

*From the Radiant “Morning Sun” to the
Frontline “Anti-Revisionist Fighters”:
Chinese Students in the USSR in the Backdrop
of Sino-Soviet Conflict, 1957–1966**

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Abstract

The period from the 1950s to the 1960s witnessed a significant change in the relationship between China and the Soviet Union, which evolved from that of a friendly partnership to one of antagonistic rivalry. This change also plunged Chinese students in different Soviet universities and research institutes into a more complex situation. As Sino–Soviet relations soured over time, these young students had to follow instructions from their homeland and adjust their roles and standpoints accordingly. While they were supposed to stand for the friendship between the two countries and as representatives of the driving force dedicated to socialist construction, they were, however, torn between their own studies and the political priorities of the state. In most cases, they had no choice but to give up hitherto relatively unconstrained lives

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* The research and writing of this article have been supported by the Special Entrusted Project of National Social Sciences Fund (Document Collection and Historical Studies on China’s Neighbor’s Policies Toward China, project #15@ZH009) and was sponsored by East China Normal University 2017 Overseas Publication Project (North Vietnam’s Position during Sino–Soviet Conflicts, project #2017ECNU-HWFW002).

and fight against revisionism, like frontline soldiers, based on their belief in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and their motherland. This in turn immediately put them under direct pressure and made them targets of tit-for-tat policies from Soviet authorities. As they were committed to prioritizing their political work rather than their own studies, they became integrated into the Chinese state as major players and witnessed the worsening trend in Sino-Soviet relations that eventually resulted in a complete breakdown.

After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seized power in China in 1949 and joined the socialist camp led by the Soviet Union, the two countries formed a multi-faceted partnership. The period from 1951 saw many Chinese students dispatched to the Soviet Union for further education as part of the significant cooperation between the two countries. The Chinese government did so primarily to meet the needs of industrial development in China, and to ease its serious shortage of technical talent. For most of the 1950s, these Chinese students studying in the Soviet Union were highly praised as evidence of the close ties between the two countries. The honeymoon period of Sino-Soviet relations became memorable experiences for almost every young student. On the one hand, as outstanding student representatives of the “New China,” they accepted their government-assigned missions, traveling to the Soviet Union in order to earn valuable experience for China’s industrial development, and in order to establish an overall scientific research system in China. They took great pride in their individual roles, full of their sense of mission as symbols of the unbreakable friendship between the two socialist countries. On the other hand, for most of them this was their first experience with travel to a foreign country, especially the Soviet Union, a country which was also well-known as the “Paradise of Communism” and equipped with more advanced and developed technologies. This created a favorable environment for them to receive innovative research training and work practices, experience unimaginably expansive medical services, which were not available in China at that time, and also have the opportunity to become acquainted with foreigners, gaining exposure to different languages, cultures, and backgrounds. Some of them even fell in love with others from different countries during this period. All of these wondrous circumstances were etched in their memories.¹