

# The Experiment One Side Watched

Cross-Domain Analysis · 🌿 Immanuel Hsü, \*The Rise of Modern China\* × 📖 \*The Shortest History of the Soviet Union\* · 1,367 pages indexed · feeds Lesson 20

## The one idea

**Moscow 1991 and Beijing 1989 are not two independent outcomes. They are one decision taken in opposite orders, twenty-four months apart, by two parties who were openly watching each other.**

That matters because it means the usual comparison — "why did one survive?" — is not a controlled experiment. One of the two subjects had already seen the other's results.

## China was watching, and said so

Hsü documents the surveillance directly. China "kept a close watch over the progress of Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev's policies of openness (*glasnost*) and political restructuring (*perestroika*), as both countries were attempting the same to overhaul the domestic economy." It was also **"the only Communist state that did not send an official party delegation to the 70th anniversary celebrations of the Bolshevik Revolution"** in October 1987 — a deliberate distance taken two years before the Square.

**And the verdict was explicit.** Gorbachev's February 1990 report to the Enlarged Soviet Central Committee, which "renounced the party's monopolistic leadership; permitted a multiparty, 'presidential' system; and endorsed a 'humane, democratic socialism'", was in Beijing's reading **"condemned as a betrayal of Marxism-Leninism... rejecting class struggle and practicing Western style parliamentary democracy, thus repudiating the very foundations of Communism."** Hsü records the question that followed in Chinese elite discussion: whether the fate of Eastern Europe awaited them.

## The inversion, in one sentence

Hsü's own framing of the Chinese discovery: "Chinese leaders had found that the traditional Communist system was unworkable unless it was adulterated with market mechanisms. The Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev seemed to have made the same discovery, but **China was ahead of the Soviet Union in breaking away from the bondage of orthodox Marxism.**"

### Same two levers, opposite order.

**Moscow:** political opening first (*glasnost*, 1986 →), economic restructuring second and incomplete.

**Beijing:** economic opening first (1978 →), political opening never — and in June 1989, foreclosed by force.

Hsü's point is that China got to the economic insight *earlier*, which is what made the sequencing available to it at all.

## Where this touches Lesson 18 and Lesson 20

**Lesson 18 already records Fitzpatrick's finding that the Soviet collapse was contingent — in 1989 most people still wanted the Union to continue.** Put that beside the Chinese reading of Gorbachev and the picture sharpens: the Soviet end was not a popular verdict on socialism, and the Chinese leadership did not interpret it as one either. They read it as a *management failure at the top*, which is precisely the reading that justifies holding the political lever shut.

**Hsü's long baseline is the other half.** He dates modern China to roughly 1600 rather than the Opium War — the West intensified a transformation already running. **A state that understands itself as a**

**four-century continuity project and a state founded in 1917 are not making the same bet**, and that difference shows up in what each one treats as survivable.

**The Russian epilogue says the same thing from the other side.** Putin's formulation, quoted in the *Shortest History*: "**anyone who feels no regret for the passing of the Soviet Union has no heart, and anyone who hopes to restore it has no brain.**" Regret without restoration — the continuity claim abandoned, then partially rebuilt as something else.

**The finding**

| Measure                     | USSR                       | PRC                             |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Self-understood age in 1989 | 72 years                   | reckoned in dynastic centuries  |
| Order of reform             | politics → economics       | economics → politics (withheld) |
| June 1989 / Aug 1991 choice | did not use decisive force | used decisive force             |
| Outcome within 30 months    | state dissolved            | state intact                    |
| Watched the other first?    | no                         | yes, and documented it          |

**The uncomfortable part has to be said plainly: the regime that used force is still here, and the one that liberalised is not.**  
That is what the record shows for state survival over three decades. It is not a verdict on whether either choice was right, and it is not evidence that force works in general —  $n = 1$  on each side, and the two cases are causally linked rather than independent.

**The honest limits**

**Survival is not vindication, and Brook supplies the counter-reading from inside the Chinese case** — "in the long term, real authority has slipped from the grasp of the Party leadership." A state can persist while the thing it was persisting for drains away.

**Hsü's text also stops before the outcome.** His Gorbachev material is contemporary commentary written as events ran, not retrospective analysis, so it is good evidence of *what Beijing thought at the time* and weak evidence about what actually caused what.

**And the most important confound is the one the pair itself reveals.** If China's choice was informed by watching Moscow, then "China chose better" is partly just "China chose second." **The single largest advantage in the comparison is not ideology, sequencing or history. It is having gone later.** Which is, incidentally, the same asymmetry the fourth pillar describes from the other direction: the first mover pays, and everyone behind walks a beaten road.