet Union served as a role model, teacher, supporter, and antagonist for the PRC. But in the field of minority relations and ethnic minority policies, the Soviet Union could be considered a cautionary tale. Shortly after
the PRC came into existence, it adopted the Soviet Union’s model for ethnic minorities by endorsing three basic doctrines: “equality of all national minorities; regional autonomy for minorities; and equality of all minority/national languages and cultures.” Yet, early on the CCP adopted a regional autonomy model in some of its most ethnically diverse areas which proved to be an important point of departure from the Soviet model, as well as being a point of contention between the Soviet Union and China. It was reported that during a 1987 conversation with Hungary’s Janos Kadar, Deng said that the CCP consciously chose not to have a Soviet-style federation of republics, opting instead for its autonomous region framework.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the PRC began to re-evaluate in earnest its own minority policy to see if other changes should be made. After all, the “minority question” could be a potential trigger of instability. This resulted in the establishment of China’s “one nation with diversity” model (多元一体) as well as the strategy “to speed up economic development but to downplay the national question” (加快经济发展，淡化民族问题). This issue of accelerating economic development in minority areas was integral to the PRC’s stability. For example, some scholars such as Huang Weiding wrote that they felt as if the CPSU could have handled the nationality question better and that this particular factor should not have doomed the Soviet regime. The key to stable minority relations, in his mind, was how the government dealt with them from a financial perspective. His book often states that the nationalities question was never dealt with “properly” and that if the Soviet economy had been functioning well, the minority regions would have been able to reap more economic benefits, hence quelling some of their nationalist ambitions. This connection was also drawn in magazines such as Liaowang (瞭望). Even as early as May 1991, before the Soviet Union’s collapse, large portions of the magazine were devoted to ethnic relations and the importance of fast economic development in those regions.
Minglang, though recognizing the importance of providing minorities with economic development opportunities to militate against potential unrest, also highlighted how generally worried the CCP leaders were about the situation unfolding in the Soviet Union. She writes, “The role that ethnic relations played in the fall of the former Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc shocked the CCP leaders, particularly when they found that the Soviet Union had endured over 2,100 demonstrations and riots involving over 10 million minority participants in 1988 alone and bloody ethnic clashes in 14 of the 15 Union republics between 1989 and 1990.” What many CCP members saw as a systemic weakness within the Soviet model could not become a pox within China’s own borders.

It was at this point that the Chinese government sponsored a series of studies to analyze the role of ethnic relations in the Soviet Union’s collapse and drew four key lessons regarding minority policies, several of which ended up altering Chinese policy. First, the Soviet federal system gave the republics too much power. This sort of decentralization allowed them to legitimately separate from the Soviet Union in times of conflict. Second, the Soviet philosophy of “nativisation” (often translated in Chinese as 民族化,) led to a situation where many of the local officials were minorities which put them in the position to dominate certain government organs. Third, economic stagnation led to huge economic disparities which greatly impaired the Union’s sense of unity. Finally, the spectre of Gorbachev rears his head. His policies of glasnost and perestroika provided a cover under which nationalist forces could grow, leading to the eventual breakaway of the republics.

Another area where we might find evidence of the CCP learning from the “Blame the System” camp is in the area of fiscal centralization. As China went through its own growing pains associated with dismantling its command economy in favour of ever increasing market reforms, it engaged in a decentralization process, whereby resources and power were meted out to local interests. In fact, before the recentralization process, “the leadership under Deng
Xiaoping repeatedly emphasized devolution of authority from the central to local governments.\textsuperscript{45} This type of decentralization could be seen as one of the major reasons why China experienced such rapid growth in the 1980s and early 1990s. However, this trend led to protectionism which undermined the development of a national market economy and threatened the legitimacy of the party-state.\textsuperscript{46}

This decentralization, however, led to a fiscal crisis within the central government due to a massive drop in its budgetary revenue. In 1993, for instance, the centre only received 22 percent of the country’s total revenue as a proportion of GDP, with the rest staying within the provinces.\textsuperscript{47}

![Figure 3: Total Government Revenue as a Proportion of GDP\textsuperscript{48}](image)

In addition, and perhaps most frightening to the CCP, was a World Bank report which came out in 1990 showing that internal trade as a percentage of GDP in China was lower than in Eastern Europe. Thus, the World Bank issued a warning “that individual provinces had the tendency to behave like independent countries, increasing external (overseas) trade and reducing trade flows with each other.”\textsuperscript{49} For those subscribing to the “Blame the System” camp, maintaining firm control at the Centre, while simultaneously experimenting with reforms, was of critical importance. One could not take place without the other … in other
words, it was a symbiotic relationship. Chinese scholars such as Wang Shaoguang and Hu Angang seemed particularly worried that economic decentralization had weakened central power and compared the potential breakdown of the Chinese nation-state to former communist countries like Yugoslavia. Their widely circulated book on state capacity, published in 1994, argued for greater central fiscal power. That same year saw the initiation of a recentralization movement; one of the most notable policies being the implementation of a new taxation system – a reform which increased central revenue inflows and helped to quiet some fears that cracks in the PRC’s economic system would lead to a delegitimization of the CCP. As recently as this year, Victor Shih and his co-authors see the recentralization process as being in direct response to the Soviet collapse.

Recentralization also took place in the political sphere. It is easy to surmise why this was deemed necessary. Tighter control of the cadres begets tighter Party control at the centre, hopefully staving off the “hollowing out” process Chinese leaders saw occur in the Soviet Union. Zheng writes that the central government “reinforced the system of “party management of cadres” (党管干部), one of the most important organization principals … and reemphasized the cadre transfer system or the cadre exchange system (干部交流制度) which enables the centre to tighten control over local cadres.”

Finally, an argument could also be made that the continued existence of “campaigns” as a policy tool is a reflection of the lessons learned by the “Blame the System” camp. For example, Elizabeth Perry writes, “The ossified Leninist party-state … stymied the best intentions of Gorbachev and other reform-minded leaders. For this reason, the PRC’s continued reliance on a campaign style of policy implementation may provide a telling clue about the relative resilience of the Chinese Communist political system.” This continuation of campaigns in China, however, should not be conflated with those that became so common during the Maoist-era. “Although the main purpose is still to prevent bureaucratic ossification,
the sources of inspiration and imitation are more eclectic than was once the case.”\textsuperscript{54} This understanding dovetails nicely into the final section which explores where we see evidence of learning from the “Blame the West” camp.

\textbf{What have we learned from “Blame the West”?}

Patriotism in China is not defined in non-political or apolitical terms. In fact, a \textit{People’s Daily} editorial on 1996’s National Day states that “patriotism is specific. China is a socialist country; we have a socialist system; and we are constructing socialism with Chinese characteristics. Patriotism requires us to love the socialist system and the road chosen by all nationalities in China under the leadership of the Communist Party.”\textsuperscript{55} The patriotic education campaign was born from the recognition that the pillars on which China’s socialist ideology rested had weakened and become brittle. Zhao Suisheng claims it “responded to the challenge of liberal and ethnic nationalism to the nationalist credentials of the communist state,” and “was a way conducive to promoting socialist modernization, reform, and opening up.”\textsuperscript{56} It can also be considered a means of linking the people to the state while simultaneously ensuring the nation’s unity and safeguarding the CCP’s reputation. The campaign itself was made official by two documents issued in August 1991, the “Notice about Conducting Education of Patriotism and Revolutionary Tradition by Exploiting Extensively Cultural Relics” and the “General Outline on Strengthening Education on Chinese Modern and Contemporary History and National Conditions.” Some claim that these documents stemmed from a letter addressed to the Education Minister and his deputy from Jiang Zemin. This letter was published in the \textit{People’s Daily} dated March 9, 1991:

\begin{quote}
We should conduct education on Chinese modern and contemporary history and national conditions to pupils (even to the kids in kindergarten), middle school students and to the university students. The education should go from the easy to the difficult, and should be persistent.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Though made official in 1991, it was not actually carried out in a comprehensive way until August of 1994 when the CCP’s Central Committee issued the “Outline on Implementing...
Patriotic Education.” The 1994 Outline explicitly laid out a series of major objectives of this campaign: to boost the nation’s spirit, enhance cohesion, foster national self esteem and pride, consolidate and develop a patriotic united front, and direct and rally people’s patriotic passions to the great cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. This movement can be considered a form of glue that the CCP was trying to use to keep the country together during its period of transformation. “The recall of suffering, past or contemporary, establishes a common denominator of bitter experience which can bind the nation together and provide roots of identity.” And recall they did; the Practical Dictionary of Patriotic Education includes a 355-page section recording China’s national humiliations in detail.

In fact, it is in this way that patriotic education could be seen as growing organically out of the lessons learned by the “Blame the West” camp. For example, patriotic education emphasized China’s unique “national conditions” which set it apart from other advanced, industrial countries (especially from other Western-style, liberal democracies.) Zhao writes, “A communist state, which would otherwise be hardly acceptable to the Chinese people after the collapse of communism in other parts of the world, was thus justified by the unique national conditions.” And we see Jiang Zemin calling on people to develop a greater understanding of China’s “national conditions” and for the party to “strengthen the education of the people, particularly the youth, in our national conditions.”

However, not everyone was instantly supportive of this new movement. More conservative party ideologues saw this type of nationalism as being somehow anti-socialist and going against staunch Marxist ideology. In their minds, this replacement pillar was yet another bourgeois, capitalist incursion into the purity of the Chinese socialist state. For example, Deng Liqun and the head of the CCP’s Propaganda Department from 1987 through 1992, Wang Renzhi, both balked at some of these ideas during a Preparatory Meeting on
Nationwide Propaganda Work. Wang explained, “The duty of the Propaganda Department is to publicize the theory and spirit of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.” What is being left unsaid is that they thought the patriotic education movement was being built on an ideologically vapid foundation.

Another area where policies may have been implemented to quiet critiques from the “Blame the West” camp is in China’s increased development of its social welfare policies. Pensions, the minimum livelihood guarantee, the “New Socialist Countryside,” and healthcare reform in the form of medical insurance, are all intended to strengthen the “socialist” claims of the PRC as an alternative model to the unbridled capitalism of the West. Mark Frazier also sees these developments as a natural outgrowth of economic liberalization, writing:

In China and other countries with growing economies, the liberalization of state-owned and other protected sectors set in motion the dismantling of old welfare regimes while structural changes associated with industrialization catalyzed political forces that created new welfare regimes. In short, welfare expansion and welfare retrenchment occurred together. Developing a social safety net was particularly important in China because, starting in the mid-1980s, several of the previous welfare “guarantees” were largely done away with. For example, contract labour ended the institution of lifelong employment and, by extension, did away with the welfare benefits to which former employees of state-owned enterprises had access. To make up for this, “the Chinese government instituted a system of social insurance … to pay for retirement benefits, health care, unemployment, workplace injury, and maternity leave. Government policies took away the state-financed cradle-to-grave welfare benefits enjoyed by some 100 million state-sector workers and replaced them with benefits financed largely from payroll taxes paid by workers and employers.” However, because Deng and the reformist camp desired to restructure and reform critical sectors of the economy such as the state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the issue of how to provide and distribute
pensions to employees was of great importance. The last thing the CCP wanted was to be seen as neglecting the social costs of economic reforms; this could seriously damage the Party’s legitimacy.

More recently, under the Hu-Wen regime since 2002, the desire to redress some of the burdens associated with China’s rapid development, particularly the problem of uneven development between China’s urban coastal areas and its rural interior, has led to the construction of a “New Socialist Countryside, although this was partially prefigured by the ‘Opening Up the West’ campaign from 1999.” Though the content of this campaign seems to draw on lessons learned from the “Blame the West” camp, its structure – the way it is actually carried out – bears the calling card of a “Blame the System” lesson. The “New Socialist Countryside” seems to speak to the CCP’s belief that raising the incomes and welfare of rural residents is critical to the Party’s future success. However, they are doing this by keeping alive some of the more overtly “socialist” theories the PRC was founded upon. Theoreticians also emphasize the importance of building this new countryside with “Chinese characteristics,” a phrase made popular during the development of the “Patriotic Education Movement” and one that has grown increasingly fashionable over the years. It would seem to point to a conscious effort on the Party’s part to keep or regain the hearts of the people, to differentiate China’s development trajectory from that of the decadent West, and to safeguard the Party from perceived discontent that could threaten its rule.

Conclusions

In an article written over a decade ago for the ten-year anniversary of the Soviet collapse, Huang Wei-cho, a highly regarded economist, drew on lectures he had given at the Central Party School in Beijing to make the interesting point that Jiang Zemin “thought” was the product of what was seen as the tragic fall of the Soviet Union. He writes, “The Soviet Union’s historical tragedy tells us difficulties are not terrible, setbacks are not terrible, but
what is terrible is the loss of the support of the people .” Comrade Jiang Zemin drew a very insightful conclusion from the CPSU’s defeat, namely that the future and destiny of a Party and a regime depends on the popular support of the masses. If you cannot win the support of the masses, the regime will eventually collapse. These same insights continued to influence the Hu-Wen regime. One sees this in their implementation of the “going out to the people” policy, as well as in their commitment to broaden and deepen China’s welfare policies. This includes “increase[d] coverage of social assistance, social pension insurance, social health insurance, and job injury insurance.”

Therefore, could it be that today the important issue is no longer whether China’s elites subscribe to the “Blame the Man,” “Blame the System,” or “Blame the West” camp, or are a hybrid of some, or all of them? Twenty years after the cataclysmic collapse, the Chinese Communist Party has managed to sidestep the landmines which brought down the Soviet Union. And though the world of “alternate histories” is best left to fiction writers, the CCP has also been helped out by some of the widespread failures of governance in Russia post-1991. For instance, if the Soviet Union’s collapse had brought about better outcomes instead of the resulting economic implosion, nightmarish demographic trends, and falling living standards, it might have been even more difficult for the CCP to avoid a similar fate. However, what was, is, and will always be of paramount importance to the Party is maintenance of its authority at all costs, so it must constantly strive to increase its power and shore up its legitimacy.

Or is this the correct assessment to make? The CCP’s future, and by extension China’s own future, is to a certain extent tied up in making sense of the most important lessons from the Soviet Union’s collapse. These “lessons” are not something in the abstract; rather they inform and shape new policies to ensure that, ultimately, the Chinese people are on the side of the State. But this is still quite difficult for an “outsider” to discern since we
live in a world of imperfect information, and China’s decision-making process remains opaque. Additionally, as with any regime, whether authoritarian or democratic, it is sometimes difficult to separate what political elites and the leadership actually think from what they espouse as political rhetoric. For example, during the closing session of the 16th CPC Plenary speech on September 19, 2004, Hu Jintao seemed to go on the offensive proclaiming how liberal reforms were damaging the country. Was this purely for domestic consumption? Was it for an international audience? Or did Hu actually uphold the viewpoints described in the “Blame the Man” and “Blame the West” camps?

Regardless of Hu’s motives, it should come as no surprise that over the past two decades, both CCP leaders and Chinese scholars have wrestled with the concept of reform in all of its guises but, particularly, the highly sensitive and contentious topic of political reform. It is this ongoing analysis of the failure of the CPSU that continues to act as a deep well from which the CCP can draw for its own preservation and further development. In essence, one can think of China, its leaders and its scholars, as engaging in a series of ongoing “negative learning” exercises from the Soviet Union’s failures. The CCP was able to see what did not work, what potential triggers might look like which could lead to the Party’s “decay and breakdown,” and what it could do to avoid these pitfalls.

This analysis, however, does not imply that China’s “authoritarian resilience” or “adaptive governance” or whichever terminology one chooses to use, was solely an offshoot of the CCP’s understanding of, and reaction to, the Soviet collapse. Scholars like Heilmann and Perry make the accurate argument that “China’s governance techniques are marked by the signature Maoist stamp that conceives of policy-making as a process of ceaseless change, tension management, continual experimentation, and ad-hoc adjustment.” In other words, even though the CCP shares a common institutional structure to other Leninist Parties that have gone into the dustbin of history, the CCP survived where others failed because of its
“creative adaptation of key elements of China’s revolutionary heritage.” This has nothing intrinsically to do with lessons learned from its Soviet neighbour.

However, even if this “negative learning” process doesn’t explain the whole story behind the CCP’s continued existence, it seems to play a not insignificant role. This theory is in keeping with several of the “lessons learned” volumes or studies which have come out of China in the years following the Soviet collapse. For example, in 1999, CASS researchers undertook a country-by-country assessment of the causes of the collapse of communist party-states, particularly those of Eastern Europe. They found three overarching elements that seemed to be at play in each of the countries. There were “splits within, and the democratization of, the ruling party; ordinary people’s discontent, which was taken advantage of by opposition forces; and the Western campaign of peaceful evolution.” Others, such as Minxin Pei, believe that the CCP discovered two main takeaways from these events – the Soviet Union’s Communist Party lost its legitimacy due to economic failure, and the quickest way to commit political suicide was to try to introduce radical democratic reforms. However, though Pei believes that these two lessons are still being actively employed by the Party today, he feels that the CCP is at the point where it is seeing diminishing returns on its ideological investment. After all, is it fair to assume that a strategy promulgated twenty years ago would still be relevant two decades later?

Nevertheless, it is in understanding and analyzing this tension between reform and stability, and between the State and the Chinese people, that the most significant conclusions come to the forefront. The policies discussed in this paper that were instituted since the Soviet Union’s collapse have all been designed with one purpose in mind: to strengthen the State. For example, fiscal reform and tightened cadre management systems provide Beijing with both human capital and financial resources. Changes to the PRC’s minority policies have been designed to boost economic development, to prop up support for the CCP, as well
as to make it increasingly difficult for separatist movements to take hold. The Patriotic Education Campaign focuses on the Party’s future. Love and devotion to the CCP must be instilled in the next generation of “red youth.” Finally, a variety of enhanced and expanded social welfare reforms is designed to improve people’s lives and to shore up the CCP’s legitimacy.

Each of these “solutions” addresses some area where the CCP found the Soviet Union to be lacking, and does so under a banner that might read “Adaptation Today, Resilience Tomorrow.” The lessons learned from the collapse of the Soviet Union illustrate what many have failed to see. China has been undergoing a profound reform process over the course of the last twenty years even though there is little or no talk of political democratization. It is possible for an authoritarian regime to reform in a deep and meaningful way without engendering the instability, decay, and ultimate collapse we saw occur in the Soviet Union. The question is: how long will this tree continue to bear fruit for the CCP?


Some examples include: Minxin Pei’s article titled, “Time to Reflect,” from the South China Morning Post, and two new publications by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) entitled Be Vigilant on Possible Danger in Peace Time and the latest Yellow Book of World Socialism.


To this day, the opaque nature of the CCP makes it difficult for outsiders to glean any really concrete information about what could be considered factional competition with the Party. Therefore, engaging in this process can not only illuminate the past but can help us understand how factionalism manifests itself within this single-party regime.


The series itself is quite comprehensive. The eight parts are divided as follows: 苏共兴衰的历史轨迹 [History of the rise and fall of the CPSU]; 苏共的基本理论及指导方针 [Principle theory and guidelines of the CPSU]; 苏共的意识形态工作 [CPSU ideology and work]; 苏共的党风 [CPSU style]; 苏共的特权阶层 [CPSU elite]; 苏共的组织路线 [CPSU’s organizational line]; 苏共的领导集团 [CPSU leadership group]; and 苏共对西方世界西化，分化战略的应对 [CPSU’s response to the Western world's westernization and separation policy].

Iu. M. Galenovich, one of the Soviet Union’s most prolific scholars and observers of Sino-Soviet relations, with a particular emphasis on how China viewed the Soviet Union’s collapse, spent almost an entire book providing analysis of this documentary series. For a Russian interpretation of this film series see, Iu. M. Galenovich, plevna Rossii u italii a proshloe i nastoiaashche Rossii i nashikh otnosheniĭ s italii v traktovke kitaĭskikh uchenykh ( tema: Moscow) 2010.

For more on these arguments and conclusions, please refer to the eight hour series, “The Collapse of the Soviet Union.” Perhaps it would be a worthwhile project to create an alternative, English subtitled version of this series so that this content can be accessed by a wider Western audience.


This incident was recorded in a New York Times article thus: “The Chinese Communist Party is circulating an internal memorandum accusing the Soviet President, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, of the "subversion of socialism" in Eastern Europe and telling officials what to think and say about the revolution in Rumania, Chinese officials said today. The officials, who are assigned in various areas, said they were hastily called in to meetings at work on Tuesday to be instructed on the document on how to respond to the decline of Communism in Eastern Europe.” December 28, 1989.

This incident is discussed in Chapter 5 “Learning from your Comrade’s Mistakes,” in Christopher Marsh, Unparalleled Reforms: China’s Rise, Russia’s Fall, and the Interdependence of Transition (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).

Wang Zhen was one of the “Eight Immortals” of the Communist Party of China and known to be an ardent political hard-line conservative. For example, he is reported as having said, “The Communist Party of China established our government in China at the cost of 40 million people's lives. Any attempt to steal the control of the government from the Party without exchanging 40 million lives for it is daydreaming!”

For more on these ideas, please refer to Li Shenming, Ju An Si Wei [Be Vigilant on Possible Danger in Peace Time] (Beijing: She Hui Ke Xue Wen Xian Chu Ban She, 2011).


Granted this desire to “separate” China from the Soviet Union was not a new phenomenon and had been present since the birth of the People’s Republic in 1927. However, because of the Soviet Union’s pervasive influence due in no small part to its financial largesse, this was rather difficult to achieve until the 1950s.

For more on this argument, see Gilbert Rozman’s chapter titled, “Concluding Assessment: The Soviet Impact on Chinese Society,” in Thomas P. Bernstein and Li Hua-yu, China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949-Present (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010). Some of these ideas are also present in the video series, “The Collapse of the Soviet Union.”
Their Own Land


Most recently Bo Xilai was CCP Committee Secretary in Chongqing although he was removed from that position in March 2012 and subsequently expelled from the Party.

See Bo Zhiyue and Chen Gang, “Bo Xilai and the Chongqing Model,” in http://www.eai.nus.edu.sg/Vol1No3_BoZhiyueChenGang.pdf


One need only look at the string of would be candidates to succeed Mao Zedong for examples.


This stems from the fact that many so-called “true Marxists” both within China and in the Soviet Union thought the PRC’s construction of autonomous regions flew in the face of socialist principles. Gardner Bovingdon writes, “Following the Sino-Soviet split, Soviet authors scornfully denounced China’s system of autonomous regions as a betrayal of socialist principles.” See Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 73.

Ibid. Also, for a good synopsis of some of the important statements made by Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin regarding minority policies, generally speaking, see 中国民族区域自治法律法规通典, 第 1 版. (北京: 中央民族大学出版社, 2002), pp. 117-126.

Ibid., p. 478,492.


For example, see articles such as He Shuoping (何硕平), “改革开放给少数民族带来实惠,” 瞭望, No. 18, May 6, 1991, pp. 5-8.

This issue of economic disparity hits extremely close to home in China. As certain provinces, particularly along the coast, have experienced unprecedented growth, other inland provinces have stagnated. This issue of unequal growth is one of the most pressing issues for the CCP leadership today. It also doesn’t help that many of the poorest provinces are those with higher percentages of ethnic minorities.


Ibid.

Zhongguo Tongji Nianjian (2010). Thank you, Jeffrey Javed of Harvard University, for providing me with this information and making me aware of this source.


Ibid., p. 203.


Ibid., p. 43.


Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction*, p. 223. Also worth noting is the fact that “According to the records of the National Library of China in Beijing, no national humiliation history textbooks were published between 1937 and 1990.” Yet suddenly after the student demonstrations and the 剧变 and 解体, national humiliation history and textbook publications were started anew. See Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, p. 35.

A Nation-State by Construction, p. 223


Ibid., p. 75.

Ibid., p. 19.

This “great historic mission” was announced at the Fifth Plenum of the 16th Party Congress in October 2005. For an extensive list of Chinese discussions about the “New Socialist Countryside” campaign, see Elizabeth Perry, “From Mass Campaigns to Managed Campaigns: “Constructing a New Socialist Countryside,”” in Heilmann and Perry, eds., *Mao’s Invisible Hand*, p. 44 (Note 46).


See, [http://news.boxun.com/news/jb/china/2004/12/200412010452.shtml](http://news.boxun.com/news/jb/china/2004/12/200412010452.shtml); specifically the following section: [一段时间以来,境外敌对势力,媒体大肆攻击我们国家领导人和政治制度。而国内媒体打着政治体制 改革的旗号宣传西方资产阶级议会民主、人权、新闻自由,散布资产阶级自由化观点,否定四项基本原则…苏联解体、苏共垮台绝不是马克思主义和社会主义的失败…戈尔巴乔夫是苏东剧变的罪魁,是社会主义的叛徒…] I have translated this as: “For some time, hostile forces outside the media have attacked our
national leaders and political systems in the name of political reform and under the banner of the domestic media, promote Western bourgeois parliamentary democracy, human rights, freedom of the press, and spread the bourgeois liberalization point of view, while negating the four cardinal principles.” And, “Soviet disintegration and the collapse of the Soviet Communist Party is not the failure of Marxism and socialism … Gorbachev is the chief culprit in these drastic changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe; he is a traitor to socialism.”

Although it falls somewhat beyond the scope of this project, the literature on policy diffusion and institutional change might be useful for future research about this topic. Though their initial research focused on international political economy, I feel that Simmons and Elkins’ research might prove helpful to understanding some of the adaptive resilience we see occurring in China. These authors focus primarily on three different types of “learning”: learning from success, learning through communication, and learning from cultural reference gaps. Perhaps there is a fourth “learning process” that could be taking place – learning from failure. For more, see Beth A. Simmons and Zachary Elkins, “The Globalization of Liberalization: Policy Diffusion in the International Political Economy,” The American Political Science Review, Vol. 98, No. 1 (Feb., 2004), pp. 171-189.


For more on this argument, refer to Zhou Xiancheng et al., Sulian yu Dong-Ou Guojia de Yanbian Jichi Lishi Jiaoxun. (Hefei: Anhui Renmin Chubanshe, 2000).

David Shambaugh, China’s Communist Party, p. 52

Minxin Pei, “Time to Reflect,” South China Morning Post, September 6, 2011.