

Being Sinologists in Post-Communist-party States: Reflections from Czech, Poland and Russia

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Sinologists are often fond of Chinese culture, if not China. Sinologists of Communist and post-Communist states are no exception. They are capable of deeper readings of contemporary phenomena in China and usually patient with difficulties arising out of Chinese conditions. This reputation has made the lives of Sinologists miserable whenever their governments and the Chinese Communist Party were trapped in political disagreement. There have been lucky ones who found an alternative career in foreign services. The less fortunate among the Sinologists though, in order to survive their ‘politically incorrect knowledge’, have had to learn to make use of their skills in service of their countries, by analyzing in what way the Chinese leadership had been mistaken. Older generations of Sinologists, some of them educated in China, and who were all trained before the China policy of their countries turned negative, have traditionally been reluctant to heavily criticize China or the Chinese people. These early post-war generations have privately remained faithful to their subject matter and directed their criticism exclusively at the Cultural Revolutionary leadership. It is noticeable that their students have managed to follow a similar pattern of avoiding politics when engaging China and Chinese subjects. This is particularly true for those who have come from a family background that has tied them to China or Chinese studies since childhood. The stories of Sinologists are therefore full of personal sensitivities, in the face of a greater foreign policy background beyond their control.

Sinologists in the post-Communist-party states have been shaped by cycles of change since the end of World War II. Despite their various intellectual traditions, each embedded in its own past, similar political interventions, which were externally defined by the Cold War and internally by Communist-party rule, shaped the training and the fate of Sinologists according to the rise and fall of the Soviet Union. There were active exchanges between these countries and China in the 1950s. The Sino-Soviet rift virtually froze such bilateral academic relationships. Scholars having received their language training in China lost the legitimacy to continue their research at home. Younger generations could learn the

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Chinese language and literature either in the Soviet Union, if their own countries were unable to provide sufficient training, or in their own countries. In the latter case, it is likely that their teachers were indebted to Chinese training and under Chinese cultural influence. The Chinese legacy could stay alive in a peculiar way as long as the generation of the 1950s could teach. Contacts with China resumed after 1990. Students of Chinese studies in the post-Communist era have generally substituted China for Russia to receive their training since then.

The revival of Sinology since the 1990s has not simply returned it to its position of the 1950s. The skill and the interest that existed before the Sino-Soviet rift have re-emerged to some extent. Studies of Chinese culture and history are legitimate once again. However, the political comradeship among Socialist states that once facilitated Chinese studies in the 1950s enjoys no parallel in the past two decades. For both religious and political reasons, China's image in recent decades has been so different from that of the 1950s. Contemporary Sinologists are molded by an atmosphere of liberation and democratization and prone to add new parameters incompatible with the primarily socialist worldview of the 1950s. The positive image of China, embedded in its cultural heritage and socialist identity, is challenged by a negative image of a China that appears authoritarian and backward. Sinologists have to decide on which side of China to focus – to decide their agenda. The challenge is further complicated by the economic rise of China and the political influence that comes along, when the reform in Russia and East European states themselves is far less impressive. While the Cold War severely constrained the imagination of Sinologists on China, the 21st century brings many new uncertainties.

These uncertainties are intensified by the resources of learning accessible outside of their own countries. China has been one obvious site of learning, but there are many different sites in China. On top of those various learning opportunities, Taiwan is especially attractive to Sinologists. Russian and Polish Sinologists arrived in Taiwan quite early. In fact, a few promising Russian Sinologists have even established a new career in Taiwan. Mongolian students have easily found hosting institutions in Taiwan everywhere, too. With democratization taking place in Eastern Europe and Mongolia, not unlike in Taiwan, Taiwan exerts a special attraction on Sinologists from the former regions. Moreover, Taiwanese academics adopt an American epistemology in China studies. Combined with Taiwanese academics' deep understanding, as well as daily practice, of Chinese culture, this makes Taiwan a practical node strongly connected to both the United States and China. Taiwan's vast and rich academic resources similarly comfort those senior Sinologists from Eastern Europe and Mongolia who experience nostalgia for Chinese classic humanities.

Russia and Vietnam stood out as two apparent places where Sinological training was self-sustaining during the Sino-Soviet rift. While Vietnam continues

to be a Communist-party state in the 21st century, the pattern of its academic exchanges with China appears largely congruent with its political relations, although the freezing of academic relations happened slightly later in 1975. Vietnam is a more appropriate case for comparison than other Southeast Asian countries because historically the Chinese resources in Vietnamese society have been rich and intermingling with Chinese people extensive. A willing student of China could learn Chinese in Vietnam on his or her own, since rich Chinese cultural resources exist to support any determined self-learner. In contrast to the freezing of Vietnamese exchanges with China in 1975, Mongolia actually reopened its Chinese classes in University in 1975, in conjunction with a policy of sending more students to Russia for learning. A significant Chinese legacy was preserved indirectly in these classes owing to teaching by members of the generation of the 1950s, who studied in China. Two Sinological traditions have co-existed in Mongolia and survived until today, although in the past two decades Mongolian students have primarily opted for China or Taiwan to receive training in Chinese studies.

The relatively large number of Sinologists in Russia mostly entered their profession without a clear idea of China. However, they were able to imagine a future career (presumably) supporting the modernization of China. They gained accesses to a long-lasting tradition which they would not otherwise have the opportunity to appreciate. China's positive image contributed to their acquirement of interests in the subject matter in the immediate aftermath of the Chinese Civil War. The same positive image has similarly made China more than just a mediocre field of study. It might not have been the first choice that came to mind, but it was an honorable academic program. That is why, when the tumultuous change in the Eastern Bloc politics turned the subject into a political taboo Sinologists often suffered both socially and psychologically. However, if individual choices did not necessarily explain Eastern Block Sinologists' entry into Sinological studies, their continued intellectual investment in Sinological studies during the slow period may serve as a reminder of the perseverance of the Sinologists of these generations.

Idiosyncratic factors became apparent during the second half of the Cold War as Sinology, being a politically questionable profession, did not have official support. This was truer in the Czech Republic, Poland and Russia than in Mongolia. For instance in the latter, the officially sanctioned mission to rebut Cultural Revolutionary historiography, which claimed ownership of the Mongolian past, made it necessary for officials to rely on Sinologists. Mongolian Sinologists were assigned a mission that went beyond the politics of the Cold War or the Sino-Soviet conflict. In general, though, Mongolia's Chinese classes, which were reopened in the late 1970s, conformed to the larger trend in the Eastern Bloc that

Sinologists could only criticize China in their writings. The Cultural Revolution was too obvious a target to miss, but criticism by scholars was not sheer political denouncement. At least two types of Sinologists were to be distinguished. One type of scholarship appealed to Chinese culture and history in their criticism, charging the incumbent leadership with betraying Chinese traditions. Another type attacked the malicious intent of the Chinese leadership. Those who adopted the latter style proceeded to solely read contemporary Chinese documents while the former could also rely on the knowledge of Chinese classics.

How and why Sinology nevertheless composed the core of someone's career in Russia and East Europe attested to the significance of coincidence and choice or lack of choice on the one hand, and dedication to scholarship and love for the subject matter on the other hand. Highly individualized conditions under a structurally frozen atmosphere paved the way for the revival of post-Communist Sinology. Ironically, the opening up of both the former Communist-party States and China, which has enabled increasingly extensive exchanges between them, has not produced deeper knowledge on China. The language training that used to undergird the tradition of Sinology in all these countries tilts more to practical use than literary knowledge. In other words, the revival of Chinese studies never meant the actual revival of the Sinological traditions in each of these societies. Scholarly production continues to rely on Sinologists trained in earlier periods. In one noticeable example, Tangut studies in Russia faces the challenge of losing successors. The incapacity of the post-Communist age to rejuvenate a once successful profession leads to the weakening of the genealogy of contemporary Tangut studies. Nevertheless, there have always been strong personalities and institutes to inspire subsequent generations.

In this special issue, authors analyze what it means to be a Sinologist in Czech, Poland and Russia. To begin, Jaroslav Prusek (1906-1980) has been such a name that has constantly been invoked in almost any retrospective narrative by both Czech Sinologists and Sinologists from other parts of the Eastern Europe. To the extent that outsiders, mainly Chinese American scholars, have labeled him and his pupils as the Prague School, a conscious effort towards self-examination can be seen among subsequent generations. Under the influence of Prusek, how have contemporary Czech Sinologists proceeded with their profession? We then ask, in addition, do Czech Sinologists develop any shared understanding of China? By tracing the use of the term "China" in their narratives, one is able to tell how similar or different it can be while being from the same epistemological community. A similar attempt at identifying contemporary Sinologists follows. Coming to Russia, one finds that institutions have likewise contributed to the continuation of Sinology during the Cold War. The Russian Academy of Sciences hosts two Sinological institutions, the Institute of Orientology and the Institute

of Far Eastern Studies. Neither is exclusively on China, but both have been a significant home for Sinology. Two Academicians—Sergey L. Tikhvinski and Mikhail L. Titarenko—have managed to keep the profession, once torn by anti-Chinese politics, through important works of translation, compilation and reviews. Finally, a note on the comparison between Russian-trained and China-trained Sinologists in Mongolia provides an overall picture of this rarely attended subject.

This special issue traces the encounters and choice of a few strata of veteran researchers in Russian and East European Sinology. Our methodology is a preliminary attempt at an anthropology of knowledge, which stresses the relevance of encounters and choice in the process of knowledge production – encounters and choices that mirror and reproduce those responsible for the survival of human groups. We could imagine, or there actually could have been, many different situations in which scholars would have had to strongly adapt themselves by adopting various, different, identity strategies as a ‘human group’ that ultimately influenced their scholarship. Not only could the choice of identity at a particular site well be unstable over time, but the choice of sites in itself is unstable, reducing the choice of identity to no more than the act of taking on particular role, except that the latter usually requires a conscious, context-specific, and immediate decision. Globalization obscures the distinction of identity from role due to the increasingly destabilizing effects of globalization on self-other relations. Intellectual paths that are influenced by the transformation, the overthrowing, lingering-on, disappearing, reproducing, fading, or backfiring of the party-state leadership in the post-Socialist states as well as their foreign relations, are destined to encounter such dislocation of self-other relations, which generate frustration, hope, emptiness, fear, opportunity and other types of anxiety. Sites, accordingly, can be defined in the intellectual, psychological and social at least as much as in the physical realm.

A final methodological note on travelling. Reflections on one’s choice of a site from which one has written different things on or about China could begin easier from recalling one’s travelling experiences—as an immigrant, a student abroad, a conference participant, a visiting scholar, a field researcher, a tourist or other experiences, whether mentioned or unmentioned in one’s curriculum vitae—whereby encounters that necessitate constant decision making are essential. Similar pressures to make a different choice likewise take place when hosting, willingly or not, visiting travelers in various forms—when surrendering to their bloc governing, enlisting their services, reading their writings, subscribing to their ideology, consuming their products, marrying their members, and so on. Travel is intrinsically a method of China studies and also a methodology of re- or de-Sinicization.