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Socialist exhibits and Sino-Soviet relations, 1950–60
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ABSTRACT
Socialist bloc exhibits in China in the 1950s communicated ideas about the future prosperity and development to be brought to China in the wake of its alliance with the socialist world, the role of socialism in preserving and maintaining folk and traditional culture, and the role of the bloc in extending the virtues of European high culture to the East. The Soviets proudly displayed Russia’s historic contribution to high culture as well as information about contemporary events at the Bol’shoy Theater and other cultural institutions in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the East Germans and the Czechoslovaks similarly emphasized the prestige and quality of their past artists and composers as well as their contemporary symphonies and orchestras. The Chinese, however, were increasingly disappointed both with socialist bloc approaches to Chinese development as well as with depictions of Chinese culture that reminded them of the heritage of European imperialism. They complained in the exhibit “comment books” about methods, practices and technology that offered little to unique Chinese “conditions” and “peculiarities.” They were frustrated by the inefficiencies of Soviet-style socialism, and they even complained about the food at the Moscow Restaurant. By the end of the decade, the exhibits served as yet another example of the miscommunication, frustration and dispute over models of development that contributed to the Sino-Soviet split.

KEYWORDS
Sino-Soviet relations; socialist bloc exchange; Eastern Europe; exhibits; Soviet foreign policy; Chinese foreign policy

General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev went to America in September 1959, accompanied by a Soviet display that was the companion exhibit to the American National Exhibition at Sokolniki Park in Moscow. The American exhibit was sponsored by the United States Information Agency, formerly part of the Department of State, and featured the famous ‘kitchen debate’ between Khrushchev and visiting Vice President Richard Nixon. Khrushchev welcomed the competition, determined to show that the Soviet Union would indeed ‘catch up and surpass’ the Americans in yet another area of competition. That encounter has attracted the attention of numerous historians, who explore the episode as an example of American foreign-policy propaganda and public

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diplomacy, exhibit history, and the evolving nature of the Cold War. Historians of the Soviet Union use Russian and East European archival materials to direct attention to the specific Soviet and socialist context shaping debates over consumerism, culture, and the Cold War. The Soviet participation in the exhibit exchange illustrates the somewhat conventional notion of the Soviet vision. The Soviet exhibit, initially in New York from 30 June 1959, displayed the accomplishments of Soviet science and technology, the virtues of the Russian classical tradition, and the importance and possibilities of ‘peaceful coexistence’ with the United States. The Soviets brought leading ballerinas from the Bol’shoi Theatre, soloists from the Kirov Theatre, a ballet company, and the 900-voice Piatnitsky Choir. Traditional forms of culture were also flourishing in the Soviet Union, emphasised exhibition organisers, who displayed Palekh lacquer boxes, porcelain, glassware, and traditional Russian shirts and tablecloths. Socialist bloc domesticity was restrained, reasonable, and tasteful, all in contrast to common socialist perceptions of a daily life in America marked by excessive materialism and the absence of culture.

The Chinese did not approve of this socialist effort to engage with the norms and practices of the West. They did not like that Khrushchev even visited the United States, as they told him in no uncertain terms when he stopped in Beijing on his way home via Vladivostok and the Russian Far East. Similarly, the many Chinese in Moscow in 1959 were not happy about the exhibit exchanges, and roundly criticised the American display. Chinese technical specialists in Moscow in the autumn of 1959 rejected an invitation from the Soviet-Chinese Friendship Society to attend the American National Exhibition. They were ‘not the least bit interested in the United States’, they claimed, surely disturbed by the large crowds assembling at Sokolniki Park. The Chinese embassy that autumn set up a pictorial exhibit about post-revolutionary China, hoping

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5 29 July 1959, ‘Priem,’ G. Pushkin, f. 0100, op. 46, p. 187, d. 6, l. 4, Arkhiv vneshnei politiki rossiiskoi federatsii (Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation) (AVPRF), Moscow.
to deflect attention from what was happening at Sokolniki. ‘[W]hen you compare the past to the present, the progress is very rapid,’ offered officials from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. ‘The Chinese exhibit is much more beautiful than the American one,’ supposedly concluded ‘several Americans’.6 Also to temper the American display, the Chinese reminded the Soviets of America’s interethnic troubles. The photographs displayed at Sokolniki, they suggested, only confirmed that ‘the life of white people [in America] is excellent.’ American references to Asia and Africa depicted labouring peasants in a way that was ‘insulting to our country’.7

Sino-Soviet relations were tense from 1958 and the beginning of China’s radical developmental path in the form of the Great Leap Forward, which was accompanied by critiques of expertise, the visiting bloc advisers, and the Soviet model generally. Within a year of the exhibit at Sokolniki most of the socialist bloc advisers had left China; in less than a decade the Chinese were identifying ‘Soviet revisionism’ as a threat equal in danger to ‘American imperialism’. High-level political disputes between the two states about the leadership of the socialist world, policy toward America, the socialist developmental model, and related topics clearly were central to the Sino-Soviet split, as Lorenz Lüthi, Sergei Radchenko, and others have described.8 This was one of the more significant geopolitical realignments of the entire Cold War, with the Global South now courted by a new patron and model in the form of radical Chinese communism.9 The polemical exchanges between the CPSU and CCP and the relationship between Khrushchev and Chairman Mao attract significant attention from scholars for good reason.

Attention to broader forms of cultural miscommunication and conflict, however, evident here in tensions over the exhibit exchanges and drawn from the reports of advisers, the exhibit ‘comment books’, and other sources, offers a different lens on Sino-Soviet tension and the complexities of international relations generally.10 This article

7 30 July 1959, ‘Baogao meiguo zai mosike zhanchu de qingkuang,’ 109-00876-03, 7, WJBDA.
explores socialist bloc exhibits – within the bloc about China, international displays, and Soviet exhibits in the major cities of China – in order to illustrate these emerging tensions in Sino-Soviet relations. The history of the production of the exhibits and their reception in China reveals Chinese frustrations with the attitudes and practices of the socialist bloc, as well as an inability on the part of East Europeans and Soviets even to recognise or understand this Chinese response. These tensions were evident well before the public disputes of 1958–60, and plagued the ‘Great Friendship’ from the very proclamation of the alliance in February 1950.

**Socialist bloc exhibits**

Socialist bloc exhibits were similar to the American National Exhibition at Sokolniki and other international exhibits in terms of propaganda and the display of new achievements and a superior ‘way of life’. They also had a distinctive history, however, that emerged from their function within a world shaped by economic practices unique to socialism. Socialist bloc exhibits had a practicality and workmanlike purpose directly related to the emerging world of postwar bloc collaboration. Their primary purpose was to extend, deepen, and facilitate ‘socialist’ forms of exchange, and they thus included the arrangement of trade agreements and contracts between ministries, factories, universities, work units, and so on. The exhibits intersected with distinctly socialist norms concerning planning, the division of labour, resource allocation, and related matters. Administrators, managers, and experts and specialists in a wide variety of fields accompanied the exhibits, expecting to foster productive relationships with their counterparts in the other socialist bloc countries. Accompanying advisers journeyed beyond the exhibit hall, to lecture, advise, learn, and trade in industrial, agricultural, and educational settings. The exhibit was in part an example of ‘socialism’ in practice, and therefore different from the way the United States Information Agency encouraged American companies to display their many products, or rounded up young Russian-speaking Americans to serve as ‘guides’ and converse with the Soviet public.11

Very practical socialist exhibits in Sofia, Prague, Budapest, Leipzig, and other places might typically include attention to such mundane matters as heavy industrial equipment, milk separators, and grain threshers.12 The very manner of preparing, constructing, and displaying the exhibits followed the format of socialist bloc exchange and cooperation.13 Exhibit officials procured numerous items and goods through the various Soviet industrial ministries for display throughout the bloc. Factory directors in the Soviet interior provinces, for example, were expected to respond to a ministerial demand for equipment and goods for an exhibit in Eastern or Central Europe in the same way they might fulfil an ‘order’ for any other economic exchange, either within the Soviet Union or the larger bloc.14 Exhibits were opportunities for Soviet technicians, engineers, and officials to arrange direct economic relationships, and also to inform socialist bloc colleagues of Soviet practices and manners of handling economic exchange. They also became an opportunity for Soviet industrial and technical experts to acquire more advanced forms of knowledge and technology in places like East Germany.

13 28 April 1950, P. Stepanov, f. 8123, op. 3, d. 1110, l. 56, RGAE.
14 16 October 1951, P. Bulgakov, f. 8123, op. 3 d. 1124, l. 14, RGAE.
Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. The relationship with China established in February 1950 was viewed with excitement by exhibit organisers, who took it as an opportunity to foster and deepen bloc collaboration with the important new member of an alliance that stretched from Europe to Asia.

In matters of cultural promotion and display the exhibits possessed a flavour characteristic of the Soviet and socialist world. This was a world of traditional cultural hierarchy in which the West (Eastern Europe, Moscow, St Petersburg) was viewed as more advanced than the East (the Far East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, North Korea, North Vietnam, China), and part of the purpose of Soviet cultural projects as well as intrabloc cultural projects was for the West to uplift and help the East. The vision made sense of Russia’s historical experience and its vast multi-ethnic space, and served to congratulate Russians in the present, who were the ‘leading people’ of the Soviet Union and pleased to provide access to all of this to the presumably less developed peoples of the socialist world. A key term, especially in the eastern areas of the Soviet Union, was kul’turnost’, a notion suggesting the process of acquiring culture, something particularly important to lesser educated people distant from the West. East Europeans in particular had an important role to play. As the Sino-Soviet relationship deteriorated in 1959–60, alarmed Soviet and East European embassy officials remained determined to expedite visits from institutions sure to represent the best of European high culture, such as the Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra and the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra. East Germans, Czechoslovaks, Poles, and others were proud to offer their contribution to the uplifting of culture in once backward China, eager to help the Soviets accomplish some of the same forms of cultural uplift in China that they believed had already been accomplished in the far corners of the Soviet Union. The notion of kul’turnost’ even pertained to daily life, where officials emphasised notions of a proper ‘cultured consumerism’, again a contrast to what was routinely depicted as the excessive materialism of the Americans. All of these notions were on display in exhibits about China and in Soviet exhibits in China during the 1950s.

**Exhibiting China within the socialist world**

The revival of tradition, minus its exploitive and negative characteristics, was part of the socialist vision throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Numerous exhibits...
throughout the bloc celebrated the artistic and cultural traditions of the Chinese past, now informed with a new content and vision. The classical heritage of Chinese culture, historically assaulted by the imperialists, as commentator A. Vinogradov argued, would now be rescued by the socialist world and simultaneously infused with a ‘different content’.²⁰ Exhibit organisers often pushed their Chinese colleagues to send more examples of tradition eagerly appreciated by their respective publics, from East Germans interested in traditional Chinese woodcuts to Muscovites interested in embroidery from Suzhou and silk-making in Hangzhou.²¹ Soviet artists, painters, and sculptors travelled to China in order to create works inspired by examples of what they took to be traditional Chinese culture (rickshaws, peasants carrying water, old winding streets in Shanghai and Guangzhou, tiled roofs in Suzhou, the lakes in Hangzhou, historic architecture), which they then displayed in exhibits sponsored by the Union of Artists in Moscow.²² Similar to the Soviet visualisation of small and Eastern peoples on its frontier, it was socialism that promised the resurrection and restoration of a historic culture long suffering exploitation in the more recent past.²³

The revival of tradition was complemented by exposure to European high culture, to which the Soviets were proud contributors. It was self-evident to publics and exhibit organisers throughout the bloc that the Chinese were now fortunate to have better access to the great works of Russian literature or performances of the Warsaw Philharmonic. Cultural exchange with China flourished throughout the 1950s. The ‘Great Friendship’ was an opportunity for China to enjoy the benefit of cultural exchange and cultural tutelage from Russians, Czechoslovaks, Germans, Poles, and others, who routinely sent their cultural delegations, exhibits, instructors, and teachers to work in Chinese institutions, participate in exchanges, and collaborate on numerous cultural projects from film festivals to orchestral performances. The Czechoslovaks, for example, enthusiastically shipped their best examples of the European classical tradition to China, and Prague in turn played host to Chinese renditions of traditional folk music, opera, and dance. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Chinese revolution in Prague, the Czechs hosted an arts festival dedicated to traditional Chinese landscape painting, regional variations of Chinese opera, Chinese porcelain and ceramics, and examples of contemporary Chinese literature and film. The Czech Philharmonic played Dvořák, Smetana, Borodin and other classical works, followed by Chinese folk music.²⁴ The Soviet Ministry of Culture routinely chose highly trained and accomplished classical musicians for the exchanges in China. Soviets contributed to traditions

established by famous pre-revolutionary musicians, giving the Chinese an introduction to the best ‘Russian classical and Soviet composers’. The East Germans as well were intensely interested in China and eager promoters of exchange, and also engaged in their own effort to ‘harmonise transformation and tradition’, or to explore and develop ‘heimat culture’ while constructing socialism, as Jan Palmowski explains. The alternative version of modernity offered by the bloc respected and maintained indigenous Chinese cultural tradition, but was accompanied by hierarchical ideas about Europe and Asia. The many advisers and cultural figures who travelled to China generally assumed the Chinese should be grateful to be exposed to the world of socialism and its culture, and believed they had more to teach than to learn. Socialist publics throughout the bloc felt the same way.

The exhibits in China

These assumptions about China were similarly evident in the huge exhibits that took place in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. The East and Central Europeans were very much part of these events, which were extensive forms of exchange far beyond the exhibits that sent advisers, technicians, instructors, administrators, and others to local enterprises, factories, universities, and related locations. The exhibits also included ‘continually functioning circles’ of advisers and interpreters who branched out to local factories and enterprises well beyond these three major cities, to Xian, Wuhan, Nanjing, Hangzhou, and other cities. A big and grandiose display in China was symbolic of China’s importance to the bloc, and high officials in both countries devoted significant attention to the huge production that opened in Beijing on 2 October 1954 (a day after the five-year anniversary of the Chinese revolution) and moved to Shanghai and Guangzhou the following year. Top officials such as politburo member Anastas Mikoyan were heavily involved in the planning process, and Soviet Ambassador Pavel Iudin followed matters relating to the exhibit very closely, attending both the opening and closing ceremonies in each of the three major locations. Chairman Mao noted the significance of the exhibit in an address to the Central Committee on 27 August 1954, in which he thanked the Soviets for their support and ‘brotherly aid’. ‘The showing of the Soviet exhibit will serve as a great inspiration for the Chinese people, having now accomplished socialist construction and socialist transformation,’ he intoned. Zhou Enlai and other leading Chinese officials attended the opening ceremony in the nation’s capital. Nikita Khrushchev was there as well, having been invited by Zhou Enlai the previous January to China’s capital for the anniversary celebrations and the opening of the exhibit. Chairman Mao paid a personal visit to the exhibit on 25 October 1954.

2531 December 1954, ‘Perepiska s deiateliami kul’tury i iskusstva Kitaia,’ B. Belyi, f. 2077, op. 1, d. 1121, l. 13, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhirov literatury i iskusstva (Russian State Archive of Literature and Culture) (RGALI); 6 December 1957, ‘Zasedania biuro inostrannoi komissii soiuza kompozitorov SSSR,’ f. 2077, op. 1, d. 1432, l. 3 RGALI.
2728 August 1954, ‘Kratkaia kharakteristika sovetskoi vystavki v Pekine,’ I. Bol’shakov, r. 5113, f. 5, op. 28, d. 187, l. 174, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhirov noveshishii istorii (Russian State Archive of Contemporary History) (RGANI).
281955, ‘Otchet,’ K. Smofoianov, f. 635, op. 1, d. 299, l. 129-30, 142, 158, RGAE.
291955, ‘Otchet,’ K. Smofoianov, f. 635, op. 1, d. 299, l. 152, RGAE.
3027 August 1954, Chairman Mao to CC, f. 5, op. 30, d. 76, l. 32, RGANI.
The enormous Exhibition Centre in Beijing attempted to illustrate the strength, stability, and significance of the Sino-Soviet relationship. The building in Beijing was divided into three sections, devoted to industry, agriculture, and culture, with some 11,500 items on display in 27 different halls ranging some 33,000 square metres. There was a theatre for 3200 people. The ‘Moscow Restaurant’ that was part of the exhibit was especially ornate in Beijing, with a high dome, crystal chandeliers, handsome wood floors, tall windows, and gigantic pillars.\textsuperscript{32} The Shanghai exhibit drew 3,828,608 people, including a ‘Friendship’ film theatre that featured 288 events for 242,818 visitors.\textsuperscript{33} After Guangzhou a smaller version of the exhibit went to Wuhan, which included forms of outreach to other more provincial locations, and its composition was changed somewhat to focus more on agriculture. The size and scope of the Soviet exhibit in Beijing (313,000 square metres) was well known to Soviet exhibit organisers throughout the globe.\textsuperscript{34} The exhibit director for a 1955 display in Argentina, for example, was proud to report that his pavilion was second only to the massive effort in China.\textsuperscript{35} China was the new jewel of the socialist bloc, and Soviet and East European organisers went to great lengths to make sure visitors understood this.

The socialist bloc exhibits in China also had to address the question of America and the general affluence and technological sophistication of the West. Many educated Chinese in the 1950s possessed memories of European and American technology and forms of expertise from the pre-revolutionary era. One of the primary pedagogic purposes of the exhibit was to reeducate Chinese who might possess different conceptions of the merits of the Soviet experience in comparison to the West. ‘Before I thought poorly about the Soviet Union,’ wrote Wu Kezong in the comment book,

I considered Soviet goods to be poorly made. I thought the Soviet Union was boasting. Today I see with my own eyes that all the exhibits of the great Soviet Union are wonderful and beautiful. I am convinced that the Soviet Union is not as they say.

Ma Junliang offered similarly comforting comments about the ‘valuable’ and ‘leading’ economic experience of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{36} As ‘Worker Guo’ in Guangzhou put it: ‘Before I saw this exhibit, I greatly admired America and the western countries.’ But now he knew that the Soviet Union had ‘overtaken in many respects’ the world of the West. Numerous Chinese cultural and other officials offered similar testimonies.\textsuperscript{37} Some came from overseas Chinese (huaqiao), who returned to declare their respect for post-revolutionary accomplishments, or confirm, as Li Wang from Hong Kong said, that ‘Soviet cars in fact were better than English and American [cars].’\textsuperscript{38} The question of the efficiency and viability of the socialist world was especially sensitive after 1956, when even Communist Party members and officials complained about Soviet ‘great-power chauvinism’, the weaknesses of the economy,
the character of the Soviet advising programmes, and the quality of Soviet science and technology.\textsuperscript{39}

Culture, however, was an area where socialist bloc theorists were confident about their ability to compete with the Americans. The exhibits in China devoted a huge section to ‘Culture’ (4250 square metres), where the East Europeans and Soviets communicated their notion of culture as \textit{kul\'turnost}', the virtues of European high culture, and the role of socialism in facilitating the cultivation of tradition. The collection of musical instruments included five concert pianos and five upright pianos.\textsuperscript{40} A fine-arts display featured examples of Soviet portrait painting, landscapes, and sculpture. Charts with ascending figures compared book publication numbers of the works of Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Chekhov from 1888–1917 with those of 1918–53.\textsuperscript{41} There were displays on radios and classical music, institutions of higher education such as Moscow State University, and photographs and information pertaining to the experience of Chinese studying in the Soviet Union, as if to remind the Chinese that the fruits of high culture were now available to them by virtue of their incorporation into the bloc. Some 4000 people attended a discussion about schooling in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{42} There were numerous cultural events in the Chinese capital that accompanied the exhibit, such as 50 different performances of classical operas and ballets in the autumn of 1954 by the K.S. Stanislavskii State Musical Theatre, as well as attention to traditional Chinese culture.\textsuperscript{43} Academics gave lectures on Soviet cultural theory, sculpture, opera, music, and historic Russian painters such as I. E. Repin, V. I. Surikov, and V. V. Vereshchagin.\textsuperscript{44}

The sections on culture attempted to show that the world of traditional high culture was accessible to the larger population, and easily integrated into the daily lives of average Soviet citizens. At the Beijing exhibit the area devoted to the ‘culture of everyday life’ featured musical instruments, televisions and radios, household appliances, furniture, carpets, crystal, porcelain, glass, and Palekh lacquerware. Photomontages and displays explored Soviet classical orchestras, soloists, opera, and ballet. Everyday Soviet life was presumably a world informed and shaped by the sublime elements of classical music and high culture. Classical instruments and music, including a grand piano, were part of the ‘Hall of Musical Instruments, Radio, Furniture, and Objects of Daily Life’ in Shanghai. Traditional crafts and artisanal work also endured in Soviet life, organisers emphasised, in spite of the transformations of industrial modernity. Qing Yuanxian was exposed to Russian porcelain and lacquer products, and learned that we Chinese must ‘develop the production of porcelain and lacquer and preserve our glorious traditions, and compete with you in a friendly fashion’.\textsuperscript{45} As a gift in Beijing, the Soviets presented to the Chinese an enormous Palekh lacquer box, an example of the ‘folk culture of Ancient Rus’, supported by four polished porphyry legs
and adorned with gold leaf. The five-pointed star made of ears of rice and wheat was fastened to a backdrop of ruby red glass with Russian precious stones, and located above an image of the Tiananmen Gate. Revolution was compatible with national tradition, and the Soviets encouraged the Chinese to think about the matter in the same way.

The section on culture and everyday life thatpertained to living conditions (byt) was restrained and proper, illustrating the way kulturnost’ supposedly informed everyday life in the socialist world. One display was devoted to Soviet furniture, complemented by an example of Soviet dining rooms, living rooms, and bedrooms. A quiet reading room was presented as an example of a ‘study of a professor or scientific worker’. A display highlighted a speech of Nikolai Bulganin, who was proud of the new ‘183 million square metres of living space’ constructed for urban workers since the war. The party and ruling elite in the socialist bloc projected a vision of a refined and cultured everyday life that contrasted significantly with the practicality, materialism, and fun that would be suggested by the American exhibit at Sokolniki Park in Moscow in 1959.

East Europeans contributed to the exhibits as advisers and lecturers, and East European achievements in culture, technology, and also consumer culture were proudly promoted by the Soviets. The Soviet Exhibition Centre in Beijing featured a second exhibit in April 1955, devoted to Czechoslovakia, but also other Central European countries such as Hungary, Poland, and East Germany as examples of consumer achievements under socialism was becoming a familiar part of socialist bloc self-presentation. Czechoslovaks were especially useful in this endeavour, with previous experiences exhibiting the virtues of their country in Marseilles, Utrecht, Helsinki, Kodani, Milan, and Toronto. The best known international example of this would be the Czechoslovak Pavilion at the Brussels World Fair in 1958, with impressive displays of industrial technology, classical music, and also consumer products from clothing to Pilsner Urquell beer to Škoda motor scooters. The explicit promotion of consumer culture, however, worried some Communist Party critics more inclined to traditional orthodoxy, and the Chinese were soon to voice similar frustrations.

463 March 1954, N. Chesnokov, f. 5, op. 30, d. 72, II, 69-72, RGANI.
467 September 1954, Tematicheski plan,’ I. Shriaev, f. 5, r. 5113, op. 28, d. 187, I. 191, RGANI.
47 March 1955, J. Veselý, 11.43.5/55; 21 February 1955, Ludmila Jankovcová, 11.43.7/55; 13 June 1955, Ludmila Jankovcová, 11.43.8/55; 7 May 1955, Ludmila Jankovcová, 11.43.15/55, krabice 2373, folder 12/1.37.3/59 (Svetová výstava v Bruselu), Národní archiv (National Archive) (NA) Úřad předsednictva vlády (Office of the Chairman of the Government)
51Informační zpráva,’ Köhler and Hendrych, Expo ’58: Scénář, 9–11.
China’s response and alternative path

Virtually every aspect of the alternative path of development (the Great Leap Forward of 1958–60) that reshaped China was a critique in some way of the socialist bloc and its assumptions and practices. The reaction covered agricultural development, the reliance on expertise, the acceptability of social hierarchy and wage differentiation, the role of planning, and other topics.\(^{52}\) The Chinese were increasingly convinced that socialist bloc assumptions and the Soviet model were being inappropriately imposed upon a very different and unique society.

The Sino-Soviet relationship deteriorated quickly after 1958, but many of these Chinese concerns and frustrations were evident throughout the 1950s. The exhibits in China illustrated some of these tensions, and served as yet another example of the weaknesses of the broader Soviet Union and of socialism in practice. Numerous technological devices failed to work, the radios in several Soviet automobiles did not function, televisions arrived with broken screens, tennis rackets arrived with broken strings, one-half of the sports jerseys had been eaten by moths, dishes and crystal were broken, and so on. Such problems were a product of an economic system where suppliers did not face the anger of the frustrated consumer if merchandise were delivered in that fashion. Chinese officials and visitors to the exhibit did not frame the problem in this way, but they did complain quite a bit. Similar to every other aspect of the socialist economy, Soviet industrial ministries fulfilled ‘orders’ from the exhibit organisers and did not worry about the quality of the final product. The exhibit staff in China could only routinely lament the problem of ‘careless packing’.\(^{53}\) The Chinese even complained about the food, the ‘inconsiderate’ staff, and the disorganisation of the ‘Moscow Restaurant’. The restaurant hardly served as an advertisement for socialism. ‘It’s good that at that time there were not any foreign guests [in the restaurant],’ complained a Chinese visitor to the exhibit in Guangzhou, ‘as it would have made a very bad impression.’\(^{54}\) Soviet exhibit inadequacies and inefficiencies came to the attention of politburo member and mayor of Beijing, Peng Zhen, who frequently complained about the matter to Soviet Ambassador Pavel Iudin.\(^{55}\) Chinese frustration with the mechanics of the exhibit mirrored the general Chinese frustration with their overall encounter with the socialist system.

More significant was a general Chinese frustration with a programme and system that did not seem to understand the Chinese or address their particular needs and concerns. Soviets themselves often seemed ignorant of China, complained contributors to the ‘comment books’, and unable to offer useful advice.\(^{56}\) At the exhibits Soviet

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\(^{53}\) 3 September 1955, ‘O nekotorykh nedostatkakh v organizatsii kul’turnykh i nauchnykh sviazei,’ S. Rumiantsev, f. 5, r. 5136, op. 28, d. 286, l. 183-184, RGANI.

\(^{54}\) 9 October 1955, ‘Otzvy posetitelei,’ f. 635, op. 2, d. 247, l. 32, 23, RGAE.

\(^{55}\) 3 March 1954, ‘Zapis’ besedy,’ P.F. Iudin and Peng Zhen, f. 0100, op. 47, p. 379, d. 7, l. 48, AVPRF. For other Chinese complaints, see 9 October 1955, ‘Otzvy posetitelei,’ f. 635, op. 2, d. 247, l. 32, 23, RGAE.

\(^{56}\) 3 September 1955, ‘O nekotorykh nedostatkakh v organizatsii kul’turnykh i nauchnykh sviazei,’ S. Rumiantsev, f. 5, r. 5136, op. 28, d. 286, l. 183, RGANI.
lecturers charged ahead with instructions on the proper organisation and management of numerous areas of experience that seemed foreign to Chinese ways and habits, from food preparation and culinary technology to public hygiene. Zhou Jianglong noted that much of the Soviet agricultural equipment displayed in Guangzhou was of limited use in water-covered rice fields, and Huang Ganghong suggested the displayed agricultural equipment needed to be demonstrated in actual fields in provincial Guangdong. Zhou Wenzuo, Qiu Jianglin, and Cheng Yichen also posed practical questions about irrigation, rice fields, Russian seed varieties, and terrace agriculture on slopes and mountains. A local party official pondered a Soviet combine: 'I thought about how we sow rice here. This combine is very useful for the harvest. But would it be suitable for the way we do our planting?' Li Bohui posed similar questions concerning the suitability of Soviet technology in Chinese factories. The encounter with the exhibit, like the general encounter with the Soviet system, thus encouraged the Chinese to develop their ideas about the applicability of the Soviet model to the 'peculiarities' of the Chinese revolution and its society, as interpreter Li Yueran suggested in his memoirs. And these Chinese frustrations were expressed during the so-called 'honeymoon' of the relationship, well before the more public disputes of 1958–62.

The socialist bloc preoccupation with high culture raised similar questions for the Chinese. Socialist bloc teachers and cultural figures found themselves suspect for their inability to understand the significance of uniquely Chinese cultural traditions. This was a debate between the advisers and the Chinese developing in numerous areas, over the virtues of 'village knowledge' to appropriate topics for filmmakers. The East Europeans in particular seemed prone to what the Chinese would soon denounce as 'revisionism' and an unhealthy interest in Western-style consumerism. In 1957, Chinese officials informed Czechoslovaks and Soviets at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing that their course of musical instruction was 'divorced' from both 'national tradition' and 'practice'. The students were better off, they claimed, engaged in manual labour and the instruction of reading to peasants.

The Chinese were correct that 'revolution' was far from the minds of socialist bloc officials and visitors associated with international exhibits. When 'peaceful coexistence' allowed for the display of English cultural exhibits in the Soviet Union, for example, Soviet organisers eagerly sought out the finest examples of English music and painting, sure to be 'well-known and highly-valued by the Russian public.' When they went

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57 1954, ‘Otech’, f. 635, op. 1, d. 278, l. 104, RGAE.
58 1954, ‘Otech’, f. 635, op. 1, d. 278, l. 104, RGAE.
60 1955, ‘Otech’, f. 635, op. 2, d. 247, l. 32, RGAE.
61 Li Yueran, Zhongsu waijiao qinliji: Shouxi eyu fanyi de lishi jianzheng (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2001), 51.
abroad, Soviet cultural workers assumed high-quality renditions of notable works from the Russian classical tradition would best bring prestige to the Soviet state. Cultural radicals from around the world were routinely disappointed, evident in their many ignored suggestions and even desperate pleas they sent to various cultural ministries in Moscow. This aspect of the Cold War was shaped in part by the character of transnational exchange within the bloc: East Europeans routinely coached the Soviets about the importance of high-quality Soviet performances before audiences both familiar with the best of Western high culture and sceptical of Russia’s accomplishments in this and other areas. The East Europeans generally encouraged the Soviets to cultivate more cultural exchange with the West, eager to be allowed more access to the world of the West and also to illustrate their usefulness to the Soviets in the Cold War competition.

Chinese frustration with the cultural assumptions of the visiting Soviets and East Europeans was also evident at the exhibits in China. Chinese visitors such as ‘former soldier’ Jian Qingyun communicated their enthusiasm for Stalin-era films, and depicted contemporary examples of Soviet film, sculpture, and painting as insufficiently decisive and radical. As the Sino-Soviet relationship deteriorated, the Soviets and East Europeans remained immune to this line of reasoning. Soviet Ambassador Stepan Chervonenko expressly reminded his colleagues in the Soviet Union in late 1961 that the current political climate demanded the arrival in China of only the ‘highest quality’ Soviet violinists and ballerinas.

Conclusions

During the time of the Sino-Soviet alliance, Soviets and East Europeans shared similar assumptions about the cultural and technological achievements of the socialist world, as well as similar assumptions about the important role they played in promoting progress in China. These views were on display in socialist bloc exhibits, both in domestic East European and Soviet exhibits, and in the large exhibits in China in the 1950s. Many Chinese, however, were not impressed, and drew different conclusions about the character of the bloc and its future direction. The socialist bloc was intersecting with and indeed contributing to an internal debate within China about culture and revolution. In December 1959, Liu Shaoqi could still comfortably applaud and emphasise the virtues of a version of ‘Swan Lake’ performed at the Bol’shoy Theatre Ballet. Just seven years later, of course, he would be removed from his position and soon after no longer

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64 20 June 1957, Iouko Tolonen to Ministry of Culture; June 1957, Minoru Ochi to Mikhail Chulaki; 29 July 1957, S. Oreshnikov to V. T. Stepanov, f. 648, op. 7, d. 258, l. 26, 19, 50, RGALI.
66 27 March 1962, M. Zimianin to G. A. Zhukov, f. 9518, op. 1, d. 145, l. 65, GARF.
67 4 November 1954, ‘Otzyvy posetitelei,’ f. 635, op. 2, d. 217, l. 155, RGAE.
68 23 December 1961, ‘Materialy o kul’turnyh sviaziakh OSKDI s OKSD,’ S. Chervonenko, f. 9576, op. 18, d. 113, l. 212-13, GARF.
69 30 January 1960, ‘Zapis’ besedy,’ S. V. Chervonenko, Chen Yi, and Li Fuchun; and 18 January 1960, ‘Zapis’ besedy,’ S. V. Chervonenko and Liu Shaoqi, f. 0100, op. 53, p. 454, d. 8, l. 31, 1, AVPRF.
be alive. Chairman Mao, by contrast, supposedly changed his room at the Kremlin in November 1957 because he was put off by its traditional Russian flavour and decoration.  

In 1958 the Soviet Exhibition Centre in Beijing was renamed the Beijing Exhibition Centre, and the Moscow Restaurant became the Beijing Exhibition Centre Restaurant.

The exhibits about China in the socialist world and the exhibits in China after 1954 were conceived and formulated in the spirit of the early slogan, ‘Learn from the Soviet Union’ (xuexi sulian). The exhibit organisers, as well as the many Soviet and East European advisers and cultural figures in China, were confident of their purpose and programme, especially in a land they considered part of the historic ‘East’. K. Smol’ianov, the Soviet exhibit director in Shanghai, described exhibit outreach activities as ‘the primary channel for the transport of the leading technological experience of the Soviet Union to the Chinese People’s Republic’. Chinese visitors and collaborators, however, were increasingly sceptical of the applicability of the socialist model and practices in China, believed bloc planners and advisers had failed to appreciate adequately uniquely Chinese sources of strength, and wondered about the global competitiveness of Soviet technology. In matters of culture, as in questions of planning, hierarchy, the use of expertise, and other areas, the socialist world remained traditional and conservative, oblivious to debates about these topics in China. Most frustrating to the Chinese was the Soviet determination to engage with the culture and practices of the West rather than the radical alternatives developing in China. Other developing notions, such as ‘socialist consumerism’ and ‘peaceful coexistence’, further left the Chinese frustrated with a socialist world that they concluded had lost its way. After the CCP pursued the radical Great Leap Forward from 1958, common ground between the two sides was increasingly difficult to find. The exhibits did not cause the Sino-Soviet split, but remind us of the difficulties of intrabloc exchange that shaped the socialist world from start to finish.

The Soviets looked West, preoccupied with their competition with the United States rather than the politics of revolutionary culture in China. This in part was how the Soviets viewed the purpose of international exhibits in the Khrushchev era of reform. Foreign exchange and trade, noted Anastas Mikoyan in Leipzig in 1955, was now possible ‘irrespective of a country’s social system’. On 30 December 1959, Soviet official G. M. Pushkin advised Chinese foreign-affairs officials in Moscow that on the question of standards of living and competing with the West, ‘in this regard we can study the experience of the capitalist countries’. That general posture was evident in the displays and activities of the Czechoslovaks, Poles, and Hungarians at the Brussels World’s Fair in 1958. For the Chinese, by contrast, the very effort to engage with the West in this way was an example of the ‘revisionism’ of the socialist world.

70Quan Yanchi, Mao Zedong yu Heluxiaofu (Huhe: Neimenggu renmin chubanshe, 1998), 89–92.
71Yan Li, ‘Building Friendship,’ 63.
721955, ‘Otchet,’ K. Smol’ianov, f. 635, op. 1, d. 299, l. 158, RGAE.
738 August 1955, ‘Otchet,’ S. Tochilin, f. 635, op. 1, d. 299, l. 83, RGAE.
7430 December 1959, ‘Puxijin tan suguo neiwei xingshi,’ 109-02064-01, 2, WJBDAG.
758 December 1959, ‘Bo bao pingjia aisenhaoweier chuguo fangwen,’ 109-01393-03, 55, WJBDAG.
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Notes on contributor