



## BOOK REVIEW

ARINCHEVA, DARIA A., and ALEXANDER V. PANTSOV, Transl. by Steven I. Levine. *The Kremlin's Chinese Advance Guard. Chinese Students in Soviet Russia, 1917–1940.* [Chinese Worlds, Vol. 38.] Routledge, Oxon [etc.] 2023. xx, 264 pp. Ill. £125.00. (E-book: £35.99.)

In the Socialist world, factional struggle was a common yet tragic feature. It could be argued that the Sino-Soviet split was the determinant factor of the disintegration of the Socialist bloc at some point. When one learns about the political environment of Socialist countries, factional struggle continuously stands out. However, it is noteworthy that these struggles had a humane angle beyond politics, which increases the complexity of the phenomenon.

One's first impression on reading Arincheva and Pantsov's timely book is a certain discomfort due to the revelation of the conditions and tensions faced by Chinese students during their stay in the early years of Soviet Russia. This by no means implies a lack of academic quality among the students, but rather that – even though the main objective of bringing Chinese students to Soviet universities was ideological – academic formation, cultural differences, translation problems, tensions between political groups, and a relative absence of academic rigor meant the experiences of the Chinese students were about everything but knowledge.

One way in which the authors allow the reader to grasp the complexity of a foreign student's experience in Soviet Russia is by providing cautious details, such as names (and pseudonyms) of persons and organizations, photos and images, as well as descriptions of specific cultural, social, and especially political circumstances through the wise management of primary sources, most of them previously unknown. Perhaps a personal concern after reading *The Kremlin's Chinese Advance Guard* is how the information was presented in the documentary materials in the Russian original, of which the English is a translation. In a curious manner, I indirectly encountered a problem common to the Chinese students in Soviet universities at the time: the difficulty of accessing knowledge in its original language.

Nevertheless, this book, or the excellent translation in this case, succeeds in communicating and explaining the daily and systemic dynamics in which Chinese students played a central role. In six chapters, organized in three parts, Arincheva and Pantsov present a comprehensive picture that integrates historic relations between China and Russia, the presence of the Chinese in Russia during World War II, the first academic experiment of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East, curricula and ideological labor, factional struggles among Chinese and institutional educations, and the unfortunate fate of the majority of the Chinese students, covering a period from 1917 to 1940. Additionally, the authors provide complementary and very useful information to contextualize the information

analysed, including lists of abbreviations and figures, and three appendices of meetings and profiles.

The book is built on solid academic foundations. In the introduction, the authors offer a review of previous academic work that has explored the history of training cadres for the Chinese revolution in the Soviet Union. As the reader may infer, the book is primarily a study on the transferability of revolutionary ideology, experiences, and practices through education. Arincheva and Pantsov review Russian, Chinese, and Western literature on the subject, emphasizing their focus on specific aspects and problems of training Chinese revolutionary cadres in the USSR, thereby offering a comprehensive study that integrates agency and structural issues.

Regarding agency, the authors delve into the roles of individuals and social groups. The book explains the practical logic behind the Bolsheviks' need to train cadres of foreign communist parties, the context of the arrival of the first twenty-eight Chinese students who matriculated between July and August of 1921, the specific ideological difficulties of the Chinese during the first few months of cadre training, and the personal adversities experienced by some of the Chinese students, many of whom were driven to despair.

On a structural front, Arincheva and Pantsov elucidate the effects of the 1920s national liberation movement in China on the necessity of cadre formation, the effects of the USSR's Stalinization process in training dynamics, the influence of factional struggles within the Bolshevik Party on Chinese groups, as well as confrontations between Chinese communists and Chinese adherents to the Goumindang, or the Chinese Nationalist Party. The book also highlights the detrimental outcomes of a global trend of anti-Chinese discrimination that led some Russians to distrust certain Chinese groups and associations. In fact, mutual suspicion and tensions resulted in violent episodes, such as the 1929 Chinese rebellion against Russian students and officials at the Communist University of the Toilers of China, the precursor of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East.

The weight of the political structure was most keenly felt during the Stalin-Trotsky struggle, a process that influenced the formation of radical and antagonistic political factions among Chinese students. The authors recount several political purges involving Russians, Russians against the Chinese, and Chinese against each other. As one reads through this sequence of events, which Arincheva and Pantsov characterize as the dramatic shift from the "Red Mecca" to labor camps, one gains insight into the toxic repercussions of the "anti-Trotskyist hysteria", which involved the dissemination of fake news, intense criticism and accusations, political interrogations, personal ruptures, and, in the most extreme cases, torture, imprisonment, exile, and physical harm.

The succinct phrase by Arincheva and Pantsov in the Epilogue sums up much of their book: "Romance turned into tragedy". This is because *The Kremlin's Chinese Advance Guard* is a fascinating historical reconstruction of how ideological commitment and the strategic necessities of the Chinese turned into a struggle for political favor and survival in Soviet Russia.

As a researcher of Chinese affairs and international politics, upon reading this book I could not overlook the famous history of the "28 Bolsheviks" group within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, Arincheva and Pantsov's critical

contribution shows that an understanding of the influence of the 28 Bolsheviks group in the CCP is not sufficient to grasp the extent of the USSR's impact on the formation of modern China. In fact, the book may prompt a reevaluation of the importance of Mao Zedong in the formation of the CCP and a reassessment of the roles of several Chinese political leaders who were active participants in the history of Chinese students in Soviet Russia, such as Deng Xiaoping himself.

In this vein, the book may be of interest not only to historians and sinologists, but also to students of Marxism and international relations. Reading it offers a detailed glimpse, at a granular social and political level, of the transformation of the USSR from the status of "Socialism in one country" to a major player in global politics. Understanding the attempts at political disciplining and purges within the Chinese student community at the time sheds light on the early stages of the political restructuring of the USSR necessary to establish zones of strategic influence. It could even be argued that Chinese students were among the first casualties on the path to the USSR becoming a world power, with the essence of the Stalinist Great Terror at its core, which, even though denounced by Khrushchev at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), laid the foundation for the absolute political control of the CPSU in the years to come.

In summary, *The Kremlin's Chinese Advance Guard* is a pioneering book, a valuable example of how to conduct research using primary sources, and a bold contribution that aims to demystify crucial preconceptions about Socialist brotherhood, cadre formation, and the strategic and historical alliance between China and Russia. Furthermore, it succeeds in reintroducing the human factor into historical and political analysis by including reports and narratives about sentiments, emotions, and even psychological distress during the Chinese students' stay in Soviet Russia. I can wholeheartedly recommend reading it attentively.

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