

**China Eyes the Soviet Demise:
CCP Perspectives on the Collapse of the
Soviet Union, 1989-2021**

By

Christopher Vassallo

Schwarzman College, Tsinghua University

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摘要

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苏联解体震荡了中国高层领导。冷战结束以来，北京重视牢记历史的教训而学习苏联解体的要素，以避免重蹈覆辙。本论文将调查中国共产党对苏联解体的重要思考，并探讨该观点在至今三十年如何主要变化。一方面，在苏联刚崩溃的时候，中共领导对苏联解体的观点倾向强调经济因素。另一方面，现代中国领导在谈苏联解体上已转变了重点。在新时代时期，以习近平为核心的中共重点讨论文化落后、社会矛盾以及意识形态污染对苏联解体产生的影响。

这篇文章出于深入研究党文献的基础，具体地使用所谓“应用历史”方法进行分析。本文思考党围绕苏联解体的观点，是为了展现中国政治如何体现“历史记忆”的概念。本文凭借党内文献、专家分析、一手资料以及历史论著做研究，包括自从1992年所有的全国代表大会的领袖报告，还有中全会报告、被透露的官方文件以及由领袖撰写的论述，例如《习近平谈治国理政》。

本文阐述，思考苏联解体的历史比喻主要是一种党建举措，就反应三十年的政治演变。在每个时期，中共高层领导是按照其面临的挑战和危机去探讨苏联解体。因此，分析该现象的主要变化与趋势能表明中国特色社会主义的历史发展。由于此次论点，本文显示，“历史记忆”就是中国政治关键的关键，而关于苏联解体的言论和论述象征着党中央对国家政治局势的态度。

关键词：应用历史；历史记忆；苏联解体；外交政策；中国政治。

ABSTRACT

The implosion and dissolution of the Soviet Union reverberated within the highest ranks of Chinese leadership. Ever since, the leadership has parsed the collapse for lessons to inform strategy and mistakes to avoid repeating. This thesis examines the content of these lessons and their changing nature over time. At the time of the collapse, CCP leaders emphasized economic reasons for the Soviet Union's downfall; in Xi's China, the reasons have been recast in order to serve as cultural, societal, or ideological lessons.

Informed by close study of Party documents, this thesis uses the methodology of Applied History to trace and codify the leadership's lessons while also illuminating the importance of historical memory in CCP policymaking. Its main sources of information are Party documents, expert analysis, firsthand accounts, and conceptual, historiographical analysis. This thesis assesses every Leader's Report from each Party Congress since 1992. Additional documents include speeches by General Secretaries, Plenum reports, leaked Party circulars, and official published works, including Xi Jinping's recent three-volume *Governance of China*.

This thesis demonstrates that the Soviet analogy has been, first and foremost, a political project – the result of thirty years of intentional ideology-construction. Tracking the analogy reveals the preoccupations of CCP leadership in crucial periods of crisis and change. While sensitive debates about topics like regime survival and Party reform are never conducted in public, the Party's discussions about the Soviet Union's collapse provide backdoor access to the way the CCP broaches its most sensitive issues of governance. By tracing uses of and changes to the Soviet analogy, this paper finds that historical reasoning plays a central, organizing role in Chinese policymaking. Ever since the Soviet Union fell, Chinese leaders have been gesturing to the collapse to explain its major leadership initiatives.

Keywords: Applied History; Historical Memory; Soviet Union; Foreign Policy; China.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

摘要	I
ABSTRACT	II
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: APPLIED HISTORY IN CHINESE POLITICS	1
1.1 A Uniquely Historical Nation.....	1
1.2 Methodology: Applied History and Comparative Analysis	2
1.3 Sources, Literature Review, and Theoretical Framework	5
1.4 Organization of the Paper	6
CHAPTER 2 A SYSTEM IN SHOCK: TIANANMEN SQUARE, THE FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION, AND THE FORCES OF REFORM, 1989-2004.....	8
2.1 Ceausescu is Dead: The Impact of Communism’s Fall in Europe	8
2.2 A Perilous International Landscape and a Defunct “Model”	10
2.3 Turning Lessons into Strategies	13
2.4 Nationalism to Replace Stalinism.....	17
CHAPTER 3 THE SOVIET UNION COLLAPSES, AGAIN: THE RETURN OF THE ANALOGY AND HISTORY’S NEW VERDICT, 2012-2021	21
3.1 “History is a Mirror”.....	21
3.2 Legitimizing Authoritarianism	25
3.3 Four New Lessons: Gorbachev’s Betrayal, “Historical Nihilism,” Red Army Disloyalty, Ethnic Unrest	27
3.4 Ideological, Not Economic, Reform.....	33
CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION: CONTINUED COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION....	35
4.1 Key Contributions and Limitations: Party Building and the Ideological Straitjacket	35
4.2 Foreign Policy Implications: “Hide and Bide” and the Return of “Containment”	37
4.3 The Analogy Returns.....	39
REFERENCES	41
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	47
RESUME	48

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

APPLIED HISTORY IN CHINESE POLITICS

1.1 A Uniquely Historical Nation

The Chinese Communist Party does not study its own collapse – except by proxy. In 1992, the world’s most powerful communist state collapsed. In the near thirty years since, its neighbor to the south has ascended to unimaginable prominence instead of collapsing alongside it. Nonetheless, the lessons of the Soviet collapse still vex the Chinese leadership. David Shambaugh, one of the foremost outside analysts of the Party, reminds us that the CCP has always been a near carbon copy of its Soviet neighbor: “When the leadership gets up in the morning and goes to bed at night, it is the Soviet collapse that haunts them...Observers don't realize just how similar the Chinese system is to the Soviet system. The former is cloned from the latter.”¹ Historian and statesman Henry Kissinger also remarks on the historical parallels between the two communist states. “Chinese leaders could not avoid comparisons between the unraveling of the Soviet Union and their own domestic challenge. They, too, had inherited an ancient multiethnic empire and sought to administer it as a modern socialist state.”² Even at a mechanistic level, the whole system was designed by Soviet experts.³ As a result, the experience of trauma colors the CCP’s relationship with Soviet history.

The Soviet experience has long been encoded into how the top leadership thinks. In 1953, Mao Zedong looked explicitly to the country for guidance. “The Communist Party of the Soviet Union...is the most advanced, the most experienced, and the most theoretically cultivated party in the world,” he gushed.⁴ After the Communist Party of the Soviet Union collapsed, the lessons of the Soviet model actually became more urgent, not less. “It seems

¹ In Jeremy Page, “China Spins New Lesson from Soviet Union’s Fall,” *Wall Street Journal*, 10 December 2013, 3.

² Henry Kissinger, *On China*, (Penguin Press, 2011), 458. For more, also see Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford University Press, 2021), esp. 52-55.

³ Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China’s Communist Rulers*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), Prologue. This sentiment was repeated by a Chinese professor of Marxism in a conversation on 10 March 2021.

⁴ Mao Zedong, “The Greatest Friendship,” (People’s Daily, 9 March 1953), quoted in *Chinese Communist World Outlook*, U.S. Department of State, 1955, 19.

that socialism has been weakened, but people...can learn from these lessons. This can help us improve socialism and lead it on the path to healthier development,” wrote Deng Xiaoping in 1999. “Do not think that Marxism has disappeared, has fallen out of use, or has failed.”¹ But this exhortation rang hollow when the Soviet state’s shocking collapse demanded a rethink of socialism as a governance system.

This analysis takes up the following research question: How have CCP leaders chosen to tell the story of the Soviet Union’s collapse over time, and, by extension, what are the most pressing lessons they have drawn? Since the CCP in part derives its legitimacy from its telling of history, the history that the Party chooses to deploy is immensely instructive. Reflecting on the history of the Soviet Union is a convenient way for the CCP to conceptualize risks to its own authority while considering potential reforms – all without directly broaching the politically treacherous notion of regime collapse.

1.2 Methodology: Applied History and Comparative Analysis

History is a key frame of reference for the Party’s leaders and theoreticians. China’s leaders, like all statesmen, think via historical analogy as witting or unwitting users of “Applied History,” a method of analytical reasoning that uses the experience of the past to resolve current challenges.² Applied History methodology tracks the uses of one or multiple analogies over a given time period. The founders of one Applied History research outpost define the initiative as “the explicit attempt to illuminate current challenges and choices by analyzing historical precedents and analogues.”³ The discipline’s seminal text, Ernest May and Richard Neustadt’s *Thinking in Time*, attempts to codify analogies by “subject[ing them] to serious analysis” through the vehicle of case studies.⁴ The discipline’s most prominent practitioner Henry Kissinger explains the power of analogical reasoning by reflecting on his own experience in government: “Any statesman is in part the prisoner of necessity. He is confronted with an environment he did not create and is shaped by a personal history he can

¹ Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works III* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994), 370

² For more on Applied History, see Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson, “Applied History Manifesto,” *Harvard Belfer Center*, October 2016.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-makers* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1986), 7.

no longer change. When I entered office, I brought with me a philosophy formed by two decades of the study of history.”¹ Kissinger’s first book, *A World Restored*, claimed that memory and history are inextricably linked. “History is the memory of states” is its most cited line.² This thesis builds on that argument by detailing the ways Chinese statesmen appeal to historical memory.

Applied History already looms large in Chinese consciousness, argues Zheng Wang, in *Never Forget National Humiliation*. Wang is one of the foremost experts on nationalism and historical memory in China. His 2012 book makes a compelling case that China is a uniquely historical nation, awash in the lessons and experiences of its recent history. The fact that historical memory is so pervasive yet so little studied means that international relations faces a “major omitted-variable problem,” Wang argues.³ His research centers on the concept that collective memory is “the prime raw material for constructing ethnicity.”⁴ To Wang, historical memory functions as an unconscious force that impacts ordinary people and shapes national identity.

This thesis adopts Wang’s premise that history is too often underappreciated as a consequential variable guiding decision-making, but this thesis diverges from Wang’s analysis by arguing for the supreme importance of analogy instead of collective memory. Simply put, when faced with tough choices, Chinese policymakers resort to historical analogies and precedents. They use specific historical precedents to articulate challenges, frame available options, and ultimately weigh expected impacts and outcomes.⁵ While

¹ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 54.

² Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-22* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 331. Niall Ferguson’s biography, *Kissinger: The Idealist 1923-1968* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 300, adds that Kissinger knew “useful analogies could be gleaned” from his doctoral study of Metternich and the Congress of Vienna.

³ Zheng Wang, *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 12. He builds this concept off of Alastair Iain Johnston’s essay, “What (If Anything) Does East Asia Tell Us About International Relations Theory?” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 15 (2012): 53-78. For more on this concept, see H.R. McMaster’s insightful *Atlantic* essay, “How China Sees the World,” (*The Atlantic*, May 2020). He quotes John King Fairbank’s assertion that to understand China’s leaders, historical perspective is “not a luxury, but a necessity.” Contemporary observer Pei Minxin adds, “China’s national experience and collective memory constitute a powerful force in foreign policy decision-making” in “Chinas Fragile Mindset,” (*Christian Science Monitor*, 9 April 2001).

⁴ Wang, *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict*, 21.

⁵ Yaacov Vertzberger, “Foreign Policy Decisionmakers as Practical-intuitive Historians: Applied History and Its Shortcomings.” *International Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (1986): 223-225. For the “practical-intuitive” model, see Alexander George, “The ‘Operational Code’: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making.” *International Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1969): 190-222. For the “predispositions” of decisionmakers, see Ole Holsti, “The ‘Operational Code’ Approach to the Study of Political Leaders: John Foster Dulles’ Philosophical and Instrumental Beliefs.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 3, no. 1 (1970): 123-57. For more on the subjective nature

collective memory functions at the preconscious and subconscious levels, Applied History is a conscious thought process. Analogies serve as roadmaps; precedents provide warnings and lessons.¹ Through historical reasoning of this sort, analogy is the vehicle powering Applied History. This paper explores one particular analogy, the Soviet analogy, and traces it over thirty years, keeping track of the various ways it appears during this timeframe. Thus, it can be said that this thesis approaches its research question not only from the perspective of history but also with the methodology of history.

While it is clear that China has always been deeply attuned to its own history, the scholarship is less clear about whether and how China has learned from the history of other states. This paper explores that landscape, looking at how the European example – from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the implosion and dissolution of the Soviet Union – shapes the decisions of the only remaining communist party-state among the great powers. Mary Sarotte, a Cold War historian, identifies a gap in existing scholarship about China’s experience of the Cold War. “The European example, although it has received mention from a few perceptive scholars, deserves more attention than it has until now garnered as a factor in CCP...decision-making.”² Insofar as Western scholars during the Cold War did look at the impact of the Soviet model on Chinese governance, they assumed China was drawing lessons for how to govern.³ Today, the inverse is true; now China draws lessons that detail pitfalls to avoid. While China watchers have largely neglected debates on such particulars, China’s decisionmakers have not. Indeed, ignoring the Soviet analogy’s influence on Chinese policymaking overlooks the veritable cottage industry of Soviet studies that exists within China.⁴

of analogizing, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 232-233, 275-279.

¹ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 101. This thesis relies on the work of Yuen Foong Khong whose groundbreaking scholarship demonstrates that historical analogies are often “used as an essential basis for information processing in political decision-making.” Khong’s framework works by inference: If a past event has one similarity, then it is likely to share additional characteristics as well. In Khong’s words: “AX:BX::AY:BY because event A resembles event B in having characteristic X, and A also has characteristic Y; it is inferred that B also has characteristic Y.”

² Mary Sarotte, “China’s Fear of Contagion,” *International Security*, Fall 2012, 162.

³ For the impact of the Soviet model during the Cold War, see Gilbert Rozman, “Chinese Perceptions of the Soviet Union,” (Center of International Studies, Princeton University, 1985), 2-3.

⁴ For example, the Central Party School continues to devote significant resources to Sovietology. For more on the Central Party School, see David Shambaugh, “Training China’s Political Elite: The Party School System,” *The China Quarterly* No. 196 (2008), 827-844. For more on Chinese think tanks and academic fields of scholarship, see Cheng Li, *The Power of Ideas: The Rising Influence of Thinkers and Think Tanks in China* (Singapore: WSPC, 2017).

This thesis seeks to explain how an international episode, namely the collapse of the Soviet Union, which China observed but never experienced, nonetheless shapes Chinese political decision-making. The Century of Humiliation is not the only historical memory holding sway over Chinese decisionmakers today. By demonstrating the lasting importance of the Soviet analogy, this thesis shows that the European example is extremely fruitful for understanding the trajectory of the last remaining great power communist party-state.

1.3 Sources, Literature Review, and Theoretical Framework

Informed by close study of important Party documents, this paper investigates the CCP's immediate perspectives on the implosion of the Soviet Union. Its main sources of information are Party documents, expert analysis, firsthand accounts, and conceptual, theoretical analysis, performed by historians. This thesis assesses every Leader's Report from each Party Congress since 1992. It also looks at a portion of Plenum reports on relevant questions of ideology and history. Additional CCP documents include speeches by general secretaries Deng, Jiang, and Xi, leaked Party circulars, and official published works by Jiang and Xi, including Xi's recent three-volume *Governance of China*. Expert analysis highlights and assesses commentary by China scholars including Kevin Rudd, Wang Hui, and David Shambaugh.¹ Firsthand accounts draw from contemporary works of journalism published by both Western and Chinese media and memoirs published by former foreign policy practitioners like Qian Qichen and H.R. McMaster. All of these sources are underpinned by conceptual analysis and theoretical works on Applied History by thinkers like Henry Kissinger and Zheng Wang. All told, these sources can be divided into three categories: primary source documents, which this thesis contextualizes and analyzes, secondary analysis, which this thesis complements and critiques, and theoretical foundations, which this thesis adopts and applies to the specific Soviet analogy.

This paper finds that Chinese perspectives on the collapse of the Soviet Union have hardly remained constant in the thirty years since its demise. Instead, the ways the Chinese

¹ Scholars like Rudd and Shambaugh occupy the liminal space between observer and participant in Chinese discourse. See Kevin Rudd, "The Avoidable War." (*Asia Society Policy Institute*, January 2019), 16-17. Rudd, for one, participated in Party discussions about the Soviet Union. Another analyst Richard McGregor's study of the Chinese Communist Party, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2010) provides the best scholarly introduction to the world of China's Communist Party.

Communist Party leadership has explained the collapse of the Soviet Union have been specifically tailored to meet the political needs of each particular moment. At the time of the Soviet collapse, during a chaotic period encompassing Tiananmen Square and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Chinese thinkers argued that their Soviet counterparts failed to provide improving standards of living for their people. The ensuing economic instability triggered the empire's collapse. Nowadays, the CCP's explanations for the collapse focus on societal and cultural explanations such as ethnic unrest and moral decay within the Soviet Communist Party. In other words, at the dawn of the era of reform and opening up, CCP leaders emphasized economic reasons for the Soviet Union's collapse; in Xi's China, which is undergoing an ideological resurgence, the reasons have been recast as cultural, societal, or moral lessons.

1.4 Organization of the Paper

Since the debate over the origins of the Soviet collapse can be roughly divided into two temporal phases, from 1989 to 2004 and 2012 to the present, this paper is divided into two body chapters. The first body chapter, chapter two, investigates the CCP's immediate range of perspectives on the implosion of the Soviet Union. It tracks how the highest levels of the CCP leadership funneled all these perspectives into two main lessons. The first was about the need for economic reform. In this telling of events, the history of the collapse was framed as essential justification for a disruptive reform movement to modernize the Chinese economy. The second lesson was about political restriction. The Soviet Union's collapse demonstrated the dire need to constrict dissident voices and channel political radicalism into patriotic nationalism. The chapter concludes by describing the process by which these parallel lessons about the Soviet collapse made their way into CCP doctrine by 2004.

In more recent years, the CCP leadership has reexamined the origins of the Soviet collapse, and the lessons have been reinterpreted to meet new challenges – proving the remarkable longevity of the Soviet analogy. Chapter three tracks these recent developments by explaining the new rationales offered for why the Soviet Union collapsed. It begins by presenting President Xi Jinping's theoretical outlook on the importance of history – one motivation behind the reemergence of the Soviet analogy. Economics no longer bears the

brunt of the blame for the Soviet collapse. Instead factors like ideological weakness, ethnic unrest, and military disloyalty are frequently mentioned – in part because they conveniently correspond to the threats that most saliently menace the leadership today.

The question of why the Soviet Union actually collapsed is almost entirely unrelated to the ways the collapse is remembered. In truth, the collapse was an accident.¹ The fall of the Soviet Union was not the result of negotiations between Gorbachev and Yeltsin or the subversive work of Bush and Baker. The collapse was just not planned. Contingencies – like the accidental opening of the Berlin Wall and the failure of a hardline coup to replace Gorbachev – pervade the moments that precipitate the empire's collapse. Historical forces are never linear and rarely decipherable. Events that seem predetermined now were often hardly predicted.² It is the task of statesmen who endure the tumult of historical change to imbue accident with meaning. So it goes that the stories Chinese leaders tell themselves and their people after the chaos of collapse are the ones remembered. This is a thesis about those stories.

¹ For more, see Mary Sarotte, *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall*, (New York: Basic Books, 2014), Introduction, which details the “the significance of accident and contingency—rather than of planning by political leaders.”

² For more, see: Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Touchstone Book. 1994), 27: “When an international order first comes into being, many choices may be open to it. But each choice constricts the universe of remaining options. Because complexity inhibits flexibility, early choices are especially crucial.”

CHAPTER 2 A SYSTEM IN SHOCK

TIANANMEN SQUARE, THE FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION, AND THE FORCES OF REFORM, 1989-2004

2.1 Ceausescu is Dead: The Impact of Communism's Fall in Europe

Four years before he would lie dead in the dirt, his drab overcoat riddled with bullets, Nicolai Ceausescu awarded Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping the golden star of the Socialist Republic of Romania. By the time of his state visit to China, on October 9, 1985, Ceausescu had been Romania's communist leader for 20 years. He had bucked Moscow in the early years of the Sino-Soviet split, instead deciding to preserve ties with Beijing, a decision for which China's leadership remained grateful. During that state visit, senior Chinese officials told Reuters that Ceausescu was an "esteemed old friend of the Chinese people." They invited him to address mass rallies in China in 1982 and 1985, a privilege rarely awarded to foreigners, even loyal foreign communists. Qian Qichen, China's vice minister of foreign affairs at the time, had even asked Ceausescu to open a secret backchannel to the Soviet Union to convey messages from Zhongnanhai to the Kremlin.¹

When the CCP chose to crackdown violently on student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989, Ceausescu offered his support even as the rest of the world reeled. "The party and government of a socialist country must take measures to suppress counterrevolutionary rebellion," he reassured Chinese state councilor Zou Jiahua. "Romania in the past and still now believes that the Chinese party and government should adopt any kind of measure to protect socialism." As the upheaval of 1989 raged on, with popular movements in East Germany, Hungary, and Poland, Romania experienced uprisings of its own. In early December, Ceausescu followed China's lead, ordering his security forces to fire on Romanian protesters in the western city of Timisoara. Informed by China's experience months prior and encouraged by a visit from Politburo member Qiao Shi, he declared martial law. When his crackdown failed to quiet unrest, and his brittle reign teetered, he made plans

¹ James Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 46.

to flee to China. These plans never came to fruition; instead, the Romanian military arrested and executed him on Christmas Day, 1989.¹

China called the execution an “internal matter.” “China respects the Romanian people’s choice,” the statement from Beijing read.² Of course, this was more than an internal matter, and the Chinese leadership was far from calm. It was an international crisis of communist governance. General Brent Scowcroft, President Bush’s national security adviser, was in Beijing as the Romanian coup unfolded. There was no doubt the CCP “had taken great comfort” in Romania’s “apparent impregnability,” he reported. After Ceausescu was killed, “I believe the Chinese leaders panicked,” Scowcroft recalled, drawing on his firsthand memory of interactions with the top leadership.³ The day after Ceausescu’s execution, the CCP called an internal meeting to seek “instruction” on how to “correctly understand” the chaos in Romania. Suddenly, they chose to disavow Romania; communism there had never been stable, they decided, because it had been imposed by Soviet overlords. Deng and the Politburo even gathered to watch footage of the execution that had first been broadcast on CNN.⁴ The film showed Nicolai and his wife Elena blindfolded as soldiers pushed their bodies against the wall of a toilet bloc in a freezing Bucharest courtyard. Three executioners unloaded their Kalashnikovs into the dictator and his wife. They collapsed in a pool of blood.⁵

“We’ll be like this if we don’t strengthen our proletarian dictatorship and repress the reactionaries,” one of Deng’s advisors said after watching the video.

Deng disagreed: “We’ll be like this if we don’t carry out reforms and bring about benefits to the people.”⁶

This was an extraordinary exchange. The highest levels of Chinese leadership were once again debating two paths: radical, market-based economic reform or continued martial crackdown – all by proxy, with execution the penalty for failure. The Party could collapse, and the leadership could suffer Ceausescu’s same fate. In other words, at the time of the collapse of Soviet-style communist regimes across Europe, in China the debate was not a

¹ David Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008), 47.

² Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party*, 47.

³ George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 179.

⁴ Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party*, 47.

⁵ Details of this account are published in Christopher Marsh, *Unparalleled Reforms* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), 105-106.

⁶ Exchange can be found in Christopher Marsh, *Unparalleled Reforms*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), 106.

clearheaded one about the origins of governance failure and the opportunities for reform. The Soviet analogy was born from the possibility that they too might die in pools of their own blood as a consequence of their failure to respond to unrest within China. This debate would come to consume Sovietology in China in the years immediately after the Soviet Union's demise. And even as the lessons that Deng and his allies ultimately chose to apply might seem quaint and straightforward now, they were a matter of life and death then.

2.2 A Perilous International Landscape and a Defunct “Model”

Ceausescu's execution was just one event in a litany of bad news. In 1989, Europe was the most salient example of a contagion of imploding communist regimes. Dramatic events on the continent displayed a real-time record of chaotic reckoning. On June 4, 1989, Poland held free elections.¹ Bulgaria voted to end its one-party system and install multi-party democratic institutions. Months later, in Czechoslovakia, once the site of a brutal communist crackdown, student protests attracted hundreds of thousands. East Germany looked to be the strongest Eastern-European communist regime. “China was clearly impressed by East Germany's uncompromising stance in the face of popular dissatisfaction,” wrote one observer.² The CCP leadership believed that the deputy leader of East Germany, a tough man named Egon Krenz, could weather the storm. But, by November, the Berlin Wall fell, and the slow dissolution of the Soviet Union commenced. Charismatic reformer Boris Yeltsin was clamoring for parliamentary democracy. Unrest in Eastern Europe augured the Soviet Union's demise. “One of the biggest shocks to the Chinese leadership in 1989 must have been the realization that communism was not so resilient after all.”³

Long before the 1980s, the CCP had looked to the Kremlin for guidance. Moscow had once been Beijing's biggest international booster and fellow communist revolutionary. In 1953, Mao had insisted, “We need to learn seriously from the Soviet Union...The

¹ In China, the date was, of course, infamous for other reasons. Yao Yilin, commenting later on China's response to protests that day, raised an international comparison: “If we had yielded, China would have taken the road that Poland did.” Quoted in Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party*, 43.

² Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen*, 45.

³ Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen*, 44.

Communist Party of the Soviet Union...has been our model in the past, it is our model at present, and it will be our model in the future.”¹

By 1969, China and Russia’s relationship had disintegrated. Beijing had denounced the USSR as “revisionist” and “hegemonic,” the two countries clashed at the border, China mobilized its ground forces, and Russia publicized its contemplation of a nuclear attack.² Even as relations crumbled, Chinese strategists continued writing about Soviet foreign policy lessons. “Writings about Soviet history reveal convergence between Chinese and Soviet interpretations...The Chinese have continuously reassessed Soviet foreign policy and at each stage they have become less negative about it,” wrote one analyst in 1985.³ In the Gorbachev years, liberal CCP leaders “watched *perestroika* and *glasnost* reforms with growing interest—until those leaders were sidelined following the military crackdown on pro-democracy protests around Tiananmen Square in 1989.”⁴

In 1990, as the Soviet Union tottered, Chinese Premier Li Peng, who was tasked with managing China’s foreign relations, visited Moscow. What he saw there shocked him. Li had studied in Moscow in the Stalinist 1950s. According to one observer, Li “seemed somewhat at a loss when asked to compare the city of his memories with contemporary Moscow. He said the streets seemed wider and the buildings more modern, but did not mention, if he noticed it, that by Chinese standards the stores are sparsely supplied, and the political debate is shockingly frank.” This was not the proud Socialist Motherland he had once known. At a news conference, Li disavowed the Soviet model. “It is true that different socialist systems have different views of *perestroika* and our reforms, but every socialist country has its own reality and real situation,” he said. “Each country should decide for itself how socialism should be built. We do not have one model to follow.”⁵ Li criticized the Soviet Communist Party for its decision to give up its statutory monopoly on power, noting that China had no desire to follow suit. China was increasingly alone.

¹ Marsh, *Unparalleled Reforms*, 101-103.

² Howard French, *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power*, (New York: Vintage Press, 2017), 154, 158.

³ Gilbert Rozman, “Chinese Perceptions of the Soviet Union,” (Center of International Studies, Princeton University, 1985), 2-3.

⁴ Jeremy Page, “China Spins New Lesson from Soviet Union’s Fall,” (*Wall Street Journal*, 10 December 2013).

⁵ Bill Keller, “Li Peng Says Soviet Ideas of Change Do Not Apply to China,” (*New York Times*, 26 April 1990), A8.

Li had travelled to Moscow to attempt to mend longstanding disagreements between erstwhile allies. “Traditional ties of friendship exist between the peoples of China and Eastern Europe. As a socialist country, China is naturally concerned about the drastic political changes that have taken place in Eastern Europe,” Li had written right before his trip. As communist states began to fall in the late 1980s, the Sino-Soviet split began to look less advantageous. “The development of good-neighbour relations between China and the Soviet Union...[is] in the interest of the two peoples,” he concluded in that article.¹ At this point, Li just wanted stability.

The irony of Li Peng’s and the Politburo’s renewed interest in harmonious relations with the Soviet Union was that it came at a time when the Soviet model of governance was at its weakest. Hardline Soviet generals staged a failed coup against Soviet liberalizer Mikhail Gorbachev on August 19, 1991. By Christmas Day, 1991, the Soviet Union was gone. Reflecting on his country’s ruin, Gorbachev mused, “That model has failed which was brought about in our country. And I hope that this is a lesson not only for our people but for all peoples.” Who was the intended audience for this lesson? The nation whose historic, paramount leader Mao Zedong had announced, years earlier, that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union “has been our model in the past, it is our model at present, and it will be our model in the future.”²

“Seldom does history seem so urgently relevant or important as in moments of sudden political transition from one state form to another,” writes historian Richard Evans.³ So, when the Soviet Union collapsed, China, a country so rooted in notions of historical determinism and comparative historical lessons, was unnerved. Suddenly, the near century-long history of shared ideology between the two nations portended a coming tragedy for the CCP. Merely verbally distinguishing between Chinese communism and Soviet communism, as Li Peng had tried to do in Moscow, was not enough. Reform, guided by the lessons of this collapse, would be necessary. Indeed, one can draw a through-line from the Soviet Union’s collapse to the two forces that would come to define China’s next two decades: the nation’s miracle economic rise and the ascendance of a new, assertive Chinese nationalism.

¹ Li Peng, “The International System and Our Diplomatic Work,” *Beijing Review* 33, no. 16, (1990): 8.

² Both quotations appear in Marsh, *Unparalleled Reforms*, 101.

³ Quoted in Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 95.

2.3 Turning Lessons into Strategies

How did China process these dramatic events that tested and ultimately destroyed the communist parties of Eastern Europe and Eurasia? It is now possible to reconstruct the top CCP leadership's visceral experience of the collapse, and, in doing so, uncover some of the lessons they drew. These earliest impressions are instinctual and raw.

Jiang Zemin, for one, appeared to blame Gorbachev for the spiraling violence and chaos. Jiang, along with influential leader Chen Yun, had already tagged Gorbachev a "traitor" to the cause of socialism.¹ Secret internal circulars accused Gorbachev of "conniving at the collapse of communism in Europe," noted that his call for "humane, democratic socialism [was] a violation of the basic principles of Marxism," and insisted that Gorbachev's real goal was capitalism, not socialism.²

Premier Li Peng's immediate thought was about China's chance to seize a more prominent place in foreign affairs: "Diverse forces in the world are realigning and regrouping... Greater unrest is still brewing in the world. The move towards multipolarization reduces the influence of both the United States and the Soviet Union," he wrote.³

Foreign Minister Qian Qichen argued, "It was completely unexpected that the Soviet Union would collapse virtually overnight in the 1990s... Currently the world situation is in a transitional period in which the old order has collapsed, yet a new one has not taken shape," he added.⁴

Most importantly, the leader of them all Deng Xiaoping said, "The problem now is not whether the banner of the Soviet Union will fall – there is bound to be unrest there – but whether the banner of China will fall... Therefore, the most important thing is that there should be no unrest in China and that we should continue to carry on genuine reform and to open wider to the outside. Without those policies, China would have no future."⁵

Blame, fear, shock, and tragedy. These were the ingredients of reform.

¹ Chris Miller, "Could Mikhail Gorbachev have saved the Soviet Union?" *Foreign Policy*, 21 December 2016, 6.

² Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen*, 60-61.

³ Li Peng, "The International System and Our Diplomatic Work," 8.

⁴ Qian Qichen, *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 165.

⁵ Deng Xiaoping, "We are confident that we can handle China's affairs well," *Speech*, September 1989, Quoted in Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen*, 53.

These visceral reactions became the stuff of institutionalized lessons. Three vehicles of opinion-making – the academy, elite opinion shapers, and think tanks – filtered these raw forces of reform into digestible lessons and takeaways.

Almost immediately after the Berlin Wall collapsed, the wider world of Chinese scholarship began official study of the reasons. First, the CCP collected potential reasons for the collapse. Tens of studies, commissioned in the following years, proposed different explanations for what triggered the collapse. Jiang, who was promoted to General Secretary in 1992, was the personal force behind the commissioning of many of these secret studies. Historian David Shambaugh catalogued fifty-two reasons the CCP identified in studies like these. They include: an ossified political system, high-level corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, overdevelopment of heavy industry, rising nationalist identities distinct from the USSR, the success of Western “Peaceful Evolution,” and a personal style of dictatorship.¹

Chinese scholars and analysts then began to narrow down these hypotheses to two reasons in particular: Gorbachev’s individual failure of leadership, which Jiang favored, and the Soviet economic system’s failure to provide viable, rising standards of living for its people, which Deng Xiaoping favored.

In the academic community, the initial consensus sided with Jiang: blame Gorbachev. The journal *Sulian yu Dong-Ou Wentu* offered one initial assessment that “pinned the blame on a single factor: Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.”² It is easy to see how blaming Gorbachev might have put the top leadership at ease. In some ways, blaming one individual absolved the leadership of reason for fear. Jiang could be confident that “efforts to find a Chinese Gorbachev will be of no avail,” and he called for “intensified ideological indoctrination.”^{3,4} So, remarkably, in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse, China had both a villain, Gorbachev, and a lesson, the danger posed by political reformers.

Slowly, however, explanations that blamed the Soviet Union’s flawed economic model began to take shape. Rather than blame any one individual, analysts and politicians began to blame more systemic factors.

¹ Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party*, 62-63.

² Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party*, 48.

³ Kissinger, *On China*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 457.

⁴ Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party*, 44.

Elite opinion was a crucial factor in the shift towards Deng's explanation. The words of Chen Yuan, son of Party leader Chen Yun, reflect this sentiment well. In the uncertain period following a failed coup attempt against Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991, Chen drafted a 14,000-character essay, titled "China's Realistic Response and Strategic Options after the Dramatic Changes in the Soviet Union." The memo, restricted to top leadership, admitted that events in the Soviet Union had undermined the credibility of communism. As a result, Chen argued that the CCP should place less emphasis on ideology and more on delivering tangible economic gains.¹

Meanwhile, in the burgeoning world of Chinese think tanks, CASS World Socialism Research Center, a CCP-affiliated think tank with 85 researchers, devoted itself to the question of what caused the Soviet Union's collapse and arrived at an answer strikingly different from the conclusions drawn by its academic peers only a few years prior who had found Gorbachev at fault. First and foremost, CASS blamed the collapse on "the deterioration of the economy," which resulted in high debt and low standards of living. CASS analysts viewed economic mismanagement as the key driver, just as Chen Yuan had. The academics at CASS "pinned the blame squarely on the impact of what [they] called the Stalin-Soviet Socialist model," according to David Shambaugh. Top academic leaders had come to realize that the "totalism of the command economy and the absence of a market mechanism were fundamental failings of the Soviet economic system."²

Economic causes were compelling not only because of the example of the Soviet economy but also because of the counterexample of its capitalist rival, the United States, which had demonstrated the power of a market economy. In 1992, three years after the initial unrest in China and Eastern Europe, Deng launched his Southern Tour on exactly this premise. He pointed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the vitality of the West's model as justification for market reforms. "Had it not been for the achievements of the reform and open policy, we could not have weathered June 4th. And if we had failed that test, there would have been chaos and civil war... Why was it that our country could remain stable after the June 4th Incident? It was precisely because we had carried out the reform and open policy, which have promoted economic growth and raised living standards," Deng said on the tour

¹ Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen*, 280.

² Shambaugh., *China's Communist Party*, 55, 64.

which marked a turning point in China's economic development.¹ Not only was this trip designed to spark an economic miracle in its own right, it could also be interpreted as a nimble way to evade the Soviet Union's pitfall of economic stagnation. "The economic boom astonished the world, convincing many foreign observers that the Chinese Communist Party had indeed found a formula for survival that had eluded its counterparts in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union," journalist James Miles wrote at the time.² During this Southern Tour, Deng gestured specifically to the power of history and analogy to chart a path forward for China's leaders:

"[Economic modernization] is an irreversible general trend of historical development, but the road has many twists and turns...socialism appears to have been weakened. But the people have been tempered by the setbacks and have drawn lessons from them, and that will make socialism develop in a healthier direction. So don't panic, don't think that Marxism has disappeared."³

Despite the tumult, Deng remained optimistic that the lessons of the Soviet collapse could help China avert a Soviet-style crisis.

Deng even convinced Jiang. Despite his earlier efforts to blame Gorbachev for the Soviet collapse, Jiang admitted the fundamental weakness of the Soviet economy. China's economy would need fixing too. "We must establish an economic structure and operational mechanism which...combine a planned economy with the use of market forces," Jiang now insisted in a speech to Party functionaries.⁴ Jiang was becoming a booster of economic modernization.

Combined, Deng and Jiang resolved their disagreements and incorporated them into a doctrine that ultimately would cohere around two parallel objectives: economic reform and political consolidation. Before 1989, serious power struggles occasionally ravaged the highest levels of the Party, which fractured into various coalitions. After 1989, they were united by a survival instinct. They purged moderates like Zhao Ziyang. Before 1989, the CCP

¹ Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Vol. 3*, (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2001), Excerpts from talks in Wuchang, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shanghai, i.

² Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen*, 36.

³ Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Vol. 3*, vi.

⁴ Jiang Zemin, "Building Socialism the Chinese Way," (*Beijing Review*, 8-14 July 1991): 14.

leadership had conducted some internal debates about economic reform, but powerful inertial forces favored the status quo. After 1989, economic reforms became the Party's lifeline.¹

2.4 Nationalism to Replace Stalinism

The Party had conducted some savvy self-strengthening, quickly identifying the Soviet Union's economic distress and taking steps to avert the same catastrophe at home. But pesky concerns about ideology and the dangers of rapid modernization would complicate these efforts to learn from the Soviet Union.

Deng had long tried to contain nationalist fervor in China. Sensing its danger, he never allowed space for nationalism to rise. He permitted admiration for Western countries. He did not try to change historical narratives. In order to maintain good relations with Japan and the United States, Deng even blocked research and publication of details about the Rape of Nanjing. His dominant theme was caution. Deng even coined the fateful Twenty-Four Character strategy, which advised that China "hide and bide" on the world stage, in response to a telegram he received from an adviser in August 1991 that had proposed backing a hardline coup against Gorbachev.²

But other Chinese leaders could not easily separate the Soviet Union's collapse from the Western triumphalism and celebration that came in its wake.³ Many Chinese leaders had taken Western sanctions after Tiananmen as an affront to their system of governance more broadly. The economic reason for the Soviet collapse became hard to divorce from the noneconomic symptoms of a failing regime – like street protests and political violence. So Chinese leaders tried to devise ways to prevent these symptoms of disfunction too. They purged the Politburo's liberals and instigated a campaign of patriotic education. What could hold the state together and stave off chaos if not communism? Jiang's answer was nationalism. Codifying nationalism as an official state ideology was not easy and had to be done from the

¹ For more on the "danger" posed by Zhao Ziyang, see Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party*, 57.

² Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011): 658. There continue to be disputes about the translation of *taoguang yanghui*. Another translation is "conceal our capabilities and avoid the limelight."

³ Gordon Chang's *The Coming Collapse of China*, (New York: Random House, 2001), Forward, "The Final Chapter" provides a good example of this triumphalism.

ground up. There was a patriotic education campaign, which as one scholar explained, was meant to enforce this pivot to nationalism:

“After the June 4 massacre and the swift demise of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the Chinese Communist Party desperately needed time and political space, along with the expected fruits of rapid economic growth, to renew its ideological credibility with its own population...Toward this end, Jiang’s patriotic education campaign, which was introduced in 1991, sought to focus the attention of his nation, and especially the youth, on the humiliations of the century that preceded Communist rule.”¹

The Party became more sensitive to the need for political reform after 1989. While top leaders might still have believed in Marxism, they “chose globalization,” according to one scholar. And the Chinese people in tandem became more drawn to “radical change” and radical democratization, which caused a problem for the leadership who valued stability above all else. So Jiang focused on “Party Building” alongside the opening economy.² Lastly, the Party appreciated its luck. In 1989, Deng had correctly predicted that China would not be spared unrest, but it turned out that the collapse of the Soviet Union had happened at a fortuitous moment for the Chinese leadership. Party leaders said it was good that the collapse happened early enough that many of the old comrades and military leaders were still alive and late enough that the Politburo’s liberals had all been purged after Tiananmen.³

These attitudes soon found their way into official policy. Starting in 1992, references to the collapse of the Soviet Union began to appear in Party Congress reports. That year, in Jiang Zemin’s “Leader’s Report” to the Fourteenth Party Congress, he launched the official search for lessons of the Soviet Union’s collapse. This was the first Congress to take place since the Tiananmen Square protests, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Jiang’s remarks sounded a discordantly positive note:

“Tremendous achievements have been scored, and much has been learned about how to build socialism. Nevertheless, the question still needs further

¹ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 201

² Jiang Zemin, *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin, Vol. 3* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2013), 1.

³ Office Hours conversation with Zheng Wang, 25 March 2021.

exploration. Indeed, in view of the drastic changes that have taken place internationally in recent years, it calls for profound study.”¹

Despite the nebulous wording, Jiang’s hope was clear: investigate the causes of a Marxist-Leninist’s state failure while reviving the winning spirit of Marxist-Leninist ideology. By the Fifteenth Party Congress, in 1997, China’s trend towards nationalism was apparent. “China’s state system [...] is the result of struggles waged by the people and the choice of history. It is imperative that we should uphold and improve this fundamental political system, instead of copying any Western models,” reads the official report.² At this Congress, Jiang announced a confrontational position on Taiwan, a sign of growing confidence and nationalist sentiment.

By 2002, at the Sixteenth Party Congress, Jiang, who by then was handing off power to Hu Jintao, could claim something of a victory over the forces that had brought the Soviet Union to its knees. He lauded China’s response to “a highly volatile international situation” and said:

“From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, there occurred serious political disturbances in China, drastic changes in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Socialism in the world suffered serious setbacks. China was faced with unprecedented difficulties and pressure in its efforts to develop the socialist cause. At this crucial historical juncture bearing on the destiny of the Party and state, the Party Central Committee relied firmly on all the comrades in the Party and the Chinese people of all ethnic groups and unswervingly adhered to the line prevailing since the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, and thus successfully brought the overall situation of reform and development under control and safeguarded the great cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics.”³

Jiang had a story to tell: Reform and opening up had allowed China to avoid the crisis of socialism that had plagued the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites. The CCP, content with its lessons, could finally declare victory with a dual mandate achieved: economic reform and political consolidation. This speech had capped a period of “intense

¹ Jiang Zemin, “Full Text of Jiang Zemin's Report at 14th Party Congress,” *The Beijing Review*, no. 43, (1992), 1.

² Quoted in Hung-mao Tien, *China Under Jiang Zemin*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 21.

³ Jiang Zemin, “Full text of Jiang Zemin's Report at 16th Party Congress on Nov 8, 2002,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 16th CPC National Congress, 8 November 2002, Section 1, para. 13.

discussions,” according to Kevin Rudd, who actually took part in internal CCP study groups on the Soviet collapse.¹

Finally, in September 2004, Party study of the lessons of Soviet collapse delivered an official verdict. At the Fourth Plenary of the Sixteenth Party Congress, Party leaders adopted an edict, “Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Enhancing the Party’s Ruling Capacity,” that reflected the lessons, conclusions, and proposed reforms that stemmed from the Party’s understanding of the Soviet collapse. The document places a priority on economic reform in order to avoid systemic, long-term decline. “We must develop a stronger sense of crisis, draw experience and lessons from the success and failure of other ruling parties in the world, and enhance our governance capability in a more earnest and conscientious manner,” it read.² Those who had emphasized economic causes had won out. One lesson was codified: the Soviet Union had collapsed because of a broken and defunct economic system that failed to raise the living standards of its people. In this telling of events, the history of the collapse was framed as essential justification for a disruptive reform movement to modernize the Chinese economy. In the ideological sphere, Chinese leaders likewise decided there would be “no systemic change” and no transition from a one-party state.³

These critiques, lessons, assessments, and reassessments continued in stops and starts in a process of informal policymaking and opinion shaping. Scholar Zheng Wang summarizes the CCP’s decision-making in the early 1990s: “For economic reform, they went to the extreme ‘liberal’ approach; for political reform, however, they went to the extreme ‘conservative’ approach. This is the ‘1989 Choice.’”⁴ The fifteen years from 1989 to 2004 had been a precarious intellectual journey. Gorbachev had been blamed and then pardoned. Economic reform had become extremely urgent. And nationalism had superseded communism. From this morass had come two overarching themes: a conviction to modernize a statist economy and a codified distrust of Western democratic principles. These two themes go a long way towards explaining the character of China today – a politically repressive economic powerhouse.

¹ Kevin Rudd, “The Avoidable War.” (*Asia Society Policy Institute*, January 2019), 16-17.

² Readout in “Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Enhancing the Party’s Ruling Capacity,” *China Daily*, 27 September 2004, para. 5.

³ Kevin Rudd, “The Avoidable War.” (*Asia Society Policy Institute*, January 2019), 16-17.

⁴ Zheng Wang, “Tiananmen as the Turning Point: China’s Impossible Balancing Act,” *Wilson Center*, 4 June 2014, para. 3.

CHAPTER 3 THE SOVIET UNION COLLAPSES, AGAIN

THE RETURN OF THE ANALOGY AND HISTORY'S NEW VERDICT, 2012-2021

3.1 “History is a Mirror”

Thirty years later, it is tempting to treat the Soviet Union’s collapse as mere historical curiosity. Perhaps the miracle years of economic growth had disqualified the Soviet analogy. China’s economy is larger, more dynamic, and far more integrated than the Soviet Union’s ever was. But analysts who think this way would find themselves in disagreement with Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, who still allocates serious weight to the analogy.

The intervening years between the decision to codify the Soviet lessons in 2004 and the revival of the analogy in 2012 constituted a “Golden Decade” for China’s economy. During Hu’s tenure, China’s GDP grew fivefold; the country became the world’s second largest economy in 2010. But China was not free of problems, and the focus on economic growth could not solve new challenges like Party corruption and unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang.¹ So Party leaders turned once more to the experience of the Soviet Union.

This chapter revisits the thesis’ research question in light of developments over the past nine years. Based on a review of Party literature, it demonstrates how today’s leadership has moved on from the economic lessons of the Soviet collapse; in their place, the chapter establishes how four observations about the collapse of the Soviet Union – Gorbachev’s betrayal, “historical nihilism,” military disaffection, and ethnic separatism – have inspired four urgent directives for today’s CCP – ideological strengthening, historical education, PLA loyalty, and ethnic assimilation. These lessons stem from intensive periods of comparative

¹ At the opening speech of the 18th Party Congress, in 2012, Hu Jintao heralded the “Golden Decade.” (Mark Stone, “Hu Jintao Hails China’s ‘Golden Decade,’” *Sky News*, 7 November 2012); GDP figures are provided by the IMF; Xinjiang and Tibet experienced upticks in violence during this decade (See Nicholas Kristof, “Is Xinjiang the Next Tibet?” *New York Times*, 2 April 2008).

historical study and come in response to a core leadership challenge, originally encountered by Deng and Jiang, to design policy that could help China avoid the Soviet Union's fate.

Xi Jinping's leadership has ushered in a reemphasis on history's lessons, including the Soviet analogy. Although the Cultural Revolution interrupted nearly ten years of his formal schooling, Xi frequently brandishes his historical erudition. A few years ago, he bragged to the Russian press that he had read eleven different classical Russian authors; he told the French press he had read nineteen of their most famous historians and thinkers.¹ Political scientists argue that policymakers have "operational codes": deep-seated convictions forged early in their career that operate as default heuristics for decision-making. For some, their operational code might comprise intense childhood experiences or an upbringing in philosophy.² It seems that Xi Jinping's operational code is history, especially Marxist history of the sort instilled during the Cultural Revolution.

So it is no surprise that Xi Jinping once led the Central Party School in Beijing, the font of academic Marxist-Leninism in China. "In 2009, when Xi was the headmaster of the Central Party School, a position that served as a steppingstone to the top, he commissioned a sprawling study of the Soviet collapse," explains journalist Nick Frisch.³ The conclusion of that study was "the Soviet Communist Party's failure to dominate the institutions underpinning its power, such as the military, spelled its doom." Xi has long been attuned to Soviet history – seeing it as a cautionary tale. Even prior to that Central Party School study, Xi oversaw Party History work, most notably at the 17th Party Congress. As China watcher Bill Bishop has noted, "There may be few officials in China more steeped in Party History than Xi."⁴

Xi is clearly intent on putting this history education to work. Upon his ascension to the presidency, the first Politburo study meeting he convened on the question of ideology reflected this theme. Hosted on December 3, 2013, it was called, "Basic Principles and

¹ Evan Osnos, "Born Red," (*The New Yorker*, 30 March 2015), para. 2. In one peculiar passage in the second volume of *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2018), Xi lists 17 different thinkers he had read – from Plato to Kuznets (371).

² Ole Holsti, "The 'Operational Code' Approach to the Study of Political Leaders: John Foster Dulles' Philosophical and Instrumental Beliefs." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 3, no. 1 (1970): 123-57. Holsti makes a compelling case for the ways John Foster Dulles's "operational code" was grounded in his philosophical and historical upbringing.

³ Nick Frisch, "The Bolsheviks in Beijing: What the Chinese Communist Party Learned From Lenin," (*Foreign Affairs*, 18 October 2017), para. 5.

⁴ Bill Bishop, "Xi on studying Party history; Reaction to WHO report; Two journalists leave for Taiwan; Arm and Huawei," *Sinocism*, 31 March 2021, Part 1.

Methodology of Historical Materialism.”¹ It used a prism of history as a way to reiterate the importance of ideological education and indoctrination. History is President Xi Jinping’s primary lens for explaining new CCP policy. In September 2015, in “A New Partnership of Mutual Benefit and a Community of Shared Future,” Xi explained, “History is a mirror. Only by drawing lessons from history can the world avoid repeating past calamity,” staking out his position as an Applied Historian in all but name.² From his perch, he has used history to revive once-discredited lessons from the Soviet collapse.

Xi’s adherence to Marxism is not only apparent from his political worldview; it also appears in his “dialectic” view of history that results from a philosophy of historical materialism. Marxists have a “Hegelian” view of history. They believe history operates in cycles and works itself out in contradictions of the form “thesis, antithesis, and synthesis” (or, in familiar Chinese terms, “contradictions among the people”).³ To them, class struggle is the key driver of historical progress. “The historical period after reform and opening up cannot be used to negate the historical period before reform and opening up, nor can the historical period before reform and opening up be used to negate the historical period after reform and opening up,” Xi writes in the third volume of *The Governance of China*.⁴ Such a notion strikes Western observers as contradictory to the point of incoherence. However, Chinese ideology is more tolerant of such apparent paradoxes.

Like any good Marxist, Xi is a true believer. According to Kevin Rudd, “Few people seemed to have understood that a core part of Xi Jinping’s intellectual make-up is that he is a Marxist dialectician... This forms a deep part of Xi Jinping’s intellectual software.”⁵ Indeed, on multiple occasions, Xi has noted publicly that Mao’s achievements before the era of reform and opening up are as consequential as the decades of miracle economic growth following 1978.

¹ “Five Politburo Meetings on Marxism,” *Qiushi*, 18 November 2018. The report details this first meeting that Xi participated in; it marked the eleventh collective study of the 18th Central Political Bureau. “The people are the creators of history,” Xi Jinping explained in this meeting.

² Xi Jinping, “Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” Speech to U.N. General Assembly, 28 September 2015, para. 5.

³ Kevin Rudd, “The Avoidable War.” (*Asia Society Policy Institute*, January 2019), 18.

⁴ Xi Jinping, “Correctly deal with both historical periods before and after reform and opening up,” *People’s Daily*, 8 November 2013, para. 1. Later republished in the third volume of Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2020).

⁵ Rudd, *The Avoidable War*, 17-18.

Xi brought this grounding in history to one of the central preoccupations of his presidency: learning from the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to one longtime sinologist:

“[Xi] does not want to view the current party as somehow a revisionist party, like Khrushchev in the Soviet Union, who rejected the Stalinist revolutionary tradition. In Xi Jinping’s view, Khrushchev’s actions marked the beginning of the decline of the Soviet Union. In order to prevent that kind of development in China, Xi believes it’s important to keep reminding Chinese people of their own distinctive communist traditions. The idea is that this revolutionary heritage will inoculate the CCP regime against the disease that overtook communism in Europe.”¹

Elizabeth Perry’s formulation presents a tangible link between Xi’s longtime interest in the study of history and his preoccupation with the Soviet Union’s collapse.

Just as Xi has studied history, he has also studied development economics. The Party leadership “know what the international literature says,” explains Kevin Rudd, “Demands for political liberalization almost universally arise once per capita income passes a certain threshold. They are therefore deeply aware of the profound ‘contradiction’ which exists between China’s national development priority of escaping the ‘middle income trap’ on the one hand, and unleashing parallel demands for political liberalisation once incomes continue to rise on the other.”² And they know what history has shown – developing nations falling into “middle income traps” or lofty communist superpowers collapsing with their economies hollowed out from within. When Xi was still just the governor of Fujian, in 2001, he published an article on development economics in a local academic journal that addressed this contradiction. In his own words:

“Economic development cannot be simply equated with industrialization and the growth of gross national product or national income: economic development is not equivalent to economic growth, but includes economic growth. ...Economic development refers to a level of social development, that

¹ Elizabeth Perry, “Elizabeth Perry on the Secrets to the CCP’s Resilience,” *The Wire China*, 7 February 2021, Q6.

² Rudd, *The Avoidable War*, 18.

is, a process of economic growth that is accompanied by changes in economic structure, society and the political system.”¹

In short, Xi’s article, published at the time of China’s entry into the WTO, was an early indicator that China’s economic advancement would not mean Western convergence. The West’s hope was misplaced.

While the West was celebrating China’s integration with the global economy, Xi was puzzling a nascent dilemma – that wealth could produce liberal democratic forces, weaken the Party, lead to collapse of CCP control, and usher in an era of chaos in China. He had seen a combination of these things happen before – during the era of reform of opening up, when wealth bred corruption, and in the Soviet Union, when the Party lost power after *perestroika* and *glasnost*.

As Chapter one demonstrated, the debate over the Soviet Union’s collapse was the subject of intense internal CCP debates from the mid-1990s through the early 2000s. It was one of the key intellectual debates within the Party as Xi was rising the ranks. Debates raged about how the CCP should handle the challenge of liberalization, including whether to move openly toward democracy. By 2004, Chinese leaders had decided against democratic political reform. By the time the official debate concluded, Xi Jinping was still in Fujian. But this was the backdrop into which Xi propelled his own stark Marxist-Leninist vision.

3.2 Legitimizing Authoritarianism

Xi’s first big contribution as intellectual leader of the Party was how to revive its ideological core. Corruption had detracted from the moral legitimacy of the Party, and “legitimacy through performance” was no longer enough. A crackdown on corruption was necessary but not sufficient. What was needed was a full-throated reassertion of Party ideology and a centralization of Party control over the state. When he first came to power, Xi warned of historical conflicts between rising and ruling powers and alluded to America’s role in accelerating the collapse of the Soviet Union.² Xi worried about the impact of American “smokeless warfare,” which targeted the CCP’s political legitimacy, an existential regime weakness. To combat this perceived threat, Xi turned to Wang Huning, a central figure

¹ Andrew Batson, “What Xi Jinping thinks about development economics,” *Batson’s Blog*, 13 December 2019, para. 7.

² For more, see Julian Gewirtz, “China Thinks America Is Losing,” *Foreign Affairs* vol. 99, no. 6, (2020): 63.

among China's "neo-authoritarians." The ideas of Wang Huning, a former law professor, America watcher, and government adviser, have shaped Xi Jinping's perspective and worldview. When Xi promoted him to the Politburo Standing Committee, he became the first political theorist to hold a seat on the PBSC since 1966, when Mao selected Chen Boda.

Wang believes China's "external sovereignty" – its capacity to stand up to Western powers – and its "internal sovereignty" – the privileged place of the CCP in Chinese society – necessitate a vast degree of social control. "Unity of leadership is the prerequisite for the existence of any country. Where there is no central authority or where the central authority is in decline, the nation will be in a divided and chaotic state," Wang has written.¹ His intellectual history is well-documented despite his extremely private persona because he produced prolific writings in his younger years as an academic. "The political system must fit into and be accepted by a country's history, culture, and society...It cannot be too above the ground," Wang once wrote.² Together Wang and Xi align on a message Wang has been pitching since the 1980s: legitimizing authoritarianism. They both believe that the state is inherently politically and ideologically fragile – a lesson the Soviet collapse underscores.

Xi and Wang have ushered in a resurgence of nationalism and history in China today.³ But Xi's historical revival is decades in the making. In scholar Zheng Wang's book, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, Wang explains how, after the Tiananmen Square protests, history education grew increasingly standardized – from classroom content to hagiographic history textbooks. According to Wang, in today's China, a historical narrative has converged around the concept of China as victim – under siege, subject to attempts at "containment." In *Never Forget National Humiliation*, Wang details China's sense of victimization, suspicion of foreign intentions, and campaigns of education and propaganda that worked to simultaneously humiliate and indoctrinate China's students. Wang explains how these forces create a unique "culture of insecurity" that is now China's default frame for interpreting current events and foreign affairs. "Choosing what to remember and what to forget is not a simple sorting process for history education. Historical memory is more than an

¹ Wang Huning, *Political Life*, 1995, Quoted in "China M&A Round-Up – March 2018," *Deloitte*, 2018. Wang's writing are far more plentiful than the rest of the CCP leadership because of his prior career as an academic.

² Tom Plate, "Can China's ideology tsar, Wang Huning, be the steady hand in Sino-US relations?" *South China Morning Post*, 6 November 2017.

³ For more on this nationalist revival, see Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), especially 2-18.

understanding of history. How the government defines history is a deeply political issue that is closely related to the legitimacy of the government and rightly shapes the national identity of China,” Wang writes.¹ Xi is the beneficiary of this long-term trend towards nationalist education. And he is aptly exploiting it by making sure that China’s emergence as a great power is not just seen as a “rise” but as a “rejuvenation,” a return to its “rightful” place in history. One of Xi’s greatest successes has been using history to support the dictates of an increasingly nationalist and ideological agenda.²

In sum, Xi’s upbringing in history, the elevation of his likeminded counterpart Wang Huning, and the primary place historical memory holds in Chinese policy-making form the perfect brew for the Soviet analogy to emerge once more, under new pretenses. With a growing ideological tide has come a growing emphasis on the telling and retelling of Chinese history, and therefore also of the Soviet analogy.

3.3 Four New Lessons: Gorbachev’s Betrayal, “Historical Nihilism,” Red Army Disloyalty, Ethnic Unrest

President Xi, like Jiang and Deng before him, has once more turned to the Soviet collapse for lessons and inspiration. In a series of secret speeches at the beginning of his first term, Xi elaborated on his lessons from the Soviet analogy. In December 2012, during a tour of Guangdong province, Xi noted that the Party needed to “profoundly remember the lesson of the Soviet collapse.” “Why did the Soviet Union disintegrate? Why did the Soviet Communist Party lose power?” he asked. The answer: “One important reason was that ideals and beliefs were shaken.”³ Gorbachev had ignored ideology to a deadly degree, “and the

¹ Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 6.

² The Soviet analogy is not the only historical analogy that draws the eye of China’s leadership. Historian Rana Mitter says this surge of nationalism actually results from a pivot *from* a victim narrative to a victor narrative. He points to Xi’s framing of World War II, once a little discussed topic in China. “There is a strong relationship between China’s memory of its experience of World War II and its present-day nationalist identity at home.” This narrative exists at the highest levels of Chinese power. Xi Jinping bragged that his greatest achievement in 2015 was his “creation of a holiday dedicated to the Second World War: “Victory Day of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.”² The telling of the Soviet collapse appears all the more tragic against the backdrop of this triumphant telling of inflated World War II glory. Found in Rana Mitter, *China’s Good War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 3. For more, on history favoring China, see Bill Bishop, “‘The most beautiful sight’; Hebei Outbreak” (*Sinocism*, 7 January 2021): “There is a reason Xi, officials, official documents and authoritative propaganda pieces keep repeating the phrase, ‘当今世界正处于百年未有之大变局 / The world today is undergoing major changes unseen in a century.’”

³ 储百亮, “习近平警告中共记取前苏联教训,” *纽约时报*, 15 February 2013, Quoted in Sergey Radchenko, “Putin and Xi Eye the Soviet Collapse,” *the ASAN Forum*, 19 March 2020, fn. 14.

great party was gone just like that. In the end, there was not a man brave enough to resist, no one came out to contest [this decision].” A few weeks later, in January 2013, Xi again blamed ideological decay for the Soviet collapse, but this time he added other factors as well:

“There was a complete denial of Soviet history, denial of Lenin, denial of Stalin, pursuit of historical nihilism, confusion of thought. Local party organizations were almost without a role. The military was not under the Party’s oversight. In the end, the great Soviet Communist Party scattered like birds and beasts. The great Soviet socialist nation fell to pieces...The Soviet Communist Party had 200,000 members when it seized power; it had 2 million members when it defeated Hitler, and it had 20 million members when it relinquished power...For what reason? Because the ideals and beliefs were no longer there.”¹

In addition to blaming Gorbachev, Xi now blamed “historical nihilism” and a denial of history.

These were troubling observations, so it is no surprise that one of the first Politburo study sessions Xi convened in his capacity as General Secretary was on the lessons of the Soviet Union’s fall. Analysts have linked this study session to the drafting of a leaked internal Party circular, “Communique on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere,” which indicated that Xi’s tenure would likely be more hardline and ideological.² That edict warned CCP officials to beware of Western values and “incorrect thinking,” spoke of the dangers of “historical nihilism” – using the same language as Xi’s January 2013 speech – revived old notions of Western “smokeless warfare,” and referenced the “Soviet experience” with socialism.³ This document was unique in that it placed so much emphasis on controlling historical narratives.

Most spectacularly, Xi attempted to use the CCP’s deeply developed “mass line” propaganda techniques to indoctrinate mid- and low-level cadres too. Throughout China, in the fall of 2013, dozens of local Party chiefs summoned cadres for a compulsory study session. The chiefs screened a six-part documentary on the collapse of the Soviet Union, called *20th*

¹ “习近平：历史不可虚无，” *中国日报*, 20 November 2016, Quoted in Sergey Radchenko, “Putin and Xi Eye the Soviet Collapse,” *the ASAN Forum*, 19 March 2020, fn. 15.

² See John Garnaut, “Engineers of the Soul: Ideology in Xi Jinping’s China” *Sinocism*, 16 January 2019, pt. 5.

³ “Document Number 9: A ChinaFile Translation,” *ChinaFile*, 8 November 2013, pt. 4.

Anniversary of the Death of the Soviet Party and State: As the Russians Relate. The film begins with inspiring images of Soviet triumph in that nation's early years. Soon, the film cuts to graphic footage of unrest in the 1990s, as ominous music plays and Russian communists, in interviews, bemoan the empire's fall. Watching the Soviet collapse on film is a kind of ritual self-flagellation for the CCP. This film revived a longstanding obsession with the collapse of Eastern European communist states that began when Deng and his advisors watched the graphic footage of the execution of Romania's communist leader in 1989. According to state media, when one screening in the Eastern Chinese city of Jiangsu ended, the local Party chief ordered the assembled officials to "correctly understand the lessons of history." What were these lessons? First and foremost among them: The Soviet Union did not in fact collapse because of the flaws of a Stalinist system but was instead was betrayed from within by leaders like Mikhail Gorbachev.¹ This was a remarkable reversal from Deng's time when economic reform had been the primary lesson.

The film marked Xi Jinping's most explicit attempt to transmit to the broader CCP apparatus the contents of a historical debate that has consumed the CCP's uppermost leadership throughout the past thirty years and to disseminate his verdict that the collapse was the result of ideological lapses. The film was meant to work on two levels: to remind cadres that the state can collapse and to "reassert an official narrative of history" in order to avert the very threat of that collapse.² These study sessions for the masses were intended to translate the intellectual debates at the Party's top level into digestible takeaways. Since the assessment was that Gorbachev had betrayed the Soviet Communist Party, the warning was that such a betrayal must not be allowed to happen here.

So, early in his tenure, Xi had already identified two reasons for the Soviet Union's collapse: Gorbachev's betrayal and a "denial of history." Neither of these were related to the precarious state of the Soviet Union's economy. By the end of 2013, Xi would add another reason why the Soviet Union collapsed. It was another noneconomic reason: the failure of

¹ For more, see Jeremy Page, "China Spins New Lesson from Soviet Union's Fall," *Wall Street Journal*, 10 December 2013, pp. 1-3.

² It was produced by Ret. Maj. Gen. Li Shenming, who served as vice chair of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Li, an admirer of Stalin and Mao, brought the substantial resources of CASS think tank to bear to produce the film. CASS currently consists of 31 research institutions, 45 research centers, and 4,200 employees, of which 3,200 are members of the research staff. Via Cheng Li, "China's New Think Tanks: Where Officials, Entrepreneurs, and Scholars Interact," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 29, (2016): 5.

the Soviet Red Army to sufficiently back the Party. “Why must we unwaveringly assert our party's control over the military?” Xi asked an audience at a private Party meeting in 2015:

“This is the lesson the Soviet collapse teaches. The Soviet Red Army was depoliticized and departyized, becoming a national institution, and so the Soviet Communist Party surrendered its weapons. When those who wished to save the Soviet Union did step forward, the instrument of dictatorship had already slipped from their grasp.”¹

This lesson was particularly relevant for regime survival and legitimacy in contemporary China. “Command of the gun” is an essential element of CCP authority.

Gorbachev’s betrayal, “historical nihilism,” the Red Army’s disloyalty. By the eve of his second term, in 2017, Xi had already accumulated quite a laundry list of reasons for why the Soviet Union had fallen. He would soon add a final one: ethnic separatism in Central Asia.

When addressing the question of ethnic minorities in China’s westernmost region, which experienced unrest and terrorist attacks in the late 2000s, Xi again looked to the Soviet Union for lessons and warnings on ethnic policy. Central Asia, miles west of Xinjiang, was once a subject of Moscow’s indirect authority. That region had caused serious trouble for the Soviet leadership and was a primary force for the kinds of separatism that ultimately dismantled that empire. Thinkers like Hu Angang of Tsinghua University and, most notably, Ma Rong of Peking University have been pointing to the “failures” of Soviet ethnic policy there for over a decade.²

In one influential analysis, Ma Rong traces the historical underpinnings of Chinese ethnic policy back to Lenin and Stalin in order to demonstrate the underappreciated similarities between the two communist states’ ethnic policies. Right after the CCP’s founding, the Party adopted Lenin’s theory of “ethnic autonomous rights.” “A 1922 document from the Second Party Congress [of the CCP] mentioned a plan for national reconstruction which called for ‘unifying China proper (including Manchuria) as a true democratic republic; carrying out self-rule in Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang, which will form

¹ Frisch, “The Bolsheviks in Beijing,” 2017, para. 5.

² For more, see Bill Hayton, “Bill Hayton on National Emotions and China’s Origin Story,” *The Wire China*, 3 January 2021.

a league of democratic, self-ruled territories,” explains Ma. This 1922 edict continued to be the *de facto* ethnic policy of the CCP throughout much of the Party’s existence, Ma adds.

While mentions of “rights to ethnic self-determination” disappeared from Party documents after 1946, Chinese ethnic policy basically operated on this Soviet premise of self-determination – largely until Xi Jinping’s presidency. “The system and policies towards ethnic minorities in the PRC, just as in the former Soviet Union, have strengthened and politicized minority group identity,” Ma argued in 2010.¹ This was a dangerous development, bound to encourage separatism. Certain policies that exist to this day, such as the National People’s Congress and National People’s Political Consultative Conference’s “representation of ethnic minorities,” resemble Soviet ethnic practices of old. The CCP even copied Soviet naming conventions for ethnic autonomous regions.

Ma’s writings make it clear that he believes the similarities between CCP and Soviet ethnic policy were inviting the potential for a disastrous splintering. He claimed that the downfall of the Soviet Union actually stemmed from the right afforded to Soviet autonomous republics to leave the Soviet Union and form independent nations:

“In the years when [Soviet] state power was stable and the system highly centralized...no one really tried hard to realize this ‘right to independence...But once the country’s political system began to waver, when, for example, Gorbachev’s ‘perestroika’ led to the decline in influence of traditional ideology and to the weakening of the powers of the central government, then possibly there were some republics...who sought to establish independent countries on the basis of the constitution’s ‘right to leave.’”

By this rationale, the primary reason for the Soviet collapse could be found within their ethnic policy: “This is how the Soviet Union, formerly a ‘superpower,’ fell apart,” Ma concludes.² He explicitly warns that China could suffer the same fate as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. “Could the clause concerning ‘changing or halting the implementation of policy’ in China’s

¹ Ma Rong, “The Soviet Model’s Influence and the Current Debate on Ethnic Relations,” *Global Asia* Vol. 5, no. 2 (2010).

² In the interwar period, attempts to splinter the Soviet Union’s already fragile ethnic confederation had a name. Polish leader at the time, Jozef Pilsudski, pioneered the concept of “Prometheism.” The political project sought to weaken the power of the Soviet Union by promoting non-Russian nationalist independence movements. For more, see Richard Woytak, “The Promethean Movement in Interwar Poland,” *East European Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1984), 273–78.

Ethnic Regional Autonomy Law at some future point take on this key function, becoming the legal justification through which ethnic autonomous areas could openly challenge the authority of the central government?" Ma wonders.¹

A series of speeches President Xi delivered to Chinese officials during and after a visit to Xinjiang in April 2014 strike the same note. They reveal the degree to which Xi conceptualizes China's greatest threats through the lens of the Soviet collapse and show how closely Xi and other top leaders have hewed to Ma Rong's analysis.

In these speeches, Xi notes, "We say that development is the top priority and the basis for achieving lasting security, and that's right, but it would be wrong to believe that with development every problem solves itself." Rising incomes and quality of life would not necessarily be enough to foil Uyghur unrest. In one speech, Xi uses the example of the Baltic states, which were among the richest in the Soviet Union, but also the first to leave the federation when the Soviet Union fell. "In recent years, Xinjiang has grown very quickly and the standard of living has consistently risen, but even so ethnic separatism and terrorist violence have still been on the rise. This goes to show that economic development does not automatically bring lasting order and security," Xi told a leadership conference.

The violence in Xinjiang could have dangerous implications for the rest of China, Xi insisted. Without serious measures to prevent further unrest, "social stability will suffer shocks, the general unity of people of every ethnicity will be damaged, and the broad outlook for reform, development and stability will be affected."² The natural conclusion of this analysis is to stamp out all ethnic differences among Chinese citizens – a main motive behind the campaign of forced assimilation in Xinjiang.³

¹ The quoted analysis can be found in Ma Rong, "Ethnic Regional Autonomy: The Historical Evolution China's System of Autonomous Ethnic Regions" Quoted in and translated by David Ownby, "马戎, "中国民族区域自治制度的历史演变轨迹," in a special issue in 民族研究 (Ethnic Studies) entitled "民族区域自治制度 70 年 Seventy Years of the Ethnic Regional Autonomy System," 2019.3: 92-109." *Reading the China Dream*, 2020.

² Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, "'Absolutely No Mercy,'" *New York Times* (16 November 2019). The reporting summarizes 24 documents of leaked material, including 96 pages of internal speeches by President Xi and 102 pages of speeches by other officials. See especially paras. 52-63.

³ Harvard scholar Mark Elliott levels a critique of this kind of thinking by likewise referring to the Soviet Union. "The attempt to undertake a critique that would upend the ethnic theory and policies currently in effect in the country, even at the cost of turning it into an approach that reinvents the wheel, is unquestionably to play with fire. If this indeed is how things go, we truly will end up following in the footsteps of the Soviet Union." In "The Case of the Missing Indigene: Debate Over a "Second-Generation" Ethnic Policy," *The China Journal*, Vol. 73, (2015): 197.

3.4 Ideological, Not Economic, Reform

These lessons – Xi’s lessons – are noticeably different from the ones that dominated the years immediately after the Soviet Union’s fall. While contemporaneous understandings in the years 1989 to 1992 seemed to emphasize economic or leadership failures as the cause of the Soviet Union’s collapse, contemporary understandings in Xi’s China today emphasize more nebulous concepts of cultural, societal, or “moral” decay. By emphasizing the dangers of corruption, ethnic unrest, and military independence, the telling of the Soviet collapse has been “societalized” to meet some of the most pressing challenges facing the Party today. The problems are no longer economic in nature, so neither are the solutions. Instead, they are policies like anti-corruption, ethnic assimilation, and military modernization. Of course, the real reasons the Soviet Union collapsed – whatever they may be – have not changed at all, but the political expediency of certain lessons has changed dramatically.

This year, Xi Jinping has the opportunity to memorialize and elevate his historical lessons to the level of Party doctrine. The Party History Study Campaign, meant to celebrate the CCP’s centennial, “highlights the importance of learning CPC history” and impresses upon cadres the need to “learn from the history.”¹ On February 20, in remarks to the Party History Study and Education Mobilization Conference, Xi kicked off the campaign with a call for applying history: “We should further summarize the historical experience of the Party... We must gain enlightenment from history and extract the magic weapon to defeat the enemy from historical experience.”²

This speech is an important milestone in Xi’s effort to centralize policymaking around core historical narratives. In other words, the Party History Study Campaign is an opportune chance to establish a “correct” understanding of Party history.³ It is no accident that Xi speaks specifically of “gain[ing] enlightenment from history.” It is sometimes argued that the Party

¹ “Chinese President Xi Jinping stresses learning CPC history in article to be published tomorrow,” *CGTN*, 31 March 2021, para. 6.

² “Xi Jinping: Speech at the Party History Study and Education Mobilization Conference,” *Xuexi*, 31 March 2021, para. 25. According to *Xuexi*, Xi delivered the speech on 20 February 2021. Xi also cites the Chinese maxim: “According to the past, verifying the past, and taking part in the ordinary, you can decide.”

³ In this same speech, Xi adds, “We should establish a correct view of party history. Historical materialism is the fundamental way for us Communists to understand and grasp history.” This sentiment aligns with a Party tradition to periodically review, reassess, and recharacterize the CCP’s revolutionary history. In 1945, the Party conducted a historical review to establish Mao Zedong as supreme leader of the Party; in 1985, the Party used a historical study session to offer an official assessment of Mao’s tenure and speed ahead on necessary economic reforms – according to the *South China Morning Post*. Jun Ma, “China’s Communist Party revisits the past to regroup for future” *South China Morning Post*, 23 February 2021.

History Study Campaign is a mechanism for Xi to assert supreme control over Party ideology and to elevate himself to a status only achieved by Mao.¹ This may be one intention, but it is not the only one. Xi knows history can be a tool for policy-making, not just ideology-formulation. For him, history is “the magic weapon.” The aim of this Party History Study Campaign is to build consensus, not relitigate narrow, academic debates on Party history.² The goal is to rebuild or revise the consensus on specific events like the Soviet Union’s fall.

This analysis has drawn from a collection of speeches President Xi delivered and circulated early in his first term as General Secretary. Xi’s most significant comments, the ones that gestured explicitly to the Soviet Union’s collapse, came during his “New Southern Tour,” which he conducted in the second half of 2012. This “New Southern Tour” was hugely influential in setting the goals of Xi’s presidency. It was the venue where he first announced the “China Dream” and the road to Chinese “rejuvenation.” The fact that Xi’s lessons from the Soviet collapse were also included during this consequential tour reveals the pride of place he assigned to the importance of learning from history.

Xi’s “New Southern Tour” is explicitly meant to recall Deng Xiaoping’s famous 1992 “Southern Tour.” During that first Southern Tour, Deng was thinking about the Soviet Union. Its collapse was recent memory. He knew economic reforms were most urgent to avert a similar fate. So the tour was all about reform and opening up and modernizing the economy. During the New Southern Tour, Xi Jinping was also thinking about the Soviet Union, some twenty years later. But this time, his references to the defunct communist giant all touched on how Soviet ideology had slipped, the famed Red Army had stepped aside, and the leadership had betrayed the values of Marxist-Leninism. So Xi urged Party leaders to chain the forces of political liberalism that so often accompanied miracle economic growth of the sort that Deng had launched during a very similar tour in a very similar place some twenty year earlier. The contrast between these two “Southern Tours,” the histories each leader recalled, and by extension their differing priorities could not be starker.

¹ This is a common theme throughout Bill Bishop’s *Sinocism* newsletter. See, for example, “Xi on studying Party history; Reaction to WHO report; Two journalists leave for Taiwan; Arm and Huawei,” *Sinocism*, 31 March 2021.

² Office Hours conversation with He Jianyu, 10 March 2021.

CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION

CONTINUED COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION

4.1 Key Contributions and Limitations: Party Building and the “Ideological Straitjacket”

This thesis demonstrates that the Soviet analogy has been, first and foremost, a political project. The emergence of the analogy is the result of intentional ideology construction carried out over a thirty-year period. The fact that over the years it has been reinterpreted to meet new challenges not only demonstrates the continued salience of the analogy but also reveals the preoccupations of CCP leadership in crucial periods of crisis and change.

To outsiders, the Chinese Communist Party is opaque; its processes are as veiled as its decisions are absolute.¹ Sensitive debates about topics like regime survival, Party reform, anti-corruption, and ethnic policy are never conducted in public. But the Party’s discussions about the Soviet Union’s collapse are a public project. On its face, the analogy is a dire warning about the price of failure. Beneath the surface, the analogy provides backdoor access to the way the CCP broaches its most sensitive topics of governance. By tracing uses of and changes to the Soviet analogy, this paper exposes the ways history has come to replace and subsume the traditional CCP doctrine of Marxist-Leninism as the organizing principle of Chinese ideology-crafting. In short, studying history is a shortcut to studying ideology in a post-communist China.

Certainly the story of the Soviet Union’s fall has been exploited and weaponized to justify a varied slate of CCP policies – from economic reform of the early 1990s to the anti-corruption campaign of the early 2010s – after these policies had already been decided. But

¹ For more on this claim, see Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China’s Communist Rulers*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), especially Prologue: “The Party and its functions are generally masked or dressed up in other guises. When it interacts with the outside world, the Party is careful to keep a low profile. Sometimes, you can’t see the Party at all...The secrecy helps explain why news reports about China routinely refer to the ruling Communist Party, while rarely elaborating on how it actually rules. This book is an attempt to fill that void.” For “Ideological Straitjacket,” see McGregor, 26.

this paper reveals that the story of the Soviet Union's fall has also been instructive for the very creation of these policies in the first place. For example, chapter three of this thesis explains how Soviet ethnic policy informed contemporary ethnic assimilation strategies and how fears of Gorbachev's *perestroika* led to present-day warnings of "historical nihilism." This observation gets to the nature of Applied History itself: more than being merely reactive, analogizing and analogy actually drive policy formulation. As a result, historical analogy should continue to be a lens for interpreting CCP decision-making.

This thesis has demonstrated how the CCP arrived at two incompatible conclusions after studying the Soviet Union's collapse. In chapter two, the message was the urgency of economic reform, the bankruptcy of communism, and the revival of nationalism in its place. In chapter three, the conclusion was to roll back the dangerous liberalizing political forces that had accompanied economic modernization of earlier decades. The primary lessons – ideological decay, "historical nihilism," military disloyalty, and ethnic separatism – actually all negated the importance of economic reform and opening up. The analogy has yet to buckle under the weight of these contradictions and remains prominent in discourse today.

There are three important limitations of a study of this sort: methodological barriers, subject-matter barriers, and source-access barriers. First, the methodology of Applied History is an impactful lens for understanding high-level processes of analogical and historical reasoning. However, one foundational question about Applied History remains subject to further research: to what extent does analogizing drive policy and to what degree is it designed to explain policy after the fact?¹ Second, a longer thesis would benefit from explicit consideration of Western explanations for the Soviet demise. Western scholarship, in general, tends to emphasize the importance to two historical features – leaders and accident – instead of broader economic or social forces. While the intricacies of this analysis are beyond the scope of this study, such consideration of the contrast in explanations between East and West would serve to highlight the distinctiveness of the Chinese narrative.² Finally, language and censorship barriers prevent access to the full archive of CCP sources and lead to two related

¹ For a foundational discussion that broaches this topic, see Fredrik Logevall and Kenneth Osgood, "The Ghost of Munich: America's Appeasement Complex." *World Affairs* 173, no. 2 (2010): 13-26. Numerous scholars have taken up this question in op-eds, including Moshik Temkin, "Historians Shouldn't Be Pundits," *New York Times*, 26 June 2017.

² Chapter 2 of David Shambaugh's *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* provides an excellent discussion of Western perspectives on the Soviet collapse.

problems – both the result of choices by the highest levels of the CCP leadership. One is the problem of the “party line.” This paper looks closely at the published works of CCP leaders. These documents are selected in order to emphasize consensus and unanimity while eliding dissent. The other is the problem of leaked documents, which is a choice of a different sort. Disgruntled leaders may choose to leak internal documents when they disagree with policy outcomes. For example, this paper would not have been able to access the internal Party circular “Communique on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere” or Xi’s internal speech to cadres in Urumqi without the efforts of such leakers. However, neither published nor leaked material can provide a complete picture of CCP internal debate. In sum, this paper acknowledges that some of these limitations are endemic to any study of an authoritarian single-party state, conducted via a methodology, Applied History, that is still new in academic circles.

4.2 Foreign Policy Implications: “Hide and Bide” and the Return of “Containment”

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the Soviet Union’s collapse on framing China’s international behavior and foreign policy posture. The Soviet collapse helped inform the next twenty years of Chinese foreign policy. Most strikingly, the Soviet unrest played a role in the genesis of Deng Xiaoping’s seminal twenty-four character strategy, which served as the tacit, guiding strategy of Chinese foreign policy for 20 years. In August 1991, after Soviet military leaders staged a coup against Gorbachev, one of China’s Eight Elders sent a telegram to Deng’s headquarters suggesting China support the hardline Soviet coup. Deng’s response was, “*taoguang yanghui, juebu dangtou, yousuo zuowei.*”¹ This phrasing, which would come to be codified as part of the twenty-four character strategy, became China’s guiding maxim for twenty years of international behavior. It had come about as an on-the-ground response to chaos in Moscow.

Ultimately, in the chaotic post-Tiananmen and post-Soviet years, something like the 24-character strategy was a necessity, not a choice. It hewed to the lessons of the Soviet

¹ “Avoid the limelight, never take the lead, try to accomplish something.” Quoted in Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 658.

collapse by prioritizing economic development above geopolitical gamesmanship. It reflected China's broader understanding, gleaned from the Soviet collapse, that single party Marxist states were in need of deep domestic reform before they could reap the benefits of hegemony. "Deng consciously sought to create the political space that would allow China to pursue its internal economic modernization without the distraction of external entanglements, to the degree possible," explains one analyst.¹ *Taoguang yanghui* was the international culmination of a period of deep skepticism and insecurity within the Chinese Communist Party leadership. China was playing the long game.

Nowadays, the Soviet analogy informs foreign policy decision-making in a new way. The analogy contains lessons for great power competition with the United States, and, in some ways, offers clues about American policy behavior. In China, an imagined U.S. containment strategy has fast become a rhetorical fact. Noting America's persistent "Cold War mentality," Xi Jinping's close foreign policy advisers believe the time for competition has come. The United States, with its "hegemon mindset," has long tried to "keep down" and "contain" China. China studies the Soviet Union's collapse for clues and lessons in the hope that the coming conflict will be similar enough that it can be informative. "The United States and China are actually in the era of a new Cold War," said Shi Yinhong, a professor of international relations at Renmin University and an adviser to the State Council. "Different from the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, the new Cold War between the US and China features full competition and a rapid decoupling. The US-China relationship is no longer the same as that of a few years ago, not even the same as that of a few months ago."²

Frequency mapping of keywords in Chinese academic foreign policy literature, conducted by Alastair Iain Johnston, also demonstrates the significant growth of the containment meme. The phrase "containing China" appeared in almost 600 Chinese academic journal articles in 2018, up from about 200 mentions in 2001, when China first entered the WTO. The average number of articles on U.S. "containment" in *The People's Daily* has tripled since 2016. The notion of "ideological struggle," has gone from nonexistent

¹ Ashley Tellis et al., "Pursuing Global Reach: China's Not So Long March toward Preeminence," (*National Bureau of Strategic Research*, Strategic Asia 2019), 8.

² "China and US in New Cold War." *South China Morning Post*, 2020, para. 5. For more, see Zhao Minghao, "Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US-China Strategic Competition," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, (2019).

in the late 2000s to extremely common since 2012.¹ This year, Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe, citing scholar Graham Allison's notion of Thucydides's Trap, commented, "containment and counter-containment will be the main theme of bilateral ties in the long term."² China has internalized the rhetorical principles of containment. The lessons of the Soviet Union, the first target of America's "containment" strategy appear all the more important to China today.

Contrary to the presumptions of some American grand strategists, the Cold War framing of today's relationship between the United States and China is not just an American phenomenon. The Cold War analogy is alive and well in China too. Future academic scholarship on this topic should work to identify gaps in understanding between Chinese and American notions of great power competition.

4.3 The Analogy Returns

The story of the Soviet Union's decline is a salient one for Party leadership. It meets the intricate demands of China's illiberal ideology, its searing and unstable history of internal factionalism and external interference, and its cultural heritage that privileges order and hierarchy. How does China navigate such a fraught history? The Soviet analogy is uniquely positioned to serve as the language of leaders, a vehicle for ideological cohesion, and a record of values.

As this thesis has demonstrated, the analogy is the language of China's leaders because, at the highest level, debates about strategic steering have often been conducted by weighing the merits and drawbacks of the Soviet analogy. It is a vehicle for ideological cohesion because public speeches and writings about the Soviet collapse have been an important way the top leadership has transmitted their findings to the wider community of Party cadres and loyalists. And it is a record of values because the analogy itself serves as a

¹ For more, see Alastair Iain Johnston and Adam Breuer, "Memes, Narratives, and the Emergent US-China Security Dilemma," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (August 2019) 32:4, 429-455.

² Meeting of the Central Military Commission at the Fourth Session of the 13th National People's Congress, SCMP, 8 March 2021. For more on Thucydides Trap, see Graham Allison, *Destined for War*. (Boston: Mariner Books, 2017), xiv-xv. Thucydides's Trap is "defined as "the inevitable structural stress that occurs when a rapidly rising power threatens to displace a ruling power," In Thucydides's Trap tensions are inevitable, and great power war is more likely than not. In fact, Allison has assessed sixteen historical cases of Thucydidean rivalries, twelve of which resulted in war. See Allison's Appendix I, "Thucydides's Trap Case File."

vessel for the top concerns and priorities of the Party at any given moment in time – whether in the crisis years after Tiananmen and the fall of the Berlin Wall or during the ideological resurgence of the Xi era. These three characteristics have made the Soviet analogy a formidable tool for governance. As long as Chinese leaders seek lessons from history, the Soviet analogy will continue to hold precarious pride of place.

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RESUME

Christopher Vassallo (魏楷) is an Analyst at Blackstone in New York City. He is a former Schwarzman Scholar and researcher for the Asia Society Policy Institute and the Harvard Belfer Center. His writing has been published by *The Diplomat*, *The National Interest*, and *The Council on Foreign Relations*, where he also worked as an editorial intern. His senior thesis, *Meeting the Soviet Challenge: How History Informed the Makings of a Cold War Strategy, 1945-1949*, received highest honors from Harvard, and he graduated *magna cum laude*. During his time at Harvard, he also served as a teaching fellow for intermediate macroeconomics. As a Schwarzman Scholar, this master's thesis was awarded Tsinghua University's Outstanding Capstone Award. His research centers on the uses of historical analogy and precedent in the formulation of grand strategies in the United States and China. In the future, he is interested in exploring historical models from Chinese history that might help elucidate how the country understands periods of great power politics. He currently assists Dr. A. Wess Mitchell with his academic work on great power competition for the Marathon Initiative. In his spare time, he loves to cook new foods, read the *New Yorker*, and support the Yankees.