

A National Development Scheme of China in Early 1950s: Sending Students Abroad to Study

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Abstract

Due to similar political views, the Chinese Communist Party and the Soviet Union built close ties in their diplomatic relations during the early period of the 1920s. Soon after the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government decided to send students to a special school in Russia to learn advanced technology and management knowledge. The Chinese government set up rules and regulations for the selection of students and their Russian language training. Anyhow, a political check was considered the most significant part of the criteria to ensure that the students chosen had a strong belief in the Chinese Communist Party. This national scheme cultivated many professionals who have had a substantial influence on the development and growth of young China afterward. However, at the same time, some of the students were not given chances to make use of what they learned in the Soviet Union and contribute to the industrialization process of the new country. This paper introduces the historical background of this project, explains the detailed student-selection criteria and examines the diverse ideology of the Communist leaders regarding the construction of the country and justifying social arrangements. We believe that the dispute between the two groups, which emphasized expertise and political loyalty, respectively, foreshadows the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

Keywords: Chinese students in Soviet Union, China in 1950s, Cultural Revolution, political loyalty

1. Introduction

As everyone knows, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in October 1949 after the Chinese Civil War with the Chinese Nationalist Party who has led the government of the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan. The new government had realized that the country needed many professionals in the fields of both technology and management to increase its competitiveness for its future growth and expansion. The cultivation of professionals with profound expertise was put to the first place among all its tasks. On July 6, 1949, one of China's top leaders, Shaoqi Liu, sent an official request to Starlin inquiring about the possibility of sending students to the Soviet Union (Literature Research Centre of the Communist Party of China, 2005:26). In the letter, the Chinese government proposed that a special school should be established in the Soviet Union for the Chinese students to master the knowledge and skills in management and administration. It was further indicated that less than 1,000 students would be sent to the school and all of the classes could be conducted through translation. Owing to the approval of Starling, this project was able to proceed smoothly from the very start. Three courses were established for the Chinese students: a rapid course (1 year), an ordinary course (2 years) and an official course (3~4 years) (Literature Research Centre of the Communist Party of China, 2005:35).

The Chinese government also sent inquiries to other capitalist countries. In contrast to the Soviet Union, those capitalist countries did not react positively to the proposal of the Chinese government about the exchange program for students and professional staff. Italy was the very few countries that indicated their intention and potential support to China's higher education career. The Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party agreed to send more than a dozen students to China. In addition to this, Italy also planned to assist China in technical development in the future. However, China insisted that Italy should accept Chinese students only after the establishment of the official diplomatic relations between the two countries. It refused to address the key point of the issue at the point of the discussion despite the amicable attitude of Italy to offer substantial help (Literature Research Centre of the Communist Party of China, 2005:278).

In September 1950, 25 students left the People's Republic of China and started their study at the five Eastern European countries - Czech, Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria (Jin, 1995:49). It was a bit surprising that the Soviet Union was not the very first choice. One of the reasons for this may be the hesitancy of Stalin in assisting the Chinese government after 1945. He did not perceive much chance of success in further control of the country and was reluctant to invest more to enhance the Sino-Soviet relations (Gittings, 1964). Actually, among the five countries, Poland and the Czech Republic were the first two countries which proposed the exchange study plan to the Chinese government. China showed particular interest in the program of Czech because Czech boasted of its highly-developed military industry. China expected to enhance its sovereignty over the territory through all devices, including military actions. Since then, China continued to dispatch students to Eastern European countries and received exchange students as well. East Germany and the Czech Republic were the destinations for the largest number of Chinese students being sent abroad except for the Soviet Union in the coming decades afterward.

About a year later, in August 1951, 375 international students departed to the Soviet Union for the first time since the foundation of the country. Then, around 13,500 students were sent to the Soviet Union throughout the entire decade (Lampton, Madancy & Williams, 1986:21). As a sign of friendliness, which may be superficial, their expenses during their stay in the Soviet Union were defrayed half according to a treaty between the two countries (Rosen, 1971:11). Thus, the Chinese students became the “living proof of the fraternal and close nature of the Sino-Soviet relationship” before the split of the two countries at the beginning of the 1960s (You & Kraus, 2014).

Regarding this national scheme, how to select qualified students from the thousands of potential candidates was a most essential issue. The Chinese Communist Party, with its Chairman Mao Zedong, was aware and acknowledged that the country was in urgent need of professional staff with expertise for growth and development. However, it was abhorrent of compromise to give up its established ideology, which was featured by the spirit of the Chinese Revolution. Individuals do not live or work in isolation but live in cooperation with one another. They are educated to give up their own benefits for the sake of the country or group they belong to. People with a strong socialist belief would not let their own opinions take priority over the decision of the country. The Chinese government was facing the challenge of opposing plots from foreign and domestic enemies at the initial stage after the country was founded. It was frightened of a comeback and would lose its communist regime. Therefore, the Chinese government was hoping to send their supporters with strong beliefs in socialism abroad, who would come back to China and devote themselves to the construction of the new country after their graduation. Unsurprisingly, it made the decision that ideal and promising candidates should pass a strict check for this political purpose. This was of crucial significance for the Chinese Communist Party to get assured of the candidates’ trustworthiness.

Nevertheless, the government soon realized the fact that most of the student candidates with desirable academic achievement were from families of the bourgeois class rather than their partners -- peasants and workers. Such students were able to receive a better education because of the background of their wealthy families. The Chinese government certainly would not want to offer such an opportunity to those they had criticized and had to find a conflict resolution to keep the balance of both political status and academic performance in the student selection process for this national scheme. Therefore, after realizing that most of the college and university students were from the bourgeois class, the Chinese government decided to call for applicants from high schools to assure that more candidates with reliable family background could have the chance to be selected.

Later, in 1966, Mao Zedong threw China’s cities into turmoil and launched the well-known Cultural Revolution. It was actually a monumental effort to prevent the turnover in his power and enhance his reputation as the irreplaceable figure in the country. He encouraged the progress of this notorious historical process (Lieberthal, 2020). Mao Zedong expected his regime to continue with the official propaganda line and praise the Chinese revolutionary spirit with tremendous emotion. His strong desire for ideological purity strengthened the crack with those Chinese communist leaders with practical politics.

2. Historical Background

As mentioned above, the primary reason for the national scheme of sending Chinese students abroad is that the Chinese Communist Party lacks technology and know-how in building up the country and fulfilling development as they expected and promised to the public. The country was in urgent need of technical and managerial executives who were loyal to the government and willing to dedicate themselves to the recovery of the national economy. Although the Chinese Communist Party took over about 20,000 engineers and technicians from the confrontational National Party, most of them were not in favor of the political views of the Chinese Communist Party. For example, in Anshan Steel Union, 62 out of 70 engineers were Japanese, who tended to show a hostile attitude to the Chinese government, especially the Communist Party. Among the 1.5 million party members in Northern China, 1.3 million were illiterate, and 50% of the instructors had received no education or very little (Shen, 2003:129). In all, the Chinese Communist Party strived with anxiety to enhance the personnel training and support system to secure more professionals for future development.

The choice of the first generation of the socialists in China actually shaped the national ideology in establishing the structure of the various systems of the new regime (McGuire, 2018:14), which has significantly influenced the country till nowadays. Many of the revolutionists who had studied and lived in the Soviet Union became the very top leaders of the People's Republic of China. Some of their children were even brought up in the orphanages in the Soviet Union. Due to this reason, they found a strong connection in ideology with the Soviet Union in themselves and considered Soviet Union's concepts the well-developed guideline of the Communist Party. In fact, Ma Zedong had considerable conflicts with the Soviet Union after taking the power of the Chinese Communist Party in 1935, which led to intensity in the relationship between the two countries (Heinzig, 1998). However, due to the traditional education and propaganda atmosphere those leaders of the Chinese Communist Party had experienced, it was not surprising that they were unable to separate themselves from the impact of the Soviet Union and were in solid hope to continue their scheme in the national administration along the Communist path. To fulfill this purpose, the Chinese Communist Party decided to send students and scholars to the Soviet Union through an exchange program (McGuire, 2018:14).

The plan of sending students to the Soviet Union to study was part of a technology transfer agreement between the two countries (Zhang, Zhang & Yao, 2006). According to the program, technology transfer would be conducted through a series of three actions:

- (1) To transfer industrial technology by aiding the construction of industrial projects;
- (2) To develop the capacity of the People's Republic of China in Science and technology through various forms of cooperation;
- (3) To help China adjust and construct technology colleges, and recruit a large number of Chinese students to study in the Soviet Union.

Sending students to the Soviet Union implies the determination of the Chinese government to follow the path of socialism through the enhancement of its alliance with the Soviet Union. Chinese students brought back to China the advanced technology, and the ideology of Soviet Union, which helped diversely in the following administration of the regime. As assumed,

many of the students became leaders at governmental sectors of various levels. Their points of view were reflected through the creation and formation of various rules and social systems in modern China. By choosing Communism as its ruling thought, China determined not to get involved in the global network for economic development and wealth. It was looking for an independent path to realize economic growth without sacrificing its national identity and integration (Schurmann, 1968). The scheme of sending Chinese students abroad to study was the very first step of the country's long-term development plan.

3. Student-selection Criteria

Higher educational institutions belonged to different governmental sectors in China around 1950. In other words, governmental sectors established colleges and universities to cultivate personnel for their future use. Thus, the central government allowed the various governmental sectors to create their own regulations for student selection to pick up students who could meet their requirements. For the case of the Ministry of Education, the intention of the scheme was to have more qualified teachers for colleges and universities in the future. Based on the instructions by the central government, Ministry of Education addressed the following points for student selection (Li, 2005):

- (1) Candidate students must have a reliable background from the political perspective with no doubts. They must be recommended by their teachers and superiors;
- (2) Candidates must have teaching experience of a minimum of 2 years and persist in excellent research within their professional fields. In addition, it would be more desirable if they could communicate using one of the following foreign languages, Russian, English, German and French.
- (3) Association professors and students of the 1, 2 and 3rd grades at universities would be given priority in consideration.
- (4) All candidates should have good health condition.

At the first stage of the selection process, the committee of each region recommended candidates about 4-5 times the required number of students. The candidates were notified that their submitted documents would be examined by a special committee in the central government (Li, 2005). The candidates' requests were supposed to be taken into account when the final decisions were made. Candidates, who had a relatively serious financial burden to support their families, were basically rejected (Li, 2005). According to the instruction of the Ministry of Education (Li, 2005), the local government should recommend qualified candidates with high competence in both learning and daily performance. The application documents include an entry form, resume, certificate of political status (to prove whether the candidate is a member of the Communist Youth League of China or the Chinese Communist Party), comments of the affiliation, identification verification, health certificate and academic achievements. In 1952, official report shows that China even selected 1,100 candidates for this national scheme from communist leaders working at governmental sectors of various levels. This implies that the Chinese Communist Party would not compromise on the issue of political check and royalty to the Chinese Communist Party should be always put in the first place regarding the implementation of this national scheme.

Before being sent to the Soviet Union, the students were given the chance to receive professional training in the Russian language at a prep school in Beijing. Students had to take a standardized test on their academic ability before being officially accepted by the university in the Soviet Union. The central government was hoping that these students could master the most advanced knowledge and make significant contribution to China's development. In all, despite the opinions of those Communist leaders that emphasis should be put on the check of the applicants' political background, governments at the various levels still made efforts to select students with the potentiality to make excellent progress in their study.

As described above, the political inspection is the most crucial stop for the selection of candidate students. China wanted to send students who were completely loyal to the Chinese Communist Party and were willing to devote themselves to the development of communism. According to the records at Shanghai Municipal Archives Bureau (1953), a detailed inspection was conducted by the local organization about the candidates' family background and political ideology. Four items were included in the assessment form: (1) motivation and attitudes in learning; (2) performance in their daily life and work; (3) moral behavior; and (4) future plan after graduation.

The authors have interviewed a candidate student named Y who was dispatched by the country to the Soviet Union. He explained in detail the examination of his qualification by the local government. Regarding Item (1), Candidate Y was scored based on the following evaluation principles: (a) Y had a strong determination to work hard at their lessons for their motherland and would make efforts to achieve excellent academic performance in all subjects. He responded to the call of the country in case of need anytime without condition. He convinced his leaders that he would not hesitate to sacrifice everything for the benefit of the communist party; (b) Y attended all the classes and meetings required and listened to the teachers earnestly; (c) Y helped their classmates patiently in learning; (d) Y didn't have a clear plan for his future study.

Regarding Item (2), the following description was given about the candidate Y: (a) As a student representative, Y actively promoted the communication between the students and the teacher, and made efforts to promote the efficiency of the teaching activities; (b) Y didn't conduct self-inspections on his daily performance and was not able to accept his weakness and mistakes. This had prevented him from making substantial progress; (c) Y didn't study hard enough about the current events about the country and international community and should spend more time to do this; (d) Y didn't obey the rules at the dormitory and often talked with roommates after the lights were off; (e) Y actively participated the volunteer activities with no time and effort spared.

Regarding Item (3), Y received the following remarks about his moral behaviors: (a) Y was sometimes rude to his classmate; (b) Y showed a strong resolve in joining the Communist Youth League of China. He collected the necessary documents for examination and confessed to the local organization about his family background and social connections. Although he did not get the approval to become an official member, he did not complain about the decision and continued to make efforts to realize his full potential.

Records at Shanghai Municipal Archives Bureau (1953) indicated that an additional announcement was made at a meeting held in June 1953 about the practice of political

inspection. Measures were taken to augment the inspection of the candidates' political ideology. Three items, which were used as the selection criteria, were originally proposed by the Russian professionals: (1) The applicant must be a member of the Communist Youth League; (2) The applicant must have a clear record from the political perspective; (3) The applicant's family members and social relations must receive inspections on their historical behaviors and prove their political innocence. At this meeting, the central communist organization of China decided to revise these items as follows: (1) The applicant must have a clear record on his resume and be considered as reliable from the political perspective; (2) The applicant must be diligent in both study and work, constantly make efforts for further progress and demonstrate their excellency in their personality. He must show a high potentiality of becoming useful personnel for the development of Communist career in the future; (3) The applicant must show strong willingness to study in the Soviet Union. In addition, his family members and social relations mustn't have violated the political principle of the Chinese Communist Party.

Furthermore, the Human Resource Department and the Ministry of Public Security of the central government made the announcement that applicants in the following cases should not be allowed to go abroad to study:

- (1) Applicants who have affiliated with anti-governmental organizations or participated in the anti-governmental activities;
- (2) Applicants who cannot show a clear record on their resumes with no undoubtful credibility;
- (3) Applicants who have made negative comments about the communist party and the country or are reported to have tackled anti-governmental activities after the foundation of the People's Republic of China;
- (4) Applicants with a low moral character or those who do not show potentiality to become competent personnel for the communist career;
- (5) Applicants with their parents serving as leaders in anti-governmental organizations before, those without a clear position in their ideology;
- (6) Applicants with their family members and social relations who were involved in anti-revolutionary activities in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau; Applicants who keep a close relationship with people with political uncertainty;
- (7) Applicants with their direct relatives (grandparents, parents, siblings and spouse) who were imprisoned or executed by the public power of the republic;
- (8) Applicants with their direct relatives who were at enmity with the country or under compulsory administration by the government.
- (9) Applicants with a complicated social background; Applicants who fail to show sufficient evidence to prove their political ignorance.

Obviously, China had a clear vision about its national scheme that what the country needed was professional personnel with outstanding competence and undoubted faithfulness. Assured

loyalty is the prerequisite of potential selection and was given priority to the candidates' academic competence. The examination of the candidates' political ideology also implied the enhancement of political brainstorm of China in school education for the purpose to strengthen the regime with socialist ideology and protect the young regime from any possibility of being turned over.

However, the fact showed that it was not easy to find students with both high academic competence and reliable family/social background. Many of the candidates went to college because of the financial support of their wealthy families. Few students from the poor families were able to receive education until a college level. Thus, such assessment of the political and family backgrounds of the students excluded those competent candidates from the target of selection. The communist party believed that the education chances should be given to those who represented the base class of the socialist society, such as farmers and blue-collar workers. Consequently, descendants of land-owners, entrepreneurs, wealthy farmers, capitalists and those who had been involved in the activities related to the Chinese Nationalist Party were highly prejudiced and deprived of the chance to receive further education. Proletariats were the firm supporters of the Chinese revolution. Obviously, one of the purposes of the Chinese Communist Party was to enhance the connection and ties with the proletariats through this national project. Thus, the assessment policy gave priority to the benefits of the proletariat without sufficient consideration of the fact that many of the selected candidates were not academically and intelligently competent to fulfill the study abroad and promote the development of the country. This would decrease the possibility for this national scheme to be a great success.

4. Benefits of Students

After the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the country was in urgent need of professional staff within the fields of engineering to realize large-scale industrialization within a minimum period. As a result, many students switched their interests to engineering. According to the official statistics of 1950, about 44.7% of the students at the entrance examinations of college were applicants of courses of engineering, management and science (Ministry of Education, 1951). This was also the trend in the selection process of qualified students. Due to some reasons, some of the students were not given the chance to learn what they were really interested in. But students were highly motivated because it was a great honor to be awarded such an opportunity to learn abroad.

Figure 1: Majors of Students Sent Abroad in 1953

	Engineering Mining Industry Transportation	Social Science Humanity	Others
Number	382	110	74
Ratio	67.49%	19.44%	13.07%

(Source: Report of Minister of Higher Education to Prime Minister on Student Selection in 1953)

Minister of the Industrial Ministry, Fuchun Li, believed that three factors were of crucial significance in building a new country, investment, resource and technology. Due to the limitation of technology, China was not able to have a full understanding about the situation of its natural sources throughout the country at that time (Li, 1951). Therefore, the Chinese Communist Party believed that the cultivation of professional staff would be the fourth factor contributing to the construction and growth of the industry in China.

Chinese students were under tremendous pressure while studying in the Soviet Union. Their daily behavior was under serious control and supervision. They had received serious political instruction before reaching there and were strongly motivated to meet the educational objectives decided by the country (Bernstein & Li, 2010:375). Upon arrival, they started to be under the close supervision of the Chinese Embassy in Moscow (Lampton, Madancy & Williams, 1986:21). They were not awarded the right to choose their own majors. They were “assigned to educational institutions and academic disciplines according to Beijing’s priorities” (Lampton, Madancy & Williams, 1986:21). As a result, 70% of them were distributed to the scientific and engineering fields, because engineers and technicians were in urgent need in China at the early stage of its foundation. Sacrificing individual desires for the country’s benefit has been one of the most significant principles and the party had maintained its continuity to the best around that period of time.

Although the country did not have a large budget for education around that time, students to be sent abroad were taken good care of by the government. The authors interviewed a student named B who studied for one year at such a pre-course. He told us about his “luxurious” life at that time. The benefits the students received include daily-life expenses, traveling fees, tuition fees and other subsidies. Their monthly allowance (Y33) was even much higher than primary school teachers (Y23) at that time. When most of the Chinese people had to starve every day, they were offered three meals a day with a great variety of food always. After going to the Soviet Union, they even did not have to pay for their clothes. Coats for autumn, winter, suits, shirts, shoes, necktie, gloves, hats were offered free of charge by the country. Female students even received scarves, skirts, bags, and suitcases at a regular pace. Students were even given the chance to receive a medical check on a regular basis. The Chinese Communist Party hoped that those students could become leaders to promote the development of the country after their graduation in the future.

Students appreciated the generous offering from the country. They were anxious to return the benefit they had received to the country and make contributions to make it stronger and stronger. But it is indeed a pity that some of them were not able to make full use of the knowledge and skill they had learned abroad after going back to China.

5. Conclusions

The scheme of sending students abroad to study was not a well-established policy around the year 1951. In 1953, the Chinese government set up rules and regulations for selecting students and their Russian language training. Anyhow, political check was still the most significant criterion to ensure the students' strong belief in communism. The availability of technical and professional training was the most precious to the new China, which lay the foundation for its potential development and growth in the decades later. All of the higher education institutions in China were shut down from 1966 to 1970 (Chang, 1974). Mindless chanting of Maoism took the place of the normal curriculum and teachers was humiliated and abused (Swets, 1973). Students were called on to participate in all sorts of revolutionary activities, and the education at schools was interrupted by between 1 and 8 years" during the Cultural Revolution (Meng & Zhao, 2017). Unavoidably, higher education lost most of its substance and feature during that period of time. It was not until 1977 that the national entrance examination to colleges and universities was resumed and higher education was able to recover and develop since then. Therefore, we firmly believe that this pioneering scheme solved the problem of insufficient professionals and experts for China for decades of years, promoted the scientific development of the country and helped to raise the educational level of the whole country afterward.

In 1963, China broke up with the Soviet Union because of their ideological difference. The Soviet Union was looking for chances to cooperate with the Western countries and proposed a cooperation pattern of "peaceful coexistence" (History.com Editors, 2009). China benefited from the honeymoon relationship between the two countries (Urbansky, 2012) and made the decision to follow the communism path faithfully, which has been employed as a tool to maintain its governance and sovereignty until nowadays.

As Macfarquhar and Schoenhals (2009) address, "the burgeoning split between Moscow and Beijing over the appropriate international policies of the Communist bloc and the internal politics of communist nations" led to the subsequent disaster of the Cultural Revolution. The intense ideological hostility between the Soviet Union and China developed in the late 1950s. The Chinese Communist Party was delighted to make use of the network with the Soviet Union before the collapse of the alliance (Luthi, 2003). But difference in the ideological thinking between the two groups of leaders of China irritated Mao Zedong, who would like to maintain the high revolutionary spirit and radically opposed the policy of the Soviet Union to reach for western ideology and assistance. Mao was afraid that the unfavorable impact from the Soviet Union would destroy the fundamental social and political context he created in China through his revolutionary experience, thus decided to terminate the instrumental alliance for independent development.

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