

From “Chaos” to “Order” to Uncertainty

Chinese Quintessential Reading
of Russia’s Post-Communist Transformation

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Abstract

The article describes how social and political changes in post-Soviet Russia over the past quarter of a century have been read and assessed by Chinese experts in relevant fundamental monographs. Each of the monographs considered herein, published in China twelve years apart, reviews different stages in the evolution of Chinese experts’ approach towards Russia, and states their analytical, ideological and political conclusions. Generally speaking, China’s sociopolitical Russian studies have evolved from the ideologically motivated resentment against the Soviet Union’s dissolution, the disbandment of its Communist Party and the ensuing shock reforms of the 1990s to the recognition of irreversible changes in Russia and “legitimization” of the Russian leadership in the 2000s-2010s. However, by the end of the current decade, the topic of uncertainty about Russia’s future sociopolitical and economic development has once again surfaced in some key publications along with increasingly “panegyric” assessments of the Russian president.

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DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2019-17-4-53-77

Keywords: Russia, China, the Soviet Union, CPSU, China's Russian studies, post-communist transformation

The perception of present-day Russia by Chinese experts is largely ideologized, which is not surprising, for while writing about modern Russia they essentially write about China. This approach, which some Chinese Russia experts smartly describe as “write about Moscow but think about Beijing,” was obviously prompted by the disbandment of the Soviet Communist Party (CSPU) and the dissolution of the Soviet Union—a truly “Freudian” drama which China’s ruling party and political class have not been able to fully overcome yet either morally and psychologically or ideologically and politically. The Soviet Union’s breakup came as a devastating blow to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and the geopolitical identity of China. It is still hard for foreign observers to grasp the magnitude and the aftermath of that upheaval in its entirety. It is all the more palpable for the Chinese leadership as it is endeavoring to carry out “market reforms” in the country, while having to deal with systemic problems and challenges that are typologically similar to those the Soviet government faced in the past and failed to overcome in the “Leninist-type” party-state the CSPU had created and which still exists in China (Karpov, 2018). This is not admitted officially, of course. On the contrary, a firm distinction is drawn between modern China and the former Soviet Union (Lin, 2003). However, this issue comes up occasionally in private conversations, especially in the past four to five years.

Modern China, despite all of its socioeconomic and political reforms, completed or ongoing, remains an ideologized Leninist-type party-state. In other words, China is still ideocracy. In such systems the ideological and political legitimacy of the authorities is articulated differently than in democratic or authoritarian-corporate regimes (Linz). One may think that the legitimacy of the ruling party in China is not an issue since its monopoly on power is ideologically

and teleologically substantiated. However, it is an issue and sometimes it may assume acute forms because legitimacy is verified not only through doctrines but also through an entirety of sociopolitical and economic practices.

So, one must not be surprised by a paradoxical situation where the task of analyzing the causes of the Soviet collapse, which official Beijing assigns to its expert community over and over again, is seriously complicated by the limits the same official Beijing imposes on such analysis. These limits assume the form of binding analytical templates, interpretations, open and hidden censorship, and experts' self-censorship which is unavoidable in such situations. There are no documents to prove that such “instructions from above” exist, but the use of the same stories about the former Soviet Union and modern Russia and their controversial interpretations from article to article and from book to book undoubtedly suggests so. These include, among others, assertions that Mikhail Gorbachev started political reforms first, and descriptions of the “shock therapy inferno” (Xu, 1992, pp. 50-61; Zhu, 1993, pp. 19-23).

The quantitative volume of contemporary Russian studies in China is quite impressive. According to some estimates, there are over 70 institutions in China which study Russia (Komissina, 2012). These also include Russian language departments at universities where teachers focus mainly on philological and ethnocultural issues.

We believe that the evolution of Chinese Russia experts' assessments of Russia's socioeconomic development over the past twenty-five years should be divided into three stages, which generally coincide with the overall logic of sociopolitical and economic changes in post-Soviet Russia. Stage One covers the 1990s, a period of “shock transformation” during Boris Yeltsin's presidency. Stage Two is a period of relative systemic stabilization and economic revival which lasted throughout the 2000s, that is, during Vladimir Putin's two presidential terms and Dmitry Medvedev's presidency. Stage Three starts from Vladimir Putin's reelection as president in 2012 and continues up to date.

Stage One was a time of acute crisis followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the CPSU, and on the other hand, a period of

growing conservative-stabilizing tendencies in China's domestic policy after the events of 1989 in Beijing. Chinese experts' assessments of the new Russian leadership's socioeconomic policy at that time were for the most part strongly negative, spiced with distinct ideological resentment (Xu, 1992; Zhang, 1995, pp. 18-21).

And yet there were a number of more reserved academic and analytical materials on Russia's "shock therapy" that appeared in China at about the same time (Zhu, 1993; Fang, 1996, p. 153).

The second half of the 1990s was marked by several analytical publications about Russia, the tone of which varied but understandably fit into the ideological and political clichés and doctrines that prevailed in China at that time (Zhang, 1995, 87-90). The ideologically motivated postulate about "the disastrous failure of radical market reforms in Russia" retained its "methodological" role. Nevertheless, the range of problems concerning the socioeconomic development of post-Soviet Russia and the array of opinions pertaining to these problems kept widening among Chinese Russia experts.

On the whole, at the turn of the millennium, Chinese Russia experts had come to consensus on two points:

1. Socioeconomic and political reforms in Russia carried out since 1991 were deemed "systemically irreversible." The question of a possible "restoration of the Soviet Union" was definitively removed from the expert and political agenda.
2. Society had to pay an extremely high economic and psychological price for the "radical reforms" in Russia. Reforms were "at variance with the historically established principles of Russian society" which became deeply disappointed at the results of such fundamental transformations (Li, 1999, pp. 93-99).

Stage Two was characterized by relative stabilization of the situation and resumption of economic growth in Russia. In China, it was a period of rapid socioeconomic development, the so-called China miracle, and political stabilization after the acute crisis of 1989. China's Russian political and economic studies did not discard the abovementioned ideological clichés but the perception of "Putin's

Russia” was much more positive than in the 1990s. Chinese experts subconsciously viewed the second Russian president as a person who was leading Russia back to “order,” similar, probably not institutionally but semantically, to the sociopolitical practices established in China (Zhang, 2006; Xu, 2006; Liu, 2011).

Stage Three was marked by gradually but steadily mounting socioeconomic problems both in Russia and China. However, the underlying systemic causes of these problems were different. By the middle of the 2010s tectonic social shifts had begun in both countries: the “Russian Spring” in Russia and Xi Jinping’s “new normal” in China. This evoked a controversial reaction among Chinese Russia experts. On the one hand, they treated President Vladimir Putin almost “panegyrically,” but on the other hand, they increasingly voiced concern over growing uncertainty about Russia’s future (Zuo, 2012; Jiang, 2012; Zhang, 2018).

TWO MONOGRAPHS, 12 YEARS APART

This article focuses on two fundamental monographs written by Chinese Russia experts who describe and analyze the reasons for the fall of the Soviet Union and the CPSU and the subsequent three decades of evolutionary/revolutionary social changes in post-Soviet Russia. The first book, written by Xu Xiangmei, an expert analyst at the Translation Bureau under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), is titled *From Chaos to Order: Political Process in Russia (1995-2005)*. It was published in 2006.

The second book came out in July 2018 under the title *30 Years from the Soviet Union to a New Russia. The Logic of Big Power’s Institutional Transition*. It was written by Zhang Shuhua, Director of the Institute of Information and Intelligence, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Interestingly, Zhang Shuhua is not a member of the CPC.

Our choice of these two works in the plethora of Chinese books about modern Russia was not accidental. These are major monographs, which generalize and systematize the approaches used by Chinese Russia experts towards studying problems in contemporary Russia at each of the abovementioned stages of their analysis and interpretation in China.

Xu Xiangmei's work summarizes the first two stages, that is, a period of the 1990s-2000s, as seen and assessed by mainstream Russian studies in China in the middle of the 2000s.

Zhang Shuhua's book is of exceptional importance for understanding Chinese Russia experts' perception of the much more turbulent 2010s.

It must be said that these monographs contain no deep analysis of political processes in post-Soviet Russia and make absolutely no academic or analytical breakthrough. What makes them important is that they help determine post-Soviet Russia's place in the contemporary Chinese worldview, understand the mechanisms of the CPC regime's self-legitimation through the interpretations of the political process in Russia at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, and possibly make some forecasts for the development of Russian-Chinese relations.

"FROM CHAOS TO ORDER"

In 2006, Beijing's Central Documents Publishers, which is directly overseen by the CPC Central Committee, released a book, *From Chaos to Order: Political Process in Russia (1995-2005)*, by Xu Xiangmei, an expert analyst at the Translation Bureau under the CPC Central Committee. It gave a rather detailed description of political aspects of post-communist transformation in the Russian Federation and attempted to analyze them. The book offers a quintessential reading of Russia's development in the 1990s and the 2000s and contains all key definitions and semantic constructs of modern Russian studies in China. As such, the book remains quite relevant from both historiographical and ideological points of view.

It must be said that the terms 'chaos' (luàn) and 'order' (zhì)—the latter can be translated as "streamlined governance"—are to a large extent systemic in China's traditional political lexicon and, being essentially antipodes, bear rather significant but absolutely opposite political and ethical connotations (Bond, 1986).

The term 'chaos' is completely negative and basically means a disintegration of a hierarchical structure. In political contexts, it can be a state, society, organization, etc. In the traditional Chinese

perception (at least, within the framework of the Confucian-Legist discourse), a hierarchical structure means public existence in the broadest possible meaning of this word (Pye, 1985). It is intrinsically valuable and ideally self-sufficient because the identity (self-identity) of hierarchically and mutually subordinated parts of such a structure (be it individuals or institutions) critically depends on their position in a given reality or ideally constructed hierarchy. In principle, there are no other mechanisms available for building one's identity. Generally speaking, this is the basic principle of the Middle Kingdom's existence: it is not a state in the modern sense but rather a Confucian-Legist civilizational oecumene. A demolition of such a hierarchical structure, in the traditional sense, is quite comparable with the end of the world as it will not only cause a collapse of “order” at the micro-level but will also automatically annihilate the entirety of related “micro-identities.” And this essentially means a “global catastrophe,” which must be avoided and warded off by all possible means. Semantically, even a bad “hierarchy” is better than “chaos.” Ethically, “chaos” is the quintessence of everything negative which is invariably upheld by bad characters.

“Order,” or “streamlined governance,” on the contrary, is the quintessence of everything positive. It means building and maintaining a sociopolitical hierarchy which, while ensuring stability and mutually subordinated identities, essentially performs a peace-building function and guarantees existential “harmony” in the Middle Kingdom. While the guides of “chaos” are always “bad guys,” those who break the “chaos” and create a new streamlined hierarchy, whoever they might be, are as a rule viewed positively from the ethical point of view. The more stable and durable “a new order” is, the more so.

Unlike many works on these issues by Chinese Russia experts, even those which claim some degree of scientificity, Xu Xiangmei's book is not downright propagandistic. Naturally, it fits quite well into the Chinese ideologized construct of post-communist transformation in Russia. Being on the whole ideologically balanced, the book nevertheless disavows some of the old templates from within, so to speak, but at the same time introduces new, often paradoxical and

controversial, interpretations. The latter are quite interesting for understanding, among other things, China's official attitude towards Russian President Vladimir Putin and the present and future of Sino-Russian relations.

"CHAOS"

"Chaos" obviously means the collapse of the CPSU, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the "shock therapy" policy conducted by Yeltsin and Gaidar. The root cause of "chaos" is Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*. The author feels nostalgic for the Soviet Union, which is quite strange, to say the least, because 50-year-old Xu Xiangmei never visited the real Soviet Union and made her first trip to Russia at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. Nevertheless, "having existed for 63 years, [the USSR] built the first socialist state in the capitalist environment [...] facilitated people's democratic revolutions in China and some of the Eastern European countries [...] the Soviet economy grew rapidly; industrialization, urbanization, per capita income, and the social security system rivaled the U.S. [...] Advanced and powerful armed forces maintained parity with the U.S. for a long time" (Xu, 2006, p. 3). The author then points to deep stagnation in the Soviet socioeconomic sphere and blames it on "the flaws of the planned economy."

At the same time, while describing Gorbachev's *perestroika*, the author should be given credit for stepping aside from the hitherto prevailing official interpretation in China. It suggested in particular that unlike the "wise and cautious Deng Xiaoping," Mikhail Gorbachev "being unaware of what he was doing" had started political reforms first, thus plunging society and the country into chaos and made gradual economic reforms impossible in the Soviet Union (Wu, 1994, p. 24; Lin, 2003). Xu Xiangmei takes a more balanced approach. She writes about three components of *perestroika*: "glasnost" (that is, partial liberalization of atmosphere in society), market economic reforms with a view to accelerated development, and "democratization of the political system." In this order. She points out right away that the Soviet leader started "democratizing the political system" only

after economic reforms had considerably lagged behind, thus seeking to spur them through institutional changes (Xu, 2006, p. 4). The author then lashes out at the “new thinking” concept. “Not only did Gorbachev’s ‘new thinking’ reform lead to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, but it also put the CPSU’s rule to rest and plunged the economy into stagnation” (Xu, 2006, p. 11).

Further narration suggests that Boris Yeltsin exacerbated the “chaos” by “destroying the old world” completely (Xu, 2006, p. 11). On the one hand, the author does not say this explicitly. On the other hand, she portrays the drama of Russian reforms in the early 1990s as the result of Boris Yeltsin’s “voluntarism.” She explains this “voluntarism” (or the “Yeltsin factor” as Xu Xiangmei calls it) in a very peculiar way, akin to behaviorism, claiming that the Russian president’s hard childhood built his character: his father used to whip him with a belt, but young Boris only clenched his teeth and never backed down. The author quotes Yeltsin himself, though (Xu, 2006, p. 138).

If one interprets these perturbations as “a transition from chaos to order,” it is the first Russian president who should be given a leading, albeit controversial, role in this process. But Chinese Russia experts in general and Xu Xiangmei in particular are unable to give credit to Boris Yeltsin even three decades on and continue to view him as the “grave-digger for the CPSU’s power.” His historical legitimation by and large remains unacceptable for the CPC even though it was Boris Yeltsin who initiated the Russian-Chinese rapprochement in the second half of the 1990s, and the Chinese party and state leadership accepted his offer. Boris Yeltsin and CPC Central Committee Secretary General Jiang Zemin signed the Shanghai Declaration in April 1996, thus paving the way for the Russian-Chinese “strategic partnership.” Official Beijing de facto supported Yeltsin, not Russian Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, at the presidential election in the summer of 1996. And yet the fact that the first Russian president demonstratively gave up top positions in the party hierarchy and eventually seceded from the Communist Party to become the leader of post-communist (essentially anti-communist) Russia does not allow Chinese Russia experts and their ideological and political mentors

to portray him as “a good guy” or “the creator of a new order.” By definition, he remains “a destroyer who exacerbated the chaos.”

“ORDER”

Close reading of Xu Xiangmei’s book leads one to think that her main positive character is Russian Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov.

First of all, she did not make a single critical remark about him in any way. On the contrary, she portrays Zyuganov as always having clear and carefully balanced views and positions, and as being invariably kind both in his political activities and towards his opponents.

Sometimes one may think that the Russian communist leader and his party “hover above the fight,” so to speak, between the other political forces and groups in post-Soviet Russia; the veracity of his position legitimizes “positive sides” and exposes “negative sides” in the views and actions of all the other actors involved in the post-communist political struggle.

A key and undoubtedly positive figure in the second half of Xu Xiangmei’s monograph is Vladimir Putin. The author gives him the laurels of a positive hero who is leading Russia out of the chaos of *perestroika* and “shock reforms.” The author neither completely conceals, nor particularly accentuates the fact that these laurels without a doubt rest on the achievements of the previous, truly turbulent, period of Russian history. Xu Xiangmei just notes laconically: “Over the five years of liberal reforms [...] Russia managed to create the basic framework of market economy. Prices were liberalized, inflation was gradually taken under control, and public production continued to fall but at a much slower pace than in the previous years” (Xu, 2006, p. 27).

“A Mysterious Putin”—the name of one of the chapters in Xu Xiangmei’s book (Xu, 2006, pp 78-83)—is the quintessence of positive developments in post-communist Russia (apart from Gennady Zyuganov and his party, of course). He is modest: despite the tradition he did not renovate his office or change furniture in it after he had become prime minister (Xu, 2006, p. 81). He does not say much, but when he speaks, he speaks weightily and clearly. He does not turn

his back on his “patron” Boris Yeltsin and thinks highly of his role in the history of Russia (Xu, 2006, pp. 146-147). As a matter of fact, this positive connotation in Xu Xiangmei’s assessment also alludes to certain traditional aspects of mechanisms used for legitimizing power in China, such as loyalty (zhōng), albeit expressed just outwardly, to the retired senior predecessor which is extremely important in a peace-building and hierarchical sense.

It is known from the history of Sino-Russian relations that one of the reasons, not the only one but still quite significant, why Mao Zedong felt a dislike for Nikita Khrushchev was the fact that the latter, viewed by Mao as Joseph Stalin’s successor, had started an open and decisive, although measured, demolition of his “patron’s” ideological, political and institutional legacy.

Boris Yeltsin may be a “terrible destroyer,” but Vladimir Putin’s refusal to discard his legacy openly and immediately does him credit. This can clearly be seen in some of Xu Xiangmei’s remarks: “It seems fair to say that the rise of Putin from an inconspicuous figure to the position of prime minister became a reality solely due to President Yeltsin’s support [...] If it is true that there is ‘the Putin phenomenon’ in the Russian political circles, it must be said that it is above all the result of the ‘Yeltsin factor’” (Xu, 2006, p. 144).

The author graphically describes Putin’s growing public support, his “closeness to ordinary people,” his decisiveness in fighting separatism in the North Caucasus and his firmness in the political confrontation with “oligarchs” in the 1990s. These episodes are presented in detail in terms of facts but appear to be somewhat sketchy in terms of substance, internal reasons, and cause-and-effect relationship.

So, Russia’s second President Vladimir Putin is portrayed by Xu Xiangmei as a new positive leader who is steering the country out of its 15-year-long “chaos” and basically establishing a new “hierarchical order” in it. This is the underlying message of the monograph emanating from its explicit name: *From Chaos to Order*.

However, close reading may lead to a paradoxical conclusion: This “order” is legitimized for the Chinese reader by nothing else but claims that it is close to the views of Gennady Zyuganov and his Communist

Party, or at least does not contradict them. Xu Xiangmei notes, albeit sketchily, the continuity of Boris Yeltsin's policy in Vladimir Putin's decisions and actions. She notes, quite briefly though, the "market-democratic" nature of modern Russian society. It certainly was not easy for her to make this intellectual stunt as she aspired to strengthen the legitimacy of the CPC's power in China through Vladimir Putin's closeness to the Russian Communist Party in present-day Russia. And yet, she did it brilliantly. At the same time, it was not done primitively by stating, for example, that "Putin is a Stalinist," as I have occasionally heard from some Chinese Russia experts. But since the second Russian president, regardless of the difference in the assessment of his work, is clearly not a dedicated follower of communism or a convinced Stalinist, and does not advocate a restoration of the Soviet Union or lean towards the Russian Communist Party, the soundness of the analysis comes into question. Something has to be hushed up, and something, on the contrary, thought up, important emphases have to be shifted and notions mixed up. But it is worth doing. In fact, having closed the book an attentive reader would come to realize that this is probably the basic existential "subject matter and method of research" designed to show that by implementing his socioeconomic and political strategy in Russia, which allegedly matches the key parameters of the Russian Communist Party's program (if not in letter then certainly in spirit), Vladimir Putin is not only an acceptable Russian leader for official Beijing but, to a certain extent, he fills the gaps in the legitimacy of the CPC itself, which suffered dramatically from the collapse of the CPSU, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and other circumstances that surrounded the emergence and development of post-communist Russia. I am not to judge whether there is more censorship, self-censorship or the author's personal views here. It is more likely that this is a complex conglomerate of all three, as is often the case with thinking but loyal intellectual analysts who have to work in systems that seriously restrict the freedom of thought and worldview.

So what did the author not say? For example, she did not say that during the GKChP coup d'état attempt in August 1991—an event of exceptional importance for China's Russian studies—Vladimir

Putin had strongly opposed the coupists and openly supported Boris Yeltsin’s proponent, St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak, in whose administration he was working at that time (Lenta, 2018). According to Xu Xiangmei, Vladimir Putin “exerted considerable effort to maintain neutrality with regard to the GKChP structures [in St. Petersburg]” (Xu, 2006, p. 80). Just that.

What did the author think up? For example, she claims that the Russian president openly supports and promotes “regulated market economy” and “managed democracy” (Xu, 2006, pp. 217-218). Regardless of how some of the Russian and foreign observers assess Vladimir Putin’s views and actions in this respect, it is well known that the Russian president has never spoken in favor of “regulated market economy” and has openly distanced himself from the theory of “managed democracy” (Papp, 2005).

It seems that the controversial scenario based on Vladimir Putin’s “regulated market economy” and “managed democracy” in Russia is important for the author as an additional and weighty argument upholding the legitimacy of the CPC in modern China. The logical chain looks as follows: the former Soviet Union, just like China in the past, experienced serious internal problems caused by the flaws of planned economy. Attempts to solve them in the late Soviet Union and then in Russia in the 1990s through “liberal shock reforms” resulted in “chaos.” The return to “order” means a rejection of “uncontrolled liberalism” and restoration of “state governability.” The Chinese reader, who lives in a world of images and axioms created by official propaganda, may view this as an additional argument proving the “wisdom” of the CPC which decided against “liberal reforms” and opted instead for “gradual market changes” under the constant “direction” and control of the party-state. Having suffered the “cost of chaos,” Russia, led by Vladimir Putin, who is close “in letter and spirit” to the “people’s aspirations” and, indirectly, to the Russian Communist Party’s principles, is also “correcting itself” and thus reaffirming the “correctness” of the Chinese leadership’s choice.

So, where did Xu Xiangmei shift the emphases and mix up the notions? She did it by trying to present the second Russian president as

an alter ego of the Russian Communist Party and its leader Gennady Zyuganov. It would be better to quote the author herself, for no one could really put it better: “When comparing the programs and the mindsets of Putin and Zyuganov, we can see that they have much in common. Putin says that Russia needs a strong system of state power, while Zyuganov stresses [the importance of] ‘strong bodies of central power.’ Putin has proposed increasing defense spending, while Zyuganov calls for strengthening defense capability [...] Putin has repeatedly spoken in favor of market reforms, while Zyuganov admits the need for a mixed economy, and both [politicians] underscore the importance of bolstering the role of the state in the process of any transformation. Putin says that ‘Russia’s idea’ is patriotism, while Zyuganov emphasizes [...] ‘social justice, the might of the state, the power of the people, human rights and freedom’” (Xu, 2006, p. 169). The author, however, acknowledges certain differences between the Russian president and the Russian Communist Party leader. For example, according to Xu Xiangmei, Putin blames Russia’s problems on the Soviet legacy, while Zyuganov thinks of “the achievements of socialism” with more reverence (Xu, 2006, p. 170). And then the author, as if she has suddenly recollected herself, points out: “[Nevertheless,] one can see that the differences between Putin and Zyuganov concern solely their understanding of the past. This is irrelevant for ordinary people. In terms of state governance, there are no substantial differences between them [...] even though Zyuganov can hardly compare with Putin as a leader who basically combines the positions of president and prime minister and enjoys massive public support” (Xu, 2006, p. 170).

One way or another, this is the underlying idea of the book stated with absolute clarity. That ship has sailed. The Soviet Union and the CPSU are gone and will never be back again. The Russian communist leader can count on administrative resource and real grassroots support, but in his program, views and decisions the second Russian president acts as his alter ego, implementing the Russian Communist Party’s major ideas in new conditions. Suffice it to look at Xu Xiangmei’s remark about the absence of “qualitative difference” between Putin’s and Zyuganov’s programs! Therefore, Putin is a successor of the Soviet

Union and the CPSU who is not only acceptable for official Beijing as a partner but who is also the leader of what remains of “the world’s first-ever socialist state” and thus additionally legitimizes the CPC’s power. This state, “having gone through the chaos of liberal reforms,” is correcting itself under the delicate “leadership” of communists’ alter ego, and beginning to move basically along the same path the “wise and cautious” CPC has never left. This seems to be a fundamental factor that determines the author’s positive attitude towards Gennady Zyuganov and Vladimir Putin.

Extremely strained interpretations, to put it mildly, made by the respected Chinese author are surely quite obvious to specialists studying post-communist Russia. But the problem is that these interpretations constituted the quintessential image of modern Russia, which was created in the Chinese public mind by mainstream Russia analysts and leading mass media under the watchful eye of CPC Central Committee ideological overseers. We believe there is much more China in this image than there is Russia.

It is noteworthy that in its key conceptual aspects Xu Xiangmei’s book, published more than a decade ago, still remains a relevant classic of contemporary Russian political studies in China.

First of all, it is widely cited as a fundamental study and a source of reference for different Chinese authors, both researchers and propaganda publicists, who write about sociopolitical processes and institutional evolution in Russia in the past ten to fifteen years (Zhu, 2018; Tian, 2012; Li, 2012).

Secondly, the book in question to a large extent establishes a certain trend, or “school,” of conceptual and methodological approaches towards Russia in contemporary Russian political studies in China. This school can justifiably be classified as the conceptual mainstream in China’s reading of post-communist transformation in Russia. Over the years passed since its publication, the approaches and assessments outlined and substantiated in Xu Xiangmei’s monograph have provided the basis for numerous master’s degree and even doctoral dissertations on the sociopolitical history of Russia after 1991. The conceptually-ethical and political dichotomy “chaos-order” serves as

a methodological and worldview system of coordinates (Wang, 2017; Zhang, 2017).

Thirdly, the author's personal contacts with leading Chinese Russia experts and specialists on former socialist countries in Eastern and Central Europe from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Institute of Party History under the CPC Central Committee during their visit to the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration in November 2018 fully reaffirm the fundamental nature and relevancy of Xu Xiangmei's approaches towards modern Russia. Less than a year ago, I read a two-day series of lectures to Chinese experts, where I told them about contemporary Chinese studies in Russia and the impact of China's policy of "reform and openness" on transformations in Russia. During the final Q&A session, the discussion naturally touched upon Boris Yeltsin and "shock therapy," Gennady Zyuganov and the Russian Communist Party, and Vladimir Putin in the context of his attitude towards the ideological, worldview, systemic and political legacy of the first Russian president. It was a truly interesting discussion, which clearly showed that the experts from the Institute of Party History under the CPC Central Committee did not in fact see any qualitative difference between the Russian communists' program and Vladimir Putin's policy. "Order" was definitely opposed to "chaos." However, the ideological magnitude of "order" became absolutely visible when the Chinese guests did not hide their surprise at Vladimir Putin's participation in the wreath-laying ceremony commemorating the Russian soldiers killed in France during World War One, which took place by the Pont Alexander III in Paris on November 11, 2018. The Chinese experts consider that war *imperialistic*. So how should one understand the Russian president who paid tribute to the memory of those who fought "for the ideas of world imperialism?"

FROM "ORDER" TO ... UNCERTAINTY?

Zhang Shuhua's monograph, *30 Years from the Soviet Union to a New Russia. The Logic of Big Power's Institutional Transition*, which was published in Beijing in July 2018, is the newest fundamental study which

summarizes the causes, progress and consequences of post-communist transformation in Russia. But its fundamental nature and novelty are not its only merits. It was published in a series of monographs titled “China’s Way” and designed to tell Chinese experts (and members of the broader reading public) about the experience of sociopolitical transformations in some of the major countries of the world in order to compare it with China’s own experience and determine what is acceptable for China and what is not. The author is a professional Russian studies expert, Director of the Institute of Information and Intelligence of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

It must be said that the logic, structure and overall ideological and political context of the narration repeat those of Xu Xiangmei, which only proves again that the latter’s book has a historiographical value. Just like Xu Xiangmei’s book, Zhang Shuhua’s monograph is not an academic research project but a chronicle of certain facts from Russia’s sociopolitical history and their interpretation based on ideological patterns.

And yet there are also significant differences attributable to the changes in Russia but, as always the case with Chinese Russia experts, mainly in China itself. Xu Xiangmei wrote her book during the period of sociopolitical and economic stabilization in Russia and a relatively “liberal” ideological and political atmosphere in China in the middle of the 2000s. It is impossible not to admit that the situation has changed in both countries: there is a deepening socioeconomic and latent political crisis in Russia, while China is living through an “era of new normal,” which is understood to mean economic deceleration, large-scale “fight against corruption,” and a palpable “freezing” of the sociopolitical climate. This probably necessitates a new interpretation of both “chaos” and “order.” In our opinion, this is the reason for peculiar interpretations of the late Soviet and post-Soviet history of Russia in Zhang Shuhua’s monograph.

The first such peculiarity and difference from Xu Xiangmei’s text is that the ideological aspect of Zhang Shuhua’s book becomes “more ponderous and cruder,” as Vladimir Mayakovsky would have said. Xu Xiangmei’s work was just “tangible.” When explaining the causes of

the crisis and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the CPSU, Zhang Shuhua only cursorily touches upon the mounting socioeconomic and political problems in the late Soviet Union, concentrating instead on the “ideological degeneration” of the Soviet elite. He blames this “degeneration” on the aftermath of the 20th Congress of the CPSU, the criticism of Stalin, and de-Stalinization launched by Khrushchev. Semantically, this resonates with the Maoist criticism of Soviet “revisionism” in the 1960s-1970s. “After Khrushchev’s rise to power, the CPSU started to drift away from the genuine theory of Marxism-Leninism and to practice ‘right-wing revisionism’... In the 1970s, Brezhnev came up with the concept of ‘mature socialism’... but his great-power chauvinistic policy and the ‘party elders’ style caused much damage to the international communist movement and the Soviet Union’s image abroad. In the Soviet Union, although the CPSU promoted and expounded on Marxism-Leninism, there was a great deal of dogmatism in [the interpretation of] Marxism-Leninism” (Zhang, 2018, pp. 5-6).

Secondly, Zhang Shuhua portrays Mikhail Gorbachev and some of his associates, primarily Alexander Yakovlev, not just as sincerely errant or naïve reformers, but as persons who deliberately and maliciously sabotaged and betrayed the cause of Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet Union and the whole world. “In the second half of the 1980s, Gorbachev and Yakovlev, as apostates and traitors ... under the cover of ‘glasnost’ and ‘new thinking’ ... helped introduce Western values; rewrote history and denied the past; they pounced at the history of the CPSU to present themselves as the champions of ‘freedom, democracy and enlightenment’” (Zhang, 2018, pp. 55-56).

Thirdly, unlike Xu Xiangmei, Zhang Shuhua does not even mention Russian Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov. His party’s positions are presented through quotes from articles written by representatives of its most conservative and ideologized segment, particularly the party’s Moscow City Committee Secretary Yuri Prokofiev who claimed that “the CPSU political elite was unable to respond to the challenges of the times and some of them took the path of treason” (Zhang, 2018, pp. 78-79).

The author does not seem to be very much interested in analyzing the figure of Russia’s first President Boris Yeltsin, the origin of his policy, seeming and real alternatives to the socioeconomic and political development of Russia in the 1980s-1990s, or the circumstances of sociopolitical struggle in Russia in the 1990s. His attention is riveted on the “shock therapy” and privatization, which had been blindly borrowed by post-Soviet leaders in Moscow from American dogmatic liberal Jeffrey Sachs as the shortest possible way to capitalism and which obviously caused numerous upheavals and led to a complete strategic failure. The picture of the socioeconomic and political catastrophe in Russia in the 1990s was drawn by Zhang Shuhua more graphically than Xu Xiangmei did in her book (Zhang, 2018, pp. 83-157). Those episodes take up almost a quarter of his monograph. In addition, unlike Xu Xiangmei, the author fails to note that Russia eventually created a new socioeconomic system which entered a period of relative stabilization in the 2000s. For Zhang Shuhua, Russia’s attempt to leap into capitalism is another catastrophe with no apparent positive results.

Just like in Xu Xiangmei’s book, a key positive figure of post-Soviet Russia in Zhang Shuhua’s monograph is the second Russian president, Vladimir Putin. Similarly to Xu Xiangmei, Zhang Shuhua speaks quite encomiastically about the progress and results of Vladimir Putin’s policy to build “managed sovereign democracy,” strengthen state control of the economy, and fight “the oligarchic dominance” (Zhang, 2018, pp. 164-173, 261-322). At the same time, Zhang Shuhua does not deny “qualitative differences” between Vladimir Putin’s policy and the Russian Communist Party’s program. However, he stresses that Vladimir Putin’s activities and principles “draw a clear line separating [him] from Gorbachev and particularly from Yeltsin-era ‘reforms’” (Zhang, 2018, p. 251). The author writes: “I believe it would be a simplification to describe Putin and the path chosen by the new Russia in terms of ‘isms.’ The main peculiarity of Putin’s way of thinking is the spirit of realism...aimed at finding practical solutions to concrete issues... This is why his way of thinking is characterized by diversity, synthesis, and intertwinement of different ideas...Putin thinks that... the Soviet communist experiment failed...but the creation of a post-

industrial society requires modernization and a wide use of new technologies...Patriotism, state understanding...public cohesion should become key values of the contemporary Russian mentality” (Zhang, 2018, pp. 273-275). Such remarks are in striking contrast to the official Chinese propaganda.

The author also lauds Vladimir Putin’s decisiveness in resisting the international “hegemony of the West” and its “intrigues” against Russia (Zhang, 2018, pp. 301-307).

Zhang Shuhua emphasizes differences in the approaches used by Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev (who was president in 2007-2012 and later prime minister). According to the author, Putin focuses on state principles and sociopolitical stability, while Medvedev favors greater economic and political competition. But Medvedev does not seek to build American-style democracy in Russia or use the “Chinese model” (Zhang, 2018, p. 356). Zhang Shuhua does not specify Medvedev’s intentions, but he notes the efforts he undertook as president to decentralize Putin’s “administrative vertical of power” by “broadening the participation of parties in regional elections” (Zhang, 2018, pp. 322-330).

The author obviously feels affection for the incumbent Russian president: “After 2013 Putin became an undeniable and bright star on the world political stage. ‘Putin’s way’ has turned into a strong political trump card with which Russia is asserting itself in the international community” (Zhang, 2018, p. 360).

At the same time, in several places of the monograph, and particularly nearer the end, the author’s panegyric assessments of Vladimir Putin’s actions and intentions alternate with expatiations on the growing uncertainty about the historical and political future of the Russian president and his country: “After the disintegration of the Soviet Union Russia lost the economic space and production chains; the technical potential and industrial base left after the Soviet Union were fully dismantled... Present-day Russia has lost the advantages of the Soviet period but preserved its flaws: it has failed to learn good things from the West... It’s neither East nor West, neither fish nor fowl” (Zhang, 2018, p. 170). However, “... it would not be enough to reconstruct Russia by

leaning solely on ambitious plans and beautiful goals. A cohesive team of like-minded people and...managerial personnel aspiring to master the best practices should become an inalienable part of Putin's success. Otherwise, Russia's revival will without a doubt remain a solo dance of one person—Putin” (Zhang, 2018, p. 362).

The next phrase is of paramount importance: “What path will Russia choose to go in the face of institutional deficiency and easily discernible and hidden social crises? How should modernization be carried out? ... What kind of modernization should it be? Up to date the Russian authorities and elites have been searching hard for an answer to this question. *Russia has again come to a crossroads and has to choose which way to go further.* Democracy and economic development, freedom and modernization, stability and absence of corruption, efficiency and democracy—which of these is the cause and which is the effect? Which is the condition and which is the result?” (Zhang, 2018, p. 359). It must be said for the sake of justice that China itself has so far not found substantive answers to these questions, whereas clichéd answers are well known: the leading role of the CPC, socialism with “Chinese characteristics,” rule-of-law state, “Chinese dream,” and the struggle for a new quality of economic growth.

CONCLUSION

The perception of modern Russia by the Chinese expert community remains a largely ideologized construct stemming from the historical and semantic dependence of the CPC's exclusive power on the former CPSU and the USSR and the need for “a politically correct” interpretation of post-Soviet transformation.

The authors of both monographs strongly reject as grossly erroneous Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the “shock therapy” policy carried out by Boris Yeltsin and Yegor Gaidar with a view to “restoring capitalism” in the Soviet Union and Russia. Xu Xiangmei and Zhang Shuhua believe that both resulted in a sociopolitical and economic catastrophe. However, the evolution of the situation in Russia and sociopolitical developments in China over the twelve years

that separate these two books have necessitated an adjustment of some of the authors' assessments and interpretations.

Xu Xiangmei's monograph was written during a period of stabilization in Russia and relative "liberalism" in China. In addition, not so much time had passed by then since the collapse of the CPSU, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the "shock" transformation in Russia. This predetermined the author's decision to portray Vladimir Putin as an alter ego of the Russian Communist Party and its leader Gennady Zyuganov, which, in her opinion, basically enabled Putin to lead Russia "from chaos to order." She also found it possible to note the construction of a relatively stable foundation of a new socioeconomic and political system in Russia. The general conclusion is that China should establish contact with the new Russia, especially since the latter has come back onto the "right path" which is not so much different from its Chinese version.

Zhang Shuhua's book came out in a different situation. The socioeconomic and political system in Russia was going through a latent but deepening crisis, while the sociopolitical climate in China had palpably "frozen up" amid economic slowdown. In addition, the Russian "dramas of the 1990s" had receded into the distant past, while the Russian Communist Party had become a more marginal political force. There was no longer ideologically-induced need to characterize Putin as an alter ego of the Russian Communist Party. The Russian president's "strength and pragmatism," his readiness to counter "the West's intrigues" and determination to make a "modernization breakthrough" had come to the fore. Assessments of the causes of the crisis and failure of the "communist experiment" in the Soviet Union clearly accentuated "the erroneous criticism of Joseph Stalin," "the degeneration of the elites and their betrayal" and "deliberately malicious" actions by Mikhail Gorbachev and his associates, all of which semantically alludes to Beijing's criticism of the Soviet Union during the Sino-Soviet confrontation.

While focusing entirely on the crisis in Russia, the author almost completely missed the formation of the "Putin order" in Russia after the "chaos" of the "shock restoration of capitalism" in the 1990s. The

emphasis was clearly shifted towards describing the disastrous nature of the events in Russia after 1991. Vladimir Putin is undoubtedly a ray of light in “the realm of darkness.” However, Russia is facing a strategic choice again and has to decide where to go further even though the sociopolitical and economic realities can hardly make this choice easier or clearer.

The overall conclusion is that China has to consolidate itself under the direction of a new strong leader, resolutely fight the “ideological degeneration of elites,” combat corruption, hold true to Marxism-Leninism and its own socialist choice, and ward off sociopolitical liberalization. Current events in Russia are characterized once again by growing uncertainty. An attentive reader may as well ask: Isn't Russia moving towards new “chaos?”

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