Recent years have seen increasing scholarly interest in the subject of China’s relations with Eastern Europe during the Cold War. The importance of this research trajectory is not necessarily self-evident. Why should we be interested in the relationship between Beijing and what, by common perception, were Soviet satellites and client states, which, even when they did not slavishly follow Moscow’s policy line, had to conform in one way or another to the general climate of Sino-Soviet relations? When these relations prospered – as in the 1950s – Eastern Europe, too, happily engaged with China. When the Chinese and the Soviets quarreled – as in the 1960s and the 1970s – the Eastern Europeans by and large endorsed Moscow’s efforts to isolate China, including in the context of the China policy coordination meetings, dubbed “Interkit.” Why care then?

The first answer is technical. At a time when Russia’s archives, after a brief period of relative openness in the 1990s, have become less accessible to scholars, Eastern European documentation fills important gaps in our knowledge of the ups and downs of the Sino-Soviet relationship. Scholars like Lorenz Lüthi and Austin Jersild have used such documentation to admirable effect.\(^1\)

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By far the more important answer, however, is that ‘common knowledge’ about relations between China and Eastern Europe does not actually reflect reality. Far from being yes-men for Soviet China policy, the Eastern Europeans often diverged from Moscow’s course. This does not just refer to Albania – the well-known anti-Soviet bastion and China’s long-time best friend in Europe – but to ostensible Soviet allies like East Germany, or Poland, or Romania. Ensuring the latter’s cooperation in building a common front against China proved nearly impossible for Soviet leaders. The Romanians reveled in their self-proclaimed role as mediators in the Sino-Soviet split in the mid-1960s and, failing these efforts, still chose to sabotage Moscow’s line on China.

Polish leaders also strayed off the Soviet-prescribed course on occasion, as when they found themselves in disagreement with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s idea of bringing Mongolia into the Warsaw Pact. The importance of this lies not in the specific disagreements per se but in what they tell us about the dynamics of relations within the socialist bloc. Just as in the case of Eastern European responses to West German Chancellor Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik, which were often out of tune with Moscow’s, so with China: policy divergences point to very real limitations in the Soviet ability to impose conformity within its sphere of influence. In other words, the Soviets had as many, if not more, problems with their supposed allies than the Americans had with theirs.

Nevertheless, it is true that Interkit was more than a paper tiger. In particular in the late 1960s – early 1970s there was a certain degree of unity in Soviet/Eastern European approaches to China. This was perhaps less a result of Moscow’s efforts and more a consequence of China’s own confrontational stand vis-à-vis the ‘little revisionists.’ It was not until Mao’s death and the demise of the Gang of Four that we begin to see first signs of Beijing’s intention to mend fences with Eastern Europe, even as Sino-Soviet relations remained in a deep freeze. This so-called policy of ‘differentiation’ seriously worried Moscow, in particular the tsar of Interkit and Deputy Head of the Central Committee’s Department for Liaison with Socialist Countries Oleg Rakhmanin who, in the early 1980s, worked hard to reverse tendencies towards rapprochement between China and Eastern Europe and maintain a united anti-Chinese front.

In his article on China-German Democratic Republic (GDR) relations in the 1980s Zhong Chen shows how East Germany successfully defied Moscow to pursue rapprochement with the Chinese. He argues that Erich Honecker did so for two reasons: one was to raise his country’s international prestige, and the other, to take advantage of China’s potential as a market for East German goods at a time of general economic malaise in the socialist camp. Honecker’s hopes of a trade bonanza were not fully realized. Although Beijing valued GDR’s industrial products, the Chinese understood that in many respects they were inferior to what was readily available in the West. But the relationship still improved dramatically after 1982. The Chinese reformers made Berlin a frequent destination, seeing East Germany’s economic experience as perhaps applicable for the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Chen cites from internal Chinese diplomatic
reports to show why: the GDR, in Beijing’s eyes, was an industrially-advanced state with world-class manufactures and the best standard of living in the socialist world. Was it, then, not worth emulating?

While Chen does an excellent job demonstrating China’s interest in the GDR’s experience, he stops short of showing what impact this experience had on Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening and whether it was of any relevance to internal Chinese economic debates in the early 1980s. One would suppose, given what we now know of these debates, that people like Chen Yun, who had cut teeth in the economic planning of the 1950s, would be at the forefront of advocating an East German road for China in the 1980s. But to what extent were such views in unison with Deng’s own vision, or with the policies of his protégé Zhao Ziyang? It is clear in retrospect that Deng’s policies – including the opening of special economic zones, which proved so successful – departed significantly from East German experience. In other words, the GDR model was probably ruled insufficient for what the Chinese hoped to accomplish. Exploring the parameters of these economic discussions could yield important insights about the nature of, and the alternative scenarios for Chinese reforms.

Another subject, which is only hinted at in Chen’s article but which could open up fascinating vistas on China’s relationship with East Germany, is that of the mutual perceptions of political reforms, especially in 1989. Chen notes that Honecker spoke approvingly of the Tiananmen crackdown, and the Chinese supported their comrade-in-arms until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It would have been intriguing to see more on this relationship, so as to understand better why Honecker proved unwilling, or, indeed, unable to resort to force in order to avert the GDR’s collapse, or what conclusions the Chinese drew from Honecker’s swift and bloodless demise. Indeed, whatever lessons were learned, they may well still be fresh in the minds of the Chinese leadership, and that, too, makes an in-depth study of the Chinese-East German relationship in the 1980s highly pertinent to understanding where China is heading today.

Chen is certainly correct to argue that the Soviets were deeply apprehensive of being pre-empted by Honecker in normalizing relations with China. It is quite remarkable that Berlin basically ignored Moscow’s pressure in this regard. This was in part a result of Honecker’s realization that the Soviets, too, were inclined towards rapprochement with Beijing – if not, why would Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev offer olive branches in his March 1982 Tashkent speech? Rakhmanin’s subsequent denials would have only underscored the point: somewhere behind propagandistic bombast and bureaucratic inertia was genuine Soviet interest in mending fences with China. If so – if Moscow was itself unsure what it should do – then Honecker risked little in pursuing whatever line he felt was most beneficial to his country’s interests. Time proved him right in this respect, and probably earlier than Chen grants in his otherwise impeccable analysis. Indeed, already from late 1982 one can see a clear tendency towards decline of the Rakhmanin line and a growing push for Sino-Soviet normalization. By the time of Mikhail Gorbachev’s arrival on the scene in March 1985, Moscow and Beijing had already made
substantial progress towards normalization. While political obstacles remained in the way of complete rapprochement, economic and cultural exchange between Moscow and Beijing had by the mid-1980s reached qualitatively new levels. Honecker, it is true, was the trail-blazer, but the Soviets were in fact not that far behind.3

Finally, I must commend Chen Chen Zhong for breaking new ground in archival research. This article not only relies on East German records (which many historians have used to good effect) but also Chinese archival documents. While the Chinese Foreign Ministry archive, which was briefly open to scholars in better times, has now reclassified most of its records, it is quite possible, as Chen has shown, to fill the documentary gap by exploring regional and local archives, which often contain copies of the Center’s directives. Chen’s interviews with former Chinese diplomats – no small feat given the persistence of the culture of secrecy among the retirees of the PRC’s diplomatic service – highlight new opportunities for scholars of China’s foreign relations, raising our expectations of quality research on recent Chinese history to a new level.


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3 For more on this point, see Sergey Radchenko, Unwanted Visionaries: the Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2014).