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Review by **Hongshan Li, Kent State University**

As the author of the insightful monograph *Mao and the Economic Stalinization of China, 1948-1953* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), Hua-yu Li provided a nuanced study on the response of Chinese citizens to the death of Iosif Stalin in March 1953, one of the most significant events for the People's Republic of China in its formative years. Through careful reading and sophisticated analysis of the secret internal reports provided for top Chinese Communist leaders, Li successfully exposed a wide spectrum of reactions among Chinese people in all walks of life to the death of Stalin and revealed the tension between the new regime and some segments of urban society. With her unique work, Li not only introduced *Neibu Cankao* (International References), an extremely valuable but rarely used source, to researchers in modern Chinese history and politics, but also contributed significantly to the new generation of scholarship on the People's Republic of China (PRC), especially the reexamination of the regime consolidation and state building efforts made by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led by Mao Zedong in the early and mid-1950s.

The death of Stalin on March 5, 1953, as Li accurately pointed out, had an enormous impact on Chinese society since the Soviet Union was China's closest ally in the divided world. Mao Zedong and his CCP colleagues, while leading the nation in mourning, paid close attention to the succession struggle in the Soviet Union as well as public reactions in China. The official Xinhua News Agency, established in the 1930s and reorganized in 1949 to serve as the "eye and tongue" for the Communist Party and government, took an unprecedented action, compiling 30 reports on public reaction to the death of Stalin in its *Neibu Cankao* in a ten-day period between March 9 and 18, 1953. These reports, written by reporters dispatched to all provinces, cities, and autonomous regions throughout the nation, were intended solely for the high-ranking officials of the Communist Party. Mao himself, Li believes, read the reports regularly at least in the early 1950s. Li argued that

such great emphasis on public sentiments in response to the death of Stalin clearly demonstrated the serious concerns among the Chinese Communist leaders for at least some segments in the urban communities and their desperate need to find any “hint from the Chinese people of support for Stalin and, by extension, for Mao and the CCP.” (p. 71.)

Based on her analysis of these reports, Li succeeded in drawing a rather clear picture on the public response of the Chinese people to the death of Stalin as it was presented to Mao and other CCP leaders. According to Li, the CCP leaders could easily detect seven different types of reactions among the Chinese people. Although many segments of the society “were either ‘indifferent,’ ‘suspicious,’ or ‘hostile’ toward Stalin, and by extension, to Mao and the CCP,” Mao and other Communist leaders, Li has argued, “must have been reassured upon learning that large sections of society were sad when they heard about Stalin’s death.” They were also pleased to know that they “could count on the support of the working class, many young students, the majority of the Youth League, most party members, and almost all People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers and military commanders.” (p. 87)

The careful examination of the documents also allowed Li to make some important observations on the flaws of the methods used in those reports and the political and social tension in Chinese society. First of all, the class-analysis method was used in all reports. However, it failed to provide a clear-cut understanding of Chinese sentiments at the time. The reports revealed that some capitalists and a number of military commanders shared the view that the Chinese should not be asked to mourn a foreign leader such as Stalin. Therefore, patriotism and national pride, Li argued, were more effective than class membership in explaining these people’s behavior. Second, there was deep anxiety and distrust shared by many Chinese towards the CCP and the Soviet Union. As a result, the death of Stalin caused many Chinese to wonder whether the Soviet Union would continue to be a strong ally for China in the confrontation with the hostile nations led by the United States. Furthermore, Chinese society was under serious social and political tension. While many people gave strong support to the CCP or at least showed willingness to live in accordance with CCP expectations, there were still a significant number of people who were not about to accept their new rulers and would be happy to see the new regime collapse. Finally, the reports, based on information provided by unit Communist Party leaders and members, Youth League members, and so-called activists, clearly showed that the Communist regime had established an effective system to keep a watchful eye on the urban population. Therefore, the death of Stalin, which ushered in greater freedom for the people in the Soviet Union, marked the beginning of an era with almost total contraction of freedom in China. (pp. 87-88)

Hua-yu Li’s recent study is a significant addition to new scholarship that reexamines the regime consolidation and state building of the People’s Republic of China in the early and mid-1950s based on newly available sources. Most scholarly works on Communist China published in the 1950s and 1960s focused on the Communist leaders with heavy dependence on newspapers, magazines, and other sources published in China, and on

exit interviews outside of the country. With such limited access to archival materials and other sources in mainland China, the earlier studies tended to see the early and mid-1950s as a “golden age” for the PRC with successful policy implementation and unreserved support from the Chinese people. Such a wide-brushed generalization has been challenged by more recent studies based on archival materials and personal recollections and interviews made available during the Reform Era. The new research, as Julia Strauss has pointed out, has focused more “on the complexity, messiness, and contingency of much of what transpired for both individuals and the coalescing state in the early stage of regime consolidation.”¹

Li has expanded the reassessment of regime consolidation through her careful examination of the reaction of Chinese citizens to the death of Stalin. One of the most important regime consolidation efforts made by the CCP leaders in the early years was to build and maintain strong political, military, economic, and cultural alliances with the Soviet Union. As soon as Mao Zedong began his first trip to Moscow in December 1949, the Sino-Soviet Friendship Association was established with branches extending to all levels and all locations throughout China. A lasting national campaign was launched by the Chinese government to win popular support for the treaty of friendship, alliance, and mutual assistance signed by the Chinese and Soviet Union leaders in February 1950. In the following three years, the Communist regime overhauled Chinese colleges and universities after the Soviet model, replaced English with Russian as the major foreign language taught at all schools, dumped Western textbooks, films, and music and introduced replacements from the Soviet Union, and made Stalin a household name in China. Upon hearing of the death of Stalin, Mao issued an order for national mourning, sent his condolence to Moscow, and published an article in the *People's Daily*, praising Stalin's contribution to Communist movements in the world and pledging to maintain a strong alliance with the Soviet Union. While most people, especially students, did follow the mourning order and showed their sadness, there were still a considerably large number of people, as Li has proved, who displayed indifference, suspicion, and even hostility. Some, including CCP members, challenged Mao's order for the national mourning for Stalin on various bases. The existence of the wide range of response to the death of Stalin among the Chinese people lends powerful support for the new scholarship that argues that the earlier years of the PRC were more complex and messy than previous scholars had recognized.

Li's reliance on *Neibu Cankao* for most of the information used in her article has effectively introduced it as an important and useful new source for scholars engaged in the study of Communist China. As one of the most authoritative information source intended for Communist officials at provincial and ministerial levels and above, *Neibu Cankao* included, at least prior to the late 1950s, numerous candid reports on almost all important issues that researchers usually could not find in any other openly published

¹ Julia Strauss, “Morality, Coercion and State Building by Campaigning in the Early PRC: Regime Consolidation and After, 1949-1956,” *The China Quarterly*, vol. 188, December 2006, pp. 891-892.

newspapers or magazines such as the *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, and *Red Flag* (Hongqi) which normally only carried inflated “positive” stories. Li’s detailed and convincing analysis of the reaction of the Chinese citizens to the death of Stalin has clearly demonstrated the richness and usefulness of the information contained in these reports. When handled with care and skill, these reports, as Li has proved in her article, “are reliable enough for this early period.” (p. 73) Other reports covering various key issues such as natural disasters, grain shortages, peasants’ refusal to sell surplus grain to the government, and local corruption and abuse of power in *Neibu Cankao* are waiting for scholarly exploration and utilization. Shen Zhihua, a leading Chinese scholar on contemporary China and the Cold War, has recently completed a powerful study on the Anti-Rightist Movement with heavier reliance on *Neibu Cankao* more than any other newspapers and journals published in China.² Obviously, Shen is another scholar who has seen the unique value of *Neibu Cankao* and made good use of it.

With information drawn from *Neibu Cankao*, Li has revealed an astonishing degree of deviation in the Chinese citizens’ reaction to the death of Stalin in 1953, making a considerable contribution to the new scholarship on Communist China in its formative years. Her careful analysis has shed new light on a turbulent and complex period of transition and transformation in modern Chinese history. It is reasonable to expect that a more coherent and comprehensive narrative for twentieth-century Chinese history and politics should be able to rise on the solid foundations laid by extraordinary work done by Hua-yu Li and other scholars.

Hongshan Li received his Ph. D. from University of Missouri-Columbia. He is now professor of history at Kent State University Tuscarawas. He is the author of *U.S.-China Educational Exchange: State, Society, and Intercultural Relations, 1905-1950* (Rutgers University Press, 2008). His most recent publication is “The Privatization of China’s Study Abroad: A New Era for Chinese Students in the United States, 1978-2007,” a book chapter in *History of Chinese Students in the United States: Learning and Achievements in the Past 160 Years* (Li You-ning ed., New York: Outer Sky Press, 2009). His current research focuses on cultural relations between the United States and China during the Cold War.

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² Shen Zhihua, “Cong BoXiong Shijian Dao Fanyoupai Yundong: Mao Zedong Fouding Bada Luxian, Chongti Jieji Douzheng de Sixiang Licheng (From the Bulgarian and Hungarian Incidents to the Anti-Rightist Movement: Mao Zedong’s Changing Thoughts in Negating the Directions Set at the Eighth Congress and Returning to the Class Struggle), in Shen Zhihua ed., *Wushi Nian Wu Ji Er Ji* (Commemorate Without Commemoration in the Fiftieth Year), Hong Kong, 2007, <http://www.shenzhihua.net/slls/000232.htm> .