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# Democracy Postponed: Chinese Learning from the Soviet Collapse

Neil Munro

### Abstract

This article analyses the significance of Chinese learning from the Soviet collapse with reference to prospects for direct, semi-competitive elections to the National People's Congress. It shows that the decay of the system of soviets, which is a euphemism for the emasculation of the powers of popular assemblies and the empty ritual of elections without choice, is widely perceived as a reason for the Soviet collapse. However, there is a lack of clarity about the functions which the system of soviets, or in China people's congresses, ought to fulfil, with legitimating, legislative, and supervisory functions receiving different emphases, and there is entrenched disagreement about how far China should depart from the traditional Leninist model. Although Gorbachev's reforms are seen as misconceived, in the longer term there may be little alternative to the introduction of direct, semi-competitive elections if the rhetoric of "socialist democracy" is to have any credibility. (Manuscript received August 19, 2008; accepted for publication November 10, 2008)

*Keywords:* China, semi-competitive elections, Soviet collapse, National People's Congress, socialist democracy

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## Studie

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# Aufgeschobene Demokratie: Chinesische Lektionen aus dem Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion

Neil Munro

### Abstract

In diesem Beitrag wird die Bedeutung der Lehren, die in China aus dem Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion gezogen wurden, im Hinblick auf eine mögliche Einführung direkter, semikompetitiver Wahlen zum Nationalen Volkskongress untersucht. Es wird gezeigt, dass der Niedergang des Systems der Sowjets – ein Euphemismus für den Verfall der Macht der Arbeiter-, Bauern- und Soldatenräte und ihrer entleerten Rituale nicht kompetitiver Wahlen – allgemein als eine Ursache für den Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion betrachtet wird. Allerdings besteht kein klares Bild, welche Funktionen das System der Sowjets bzw. das der Volkskongresse in China erfüllen sollte. Legitimierende, legislative und Aufsichtsfunktionen werden unterschiedlich gewichtet und es finden sich tief gehende Meinungsverschiedenheiten darüber, wie weit China vom traditionellen leninistischen Modell abweichen sollte. Obgleich die Reformen unter Gorbatschow als verfehlt betrachtet werden, dürfte es längerfristig kaum eine Alternative zur Einführung direkter, semikompetitiver Wahlen zu den Volkskongressen geben, wenn die Rhetorik einer „sozialistischen Demokratie“ nicht jeglicher Glaubwürdigkeit entbehren soll. (Manuskript eingereicht am 19.08.2008; zur Veröffentlichung angenommen am 10.11.2008)

*Keywords: China, semikompetitive Wahlen, Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion, Nationaler Volkskongress, sozialistische Demokratie*

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## Introduction

The aim of this article<sup>1</sup> is to analyse the significance of learning from the Soviet collapse by Chinese establishment intellectuals with reference to the prospects for semi-competitive elections to the National People's Congress (NPC). By semi-competitive elections, I mean multi-candidate elections operating on the basis of direct universal suffrage under the framework of either a one-party system or one where multiple parties compete under the domination of one party or ruling elite.

China's leaders are adamant that their country is building "socialist democracy" whilst emphasizing that it is a work in progress (Hu 2004; Government of China 2005). They also seek to dampen rising expectations by emphasizing that building democracy in China will take a very long time. Premier Wen reportedly told foreign journalists in December 2005 that just as African Americans had to wait 100 years from emancipation until they acquired genuine civil rights, so building democracy in a country of 1.3 billion people also takes time (Yi 2005). In another interview with foreign media in September 2006, Wen said:

Building democracy, especially direct elections, should proceed gradually in an orderly way according to the national situation. We firmly believe, when the people in the form of direct democracy can manage a village well, in future they can manage a township, and after they can manage a township, in future they can manage a county, and a province until the people really become masters of the country (*dangjia zuozhu*). (Quoted in Sina.com 2006)

In other words, China's leaders have come to see democratization as a very gradual process, controlled from the top but starting at the bottom. Establishment intellectuals interpret their rhetoric differently, some arguing that China can develop its own form of democracy in which alternative candidates compete for the people's vote within the framework of continued Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule (Wang 2006; Wang 2007) and others, such as Yu Keping (2008), saying that democracy can develop first within the party and then extend out to

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the rest of the population. Still others, such as Li Junru, restrict the meaning of Chinese democracy to consensus-building by means of consultation such as already exists in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (Interviews cited in Shambaugh 2008:122f.). What these different views have in common is their rejection of the old system of top-down dictatorship and elections without choice which the CCP inherited from the CPSU. Shambaugh's (2008:Chapter 7) analysis of ongoing organizational reforms makes clear that expanding electoral competition by enfranchising the public at large is one of the last things the CCP may do to shore up its rule, coming a long way after party institution building, improving party discipline, expanding internal party and external consultation, and developing the human capital of cadres. The Central Party School researcher Zhou Tianyong (2004:Chapter 1) suggests that China may some time around 2020 begin a gradual transition lasting thirty to sixty years to full democracy. Given the potential for catastrophe if the process goes wrong, it is not too early to begin thinking about the implications of semi-competitive elections.

Scholars in the West disagree over the prospects for Chinese democracy. Some believe that a long, evolutionary transition is underway (Guo 2003), or at least that the country is moving to some kind of constitutional regime approximating the rule of law (Peerenboom 2002, 2007). Others suggest that though the coming transformation will be elite-led, it will lead to the same result as in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union – the removal of the Communist Party from power (Gilley 2004). Some argue that the Chinese regime is brittle (Shirk 2007) or so beset with problems it is unlikely to achieve its potential (Pei 2006), or even that it is likely to collapse (Chang 2001). Others see the prospects for democracy as uncertain, dependent on whether or not some crisis splits the party elite (Dickson 2003), or they foresee a blended or hybrid regime (Ogden 2002) or else maintain that despite some weakening its core is still totalitarian (Guo 2000). David Shambaugh (2008), to my knowledge the only leading China scholar who has examined Chinese learning from the Soviet collapse in detail, regards the regime as both stable and dynamic, undergoing simultaneous processes of atrophy and adaptation. Although his work is discussed further below, I will preface that discussion by saying that I agree that atrophy and adaptation are both ongoing and that adaptation has so far proved successful, but I am a little more sanguine about the prospects for semi-competitive elections at the national level.

The rest of this article is divided into six sections. The first reviews work already published in the West on Chinese learning from the Soviet collapse. The second compares the Chinese people's congresses and late Soviet electoral systems. It identifies four problems inherent in introducing semi-competitive elections at the national level: malapportionment, the nature of the nomination process, the information costs to voters, and security. The third section provides an overview of Chinese learning from the Soviet collapse since 1990. It finds that although the debate has increased in complexity and broadened in response to ideological initiatives from above, there are also entrenched cleavages which have persisted over time. The fourth section reports on the results of fieldwork. This shows that the view that the decay (*bianxing*) of the system of soviets, which is a euphemism for their lack of real powers and the empty ritual of elections without choice, is widely perceived amongst Sovietologists in Beijing as a reason for the Soviet collapse, without, however, producing any general agreement on the direction political reforms should take in China. The fifth section examines a selection of published works by leading authors on the relationship between the Soviet collapse and the system of soviets. This selection suggests three basic functions which the system of soviets failed to fulfil, or fulfilled badly, namely, electoral legitimation, the development and passage of legislation, and the provision of a means of feedback or popular supervision. However, none of these leading authors seems to have a coherent set of suggestions for how China's system of people's congresses can better fulfil these functions. The final section considers the prospects for semi-competitive elections at the national level.

This study draws upon data gathered in formal interviews with establishment intellectuals in Beijing during April 2007 whilst I was a visiting scholar at the Institute of Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies (IREECAS) of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences as well as academic periodicals and monographs on Soviet history. I make the assumption that when seeking to interpret the Soviet collapse and what it means for China, policy-makers turn first for information to leading authors with recognized expertise. I do not, however, assume that policy-makers have chosen to heed their advice on any particular matter.

## Western Literature on Chinese Learning from the Soviet Collapse

After the beginning of reform and opening up in 1978, Chinese scholars began a major reassessment of Soviet socialism (Rozman 1987). Liberalizers turned for inspiration to early Marx, late Lenin, or Bukharin; emphasized more freedom and less control; saw China as being in a pre-socialist stage or redefined socialism to include freedom and democracy; criticized contemporary Soviet society; were less inclined to accept excuses for major policy errors of the past, including collectivization and the Stalinist purges; were pessimistic about the Soviet economy; and favoured economic systems allowing more participation, reliance on expertise, and material incentives (*ibid.*:372f.). However, the orthodox view, dominant in Soviet studies because it was supported by the top leadership out of concern for political stability, gave a positive assessment of Stalin and a negative one of Khrushchev; treated Lenin as unassailable; was more inclined to emphasize centralized control over the economy; often expressed a hope to see faster Soviet economic growth; and portrayed the Soviet cultural, political, and scientific superstructure in a favourable light (*ibid.*:375f.). After the events of 1989 and the Soviet collapse, it seemed clear that China would remain extremely cautious on democratization for a very long time (Segal 1992). At the 14<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress of 1992, a radical hard-line faction which saw the collapse as a reason to revert to a more traditional style of socialism was defeated (Garver 1993). China returned to full-scale economic reforms, partially frozen in the aftermath of the Tian'anmen Square events, but kept the political system stable.

Both Chinese and Soviet reforms had begun in ideology rather than in institutions, but they had followed different paths: the Chinese reassessment of socialism under Deng Xiaoping's leadership had differed from Gorbachev's in its approach to past leaders and past failures, the questions of humanism and democracy, and the role of the party in society (Sun 1994). In the light of the Soviet debacle, it made sense for the Chinese to reassert these differences. However, reform communism as a viable project required both orthodox reaction to maintain control over politics and liberal progressivism to generate support for reform in economics: Gorbachev was therefore portrayed as having failed in the former and having therefore lost the means to progress in the latter (Sun 1995).

One of the first Western scholars to systematically explore the Chinese literature on the Soviet collapse was Christopher Marsh (Marsh 2003, 2005). Seeking to explain divergent outcomes of reform between Russia and China, he makes two points: first, that “interaction effects” including cross-national learning are an understudied independent variable in comparative politics; and second, that learning from other countries contributes to successful reform. His work demonstrates that China was open to learning from the USSR, and in addition he shows that Russia failed to do the reverse.

Shambaugh (2008) has published the major work on Chinese learning from the Soviet collapse. He summarizes the factors which Chinese establishment intellectuals and policy-makers identified as contributing to the collapse (ibid.:62) and lists under similar headings a range of factors identified by Western Sovietologists (2008:18). Looking at both together, it is clear that there is substantial agreement between the two literatures, despite terminological differences. Both emphasize as a direct cause the impact of Gorbachev’s policies, particularly his hasty political reforms and ideological conversion to social democracy. As background factors, both point to economic stagnation and low living standards, the command economy’s weak incentive systems, the problems of collectivized agriculture, the lack of integration with the international economy, the burden of excessive military expenditure, and the lack of a coherent economic reform strategy under *perestroika*. Both emphasize as social and cultural factors the Soviet bloc’s isolation, as well as the phenomena of alienation in the work place, industrial unrest, bad relations among ethnic groups, rising nationalism, a moral vacuum or “crisis of faith”, and the effects on public consciousness of a sudden opening up of the previously closed information space. Both literatures identify as factors leading to the collapse imperial overstretch and the genetic defect of the USSR’s *faux*-federalist design. In addition, Shambaugh (2008:62) identifies a stream of Chinese thinking on the Soviet collapse emphasizing the USSR’s overcentralization of power, lack of regularized means of leadership succession, lack of inner-party democracy, ossified ideology, and the emasculation of the role of the soviets as contributing factors. These critiques, which essentially amount to denunciations of Stalinism, partly echo Khrushchev’s secret speech at the 20<sup>th</sup> CPSU Party Congress in 1956 but studiously ignore any similarities to China’s own system of government under Mao (Shambaugh 2008:66). Shambaugh does not, however, explore the theme of the “emasculation” of the soviets in detail.

After reviewing the explanations, Shambaugh (2008:76-81) describes the

lessons drawn, dividing them into two groups: general lessons and prescriptions specific to the CCP. In terms of the former, there are exhortations to be ideologically flexible; to avoid haste in reform; to learn from capitalism; and to ensure synergy, not zero-sum competition, between the strategic interests of the state on the one hand and the people's material interests on the other. The Chinese also congratulate themselves on having made economic reforms their priority and emphasize the importance of building up the CCP as an institution. There are calls to pay close attention to two of the Soviet Union's blind spots: ethnic relations and the feelings of intellectuals. The party believes it must be vigilant against the West's "soft-power" strategies, which they call "peaceful evolution". In terms of specific lessons, some CCP theoreticians have identified corruption as the number one danger for party rule. Others point to the need to improve cadre selection criteria and to establish a collective leadership with consultative decision-making systems. For some, this means enhancing internal party democracy. The media should remain under CCP control, but propaganda should not be allowed to become dull and dogmatic. At a philosophical level, the party has reinforced the red line separating its vision of the future from "humanistic and democratic socialism" of a European type.

Shambaugh (2008:177ff.) considers continued authoritarian rule by the CCP the most likely scenario, but suggests that the CCP might allow limited political competition which doesn't threaten its dominance. One way of doing this, he suggests, would be to strengthen the NPC, which under current arrangements he calls "a puppet legislature that essentially rubber stamps party policies"; another would be to beef up the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (2008:179). The 3,000-strong NPC plenum meets only once a year for two weeks at a time, and nominations to its 175-odd member Standing Committee are controlled by the CCP Political Bureau. Nevertheless, together the NPC and its Standing Committee handle a large volume of complex legislation: it passed 176 laws between 1978 and 1994 and more than 400 others from 1995 to 2002 (Pei 1998:176; Government of China 2007). The view of them as "rubber-stamp" bodies has been challenged, for instance, on the grounds of assertiveness as measured by delegate motions and dissenting votes, negative votes or abstentions from 10 to 30 per cent being quite common in the 1990s (Tanner & Chen 1998:39; Tanner 1999:Table 5.2, 84-89; Potter 1994). To my knowledge, there has been no detailed exploration of the implications of Chinese learning from the Soviet collapse for reforms to the NPC role and election system.



## People's Congress Elections Compared to Late Soviet Elections

Before Gorbachev, Soviet elections were a byword for a total lack of competitiveness and mobilization turned into an empty ritual (Pravda 1978): in the 1984 Supreme Soviet elections, there were 1,499 candidates to fill 1,500 seats, one candidate having died on the eve of the poll (White et al. 1997:21). The 1988 democratization reforms replaced this rubber-stamp parliament with a Congress of 2,250 deputies, who in turn elected a new Supreme Soviet of 542 deputies, constituting a real parliament, debating and adopting bills and overseeing government (ibid.:23-28). Ordinary people were brought in as active rather than passive participants in the electoral process: in the March 1989 elections to the Congress, 1,431 candidates contested 750 seats in population-based single-member districts, and 1,419 candidates contested 750 national-territorial single-member districts. In addition, there were 871 candidates for 750 seats reserved for public organizations, including 100 delegates of the CPSU, at that time still the ruling party with a constitutional monopoly of power. The CPSU won 87 per cent of the seats, more than the roughly three-quarters they routinely won by quota under non-competitive conditions. Although revolutionary in the Soviet context, Gorbachev's electoral reforms were not the first instance of semi-competitive elections under a Soviet-type regime. Hungary had allowed multiple candidates to compete in local and National Assembly elections from 1983 (Barany 1990; Márkus 1999).

In China, semi-competitive electoral systems already exist at the level of county and township people's congresses as well as village councils, although deputies at prefectural, provincial, and central levels are elected by deputies at the level below (Jacobs 1991; Shi 1999; Manion 2000; Zhao 2000; Diamond & Myers 2001; Schubert 2002; He 2007; Schubert & Chen 2007). At county and township levels, the number of candidates exceeds the number of posts by a ratio from one-third to one, whilst at higher levels, the ratio is one-fifth to one-half (China Election Law 2004:Article 30). At both levels, a process of consultation (*xieshang*) takes place to reduce the number of candidates with the aim of achieving representation of different geographical areas, the Communist Party, united front parties, non-party members, various bureaucratic systems (*xitong*), occupational categories, or according to gender and ethnicity (Jacobs 1991; Manion 2000). At both levels, opportunities to campaign are minimal and voters have little information about the candidates. In sum, first-past-the-post

elections with Chinese characteristics offer voters tightly controlled choices. The main similarities and differences between China's elections and the Soviet elections of 1989 are summarized below.

Table 1 Chinese and Late Soviet Election Laws Compared

	USSR Congress 1989	China
Highest direct elections:	All-Union	County/Township
Apportionment:	One vote, one value*	Urban vote 4 x rural
Nominations by voters:	500 or more voters	10 or more voters
Nomination process:	Relatively open	Tightly controlled
Candidates per seat:	Unlimited	Limited
Turnout requirement:	50 per cent	50 per cent
To win a seat requires:	50 per cent+1 vote	50 per cent+1 vote

Note: \* population-based seats.

Source: White et al. 1997:23-28; Jacobs 1991; Manion 2000; China Election Law 2004.

There are at least four problems which China's leaders would have to deal with before allowing direct semi-competitive elections at the national level. The first is malapportionment, which demands a solution because of the risk that political entrepreneurs could make an issue of it under semi-competitive conditions. The Chinese regime has already started to reduce this: counting as only one-eighth of the value of each urban vote before 1995, each rural vote now counts as one-quarter, and the question of equal representation appears to be moving up the NPC's agenda (Xinhua 2008). The second is the nature of the nomination process. Opening up nominations would entail the functional necessity of both raising the formal barriers to avoid an impossibly large number of candidates and making *xieshang* a more transparent, rule-bound process. A minimum of 500 voters were needed to put forward a candidate in the Soviet elections, and the final slate was approved by a selection conference held in each constituency or social organization for which candidates sought election (White et al. 1997:24). The third is the information problem: how are voters to choose amongst candidates without parties or who overwhelmingly belong to one party? In direct elections at the county or township level, the voters may know the principal candidates by reputation at least. When the constituency has a population of hundreds of thousands or even millions, this is not feasible. The organization of various

platforms, factions, and proto-parties within and outside of the CPSU followed hard on the heels of the first semi-competitive elections in the USSR (Fish 1995). If the CCP did not want to allow multiple parties to compete or if it wanted to prevent the formation of factions within itself, it would have to find some other way of reducing information costs. Wang Changjiang (2006) rejects the view that allowing competition for the popular vote inevitably leads to fragmentation and factionalism on the grounds that ideological conflict in politics has in general receded and party institutions can cope with internal conflict. Yet his argument defies the precautionary principle that it is safest to assume that what can go wrong will go wrong, and doesn't take into account the problem of how voters choose. The fourth problem is the problem of security. In the late Soviet elections, although some local party bosses won in their own bailiwick, others were soundly beaten, including 38 first secretaries, the leaders of Latvia and Lithuania, and the regional first secretary of Leningrad (White et al. 1997:28). In addition, Boris Yeltsin won the Moscow seat with 89 per cent of the vote, despite Gorbachev's attempts to frustrate his campaign. He thus began a political comeback. Even under conditions which are only semi-competitive, weak leadership can allow the political opposition to turn the tables, and incumbent authoritarian leaders have to consider that risk.

### Overview of Chinese Written Sources

Below I offer a sampling of what has been published in China since 1990 on the reasons for the Soviet collapse and the lessons for reform, with the aim of characterizing the discursive context for more detailed discussion below on the relationship between the collapse and the system of soviets. I began with the hypothesis that the Chinese literature should be divided into periods: that of the early 1990s should reflect orthodox reaction to the events of 1989; the later 1990s and early 2000s should reflect Jiang Zemin's emphasis on building the economy and the theory of "Three Represents"; whilst the most recent work should give stronger emphasis to political reforms. However, I did not find this framework entirely satisfactory. For one thing, Liu Keming and Jin Hui (1990:Chapter 24) were able to publish in 1990 a political and economic history of the Soviet Union which is rather positive in tone about Gorbachev's democratization: although it talked about strengthening the party's leading role, it also dealt with the separation of the party and the state, reforms to the soviets, increasing political participation, and reforms to ideology, including Gorbachev's

New Thinking and “objective” reassessments of the past as a consequence of glasnost.

In the principal journal of Soviet studies, *Sulian Dongou Wenti* (Soviet and East European Affairs),<sup>2</sup> which until the end of 1992 was classified as *neibu* (internal), Pan Deli (1992) offered one of the earliest assessments of the reasons for the collapse, emphasizing mistakes by Gorbachev such as giving political reforms priority, indecision at crucial moments, allowing the growth of opposition and ethnic division, making concessions in Eastern Europe, and turning to the West for support. In the same issue, Li Jingjie (1992) offered some “lessons”, including validation of the priority of developing productive forces, viewing socialism as a work in progress, and learning from capitalism, as well as the view that socialism should be prosperous and democratic, that ruling parties must cultivate themselves, handle relations with intellectuals properly, pay careful attention to ethnic policy, and adopt the correct reform strategy and tactics. A reactionary account of the Soviet collapse with lessons was written by Ding Weiling et al. (1992), who emphasized as causes the West’s peaceful evolution strategy, described social democracy as a staging post to capitalism, accused Gorbachev of ideological capitulation, and so on. The book called for building the ideological equivalent of the Great Wall, promised the inevitable triumph of socialism, and recommended patience.

In 1996, Jiang Zemin called on Chinese intellectuals to investigate the reasons for the Soviet collapse and the lessons for China (Lu 2001). Orthodox scholars continued to argue that the collapse of Soviet socialism was mainly the fault of Gorbachev, and particularly his adoption of “humanistic and democratic socialism” (Ma 1997; Zhou 2000). Such accounts often took the line that the collapse of Soviet socialism was only a temporary setback for the movement worldwide (Xu 1997), or took a class-struggle perspective in analysing developments in contemporary Russia (Zhou et al. 2000). Longer works covering the whole Soviet period critiqued each leader from Stalin onwards but nevertheless put the principal blame for the collapse on Gorbachev; the orthodox lessons were to insist on party leadership, manage internal struggle better, improve cadre selection, strengthen grass-roots organizations, and fight against corruption (Wei

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<sup>2</sup> From the beginning of 1992 the journal was known as *Dongou Zhongya Yanjiu* (East European and Central Asian Studies) and from 2003 as *Eluosi Zhongya Dongou Yanjiu* (Russian, Central Asian and East European Studies).

1998). However, other scholars took a more “Dengist” line, reasserting both Marxism and reform and opening up, and putting more emphasis on Soviet economic failures as a cause of the collapse (Wu et al. 1997).

After the adoption of the Three Represents as official ideology, there was a general broadening of discussion. Authors not only parroted the new slogan by claiming it was what the CPSU should have done, but also emphasized the need to learn from other ruling parties (Liu 2001; Pan 2001). The Three Represents provided an ideological platform from which to argue that the Soviet collapse was caused by a loss of public confidence or legitimacy (Zhou 2001). Some authors developed the argument that the sources of legitimacy include both societal values and government performance, and part of the reason for the collapse was the CPSU’s failure to cultivate it (Hao 2002; Lu & Wei 2005). Other authors discussed the Soviet collapse primarily in terms of a generalized crisis of faith, and the lessons to be drawn included paying due attention to the danger of corruption (Huang 2002). Some focused on the CPSU’s failure to reform itself (Wang 2001) and to involve the people in policy-making (Zuo 2001). However, Lu Nanquan (2001), a leading author whose work is discussed more fully below, argued that the Stalinist model was not reformable: it had too many systemic problems and was a dead end. This was a view which he claimed (Lu 2001:4) to have circulated internally as early as August 1989. Integrated explanations attributed the collapse to the combination of systemic problems and poor leadership, as well as ethnic relations and external factors such as defeat in Afghanistan (Zhang 2001; Xu et al. 2001). Orthodox authors, however, continued to insist that the main reason for the Soviet collapse was Gorbachev, in particular his rejection of the past, his abuse of the principle of democratic centralism, his abandonment of the party, his blind copying of Western institutions, and his adoption of social democracy (Chen 2002; Mei 2006; Zhang 2007). Some even claimed that he was the prisoner of vested interests who deliberately set out to destroy the Soviet Union (Liu 2002).

## Interviews

In April 2007 I interviewed 20 experts at IREECAS and other institutes in Beijing on the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union and corresponding lessons for China. All respondents were given an assurance of anonymity. Note that this was not a representative sample survey but only a “straw poll” to be used as a hermeneutic device in guiding the interpretation of written sources

(see Appendix for more details). The questionnaire asked respondents to place in rank order a total of 37 possible reasons for the Soviet collapse, grouped under three major headings, political, economic, and external factors, and 11 subheadings corresponding to themes emphasized in the Chinese literature. The subheadings were: for politics, excess centralization of power, ideological rigidity, lack of democracy in the party, decay (*bianxing*) of soviets, federalism, and ethnic factors; for economics, shortages, economic decline, backward economic structures, excessive centralization of economic management, and contingent or non-systemic factors. Then the rankings were converted to an ordinal scale where one means least important and five means most important (see Appendix for the method used in constructing the scale). The causes identified as extremely important with a median score of five were: excessive militarization of the economy, policy mistakes by Gorbachev in the course of economic reforms, the habit of unanimous support and autocratic leadership style, ossification of ideology and propaganda work, and the “discounting of the soviets’ power and competences, and the result that their procedures became formalistic”. An additional item allowed respondents to emphasize the process by which the “elections became formalistic, thus causing representative organs to become distant from the electorate”, which had a median rating of 3.8, ranking alongside such factors as abuse of power and pursuit of private interests by cadres and the monopolization of truth by the party (both 3.7). The questionnaire also offered space to volunteer reasons for the collapse. One senior interviewee volunteered as a primary reason that, “the people’s rights to participate in politics were not realized”. Another senior interviewee, by contrast, gave as a primary reason “accepting Western values, promoting the ‘democratic socialist’ line of reforms”.

In the course of more informal discussion, a senior scholar summed up the key reasons as dogmatism and “closedness” (*fengbi*). The absolute claims of the CPSU propaganda apparatus in favour of the Soviet system or against the Western system could not be sustained. Over the long term, they elicited scepticism which eventually led to a crisis of faith. Glasnost opened up a vacuum because people had no critical ability because of their lack of exposure to alternative ideas. The West’s ideas thus acquired huge influence, whether or not they were suitable for the USSR. Another senior scholar contended that the CPSU itself created the conditions for the collapse, for example, by restricting internal democracy, although the personal qualities of the Soviet leadership (for example, Gorbachev’s being too soft and indecisive) also played an important role. At

a different institute, a senior scholar disagreed with the idea that ideological rigidity led to the Soviet collapse. He cited many changes in ideology from Lenin through to Khrushchev and then said that the main reason was that Gorbachev had turned his back on Marxism-Leninism.

After discussing reasons for the collapse, I offered interviewees the opportunity to rank order a set of 13 “historical lessons” (*lishi jiaoxun*). The most important of these were to insist on party leadership and the socialist road (median 5.0), to carry out economic reforms freeing and developing productive forces (median 4.7), and that unity of the country is the highest principle (3.5). As lessons of second-order importance (median 3.0), respondents ranked “reducing economic differences and realizing collective prosperity” and “carrying out political reforms, perfecting and improving socialist democracy and the legal system guarantees the country’s development”. Lessons volunteered by respondents showed that support for political reform came with widely varying caveats. For example, one senior scholar suggested, “we shouldn’t completely deny the Stalinist model or the Soviet model of the socialist system”, “we should gradually develop and improve socialist democracy and strengthen the party’s system of democratic centralism”, and “we should resolutely oppose bureaucratism, prevent the appearance of special interest groups within the party and the betrayal of the people’s interests”. However, another respondent, also in favour of political reform, suggested, “as the people’s cultural level rose, the CPSU should have tried to expand their political rights, for example, electing officials”. Yet another echoed Wen Jiabao’s rhetoric cited earlier: “Reforms should be carried out under conditions of social stability, on the basis of development”, and “reforms should be carried out under the leadership of a progressive ruling party, in a planned, step-by-step way, relying on the support of the masses”.

In the course of informal discussions, one interviewee explained why he found it impossible to imagine China without the party’s leadership. Because China is so large, so complex and diverse, if it lacks a strong nucleus of leadership, the country could easily run into problems. Moreover, small problems could quickly develop into big problems, on the scale of ethnic conflicts, civil war, and so on. He emphasized that the socialist road chosen by China is not the same one followed by the Soviet Union, nor the same one followed by China in previous decades. It does not exclude a market economy, nor does it exclude certain political reforms, such as democratization. According to this scholar, the main lesson to be drawn from the Soviet collapse is that the Soviet socialist road was a

dead end or extremely problematic. But he expressed optimism that under CCP leadership and by following its socialist road, China would find a bright future. Chaotic democracy of the Taiwanese type (fist fights in parliament, etc.) was, this respondent claimed, “unimaginable” (*bu ke xiangxiang*) on the mainland. These views were echoed by another who emphasized that there is nothing to replace the CCP in order to avoid chaos. This scholar also criticized Westerners for viewing Chinese politics as a simplistic struggle of reformers versus conservatives, and opined that the CCP was not chosen by the people but by history. Another respondent emphasized that Chinese insights are informed by the fact that China travelled the same path as the Soviet Union, that China does not have the same history as Western countries, and that history is something which one ignores at one’s peril. He expressed confidence that China can avoid the fate of the USSR mainly through gradual political, economic, and social reforms. A senior scholar emphasized that the principal aims of the CCP are development and stability. This means avoiding political mistakes, sticking to the socialist path, and pursuing reforms step by step. Yeltsin and Gorbachev’s big mistake, in his view, was to try to jump straight to a Western system through a mechanical copying of its institutions. However, another respondent who did not tick the box “To preserve the unity of the country we must insist on the socialist road and the leadership of the CCP” explained this omission by saying that the real issue is how to lead, not what system or what ideology is used to support policy. In this respondent’s view, the main lesson for China of the Soviet collapse was the importance of gradually opening up, of carrying out political reforms such as mandatory retirement ages for officials, of encouraging the use of market mechanisms, and also of not engaging in confrontations or interfering in other countries’ internal affairs.

As regards elections, a senior scholar suggested that an important lesson for China is gradually introducing electoral practices starting with institutions at the bottom of the political system, rather than at the top as Gorbachev had done, avoiding the formalism of having as many candidates as there are posts, and introducing competition gradually. He cited village elections as a useful tutelary practice. Another respondent specifically mentioned the introduction of the Congress of People’s Deputies by Gorbachev as an example of a misconceived reform. The mistake, according to this person’s view, was not in introducing semi-competitive elections but in returning to the idea of “all power to the soviets” without first separating judicial, executive, and legislative functions. The



replies of other respondents, however, indicated that expansion of electoral competition and separation of powers were beyond the pale.

### Close Reading of Selected Works

One of the things I found intriguing about the results of my interviews was that, although there appeared to be widespread agreement that the system of soviets or councils in the USSR was dysfunctional and contributed to the collapse, the responses couldn't tell me what the function of such institutions should be, why they didn't work in the Soviet Union, and how similar institutions could be made to work better in China. To clarify these issues, I did a close reading of a selection of book-length works on Soviet history by authors who occupy or have occupied key positions in the academic hierarchy of Chinese Sovietology or related fields. As a selection, the list is not intended to be exhaustive.

These works are: Chen Zhihua et al. (2004), *Sulian xing wang shi gang* (An Outline History of the Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union), Xu Xin et al. (2001), *Chaoji daguo de bengkui: Sulian jieti de yuanyin tanxi* (Collapse of a Superpower: Analysing the Reasons for the Collapse of the Soviet Union), Xing Guangcheng's (1998), *Sulian gaoceng juece 70 nian: cong Liening dao Ge'erbaqiaofu* (70 Years of High-Level Policy-making in the Soviet Union: from Lenin to Gorbachev), and Lu Nanquan et al. (2002), *Sulian xing wang shi lun* (On the Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union). Chen Zhihua is a fellow of the academy from the Institute of World History. His second co-author, Wu Enyuan, is a fellow of the academy, deputy director at the Institute of Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, and a CCP committee secretary. Xing Guangcheng is the current director of IREECAS, Xu Xin and Lu Nanquan are retired fellows of the academy, both also from IREECAS and both eminent scholars in their field. Lu's second co-author, Jiang Changbin, is director of the Centre for International Strategic Studies at the Central Party School. Their works exhibit both liberalizing and orthodox shades of opinion.

For Chen Zhihua (Chen et al. 2004:64-68), the function of the system of soviets as a means for party rule is sufficient unto itself. They explain its origins as follows. First, they argue that the multiparty system emerging in Russia at the end of 1917, which found its clearest expression in the Constitutional Assembly elected in November, was illegitimate because it did not reflect the "real situation in terms of changed class relations" (ibid.:67). Having reported the results of those elections, in which, out of a total of 715 seats, the Bolsheviks won only 175,

the Social Revolutionary Party (Right) won 370 seats, the Social Revolutionary Party (Left) 40 seats, the Constitutional Democrats 17, the Mensheviks 15, and diverse others 98 seats, they then discount these results on the following grounds: first, the majority of the proletariat supported the Bolsheviks; second, the peasants weren't clear on the difference between the Social Revolutionary left and right wings; third, the masses hadn't understood the "meaning" of the October Revolution; fourth, certain regions hadn't yet established soviets; and fifth, the bourgeoisie were out to twist the revolution. In other words, although the Bolsheviks lost the election, the election results should be ignored. Chen et al. (2004:75-83) further argue that the system of government established by Lenin combined, through the principle of democratic centralism, both effective leadership and the full realization of the people's rights to participate in politics. After the provisional government was overthrown on 7 November, the Second Congress of the All Russia Soviet of Workers and Soldiers seized power, but these authors do not mention any of Lenin's tactical concessions to multipartyism or democratic supervision of government. Instead, they reiterate Bolshevik claims that the soviets represented a new form of government, the dictatorship of the proletariat, in which through the soviets, power had been given to the vast majority of the people, formerly oppressed and exploited; that they were directly connected to the people, being elected by the people and subject to recall; that they constituted the advance guard of the workers, and therefore, in order to implement the dictatorship of the proletariat, had the right and duty to govern (Chen et al. 2004:78).

In a piece which sets out to refute some "popular ideas" about learning from the Soviet collapse, the second author, Wu Enyuan (2006a:227) contrasts "autocracy" (*zhuanduan*) and "centralization of power" (*jiquan*), which he associates with "totalitarianism" (giving the word in Russian), against "authority" (*quanwei*) and "centralism" (*jizhong*) which he associates with "authoritarianism" (again, in Russian). Wu argues that the difference between totalitarianism and authoritarianism is a question of degree, and that Gorbachev's error was in overemphasizing democracy at the expense of authority, or "throwing the baby out with the bath water". In another piece dealing with the topic of post-Soviet nostalgia, Wu quotes Deng Xiaoping's statement on Stalin:

We can't require a great leader, a great personage and thinker to have no faults or mistakes. That kind of requirement is not the attitude of a Marxist [...] The Party Centre and the Chinese people can never do the

type of thing that Khrushchev did. (Wu 2006b:39)

Xu Xin (Xu et al. 2001:54-62) emphasize that the weakness of the soviets rendered them unable to defend the regime when Gorbachev's reforms threatened it. This was precisely due to their undemocratic nature: elected in single-candidate elections without choice, from a slate chosen by party committees, often as not, for achievements in a non-political role, they were collectively incapable of shouldering the burden placed on them by their formal constitutional position as the supreme organs of state authority. Through such mechanisms as overlapping membership between the soviets and the executive organs, the concentration of power in the executive committees of the soviets, the supervision of these executive committees by party committees at the corresponding level, and the centralization of power in the branch ministries which controlled enterprises "vertically" from Moscow, the theoretical relationship was reversed so that the soviets became accountable to their executive organs rather than vice versa. Xu et al. (2001:390f.) suggest that an important lesson derived from the Soviet collapse is to develop the socialist legal system through a continuous process of improvement and standardization of legal norms. They (2001:399f.) treat Gorbachev's democratization as an excessive veering to "the right" which was caused by the long-term excessive "left" orientation of Soviet policy. They (2001:387ff.) are emphatic that the party, encompassing managers and experts at every level and of every stripe, must remain in its leading role and stick to the socialist road in order to guarantee that the people's and the country's interests are put first. The goal of democratic reforms, they argue, should be to create "socialist democracy"; however, this is not Western-style democracy, but democracy operating on the principle of democratic centralism (Xu et al. 2001:390f).

Xing's (1998:495f.) view of the political system is functionalist: a healthy system produces policies which benefit the people. He argues that the party needs to earn a sufficient level of genuine, as opposed to coerced, popular support (ibid.:539ff.). On the respective roles of party and state, Xing presents a view often seen as traditionally Leninist: the party's role is to make strategic decisions and that of the state to implement them. The party should therefore act through the state (ibid.:587-594), and it should act within the law (ibid.:604f.). He (ibid.:612ff., 620f.) emphasizes that the role of the soviets or the people's congresses is to act as a conduit for popular feedback: the party should take care not to block this important channel of communication. He argues that the Soviet

“tragedy” (*beiju*) was that the CPSU became alienated from the people because the system of soviets was emasculated by the party system and by the system of executive authority. According to him, the lack of political freedom and genuine popular elections resulted in the concentration of power in the hands of a few and thereby caused alienation. This eventually became the main reason for the party’s self-destruction.

According to Xing (*ibid.*:533f.), Gorbachev’s political reforms brought a cacophony of new voices onto the political stage, causing a rapid political overheating and a dangerous loss of control. However, he also argues against the traditional Soviet system of top-down leadership and unanimity and in favour of establishing sufficient democracy within the party to ensure vigorous and healthy theoretical and policy debates (*ibid.*:539ff.). As to internal party splits, he (*ibid.*:750f.) quotes Trotsky approvingly on the need to stick to a golden mean between complete unanimity and being riven by internal strife. Stalin’s suppression of any and all internal disagreement should be avoided, but factions should also be prevented from becoming too large and too permanent.

Lu Nanquan and co-authors (2002:251-258) describe a widening gulf between the idea of unified legislative, executive, and judicial authority under the supervision of the soviets and actual practice in the USSR. Lenin’s *April Theses* and *The State and Revolution* written in 1917 proposed a framework, based on the model of the Paris Commune, including popularly elected soviets overseeing the work of executive organs at each level of government, but leaving the role of the Bolshevik Party undefined (Lu et al. 2002:251-254). After gaining power, Lenin changed his opinions on the role of the soviets and their method of election. Faced with governing a huge country with low levels of literacy and development, a rebellion by “Whites”, and foreign intervention, Lenin abandoned “communard” democracy in favour of a new model, in which the soviets would be led by the Bolshevik Party, the party would use the soviets as the means for leading state and society, and trade unions and other social organizations would strengthen linkages between the party and the masses. The executive, in the form of the Council of People’s Commissars (*Sovmarkom*) under Lenin, duplicated and increasingly supplanted the soviets’ legislative powers. Elections were effectively replaced by a system of appointment, and other parties were squeezed out.

Lu et al. (2002:257f.) identify four problems with the relationship between the emerging system of soviets and the Communist Party: first, duplication of powers and over-centralization resulted in a deterioration in the quality of

decision-making; second, the absence of checks and balances made the system excessively dependent on the personal qualities of top leaders at each level; third, it encouraged proliferation of official posts which they identify with “bureaucratism” (*guanliao zhuyi*); and fourth, it encouraged “replacement of government by the Party” (*yi dang dai zheng*), which they identify (*ibid.*:258) with the loss of popular sovereignty. Xu Xin et al. (2001:44f.) associate *yi dang dai zheng* with the distraction of party cadres from their main task of providing “general political leadership”. Chen et al. (2004:224) claim that *yi dang dai zheng* has two manifestations: first, the party seizing control of powers of appointment in executive and economic management organs of the state and, second, assuming powers of direction of their professional activity.

Lu et al. (2002:855f.) cite Huntington (1968) to the effect that one thing Communist governments are good at is controlling their societies to preserve social stability and to govern: once they lose this advantage, they lose their *raison d'être*. Of the leading authors examined closely here, they (Lu et al. 2002:869ff.) are the boldest in their endorsement of democratic reforms. This does not mean they approve of Gorbachev's policies. Indeed, they argue that one of his mistakes was to introduce an excess of democracy or to pursue democracy as an end in itself, with the result that expert opinions on crucial questions of reform strategy and purpose were ignored, and steps to dismantle the system of vertical responsibility were not thwarted (*ibid.*:849-51). Arguing from the position that socialism must make people better off if it is to be successful, Lu et al. (*ibid.*:875f.) extend the idea of being “better off” into the political domain. They contend that one of the reasons why Communist parties have not been more successful in contesting elections in post-Communist Europe is that although transition brought economic hardship, the old regime not only failed to bring sufficient prosperity, but it also “did even more badly in the building of democratic politics” (*ibid.*:871). They call for the building of a type of “socialist democracy” which borrows from Western countries elements of their judicial systems, civil service systems, and even electoral systems. In endorsing the principle of democratic centralism, they argue that the emphasis should be “democratic” rather than “centralist”.

## The Soviet Collapse and Prospects for Semi-Competitive Elections

To a certain extent, democracy may have replaced communism as the indefinitely delayed utopia, and in the meantime, as Shambaugh (2008) has shown, reform is incremental and aimed at preserving the system rather than changing it. Lu and Wei (2005:28) argue that the legitimacy of the Soviet system rested in part on people's belief that they would have a better life in future, to the extent that they were willing to make moral and material sacrifices, but that after several decades indefinite delay caused a loss of belief in the eventual achievement of the future ideal. They argue further (*ibid.*:29) that although economic achievements have given the CCP a vast reserve of popular trust which new democracies in Eastern Europe do not enjoy (*cf.* Cheng 2005), eventually the continuing marketization of the Chinese economy will reduce the role of the CCP and, hence, also the credit which it can claim.

Zhang and Xing (2006) promote the view that developing internal party democracy can eventually lead to a broader "people's democracy" which would resolve the CCP's perennial problem of legitimacy. In this context, the Soviet experience is relegated to the status of a "negative example" whilst the CCP is implicitly compared to the enfranchised bourgeoisie of nineteenth-century Europe. There are two problems with the idea that internal party democracy can be a substitute for popular democracy. First, it sets the CCP up as an elite who, rather like white South Africans under apartheid, are separated from the masses by their political enfranchisement. This sits ill with the CCP's proletarian and peasant tradition. The second is that, as Pei Minxin (2007) suggests, internal party democracy can also lead to internal party paralysis. If the party were to go down the route of developing genuine internal democracy, its 80 million members would exhibit similar cleavages to the country as a whole, and the resulting struggle would be complicated by the fact that the losing side would be tempted to appeal for support to the non-party majority. This is not to suggest that internal party democracy would be impossible, but only that it could create a situation even more dynamic and unstable than just giving every adult a vote in elections to the NPC.

The message of Chinese learning from the Soviet collapse is conservative. Authors focus on the problem of regime security. Such conservatism is understandable because of the collapse's dismal aftermath, which many of today's

leading Sovietologists witnessed first hand, and also because of the Sovietologists' role as guardians of the common Communist legacy. However, even amongst this specialized group, there is a widespread view that the traditional Soviet system was not democratic enough, and that to avoid its fate, the Chinese regime must involve the people more in government. The rhetoric of China's leaders reiterates the need for patience but at the same time encourages the belief in evolutionary progress, whilst the practice of semi-competitive elections at the local level propagates the principle that legitimacy is acquired through a peaceful, orderly, but competitive struggle for the people's vote. Semi-competitive elections at the national level are therefore in the paradoxical position of being both extremely probable in the long term and very unlikely in the short term.

### **Appendix: Details of Fieldwork**

Themes: reasons for collapse of Soviet Union and lessons for China.

Method: formal interviews (no sample frame), each respondent each asked to recommend two others; some interviewees identified through bibliographic research.

Instrument: Chinese language questionnaire (available from the author) with two questions, one on reasons for the collapse and one on lessons for China. For each question, interviewees could rank as many answers as they wished, or leave them unmarked, which they were told counted as assigning the lowest possible rank. Ordinal ranks were then converted to an interval scale ranging from 1=not all important to 5=very important using the formula  $1+4(1-(r-1)/(M-1))$  where  $r$  is the ordinal rank assigned by each interviewee, and  $M$  is a variable equal to one plus the maximum ordinal number assigned. The median is the middle score when replies on the interval scale are sorted in ascending order.

Results: 20 questionnaires completed by scholars/professionals at: IREECAS (7), Institute of Marxism-Leninism (8), Institute of Political Science (1), CASS Centre for Documentation and Information (1), CPC Central Party School (1), Beijing University Department of International Relations (1), People's Daily (1).

Of which: senior (fellow of academy, professor, director, etc.): 6; mid-rank (candidate fellow, deputy director, etc.): 6; junior (Ph.D., post-doc, etc.): 8.

Statistical validity: Because this is not a representative sample survey, no statistical inferences are made but results are used as a hermeneutic device to guide exploration of written sources.

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