

Lenin and the Debate on Chinese Socialism among PRC Soviet-watchers in Early 1980s China

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Abstract

After the death of Chairman Mao Zedong, when China gradually initiated reform and open door policies, Soviet leaders' political agendas were no less appealing to post-Mao China than were Western agendas. This paper will show that Chinese scholars made tactical use of the writings and programs of Vladimir Lenin; this was done to grasp the nettle of Chinese socialism in the early 1980s, after the disastrous Cultural Revolution.

According to the secondary scholarship, Chinese Sovietology after 1991 has consistently emphasized the role of the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his policies, which (in the eyes of the Chinese communist regime) brought about the downfall of the Soviet empire. In reality, however, Chinese Soviet-watchers were researching various Soviet leaders throughout the 1980s and 1990s – and particularly Lenin, who featured prominently in Chinese writings and claimed equal importance to Gorbachev. In the early 1980s, Chinese scholars used the first Soviet leader, Lenin, and his writings to rebuild faith in socialism and to disperse scepticism of the Chinese communist regime after the disastrous Mao era. While some pieces of work resorted to using Lenin's socialist humanism to attack Maoism and Chinese communist rule, most of the time Chinese scholars used Lenin to strengthen the weakening legitimacy of Chinese socialism without tarnishing the image of Mao, and to command support for new leader Deng Xiaoping's open door policy and future reforms. Their main argument pointed out that Lenin's moderate approach to socialism should be China's model after Mao.

Arriving at the conclusion of this paper, first, Lenin's name could be used to help rally Chinese communists against the radical policies that had long prevailed. On many issues, his views were introduced in an effort to justify new policies or rally support behind new proposals in the early 1980s. His stand was invoked to weaken the hold of Maoist remnants in favour of utilising all possible resources for economic construction, and to support reformers in their pursuit of more sweeping changes. Having said this, the

use of Lenin was by no means for leading the attack on Mao, but rather for defending the legitimacy of Chinese socialism founded by the Chairman. His theory was intended to help save the Chinese communist regime that had been paralysed by the Cultural Revolution. The first Soviet leader was seen by Chinese officials and scholars as an epitome of the new kind of image the Party forged for itself after the maelstrom of the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese writings played on these positive associations of the Grail of Lenin, making him the moral centre of its representation of post-Mao China.

Keywords: *Deng Xiaoping, Lenin, Mao Zedong, Socialism, Chinese Soviet-Watchers, the Soviet Union*

1. Introduction

After Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), died in 1976, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was on the brink of a precipice: the country needed to deal with its dire economy, and the people needed to heal the trauma of the decay of social morale. Most importantly, the Party was facing the two mammoth tasks of rebuilding state institutions and restoring its citizens' faith in communism; both of these had been heavily ravaged by Mao and his radical socio-political movement of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

The paper will examine how Chinese officials and PRC Soviet-watchers used the first leader of the Soviet Union – Vladimir Lenin and his works to rebuild the faith of socialism and disperse scepticism on the CCP regime in the early 1980s. While some pieces of Chinese writings resorted to socialist humanism defined by Lenin for attacking Maoist terror and the Chinese communist rule, most of the time the writings exploited the spirit and letter of Lenin to strengthen the weakening legitimacy of Chinese socialism without tarnishing the image of Mao, and to command support for Chinese new leader Deng Xiaoping's open policy and future reforms after the disastrous Mao era.

According to the secondary scholarship, Chinese Sovietology after 1991 has consistently emphasized the role of the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his policies, which (in the eyes of the Chinese communist regime) brought about the downfall of the Soviet empire in 1991 (Guan, 2010: 509-514; Rozman, 2010: 464; Shambaugh, 2008: 48, 56 & 81; Wilson, 2007: 272). In reality, however, Chinese Soviet-watchers were researching various Soviet leaders throughout the 1980s and 1990s – and particularly Lenin, who featured prominently in Chinese writings and claimed equal importance to Gorbachev. In the early 1980s, Chinese scholars used the first Soviet leader, Lenin, and his writings to rebuild faith in socialism and to disperse scepticism

of the CCP regime after the disastrous Mao era. While some pieces of work resorted to using Lenin's socialist humanism to attack Maoism and Chinese communist rule, most of the time Chinese scholars used Lenin to strengthen the weakening legitimacy of Chinese socialism without tarnishing the image of Mao, and to command support for new leader Deng Xiaoping's open door policy and future reforms. Their main argument pointed out that Lenin's moderate approach to socialism should be China's model after Mao.

2. Methodology and Sources

With respect to primary sources, it should be mentioned here that this research is based primarily on the "national core journals" (*Guojiaji hexin qikan* 国家级核心期刊) published in the PRC, and mainly on the following four categories of journals.

The first are those journals focusing on research in the humanities and social sciences in general (*Shehui kexue yanjiu* 社会科学研究 Social Science Research, *Shijie jingjiyu zhengzhi* 世界经济与政治 World Economics and Politics). Second are those journals dealing with problems of socialism or communism in the world (*Dangdai shijie shehui zhuyi wenti* 当代世界社会主义问题 Problems of Contemporary World Socialism, *Shehui zhuyi yanjiu* 社会主义研究 Socialism Studies). The third group forms the core of this study; they concentrate on questions and issues relating to the former Soviet Union (later the Russian Federation and other Commonwealth Independent States after 1991) (*Sulian dongou wenti* 苏联东欧问题 Matters of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, *Eluosi yanjiu* 俄罗斯研究 Russian Studies). Lastly, the research scope also included relevant articles in various university journals (*Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan yanjiu shengyuan xuebao* 中国社会科学院研究生院学报 Journal of Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao xuebao* 中共中央党校学报 Journal of the Party School of the Central Committee of the CCP).

All the journals selected for this research accept submissions from all over China.¹ Most (but not all) of the contributors are academics, and the journals maintain acceptable quality standards and have a good reputation in the Chinese academic world. Some of them, such as *Sulian dongou wenti* (Matters of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe 苏联东欧问题) and *Shehui zhuyi yanjiu* (Socialism Studies 社会主义研究), are the very best PRC journals in their fields.

In order to clear up previous misunderstandings about Chinese research on the issue, the researcher has chosen a different approach to re-examine the field. First, the article will focus on the publications in the bimonthly official journal of *Sulian dongou wenti* (Matters of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe or MSUEE 苏联东欧问题) as the primary source for analysis. The

journal is published by the Institute of Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies (*Eluosi dongou zhongya yanjiusuo* or IREECAS 俄罗斯东欧中亚研究所), which is the largest powerhouse in research of the former Soviet Union in the PRC. The institute is affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) – China’s most prominent organisation specialising in the humanities and social sciences and under the control of the State Council and Party supervision. The IREECAS journal not only publishes articles written by the IREECAS’ employed scholars, but also accepts submissions contributed by other scholars across China. It can thus be used as a medium that reflects the historical development of Soviet studies in China.

Second, the investigator will also examine other PRC humanities and social science publications regarding the research on the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), mostly focusing on the four categories of journals previously classified. By engaging these publications (either from the IREECAS journal or others) the study will pay attention to various thematic research topics diverging in focus and analysis in the early 1980s. Such a methodology may reduce a certain bias on subject and instead direct the audience to review the issue from a more objective perspective.

Moreover, the article intends to examine the thinking of Chinese Soviet-watchers against the backdrop of political and social changes in early 1980s China. The study will be based not only on the analysis of primary sources already undertaken, but will also attempt to locate the developments of Chinese Soviet research amid the rapid changes in the social and political environment of China. Therefore, in order for this research to be successfully located in the rich fabric of the intellectual activities of contemporary China and in the changing environment, the investigator has also identified the following three kinds of documents that may be beneficial to the research:

- **Articles in PRC official newspapers and journals concerning aspects of the former Soviet Union:** *Renmin Ribao* (人民日报 *People’s Daily*, owned by the CCP Central Committee); *Guangming Ribao* (光明日报 *Guangming Daily*, published by the CCP Central Propaganda Department); *Beijing Review* (China’s only national English weekly news magazine published in Beijing by the China International Publishing Group), etc.
- **Writings and speeches of PRC officials and leaders on the matters of the Soviet state:** such as those of Mao Zedong (毛泽东) and Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), and other contemporary Chinese leaders’ related speeches scattered among the current Chinese newspapers.
- **Chinese and English translations of works and speeches of Lenin:** as Chinese scholars always cite the words of Lenin to support their

arguments in articles, it is important for the researcher to check the accuracy of those quotations.

The use of the term “Soviet-watchers” (or Sovietologists) in this article for those who study and research the state of the USSR is based on Christopher Xenakis’ definition. Xenakis defines US Sovietologists broadly, to include “political scientists, economists, sociologists, historians, diplomats and policy makers, working in academia, government, private think tanks, and the media” (Xenakis, 2002: 4). He uses the terms “Sovietologists”, “Soviet experts”, “foreign policy analysts”, “Cold War theorists”, and “political scientists” interchangeably, citing the examples of George Kennan, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Richard Pipes and Strobe Talbott. These individuals are both Soviet-specialists and policy makers, while Hedrick Smith and Robert Kaiser are also Soviet-watchers and journalists simultaneously (Xenakis, 2002: 4). For the sake of conforming to the Chinese context and the convenience of narrative, the author will use the term “Soviet-watchers” (instead of Sovietologists) throughout the article.

In terms of this elastic definition of the field and the diversity of scholars’ backgrounds, the situation in China is generally similar to the situation in the US as described by Xenakis. For example, as we shall see, although some Chinese scholars specialize in either Soviet or world communism, most of those mentioned and quoted in this paper are generalists rather than specialists in Soviet studies. Their articles often express more political zeal than scholarly expertise or analytical insight. Generally speaking, the descriptions by Xenakis of US Sovietologists could also be applied to the Chinese situation. Chinese Soviet-watchers are a diverse group, rather than representatives of a single school of thought or central theory. Their publications never imply a complete homogeneity of views. However, although their academic training is in different disciplines and by no means confined to Soviet studies, their research and publications are relevant to Soviet research in one way or another.²

Almost all Chinese Soviet-watchers included in this article come from the following three kinds of institutions: the first is IREECAS in CASS and it carries a great deal of weight in Soviet studies in China. IREECAS is also the headquarters of the Chinese Association of East European and Central Asian Studies (CAEECAS), which administers the membership of Chinese Soviet-specialists across the country. Second, the research scope also pays attention to scholars in Soviet studies from other institutions in CASS, such as the Institute of World History and Institute of Marxism-Leninism. Last, the investigation includes Chinese Soviet-watchers from provincial academies of social sciences and other universities (including the party schools), particularly to those with units, departments, and journals devoted specifically to research on the USSR.³

3. The Symbolic Effects of Lenin

In the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee taking place in late 1978, which signalled CCP's complete departure from past Maoist politics and opened the door for future reforms, Deng Xiaoping, chairman of the Party Central Committee and the *de facto* Chinese new leader, stated that China's most imminent problems were its self-isolation and economic and technological backwardness (Deng, 1995a: 235). After the passage of time, he increasingly realized that Mao's legacy in China largely consisted only of spiritual and moral disruption (Deng, 1995b: 308). In Deng's mind, it was not only the leftist ideology that was inimical to China's coming post-Mao reforms. Since the emergence of the Democracy Wall movement in 1978/1979, Deng increasingly felt uncomfortable with China's widespread scepticism of socialism, which had been bred by decades of Maoist terror.⁴ After squelching the Democracy Wall movement, Deng seriously criticized "a small number of persons" who had attacked the CCP by "raiding Party and government organizations," and "slandering Comrade Mao Zedong." He argued that "it is not enough for us to keep on resolutely eliminating the pernicious influence of the Gang of Four," and warned, "Both the ultra-Left and Right currents of thought run counter to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought and obstruct our advance towards modernization" (Deng, 1995c: 175). In order to shore up the post-Mao regime, Chinese officials and scholars in the early 1980s acted in concert to find the right formula from the creeds of the first Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin. They hoped to clean up the dregs of Maoism and restore what they saw as true socialism, as well as to discourage deviation from Marxist orthodoxy.

Two significant articles were published in *Renmin ribao* (人民日报 *People's Daily*) in 1980, one of which was produced by the CCP Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, and the other of which was written by IREECAS scholar Song Hongxun (宋洪训). Both articles reiterated Lenin's teaching that it is compulsory to persevere in the priority of economic construction, once proletarian revolution has taken hold in a culturally and socially backward country like China. Both articles concluded that economy, not politics, is the linchpin for consolidating the proletarian dictatorship (Zhonggong Zhongyang Bianyiju, 1980; Song, 1980).⁵ Referring to Lenin's work, Qi Shirong (齐世荣) a professor of history at Beijing Capital Normal University, emphasized that "violence is by no means of the essence of proletarian dictatorship" (Qi, 1980: 15).⁶ Chun Yuyu (淳于毓), a professor in the Institute of Contemporary Socialism at Shandong University, strongly criticized China's past abuse and mechanical understanding of "continued revolution" (*buduan geming* 不断革命). Chun brought in Lenin's speech to emphasize that exaggerating the importance of revolution had been destructive for China in the past (Chun, 1983: 54-55).⁷

On the other hand, another group of works played a role in safeguarding the role of Chinese socialism by quoting Lenin's phrases. In 1980, an article appeared in the *Beijing Review* commenting on the case of former PRC statesman Liu Shaoqi (刘少奇), whose course for modernization had been rejected in political struggle and who died at the hands of Mao in 1969; the article eulogized Liu's great contributions to the Chinese revolution. The editorial took advantage of the posthumous rehabilitation of Liu in 1980, to demonstrate that the CCP "has restored the true qualities of Mao Zedong Thought," and "has firm unity within its ranks and firm unity with the people" (*Beijing Review*, 1980: 13). The article quoted Lenin's following words to pay respect to the CCP and defend its position:

The attitude of a political party towards its own mistakes is one of the most important and surest ways of judging how earnest the party is and how it in practice fulfils its obligations towards its class and the toiling masses. Frankly admitting a mistake, ascertaining the reasons for it, analysing the conditions which led to it, and thoroughly discussing the means of correcting it – that is the hallmark of a serious party (*Beijing Review*, 1980: 13).⁸

In scholarly writings, while in complete agreement with reinstating socialist humanism (*shehui zhuyi rendao zhuyi* 社会主义人道主义) in Lenin's terms, Ma Jihua (马积华), a researcher at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, considered humanism to not be an abstract concept. He remarked that many slogans derived from bourgeois humanism, such as "freedom, equality, fraternity, democracy, and human right," are "oppositional to Marxism-Leninism" (Ma, 1984: 13).⁹ After encapsulating all the essentials of Lenin in constructing socialism in an economically backward country, both Wu Renzhang (吴仁彰 an IREECAS scholar) and Xu Pohan (徐博涵 director of the Institute of Scientific Socialism at the Shanxi Provincial Academy of Social Sciences) averred that, while focusing on the productive forces is indispensable, the most fundamental tenet of Leninism is upholding the proletarian dictatorship and communist one-party rule (Wu Renzhang, 1981: 4; Xu, 1984: 82).

The two categories of writings above are not contradictory but complementary to each other. Both Party mouthpiece papers and scholarly works adroitly manipulated the tenets of Lenin's thought, in an attempt to renew the CCP legitimacy after the discredited Maoist era. They did this by undercutting the position of residual radical and conservative forces, and arresting the cynicism and crisis of faith in communism – two of the biggest political and ideological tasks haunting Deng's early rule.

To confront the post-Mao crisis, the early Deng regime also attempted to find a way to overhaul the outdated Maoist institutions. Deng once boiled down all his thoughts on Party reform in a talk to an enlarged meeting

of the Politburo in 1980. His standards consisted of several elements, such as institutionalisation of the Party system, facilitating the economy, parrying the errors done by the Cultural Revolution, and most importantly, strengthening but not enervating the Party dictatorship (Deng, 1995d: 319-41). Deng's concept of Party democracy was no different to that of Mao, who viewed "the extension of democracy in the party" as a way to "strengthen discipline" and "an essential step in its consolidation and development" (Mao, 1965a: 205).

Deng did not regard Mao as having created the wrong system; rather, it was the bad elements of the system that distorted Mao's behaviours.¹⁰ Most importantly, Deng perceived that Mao had actually undermined the CCP during his rule, so it was essential for the post-Mao political reform not to de-centralise the Party power, but to reinforce it for ruling the PRC more effectively (Deng, 1995b: 297-300). This thesis has been corroborated by Frank Dikötter and Michel Bonnin. Both scholars argue in their books that Mao's numerous mass political campaigns not only destroyed the social fabric of China, but also hollowed out the communist ideology and ultimately buried Maoism. After the departure of Mao, the new CCP leadership realised that the prior personalized and dogmatic politics had led to bureaucratic inefficiency, and the absence of systems of responsibility and administrative regulations (Dikötter, 2016; Bonnin, 2013).

To keep up the tempo, Chinese scholars took great efforts to invoke Lenin's writings and the early Soviet rule for promoting China's socialist political reform (or, more accurately speaking, administrative reform). First, China under Mao had suffered from rampant bureaucratism, and curbing the infestation of bureaucratic practice was a major agenda of Deng's political reform (Deng, 1995d: 320). Some writers remarked that, according to Lenin, the root of bureaucratism is found in the legacy of old society, feudalism and colonization (Huang, 1980: 65; Mao, 1981: 26). Others argued (by drawing on Lenin's works) that the disease of Soviet bureaucratism had originated in the Tsarist tradition, the pathetic economy, and a low level of education of the masses before 1917 – the founding year of the Soviet Union (Zheng, 1982: 8; Xu, 1982: 12; Wan, 1985: 33).

As a commentator in *Beijing Review* pointed out, in Lenin's view all the Soviet Union's problems after the October Revolution could be traced back to its "semi-Asiatic conditions."¹¹ China, according to the author, "was much more backward than Russia in Lenin's time," and the past backslide of the Cultural Revolution was a "typical feudal-bureaucrat autocracy home-grown on the ruins of the millennia-old feudal empire." The commentator finally suggested that the CCP was only "a victim of feudalism," and "eliminating the influence of feudalism institutionally and ideologically, therefore, is necessarily an urgent task in Party building in the period ahead" (Ruan, 1980:

17-19). The conclusion of these arguments can be summed up as stating that bureaucratism and other negative vestiges in the socialist states are by no means the intrinsic problem of socialism; instead, they are the dross from old tradition and old society.

Second, Chinese scholars appreciated several of Lenin's points in reference to the early Deng political reform. Using Lenin's work encouraging mass participation in governmental administration, Xiao Lifeng (肖励锋), a professor at the Zhongnan University of Economics and Law in Hubei Province, argued that proletarian democracy is far superior to bourgeois democracy; in the former system it is the people who have the oversight of the state, while the exploitative class dominates in the latter system (Xiao, 1982: 3).¹² According to IREECAS scholar Xu Yunpu's (徐运朴) survey, the Soviet state institutions under Lenin were "a highly democratic socialist system," and "a thousand times better than bourgeois democracy." In his view, Lenin's creation "should be the right direction for all future socialist democratic developments" (Xu, 1982: 14-15).¹³

In addition, aside from having agreed with Lenin's thesis that proletarian democracy should be advanced over bourgeois democracy, and that it is the highest form of democracy in the world, scholars Hong Yunshan (洪韵珊 a researcher at the Sichuan Provincial Academy of Social Sciences) and Wang Lixing (王立行 a researcher at the Shandong Provincial Academy of Social Sciences) argued (by quoting Lenin's *The State and Revolution*) that in order to facilitate the implementation of proletarian democracy, proletarian dictatorship (the synonym of communist party dictatorship) is essential. In their final judgment, proletarian dictatorship should exist until the state enters the stage of communism (Hong, 1983: 44; Wang, 1984: 18).¹⁴

Seen from the comparison between Deng and the Chinese writings presented above, scholars' arguments on the characteristics of Lenin's rule in the early Soviet Union largely resonated with the thrust of Deng's various speeches. Under the full cover of the most authoritative communist leader Lenin, Chinese scholars ascribed all the past defects and wrongdoings in socialist China to the imperial and feudal tradition before 1949 – the founding year of communist China. They suggested that all impoverishments and sufferings of pre-1976 PRC had little to do with the true nature of socialism or even Mao himself. Their assurance of the absolute superiority of proletarian democracy and the fundamental necessity of holding fast a proletarian dictatorship was undoubtedly welcomed by the Deng regime, which at the time desperately sought a theoretical basis for keeping the corpus of Mao unimpaired and ensuring the long-term survival of communist rule in China. China specialist Willy Wo-Lap Lam once commented that Deng's blind faith in the absolute necessity of CCP leadership, and his intolerance of people who oppose socialism, had demonstrated that the Chinese leader "never tried, or

dared, to exorcise totally the Chairman's ghost," and he "was nothing more than Mao's disciple" (Lam, 1995: 150).

There is a more telling example illustrating why Lenin was so relevant to the political context of China in the early 1980s. Deng Xiaoping had been quite enthralled by the first decade of the PRC administration, when Mao's personal power was subordinated to the collective leadership or democratic centralism of the CCP. He once stated, "Comrade Mao Zedong's leadership was correct before 1957" (Deng, 1995d: 293-94), and complained that since the Great Leap Forward "this fine tradition has not been upheld, nor has it been incorporated into a strict and perfected system" (Deng, 1995d: 328-29). In his speech on Party reform in 1980, Deng prioritised tackling the over-concentration of power in the hands of an individual, as "it hinders the practice of socialist democracy and of the Party's democratic centralism" (Deng, 1995d: 320). He was fully aware that the over-concentration of individual power in leaders had become "one important cause of the Cultural Revolution," and urged "no further delay in finding a solution to this problem" (Deng, 1995d: 328). Even in the wake of the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, when the situation required the CCP to tighten the political screws in China, Deng still requested the Party to maintain "a strong collective leadership." He said, "It is unhealthy and very risky to base the destiny of a country on the prestige of one or two individuals" (Deng, 1995e: 301).

In the early 1980s, the use of Lenin to corroborate the significance of democratic centralism in Party building had gained momentum, particularly after the release of Deng's speech on political reform in August 1980.¹⁵ Under the umbrella of Lenin and his words, some articles compared the Soviet Union after Lenin and China during the Cultural Revolution. They made it clear that both periods had seriously violated the norms of democratic centralism and resulted in personal dictatorship and factional strife (Liu, 1980; Hong, 1983: 45). Others asserted that democratic centralism is the principle of intra-party democracy. They demanded that democratic centralism be re-enforced for rebuilding Party democracy in post-Mao China (Wu Liping, 1981: 44; Zhou, 1984: 20-22).

An article appeared in 1985 that challenged the long-time Chinese understanding of "democratic centralism," which had been mechanically interpreted as a simple equation of democracy plus centralization. The author Shao Xing (邵骅), a professor at the Central Party School, suggested that the Chinese translation of "democratic centralism" change from *minzhu jizhongzhi* (民主集中制) to *minzhude jizhongzhi* (民主的集中制), which would clarify its fundamental differences with the concept of bourgeois democracy and would be closer to Lenin's definition. This was the first time in the PRC that a scholar unequivocally pointed out, in view of Lenin's original work, that the Russian term "*demokraticheskii tsentralizm*" (democratic centralism) should

include both the adjective “*demokraticeskii*” (democratic) and the noun “*tseentralizm*” (centralism). “*Demokraticeskii*” is being used to modify the main word “*tseentralizm*” (Shao, 1985: 59-60).

In another article published at the same time, IREECAS scholar Li Yuanshu (李元书) also studied the problematic Chinese definition of “democratic centralism” against Lenin’s original, and recommended that the Chinese translation be corrected by reprinting the word “centralism” in bold, for putting accent on the importance of the phrase in this context. Li argued that in Lenin’s organisational principle, the Bolshevik Party should be the combination of “strong collective leadership and iron discipline.” It was exactly such a powerful Party that had kept score during the victory of the October Revolution and withstood the harsh civil war and international hostility after 1917. Moreover, Li remarked that it was Stalin who had overturned the democratic centralism created and reinforced by Lenin after the latter’s pre-mature death, and since then the USSR had evolved into a state saddled with tyranny and ideological fetishism (Li, 1985: 49-51).¹⁶

Before the 1949 liberation, British journalist James Bertram wrote that he, being from a Western context, felt puzzled by the self-contradictory term “democratic centralism” and asked Mao Zedong for clarification. Mao answered:

On the one hand, the government we want must be truly representative of the popular will; it must have the support of the broad masses throughout the country and the people must be free to support it and have every opportunity of influencing its policies. This is the meaning of democracy. On the other hand, the centralization of administrative power is also necessary, and once the policy measures demanded by the people are transmitted to their own elected government through their representative body, the government will carry them out and will certainly be able to do so smoothly, so long as it does not go against the policy adopted in accordance with the people’s will. This is the meaning of centralism. Only by adopting democratic centralism can a government be really strong (Mao, 1965b: 57).

Mao’s response came at a time when a strong Chinese government was needed in resisting the Japanese aggression in the 1930s. Upon the end of Mao’s radical era and at the beginning of the 1980s, when China was ready to return to normal politics, the 1982 PRC Constitution stipulated that democratic centralism should be the guiding principle for the actions of the CCP, and defined the term in the following words:

Within the Party, democracy is given full play, a high degree of centralism is practiced on the basis of democracy and a sense of organization and discipline is strengthened, so as to ensure unity of action throughout its ranks and the prompt and effective implementation of its decisions. Applying the principle that all members are equally subject to Party discipline, the Party

duly criticizes or punishes those members who violate it and expels those who persist in opposing and harming the Party (Beijing Foreign Language Press, 1987: 95).

The Constitution also specified that there are two essential elements making up democratic centralism. While the second guideline states that the Party must be the representative of “the broadest masses of the people,” the most important clause is that the CCP should form “a high degree of ideological and political unity,” and should be “in adherence to the socialist road, to the people’s democratic dictatorship, and to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought and in the concentration of our efforts on socialist modernization” (Beijing Foreign Language Press, 1987: 94). Clearly, the Russian original of democratic centralism in Lenin’s works has every signature of the ideological tradition of Chinese communism. Both of these stress Party discipline and strong collective leadership, while keeping distance from Western liberalization and democracy. The term is not directed toward the expansion of individual rights, but for the power concentration of communist party. Lenin’s definition of democratic centralism was no doubt an effective tool used by the CCP in the early 1980s – useful for rebuilding intra-party democracy and erasing the lingering throes of Maoist dictatorship and factional struggle, while making a serious effort to strengthen the CCP rulership as it drove China into modernisation.

Last, Deng Xiaoping on several occasions bluntly stated that the goal of his early 1980s political reform was to facilitate China’s modernization and economic development (Deng, 1995d: 321; 1995f: 178). Chinese scholars were also quoting Lenin at this time to promote Deng’s purpose. In 1984, Ren Jianxiong (任健雄), a scholar at the Sichuan Provincial Academy of Social Sciences, described how Lenin in his later years had urgently felt the need to reform the Soviet political structure and shake off its economic backwardness. The scholar presented the substance of Lenin’s political reform after War Communism (1918-1921), which included distinguishing the responsibilities of the Party and of the government, allowing people to enjoy the right to manage state affairs, curbing bureaucraticism, achieving high working efficiency, training cadres with professional knowledge, and promoting a large number of young personnel (Ren, 1984: 7-10). These agendas are almost identical to Deng’s mission published in his 1980 speech on reforming the Party and state institutions, and expediting the economic growth (Deng, 1995d: 321-33).

In the early 1980s, several articles also invoked Lenin’s words to say that socialism has no fixed model and people should not build socialism using only books and experiences.¹⁷ They urged China to construct socialism based on its own conditions and to draw lessons from either socialism or capitalism.

The authors remarked that Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP, 1922-1928) would be exemplary for China, and associated War Communism and Stalinism with the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution under Mao (Xia, 1981: 52-52; Cui, 1981a: 10-12; Zheng, 1984: 48-49). Deng once admitted that he did not know what socialism really meant, but he did know that socialism is certainly not pauperism, which was the situation under Mao (Deng, 1995g: 174). To quote his words in 1985:

What, after all, is socialism? The Soviet Union has been building socialism for so many years and yet is still not quite clear what it is. Perhaps Lenin had a good idea when he adopted the New Economic Policy. But as time went on, the Soviet pattern became ossified. We were victorious in the Chinese revolution precisely because we applied the universal principles of Marxism-Leninism to our own realities (Deng, 1995h: 143).

Whether the New Economic Policy was the correct model for China under Deng is not relevant in this context. The most important thing is that both Deng and Chinese scholars had been using the symbols of Lenin and his NEP as a public declaration for post-Mao China to renounce its past Soviet and Maoist shackles, and to live up to its claim of building and reforming socialism in a very different way.

4. Lenin and Post-Mao Chinese Socialism

As evident in the writings above, the influence of Lenin in the political context of early Deng's China are multi-dimensional. First, throughout the 1980s Deng had stated unequivocally that, while he was itching for the reversal of Maoist radicalism, post-Mao China should "distinguish between socialist democracy on the one hand and bourgeois, individualist democracy on the other" (Deng, 1995c: 184). Chinese people must be "under the leadership of the Communist Party," and "cannot adopt the practice of the West" (Deng, 1995i: 238). Some scholarly writings on Lenin in the early 1980s, while ostensibly paying lip service to the official line of opposing bourgeois liberalization, boldly attacked many dark sides of the CCP regime: continuous revolution, class struggle and the trampling of human rights. By drawing upon Lenin, scholars were advocating for Chinese people to have a real say in managing state affairs and ultimately to rebuilt what they saw as true socialism. They claimed to target the derailment of the Cultural Revolution; in essence, their writings seemed to be an unspoken disguise for criticising Mao and his tyrannical rule (Li, 1980: 67-70; Chun, 1983: 54-55; Ma, 1984: 13).

Moreover, the central point of these writings was demanding the restoration of "people's democratic rights," and the authors considered

such rights to be inseparable from true socialism as defined by Lenin (Li, 1980: 67; Chun, 1983: 51; Ma, 1984: 16). People's democratic rights in the context of these works did not seem to conform to the thinking of Deng, who linked "democracy for the people with dictatorship over the enemy, and with centralism, legality, discipline and the leadership by the Communist Party," and stressed "the importance of subordinating personal interests to collective ones, interests of the part to those of the whole, and immediate to long-term interests" (Deng, 1995c: 177). Because these scholars signalled a discrepancy with (though not an outright rejection of) the orthodox CCP ruling philosophy, it was convenient to draw upon Lenin. That is, Lenin was a sacrosanct symbol and figure who might instigate less political danger. Thus, Lenin's thought was applied to Chinese writings in order to ask for the return of humanistic socialism, if not wholesale democracy in the Western sense; this occurred in the early 1980s when the vestiges of Maoism were still rampant in the PRC.

Second, once Mao died in 1976, Deng had to wait for several years to outdo his rival Hua Guofeng (华国锋, allegedly Mao's designated successor), and to rise to the dominant position of the Party in the early 1980s. During this interim, Deng was facing intensive competition for power from Hua Guofeng. In a 1979 speech, Deng employed Mao's maxim "seeking truth from facts" to symbolise his pragmatic approach (Deng, 1995j: 58),¹⁸ and to oppose the dogmatic stand of "two whatevers" upheld by Hua.¹⁹ Deng accused that the "two whatevers" "did not represent Marxism-Leninism," and were "merely peddling the old stock in trade of Lin Biao and the Gang of Four in new guise." He even argued that the contest of these two political lines (Hua and himself) was the life-and-death struggle for the mandate to rule China after Mao (Deng, 1995k: 197-98). One may assume that if Hua Guofeng proclaimed that he had full legitimacy to succeed Mao, then Deng may have needed the umbrella of an ultimate figure of authority in the communist world to sustain his competition with Hua. The use of Lenin appears to be the best vehicle for serving Deng's purpose in his political campaign against Hua and extricating China from Mao's residue.

At the time, some Chinese scholars seemed to have been involved in the Deng-Hua rivalry and positioned themselves on Deng's side in an effort to undermine Hua. A number of them cited Lenin's debate with the left communists during the early Soviet Union, to serve their purpose in their articles (Gao, 1979: 27-36; Yu, 1980: 19-28; Yang, 1981: 1-25; Xia, 1981: 51-68). One example of this is the article written by Yang Yanjun (杨彦君), a researcher at the Harbin Academy of Social Sciences. Although the author did not mention the name of Hua Guofeng, he remarked that the goal of socialism is "developing the economy" but not aiming at "world revolution and class struggle" (Yang, 1981: 5).²⁰ He praised Lenin's stand on "prioritising the economic development and criticizing the high-sounding style of the left

communists,” who opted for “marching toward communism at the time when the Soviet Union was still underdeveloped” (Yang, 1981: 13).²¹ In some ways, Yang’s veiled attack seemed to target Hua’s assertions, as the interim Chairman announced that he would wholeheartedly follow Mao’s order of continuous revolution and class struggle, and proposed an over-ambitious plan for China to achieve industrial and agricultural modernization within ten years – this at a time when the country was still mired in a dismal economic state after the Cultural Revolution (Weatherley, 2010: 163). Hua soon became the target of the CCP reformers, and his Maoist and bombastic style quickly turned into the source of his eventual downfall.

At the time Chinese scholars had wisely used Lenin for symbolizing Deng, whereby they attempted to break down the outdated Maoism and its incarnation in Hua and other leftists, and usher the PRC into a new age. According to Hao Zhidong, the goal of the new leadership headed by Deng Xiaoping after the death of Mao coincided with the goal of intellectuals to find out what had gone wrong in the Cultural Revolution. With Deng’s support, they first began to pave the way for a climate that tolerated more questioning, in an effort to overcome Mao’s dogmatism. From 1978 onward, with the help of intellectuals, Deng began to win the debate and forced Hua and his followers to suffer through self-criticism. The debate led to the firm establishment of Deng’s position in the Party. It also guaranteed the government’s shift from class struggle to the economy, a policy established in December 1978 (Hao, 2003: 101).

Third, the use of Lenin in the early 1980s was also propitious in justifying Deng’s regime as the legitimate socialist government after the rejection of radical Maoism. Mao Zedong once commented:

It was through the Russians that the Chinese found Marxism. Before the October Revolution, the Chinese were not only ignorant of Lenin and Stalin, they did not even know of Marx and Engels. The salvoes of the October Revolution brought us Marxism-Leninism. The October Revolution helped progressives in China, as throughout the world, to adopt the proletarian world outlook as the instrument for studying a nation’s destiny and considering anew their own problems. Follow the path of the Russians – that was their conclusion (Mao, 1965c: 413).

Mao’s words actually reveal an undeniable veracity that, although the PRC was created by Mao and his communist fellows, the founding principle and genesis of Chinese communism came from Lenin and the Soviet Union. In a 1979 speech, Deng pointed out squarely that Lin Biao and the Gang of Four were targeting not only Mao, but most importantly, Marxism-Leninism (Deng, 1995c: 171). At the same time, Party veteran Chen Yun in another speech put post-Mao China into the larger picture of the international

communist movement, and argued that the fate of the CCP regime would affect the “victory of world communism.” According to him, the USSR after Lenin was no longer a socialist state in nature, as its intra-party democracy had been encroached upon since Stalin took power. He argued that post-Mao China should recover intra-party democracy and normal Party life – a return to Leninist norm (Chen, 1979).²² In other words, the CCP is an international socialist Party belonging to the global communist movement, and it is a truly Leninist Party, but by no means an indigenous product created by Mao. Consider, for example, that in a speech made by Ye Jianying, marshal of the People’s Liberation Army, the term “Marxism-Leninism” always precedes “Mao Zedong Thought” (Ye, 1979). Such a writing format became common in China after Mao’s death, and we can find many of these examples in the speeches and works of PRC officials from 1978 onward.²³

Deng once divided socialism into “utopian socialism” and “scientific socialism,” the latter of which included “the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought” (Deng, 1995c: 187). Subsequently, Gao Fang (高放), a professor of the history of communism at Renmin University, outspokenly remarked that both China under Mao and the USSR under Stalin had practiced utopian socialism, which plunged both states into “chaos and darkness.” He, therefore, demanded that post-Mao China return to the path of scientific socialism set by Lenin (Gao, 1980: 19).²⁴ The arguments above redefined the Chinese communist regime as a true Leninist state, the Maoist past being only an aberration but not the nature of the CCP. Deng’s rule was perceived as following the path of Lenin – orthodox socialism, not the socialism distorted by Mao. In sum, post-Mao China has devolved Mao’s role to the Party as a whole, and the CCP has identified itself as a legatee of Lenin rather than of Mao.

Having said this, the paradigm of Lenin in early 1980s China by no means functioned to overrule Mao. Mao founded the Chinese party-state in 1949, and his fate and the PRC are always inter-connected, so it would be out of the question for Deng to obliterate the unsurpassable landmark of Mao’s position through any measure. According to Yang Haikun (杨海坤), a professor of law at Suzhou University in Jiangsu Province, socialist democracy as defined by Lenin was not only antagonistic to “personal dictatorship and patriarchy,” but also incompatible with “anarchism and bourgeois liberalisation,” which are the targets of every Chinese communist leader (Yang, 1983: 45).²⁵ Seen from the examples cited above, the use of Lenin after Mao’s death was mostly intended to cut away the bad side of Maoism only, and not to totally root out the status of Mao. As Deng once said, “Criticizing Comrade Mao’s personal mistakes alone will not solve problems.” He believed that it was “the faulty systems and institutions of the past” that pushed Mao “in the opposite direction” (Deng, 1995b: 296).

In reality, the use of Lenin in early 1980s China could be regarded as protecting or saving Mao's place in history. CCP Secretary General Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦) once defined the quintessence of Maoism as "the integration of Marxism-Leninism and present Chinese realities," which was "the only correct road opened by Mao for our future." Hu equated Mao's strategy of liberating China through encirclement of the cities from the countryside with Lenin's victory of the October Revolution. He said that both courses were the same as they were "examples of seeking truth from facts and achieving successful revolutions by integrating the universal truth of Marxism" (Hu, 1983).²⁶ Hu's words echoed Deng Xiaoping who had used the same motto "seeking truth from facts" to absolve Mao's crimes and banish the remaining Maoists, while establishing his own credentials as China's new leader and preparing the country for the path of socialist modernization (Deng, 1995j: 58).

From Deng's point of view, the best part of Mao's rule was before the Great Leap Forward in 1957, and during those years Mao "developed Lenin's theory of Party building most comprehensively" (Deng, 1995j: 56-57). According to the CCP verdict, Mao only made mistakes in the evening of his life, a period that was the antipode to true Maoism (Zhongguo Gongchandang Zhongyang Weiyuanhui, 1981: 272). It seemed that true Maoism appeared before the emergence of the Great Leap Forward and it was equivalent to Leninism. The aim of post-Mao China was to return to true Maoism as well as Leninism. As American scholar David Goodman comments, the essence of the reforms launched in 1978 highlighted Deng's obsession with "the golden age of the unforgettable 1950s," when the collective leadership, inner-party democracy, style of honesty, cleanliness in government and frugality in enterprise were the norm. In Goodman's view, Deng was not "an innovator," but rather "a traditionalist," who was eager to restore the good sides of Maoism and legitimise contemporary politics (Goodman, 1994: 123-24).

In 1981, Jiang Yihua (姜义华), a professor of history at Fudan University in Shanghai, described War Communism as being equivalent to the direction under Mao, while the New Economic Policy symbolized Deng's path of reform and open door. In the conclusion of his article, Jiang remarked that the formulation of the New Economic Policy was a result of Lenin having learned from the mistakes of War Communism (Jiang, 1981: 20). According to Gilbert Rozman, in the mind of Chinese Soviet-watchers in the 1980s, War Communism epitomised a rigid system that aimed to eliminate private property, commodity production and market exchange. On the other hand, the New Economic Policy represented a moderate approach allowing small businesses, cultural diversity and faster economic growth under the one-party rule, which is a model of value for present-day China and similar to the economic policy that Deng had carried out after 1978 (Rozman, 1987: 4). In

1982, IREECAS scholar Ye Shuzong (叶书宗) controverted some scholars' arguments that War Communism was a leftist error while NEP was a clear manifestation of true Leninism (Ye, 1982: 68-72). Ye demonstrated that the two programs were different stages of socialist revolution, and NEP could not have been conceived without the precedent of War Communism:

Lenin was a human being but not God. As a human being, his thoughts were changing from time to time. Both War Communism and the New Economic Policy were the ways used by Lenin to construct socialism. Such measures could not be found in the books of Marx. From War Communism to the New Economic Policy, every stage was the inseparable part leading to the development of Leninism (Ye, 1982: 72).²⁷

Ye's stand on Lenin was exactly the same as Deng's view on Mao, evidenced by his 1977 speech entitled "Mao Zedong Thought Must be Correctly Understood as an Integral Whole" (Deng, 1995j: 55-60).

Last, some Chinese scholars in the early 1980s greatly appreciated Lenin's notion that socialism could be founded in a backward nation without previous experience in the capitalist stage.²⁸ In their opinions, an economically backward country like China could reach the final victory of communism by learning from Lenin's teachings, such as persisting in a proletarian dictatorship, observing advanced elements from all over the world, and most importantly, seeking truth from facts to build socialism (Cui, 1981: 10; Xu, 1981: 27; Han, 1983: 42; Xu, 1984: 85). Chinese scholars' defence of Lenin on this point was attempting to excuse the economic and social backwardness that still existed in China after more than three decades of the CCP rule. Lenin's statement was being used to explain that the extensive poverty in early 1980s China was not due to Mao or the intrinsic Party rule, but rather to historical legacies of the feudal past – or something else altogether.

5. Conclusion

Through the enduring lustre of Lenin, scholars attempted to bring vigour to the weakening legitimacy of Chinese socialism after the Cultural Revolution, and to provide a mandate for Deng's policies and future reforms. Interpretation of Lenin thus became a solvent of the old order as well as a catalyst for major changes in early 1980s China. Their introduction of Lenin's argument laid the groundwork for the "primary stage of socialism" theory built on by the later CCP Secretary General Zhao Ziyang (赵紫阳) in his keynote speech delivered during the 13th Party Congress in 1987. In Zhao's words, because China had attained socialism without proper capitalist experience before, the PRC may use whatever means is available to catch up with the advanced countries, including commodity economy and other

capitalist elements (Zhao, 1987: 11). The use of Lenin's argument also opened the path to Deng Xiaoping's word-juggling of "socialist market economy" propounded in the early 1990s. The slogan envisions the future development framework of China, namely economic capitalism plus the guaranteed Chinese Communist Party monopoly (Deng, 1995m: 361). China in the early 1980s wanted to wriggle out of the Maoist model in economic terms, but still needed to retain socialism in political terms. Hoisting the flag of Lenin was a much-needed convenience for the PRC, as Lenin's model of manipulating unorthodox methods to achieve orthodox socialism in a backward state bears the stamp of the *Zeitgeist* of post-Mao China. This *Zeitgeist* can be defined as: there is no universal truth, only the truth according to the tide is truth.

To conclude, first, Lenin's name could be used to help rally Chinese communists against the radical policies that had long prevailed. On many issues, his views were introduced in an effort to justify new policies or rally support behind new proposals in the early 1980s. His stand was invoked to weaken the hold of Maoist remnants in favour of utilizing all possible resources for economic construction, and to support reformers in their pursuit of more sweeping changes. Having said this, the use of Lenin was by no means for leading the attack on Mao, but rather for defending the legitimacy of Chinese socialism founded by the Chairman. His theory was intended to help save the CCP regime that had been paralyzed by the Cultural Revolution. The first Soviet leader was seen by Chinese officials and scholars as an epitome of the new kind of image the Party forged for itself after the maelstrom of the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese writings played on these positive associations of the Grail of Lenin, making him the moral centre of its representation of post-Mao China.

Notes

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1. For a list of the 1980s PRC journals on the Soviet Union, see Rozman, 1985: 440-441.
2. Similarly, Robert Desjardins in his book on post-war French Sovietology also includes not only the scholarship of French Soviet specialists but also the writings of French historians, economists and political scientists, whose works are orientated only incidentally towards the USSR. See Desjardins, 1988: 10.
3. For a list of PRC institutes that have facilities for research of the Soviet Union, see Rozman, 1985: 444-445.
4. Democracy Wall was the first political dissent movement in Post-Mao China, which demanded the institution of democracy and the rule of law, to replace the Party dictatorship. For the panorama of the movement, see Baum, 1994: 66-93.
5. On Lenin's original, see Lenin, 1985a: 371.
6. The quotations are translated by the author. On Lenin's original, see Lenin, 1985b: 136-37.
7. The quotations are translated by the author. On Lenin's original, see Lenin, 1985c: 172.
8. On Lenin's original, see Lenin, 1960a: 57.
9. The quotations are translated by the author.
10. Ezra Vogel also holds a similar point of view. He remarks that during the Cultural Revolution, Deng "was convinced that China's problems resulted not only from Mao's errors but also from deep flaws in the system that had produced Mao and had led to the disastrous Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution." See Vogel, 2011: 44-45.
11. On Lenin's original, see Lenin, 1960b: 256.
12. On Lenin's original, see Lenin, 1960c: 235-77.
13. The quotations are translated by the author.
14. On Lenin's original, see Lenin, 1960d: 381-492.
15. On Lenin's discourse on democratic centralism, see Lenin, 1960e: 347-530.
16. The quotations are translated by the author.
17. On Lenin's original, see Lenin, 1960f: 235-77.
18. The slogan "seeking truth from facts" was originally used by Mao Zedong in 1930, see Mao, 1980: 112.
19. Hua Guofeng's words first appeared in 1977, see Hua, 1977.
20. The quotations are translated by the author.
21. The quotations are translated by the author.
22. The quotations are translated by the author.
23. Two examples here: Deng, 1995l: 13 and Zhao, 1987: 17.
24. The quotations are translated by the author.
25. The quotations are translated by the author.
26. The quotations are translated by the author.
27. The quotations are translated by the author.
28. On Lenin's original, see Lenin, 1960g: 79.

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