

11-1-2013

## Mingjiang Li. *Mao's China and the Sino-Soviet Split: Ideological dilemma*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Barry McCarron  
Georgetown University, [bm323@georgetown.edu](mailto:bm323@georgetown.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McCarron, Barry (2013) "Mingjiang Li. *Mao's China and the Sino-Soviet Split: Ideological dilemma*. New York: Routledge, 2012.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 5: No. 1, Article 17.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1179

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol5/iss1/17>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of International and Global Studies* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

**Mingjiang Li. *Mao's China and the Sino-Soviet Split: Ideological dilemma.*  
New York: Routledge, 2012.**

The Sino-Soviet split was a momentous development in Cold War history. It undermined the international communist movement, constituted a dramatic shift in the global balance of power in Washington's favor, and was a major factor in the eventual demise of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Communist bloc. Why did the "brotherly solidarity" between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC), once viewed by Moscow and Beijing as "eternal" and "unbreakable," unravel in the late 1950's and early 1960's and escalate to the point of bloody military clashes along the Sino-Soviet border in 1969? Since the end of the Cold War, scholars have utilized newly available primary sources from the former Communist world to shed more light on this question, but they have reached dissimilar conclusions.<sup>1</sup> Mingjiang Li, an associate professor of political science at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, is the latest scholar to address this question while also contributing more broadly to the study of China and the Cold War, foreign policy and politics in Mao's China, and the role of ideology in international politics.

Using recently declassified documents from the Foreign Ministry archives of the PRC, Li contends that ideology, driven primarily by China's domestic politics, is crucial to understanding the origins and evolution of the Sino-Soviet rupture. His interpretation is at odds with those of scholars who place greater emphasis on other factors such as competing national security interests, struggles for leadership of the international communist movement, economic disputes, cultural differences, or personality clashes. Although Li's monograph complements a recent spate of scholarship that foregrounds ideology as the central factor in explaining the breakdown in Sino-Soviet relations, he contends that existing scholarship has theoretical shortcomings because it fails to adequately account for the ebbs and flows in ideological friction between Moscow and Beijing. In order to explicate this fluctuating effect of ideology, Li introduces the concept of an "ideological dilemma" and theorizes it in an attempt to better explain the dynamics of the Sino-Soviet split and further our understanding of the relationship between ideology and foreign policy.

Following an introductory chapter that critically reviews the literature on the Sino-Soviet split, chapter two explains the concept of an ideological dilemma and why it is an effective framework for understanding the variability of ideological influence on foreign policy. Ideological dilemmas arise when ideological differences between states challenge or threaten the legitimacy of their leaders' political power and domestic policy programs. Attempts by leaders in one state to defend their ideological position to domestic audiences elicits criticism and comparable disapproval from leaders of rival states, essentially generating a vicious cycle of antagonism that has the potential to trigger interstate security disputes. In saying this, the author argues that the impact of the ideological dilemma on a state's foreign policy is not static; rather,

---

<sup>1</sup> Notable works include Shen Zhihua and Li Danhui, *After Learning to One Side: China and its Allies in the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Boris T. Kulik, *Sovetsko-Kitaiskii Raskol: Prichiny i Posledstviia* (Moscow: IDV RAN, 2000); Odd Arne Westad, ed., *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

it waxes and wanes in accordance with domestic and international circumstances. The relative strength of this concept is that it presents a more flexible and nuanced method of understanding the relationship between ideology and foreign policy in comparison to other approaches to international relations, which view ideology as either a constant and critical factor influencing foreign policy (social constructivism) or as absent and irrelevant (realism/neorealism).

Li next applies the concept of an ideological dilemma to examine the unfolding of the Sino-Soviet split from the late 1950's through the first phase (1966-1969) of the Cultural Revolution and divides his analysis into six chapters, each corresponding to what he considers six critical phases in the breakdown of the Sino-Soviet alliance. Traditional accounts of the Sino-Soviet split maintain that it began in February 1956 when Khrushchev criticized Stalin and advocated a policy of peaceful coexistence with the West at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> However, Li presents evidence to show that the Chinese leadership's reactions to this development were less negative than traditionally understood. While his suggestion that Sino-Soviet cooperation in 1956 and 1957 "marked the peak of the alliance" (p. 21) is debatable, his sources convincingly demonstrate that the reorientation of Soviet ideology and policy and its attendant friction in Sino-Soviet relations insufficiently accounts for the breakdown in the alliance.

Not until Mao's launching of the Great Leap Forward, Li contends, did indications of the Sino-Soviet split emerge. His central argument is that Mao purposefully escalated ideological disputes with Moscow in order to advance his domestic programs and defeat political challengers. Opposition to the Great Leap Forward program from both Moscow and domestic rivals in China—in addition to the program's ultimate failure—impelled Mao to exacerbate ideological tensions, which invited counter actions from the Soviet Union. This vicious cycle of the ideological dilemma repeated itself at various moments throughout the 1960's and intensified to such a degree during the Cultural Revolution that it spilled over into the national security arena, most notably during the Sino-Soviet border skirmishes in March 1969.

A major strength of Li's book lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which combines history and political science to analyze the origins and dynamics of the Sino-Soviet split. For example, his historical research shows that Sino-Soviet relations improved for brief periods in the wake of the catastrophic Great Leap Forward and after Khrushchev was removed from power in October 1964. This thaw in relations coincided with periods when the ideological influence on Beijing's foreign policy was less pronounced. His concept of an ideological dilemma, which contributes to the field of international relations, is able to account for both this diminishing ideological friction and its subsequent intensification. Although the concept of an ideological dilemma furthers our understanding of the dynamics of Chinese foreign policy and the Sino-Soviet split, its utility in terms of comprehending other case studies or other states' foreign policy is an area for future research.

Another strength of *Mao's China and the Sino-Soviet split* is its use of newly declassified Chinese documents, which furthers our understanding of China's domestic politics and foreign policy towards the Soviet Union. However, the work's exclusive reliance on Chinese primary sources also constitutes its major weakness. Li correctly points out that Mao was primarily responsible for destabilizing the alliance between Moscow and Beijing, but multi-national

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, John Gittings, *Survey of the Sino-Soviet Dispute: A Commentary and Extracts from the Recent Polemics, 1963-1967* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) and Donald S. Zagoria, *The Sino-Soviet Conflict, 1956-1961* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

archival research is necessary for a more complete picture of the origins and evolution of the Sino-Soviet split. Additionally, Li's work is constrained by the fact that these documents represent only a partial declassification of the Foreign Ministry materials, and the most important ones, located at the Chinese Communist Party Central Archive, are inaccessible to the public.

Overall, Li builds on the work of other scholars who argue that the centrality of ideology, fueled by Mao's need to mobilize the Chinese populace for domestic purposes, is the main factor behind Chinese foreign policy-making and the breakdown in the Sino-Soviet relations.<sup>3</sup> However, his theorizing the concept of an ideological dilemma to explain the Sino-Soviet split is novel and provides a more nuanced understanding of the ebbs and flows in ideological friction between the Soviet Union and the PRC. Li's book essentially contributes to a growing body of literature that seeks to understand Sino-Soviet relations and China's role in the global Cold War; nonetheless, scholarly debate over the driving force behind the Sino-Soviet split and China's foreign policy is likely to continue so long as important Chinese documents remain off limits.

Barry McCarron  
Georgetown University  
[bm323@georgetown.edu](mailto:bm323@georgetown.edu)

---

<sup>3</sup> Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War* and Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*.