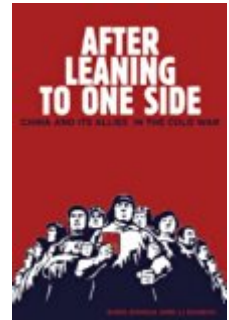


Zhihua Shen, Danhui Li. *After Leaning to One Side: China and Its Allies in the Cold War.* Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011. 360 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-7087-3.



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As Chinese archival materials become available and increasing numbers of Chinese graduate students and professors labor in American and European institutions, the next step in broadening our understanding of China's role in the world is the integration of the work of mainland Chinese scholars into the discussion. *After Leaning to One Side* by Zhihua Shen and Danhui Li provides an excellent introduction to the new scholarship on post-1949 Chinese foreign policy being produced in the People's Republic of China (PRC) by two of its leading practitioners, one that will hopefully claim its rightful place among the standard texts of the new Cold War historiography. Shen and Li are familiar to all scholars who have worked on China and the Cold War in recent years, and they are responsible not only for tremendous advances in scholarship but for institutionalizing the multi-linguistic and multi-archival study of the Cold War in China, making East China Normal University in Shanghai the epicenter of a new generation of Chinese historians. It is all the more significant then that the new sources and perspectives evi-

dent in this rich book, while they will be neither uncontroversial nor unchallenged, should nevertheless help reframe the way we view the interests and processes behind Chinese foreign policy-making during the Cold War.

Despite being composed of a number of disconnected essays written at different times, the overall argument of the book is clear and evident throughout. Shen and Li begin with the question as to why alliances between socialist states, which in theory should be held together by a common ideology, have proven to be far more brittle than alliances between capitalist states, whose tendency toward violent competition formed the basis of the Leninist approach to international politics. They argue that the ideological structure of Marxism-Leninism requires a hierarchy in order to determine who is the authoritative interpreter of communist scripture and consequently has the power to define the overriding interests of the "socialist camp." This principle, however, inevitably comes into conflict with the national interests of individual countries which must diverge

at some point, especially where the basis of revolutionary legitimacy is as much the re-assertion of the prerogatives of national sovereignty against external encroachment as it is socioeconomic egalitarianism. Complicating the picture further is the single-party state structure, which automatically converts ideological and programmatic differences into national ones, and vice versa. As a result, communist alliances veer between periods of near-romantic ecstasy, as during the mid 1950s when aid to the PRC might have accounted for roughly 7 percent of Soviet GDP, and violent enmity, evident in the Sino-Soviet clashes on the Ussuri River in 1969 or in the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979.

Shen and Li use this argument to frame chapters which cover the Korean War, Sino-Soviet economic cooperation, border tensions in Central Asia, and finally the Sino-Vietnamese relationship at the time of the U.S.-China rapprochement. The historiographical interventions made in these individual sections are often interesting in themselves and the book may well be employed piecemeal in undergraduate courses which cover one or more of the above topics. One of the most interesting interventions regards Stalin's decision to support Kim Il Sung's planned invasion of South Korea in April-May 1950. Shen and Li argue that Stalin's shift was prompted by the success of the Chinese in gaining concessions from the USSR in the Sino-Soviet friendship treaty and a consequent desire to put Mao and company in their place by postponing an assault on Taiwan in favor of the Korean action. This contrasts with earlier works which maintain that Dean Acheson's speech in January of that year excluding South Korea from the American defense perimeter in the Pacific prompted Stalin's sudden support for the invasion of South Korea. This claim has the interesting effect of foregrounding relationships within the socialist world as opposed to East-West relations, an idea that is currently struggling for legitimacy even for the period of the Sino-Soviet

split, let alone 1950, at the very height of the Cold War.

This claim, however, like some other key elements of the book, is the product more of speculation than documentary evidence. The authors are fully aware of this fact, admitting that "Such an assessment of Stalin's intentions about Korea is necessarily based on inferences.... No document, however, has yet directly confirmed Stalin's plans, and it is possible that none ever will" (p. 46). Consequently, the utility of the book stems more from the fresh perspective it provides on events and decision making, particularly within the PRC, than from breakthrough documentary revelations. Much of the recent historiography on this period of Chinese foreign policy, particularly Lorenz Luthi's and Sergey Radchenko's books on the Sino-Soviet split as well as Chen Jian's *Mao's China and the Cold War*, presents a very Mao-centered view in which he drove Chinese foreign policy to suit his domestic agenda of popular mobilization and staving off "revisionism."^[1] In *After Leaning to One Side*, by contrast, Chinese policy-making is often more cautious and reactive, and other key political figures such as Chen Yun and Liu Shaoqi are given more agency, not to mention local officials in places like Xinjiang. This aspect is especially manifest in the chapters on Soviet experts in the PRC and the situation on the Kazakh – Xinjiang frontier, and it is a welcome revision to the picture of China as a massive state hijacked by a megalomaniacal Mao who saw foreign policy as a tool of self-aggrandizement. The picture Shen and Li present is of a Chinese leadership led, of course, by Mao, trying to protect its prerogatives in a cautious and calculated manner.

At times, the evidently sympathetic view of the Chinese position might be striking to an American reader used to a different presentation in the exiting corpus of literature on Maoist China. The repeated use of "Vietnam" instead of "Democratic Republic of Vietnam" or "North Vietnam" to refer to the state governed from Hanoi is somewhat

bothersome, and the opening sentence of chapter 6, “National borders are inviolable” (p. 135), whether it is meant to be descriptive or prescriptive, is curious, to say the least. A number of the chapters, particularly but not exclusively the one on border issues in 1962, clearly side with the PRC against the Soviet Union.[2] Similarly, the claim that Beijing’s attempt to balance support for Hanoi against its rapprochement with the United States in 1971-72 succeeded in both respects is difficult to square with the subsequent trajectory of Sino-Vietnamese relations, and may reflect an excessively sanguine evaluation.[3] This aspect of the work might serve as a useful corrective, however, and more importantly, it might help prepare American and European students and scholars who have not yet engaged with Chinese scholars on their own terms to operate in an academic world in which Chinese scholarship in history is increasingly present and self-confident.

The bigger question about the book, though, centers on the persuasiveness of its main argument. On a very basic level, the argument suffers from an inadequate evidentiary base in that there simply are not enough international socialist relationships in general, let alone in this book, to conclusively determine what it is that makes these relationships particularly unstable. The few key relationships on which this book is centered, namely the PRC’s relationships with the USSR, North Korea, and North Vietnam, each contain enough other plausibly problematic variables to make a blanket statement that all socialist relationships are fundamentally unstable for ideological reasons difficult to defend. What is the role of the racial and ethnic tensions and prejudices in the Sino-Soviet relationship that Radchenko highlighted in his earlier book? What about the millennia of history between China, Korea, and Vietnam, a history structured by the complex interplay of attraction and rejection, cultural connections and imperialist invasions? Historical events do not occur in a laboratory environment, of course, and it will never be possible to control for all variables,

but these seem like particularly deep and complex relationships which might be hard to reduce to a single factor. In addition, the narrow time frame of the book enables the question of socialist relationships to be framed in a particularly narrow manner. Have the PRC’s relations with its socialist neighbors changed in recent decades as ideology has arguably faded into the background? It seems that Beijing’s tense relations with its neighbors and its inability to create enduring alliances on its periphery point to deeper problems with its diplomacy. Similarly, capitalist alliances were certainly quite unstable in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often erupting in betrayal and violence even among ostensibly friendly democracies, as demonstrated by the Fashoda crisis, among others. It was precisely this phenomenon which led Lenin and the Bolsheviks to feel so confident about the inevitability of another great capitalist war. Consequently, are capitalist alliances really more stable, was the Cold War simply an exceptional circumstance, or did the Second World War fundamentally change the modes of international political behavior in certain quarters? Shen and Li’s thesis presents an interesting starting point for discussion, but much more researching, thinking, and writing will have to take place before we truly understand the complex dynamics of the “socialist camp.”

This is, however, just the tip of the iceberg of the work of these two scholars, though most of it remains untranslated. *After Leaning to One Side* is a crucial first step in the introduction of the new Chinese historiography to an English-speaking audience, and its importance goes beyond the new sources and arguments it contains. One hopes that it will get the wide audience and careful consideration that it deserves.

Notes

[1]. See Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Lorenz Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 2008); and Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: the Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009).

[2]. See, for example, the description of Soviet activities in Xinjiang in the early 1960s, pp. 186-192.

[3]. See p. 243.

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