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Many versions of China’s socialist transformation in the 1950s have been told, but few of them have been offered by Soviet comrades. Deborah Kaple interviewed twenty-five former Soviet advisers who resided in China in the 1950s and recorded their working experience in and personal feelings about China. Based on these interviews, this article explores how Soviet advisers and experts lived through the realities of China’s socialist transformation. Moreover, it reexamines the state of Sino-Soviet affairs from the point of view of the Soviet advisers who were themselves a crucial ingredient of the Sino-Soviet friendship.

The article begins with a summary of the history of China’s learning from the Soviet Union. From the 1930s, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders learned about the Soviet experience mainly through the Short Course 1and thus came to admire revolutionary Stalinism.2 Not surprisingly, when it came to building a socialist China, Chinese communists looked to the Soviet Union for advice. Kaple argues that China in the 1950s emulated the High Stalinism which the Soviet advisers brought in.3 Between 1948 and 1960, thousands of Soviet advisers and experts arrived China and “reproduced the techniques and habits of High Stalinism in their work in China” (6).

The first stage was between 1949 and 1953, the era of limited Sino-Soviet Friendship. China received loans and assistance from the Soviet Union, including hundreds of Soviet advisers and experts, but the loans were to

1 Short Course of the History of the All-Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik) (Moscow: International Publishers, 1939).

2 Revolutionary Stalinism featured a centralized economy, the Gulag, collectivized agriculture, and rapid industrialization, 7.

3 High Stalinism, Kaple explains, was a derivative of revolutionary Stalinism. It emphasized strong party leadership, heavy reliance on mass methods, education and re-education techniques, and the threat of imprisonment in the Gulag, 12
be repaid with interest and there were serious disagreements over the compensations of the Soviet advisers and experts. On the ground, the Soviet advisers and experts were ill prepared for the reality of China before they left the USSR, but many remembered their China years as the “honeymoon period” (13). In their worksites they witnessed the first wave of political campaigns and mass mobilizations in the early 1950s that were “very much like the ones Stalin had recommended in the *Short Course*” (15).

The second stage was from 1953 to 1956, the “Advent of Khrushchev” (16). On the one hand, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, eager to strengthen political and economic ties with China, offered more Soviet support. Soviet advisers and experts arrived in ever-greater numbers. On the other hand, the Soviet side began to experience management problems such as delays and stresses in the work relationship.

Kaple considers Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization speech (February 1956) to have been the turning point of the Sino-Soviet relationship. Soviet advisers and experts immediately found out that “China could not accept the denunciation of Stalin” (19). They noticed confusions, disagreement, and even resentment from their Chinese comrades over Khrushchev’s assessment of Stalin. A.I. Kozhin, a Soviet adviser at the newspaper *Renmin Ribao* and a Pravda correspondent in China, commented that “from the moment of the speech, the spiral of our sharp disagreements began to unwind on the ideological front” (22). Many Soviet advisers encountered frictions in their work.

Upset by Khrushchev’s Speech, Mao began to advocate a more independent stance toward learning from others. In 1957, after visiting the Soviet Union, Chairman Mao decided to launch a Chinese form of Stalinism: the Great Leap Forward (22). It, however, profoundly agitated Soviet comrades. Yuri Andropov, at the time head of the CPSU Central Committee’s Department for Relations with the Communist and Socialist Workers’ Parties of the Socialist Countries, complained, to Kozhin, that China was making a mistake; Arkhipov, the head of the Soviet Advisers Program, privately characterized the Great Leap Forward as the “Big Leap Backward” (24). This campaign caused dislocations, disruptions, disrespect, and suspicion in Chinese attitudes towards the Soviet advisers in China. The previously warm working relationship cooled. In July 1960 Khrushchev suddenly recalled all the Soviet advisers and experts back to the Soviet Union.

This article sheds new light on work and life in Mao’s China by bringing in the personal narratives of Soviet personnel whose voices have been largely unheard. Interesting stories are told. Some are hilarious, such as Soviet journalists’ complaints of China’s censorship, the presence of the secret police in their life, and the dilemma on how to display the leaders’ portraits after Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization speech. Furthermore, this article points to a few crucial themes of the Sino-Soviet relationship.

Above all, this essay opens a dialogue on what was the nature of China’s Great Leap Forward. In 1956, Mao Zedong published his “On the Ten Great Relationships.” “Conventional wisdom often interprets it as a sign of China’s turning away from Soviet model. However, Kaple insightfully contends that what Mao turned away from was Khrushchev’s (revised) Soviet model, not the Stalinist model. Rather Mao turned to more revolutionary Stalinism and launched the Great Leap Forward. This view leads to new directions from which

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to analyze a series of Chinese campaigns in the late 1950s and will stimulate scholars to reassess the Soviet impact on China.

This article also provides new evidence on what was the turning point of the Sino-Soviet relationship, which deteriorated suddenly in the late 1950s, with no apparent conflicts of national interest. Scholars have debated what events triggered the deteriorations. Increasingly scholars have focused on the year 1956, particularly Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization speech as the catalyst. The problem for this view is the lack of direct evidence, because in public at the time the CCP endorsed Khrushchev. Kaple’s interviews of Soviet advisers provide not only first-hand observations of the unfiltered reactions of their Chinese acquaintances to Khrushchev’s secret speech, but even testimonies on Chinese leaders’ resistance to Khrushchev’s talk, given the special access of several Soviet advisers to Soviet ambassador Pavel Yudin and to Chinese media.

One drawback of the article is the absence of a clear overview of the Soviet Advisers Program. Many questions are not addressed, such as when and how the program started, how it operated, and how many Soviet advisers and experts arrived China. This article suggests that the fate of the program almost precisely echoed the highs and lows of the Sino-Soviet relationship; but in reality the program may have had its own development. Chinese scholar Shen Zhihua argues that in 1948, upon China’s request, Stalin sent hundreds of specialists, mainly railway engineers, to Manchuria to rebuild the railways there. This established the pattern of China asking, and Soviet leaders responding, which was different from the Soviet Advisers Program in Eastern European countries. Soviet advisers and Soviet experts were different categories. The former were quasi-officials who held certain authority and made suggestions to the Chinese government; the latter had no government affiliation and were intended simply to resolve problems, mostly technological. Their salaries were compensated by completely different systems, although both prohibitively expensive for Chinese. In the early years, China asked for both advisers and experts, but by the end of 1955, China consciously reduced its requests for advisers and raised the demand for experts, particularly in the sector of military technology. The total number of Soviet advisers and experts grew each year from 1948 to 1956, reached a height in 1957 at 2298 (or more), then began to drop, slowly. In 1960, before the recall, there were still more than a thousand Soviet advisers and experts in China. The Soviet Advisers Program had its own complications which did not necessarily reflect the fluctuations of the Sino-Soviet relations.

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8 Shen Zhihua, *Sulian zhuanjia zai Zhongguo*, 266.

9 Shen Zhihua, *Sulian zhuanjia zai Zhongguo*, 197.
Kaple claims the High Stalinism was the core model for China in the 1950s, which may underestimate the complexity of the Soviet models.10 In 1948, Stalin cautioned Mao not to implement full socialism. From 1949 to 1953, officially China was implementing the New Democracy, which resembled the New Economic Policy in the Soviet Union. Logically, if CCP leaders had decided to move forward toward socialism, the model they chose should have been revolutionary Stalinism, as had happened in the Soviet Union, and as they had learned from the Short Course. Why single out High Stalinism as the model? What was the difference between High Stalinism and revolutionary Stalinism? I hope Kaple will elaborate more on this important claim in future publications.

This article takes a new look at China in the 1950s from the lens of Soviet advisers and experts, and re-examines the Sino-Soviet Relations. It is of great value for those interested in Mao’s China and the Sino-Soviet Relationship.

Xiaojia Hou received her Ph.D. in history from Cornell University in 2008, and her undergraduate and master’s degrees in history from Peking University. She has published two book chapters, one article, several book reviews, and her book Negotiating Socialism in Rural China- Mao, Peasants, and Local Cadres in Shanxi 1949-1953 was published by the Cornell East Asian Series (Ithaca, New York) in 2016. Her research agenda centers on China’s socialist transformation in the 1950s, particularly on the daily life under Mao Zedong and how the nature interacted with politics. She is currently an Assistant Professor at the Department of History, San Jose State University.

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