

Technical Assistance of the Soviet Specialists to China on Urban Planning in 1949-1959

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Abstract

A highlight of the urban planning activities in the early days of the People's Republic of China was the massive number of professional Soviet specialists sent to technically assist China with urban planning. This was also a unique phenomenon in the international urban planning sector. More than forty Soviet specialists, who could be categorized into four series, were sent to China over a 10-year period to provide technical assistance, commencing from the arrival of the first series of Soviet municipal engineering specialists in August 1949 to the return of the last series of specialists in May 1959. By virtue of the technical assistance of the Soviet planners China managed to learn from Soviet planning theory in its entirety and developed urban reconstruction & expansion plans for a number of existing megacities as well as a number of important emerging industrial cities. Furthermore, thanks to the Soviet specialists, China was able to train and acquire a multitude of first-generation urban planners of its own who instilled into modern Chinese planning model a “cultural gene” which, originating primarily from the Soviet model, characterized socialist urban planning.

Keywords

China, Soviet Union, Urban planning theory, Socialist urban planning.

How to cite

Li, Hao; “Technical Assistance of the Soviet Specialists to China on Urban Planning in 1949-1959”. In Carola Hein (ed.), *International Planning History Society Proceedings*, 19th IPHS Conference, City-Space-Transformation, TU Delft, 5 - 6 July, 2022, TU Delft Open, 2022.

DOI: 10.7480/iphs.2022.1.6440

1. INTRODUCTION

A highlight of the urban planning activities in the infant days of the People's Republic of China was the massive number of professional Soviet urban planners sent to technically assist China with urban planning on a full scale. Due to the technical instructions of the Soviet professionals, Soviet planning theory was able to be spread broadly across China. In the meantime, as China learned from the Soviet Union in many domains, e.g. politics, economy, culture and education, a lopsided general social tendency was initiated in China which resulted in a rather systematic and in-depth investigation of Soviet planning theory. From the perspective of international urban planning, it was a unique phenomenon that the urban planning ideas of one world power should be communicated to another in its entirety, occupying a dominant place within a rather short time and bringing a far-reaching, profound impact thereafter. The paper introduced an investigation of historical assistance from the professional Soviet planners not only in order for the Chinese urban planning sector to accumulate experience and seek technical improvements, but also to look culturally deeper into what science, with its fundamental theory and rationales, underlies modern Chinese urban planning activities. Therefore, the paper has a vital academic importance to diversifying and supplementing the study of historical international urban planning.

Considering the worsening Sino-Soviet ties in 1960, China turned in whole to Western urban planning theory from the 1978 introduction of the Reform & Opening-up policy. This, in addition to the skeptical attitude of the international community to socialist institutions after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Soviet planning theory and the one-time assistance of the Soviet Union to China has long been a sensitive topic rarely dealt with, let alone research and theoretical findings on the history. Only on some commemorative occasions, e.g. the 50th or 60th Anniversary of the Proclamation of the New China, would a handful of retired elderly specialists recall and recollect the history. As academic entities studying the history and theory of Chinese urban planning germinate and come into existence in recent years, academia is developing an increasing interest in the topic of the Soviet planning specialists.¹ Accordingly, there have been some achievements. Li Baihao et al. investigated the sites, layouts and plans of 156 significant projects built in the 1950s with a great deal of assistance of the Soviet specialists.² Huang Li studied the 1949-1965 historical change of modern Chinese urban planning, i.e. from pre-PRC modern laissez-faire policy, to the entire replication of the Soviet model, and then to the development of and reflection on the independent Chinese model.³ Zhao Chen et al. thought back on the entire history of the application of the Soviet model.⁴ Li Yang conducted an analysis of how the Soviet factors influenced the planning case of Beijing in the 1950s.⁵ Hou Li compared how the Soviet model influenced the urban planning cases of Beijing and Shanghai in the 1950s.⁶ Xu Hao and Li Baihao investigated the theoretical and empirical divide between the Soviet model and the Western model in 1949-1952 to explicate the logos underlying a paradigm shift on the basis of "the replacement of the old institution with the new".⁷ In spite of the efforts, historical research in this field remains fairly inadequate and further in-depth exploration is urgently needed.

The author of the paper has been occupied in research on Chinese urban planning in the 1950s. Earlier, the preliminary study of the planning history of eight emerging important industrial cities dealt with the technical assistance of the Soviet planners.⁸ Considering the

crucial leading role of the soviet planners in the then Chinese urban planning activities, the author intends to conduct a comparatively systematic thematic study based on an extensive consultation of the relevant original archives as well as an in-depth interview with a number of people once involved in the planning activities. The study is still underway and the article starts with an outline of the history with the intention of eliciting peer attention and review.

2. FOUR SERIES OF SOVIET SPECIALISTS SENT TO CHINA TO ASSIST WITH URBAN PLANNING

According to part of the statistics, more than forty Soviet specialists were sent to China over a 10-year period to provide technical assistance (limited to fields closely related to urban planning), commencing from the arrival of the first series of Soviet municipal engineering specialists in August 1949 to the return of the last series of specialists to the Soviet Union in May 1959. They worked in China for different lengths of time, as short as a half year or as long as three years. Based on the time of arrival and the hirer entities, the specialists could be categorized roughly into four series which varied remarkably in the backgrounds, field and key concerns of assistance.

2.1 FIRST SERIES: SOVIET MUNICIPAL ENGINEERING SPECIALISTS (1949-1950)

Between April and May 1949 the CPC Central Committee filed a request with the Soviet Union for the assignment of the first series of specialists to assist with municipal construction for Shanghai and Beijing, two newly liberated megacities. Because municipal construction concentrated primarily on the dissolution of extant practical problems at the time, due consideration must be given to urban planning in the long run. Therefore the Soviet planners gave some advice on urban planning.

The first series of Soviet municipal engineering specialists arrived in China at the end of August 1949 and returned to the Soviet Union in the middle of May 1950, staying about 8 months in China. The team included three interpreters as well as eighteen members specializing in water supply and sewerage, transportation, healthcare, construction and electrical engineering. The team leader was Moscow Soviet Vice Chairman and Vice Mayor П. В. Абрамов.⁹ The major urban planning adviser was Soviet architectural engineer М. Г. Бараников who, on November 14, 1949, made a thematic report complete with a range of proposals to the Beijing People's government regarding urban planning for Beijing (refer to Figure 1) before making a second report in Shanghai on March 16, 1950 regarding the reconstruction and consequent development of Shanghai. The first series of Soviet municipal engineers arrived before the official proclamation of the New China. The government had been replicating the Soviet institutions in whole in a lopsided manner. In regard of urban planning, the technical assistance primarily played a preliminary part in the introduction of Soviet theory and practice.

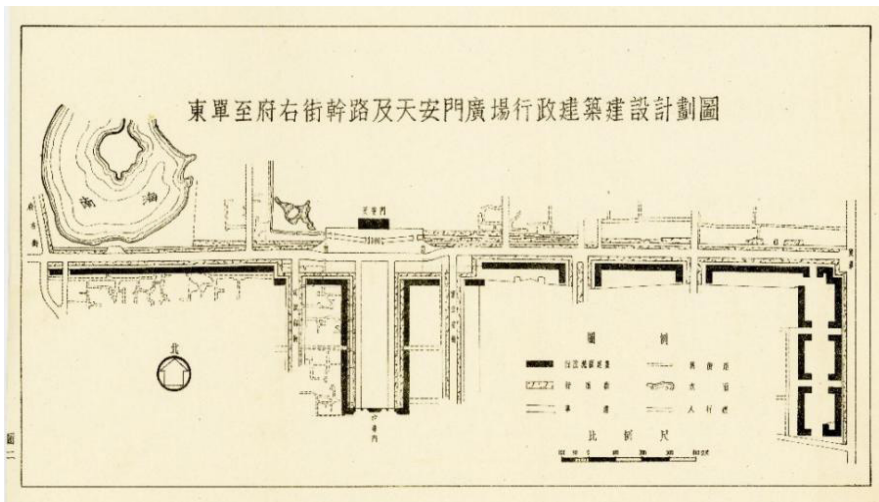


Fig. 1. Бараников's proposal on the layout of the central civil administration area around the Tian'an-men Square and Chang'an Street (Nov. 1949) Courtesy of Бараников, On the Future Development of China (offprint)



Fig. 2. Мухин (2nd from right), Liang Ssu-cheng (1st from left), etc. posed for a picture, Jul. 1958, Moscow. Courtesy of the family of Wang Wenke (1st from right)

2.2 SECOND SERIES: SOVIET URBAN PLANNING SPECIALISTS (1952-1956)

The second series of Soviet specialists were sent at the invitation of China at a time when the second Five-Year Plan (1953-1957) was forthcoming. The series consisted primarily of A. С. Мухин, Д. Д. Барагин and Я. Т. Кравчук who was retained primarily by the urban planning authority at the central government level. They came to China separately. Мухин, who arrived in April 1952, was retained first by the State Department Central Committee on Fiscal and Economic Programs (an entity under the central government), then by the Ministry of Construction Projects and returned around the beginning of October 1953. Барагин succeeded Мухин, arrived at the end of May 1953 and returned at the end of 1956. Кравчук, who arrived in June 1954, was retained first by the Ministry of Construction Projects, then by the newly-mandated National Construction Committee and went back around July 1956.

Мухин had been an assistant of Soviet master architect A. В. Шуцев, and served as the chief engineer in northwestern Soviet port city Мурманск (refer to Figure 2). He was virtually alone when he came on a mission to provide China with assistance in urban planning. It chanced that China was preparing to kick off the first Five-Year Plan and the siting of 156 Soviet-assisted important industrial projects was underway. As China was starting from scratch in urban planning and was in dire need of professional planning engineers, Мухин prepared a host of lengthy, inspiring urban planning reports for Beijing, Shanghai, Shenyang, Xi'an, Baotou, Lanzhou and Hangzhou, including proposals on preliminary planning efforts. He appeared at numerous important meetings, like the first national urban development symposium, calling for large-scale urban planning activities, putting forward applicable scientific theory and methodology, and assisting China to develop the first draft of an urban planning & design procedure. His assistance brought a significant impact on the establishment of urban planning institutions for China, the implementation of important planning projects, the introduction of urban planning as a discipline, and the development of planning talent programs. Мухин helped lay a very important groundwork for Chinese modern urban planning; hence the phrase "Мухин Age" was coined in honor of his stay in China as part of the Chinese history of urban planning.¹⁰

Once a chief engineer of the Leningrad Urban Design Institute (Leningrad was the now St. Petersburg), Барагин had a great deal of experience in planning projects (refer to Figure 3). As one of the few Soviet planners who worked longest in China (three years), he came through the intensest and most important part of the urban planning activities which took place over the first Five-Year Plan period of China. Барагин gave extensive and profound instructions on the planning of the various Chinese cities and areas, covering almost all major cities involved in the first Five-Year Plan. His technical decisions proved scientific and pragmatic in directing a range of urban planning & design solutions to the areas and cities. Take Beijing as an instance. It was due to his assistance that China formulated and released the first draft of a reconstruction and expansion plan for Beijing in the second half of 1953. In providing technical assistance he was so remarkably strict and down-to-earth that China was able to establish an increasingly refined, systematic and many-sided suite of urban planning schemes and institutions.¹¹



Fig. 3. Барагин (2nd from right) directing planning work, 1956. Courtesy of Zhang Youliang

Кравчук, prior to assignment to China, had served as vice head of the Moscow Urban Design Institute. As a very experienced planner he was familiar with Soviet urban planning policies and institutions (refer to Figure 4). Unlike Мухин and Барагин who were primarily in the employment of the planning scheme preparation authorities, Кравчук served primarily on the National Construction Committee, focusing on the authorization of planning solutions. He spent more than two years in China, taking charge of the technical and administrative approval of a great many planning tasks and giving technical planning instructions for many areas and cities. He helped lay an important foundation for the July 1956 release of the Tentative Directive on Urban Planning by the National Construction Committee. The technical assistance of Кравчук came as a powerful impact on the institutionalization and normalization of urban planning activities of the newly proclaimed China. The Soviet planners who stayed in China in the same period also included Асевков, communications academician of the Soviet Academy of Construction Science, and professional architect Туманская. Асевков, who arrived in China in October 1952 and returned in October 1954, was retained by Tsinghua University as a lecturer on architecture and urban planning. Туманская (female), who came to China along with her husband who worked in the Sino-Soviet Friendship Hospital, was employed by the Beijing Municipal Planning Committee, provided some urban planning assistance to Beijing.



Fig. 4. Кравчук (2nd from right) directing planning work, Jun. 1954. Courtesy of the family of Wang Wenke.

2.3 THIRD SERIES: SOVIET PLANNING SPECIALISTS (1955-1957)

The third series of Soviet urban planners, organized primarily as a panel, were retained by the Beijing government as a professional team accountable directly to the CPC Beijing Committee in assisting with the preparation of a systematic normative overall plan (refer to Figure 5). The nine-member panel, composed primarily of specialists of the Moscow Urban Design Institute, was led by construction planning director С. А. Бодрев who formed the core of the panel along with В. К. Змиевский, technical director of the Moscow Urban Design Institute, and А. А. Юниной (female), planning finance documentation manager. The specialists arrived in China from April 1955 to July 1956, worked for around two years and returned to the Soviet Union in the second half of 1957. The third series of Soviet planners carried out a comprehensive and minute investigation of the then situation of Beijing, going deep into multiple fields, e.g. population, industry, transportation, water supply & drainage, heating and gas, among others. In spring 1957 the planners completed the second version of the *Preliminary Overall Urban Planning Scheme for Beijing*, which was to serve as the main basis for local urban planning & administration for the following over two decades to come. While being involved in the planning for the capital city, the panel devoted a lot of time and energy to lecturing the Beijing urban planning officials, central government planners and planners of other cities on urban planning topics. The contribution of the Soviet planners had a great impact on the formation of a team of professional Chinese urban planners. Apart from that, the Soviet panel visited Tianjin and Wuhan on investigation missions, submitting some proposals on local urban planning topics.



Fig. 5. The Soviet panel of specialist discussing the Beijing overall planning scheme, 1957. Courtesy of Zheng Tianxiang.

The Soviet planners staying in China at the time also included Leningrad Civil Engineering Institute Prof. A. A. Афонченко who came to China in September 1955 and went back in September 1957. While in China he was retained by Tsinghua University as a professor of architecture and urban planning.

2.4 FOURTH SERIES: SOVIET PLANNING SPECIALISTS (1956-1959)

The fourth series of Soviet specialists, organized primarily as a panel, mainly comprised a subway team and a planning team.

The subway team, primarily in the employment of the Ministry of Railway and the Beijing government, consisted of five specialists of the Moscow Subway Design Institute and was led by vice head and chief engineer Б. А. Иванович, who served as an academician of the Soviet Academy of Sciences as well. He arrived in October 1956 and returned in April 1957, working for a half year in China.



Fig. 6. Group Photo: China Academy of Urban Planning and Design (CAUPD) sent Махов(7th from right, front rank, Jun. 1957), etc. back to Soviet. NOTE: Architect Манахова (3rd from left, front rank); electrician . Забаровский (4th from left, front rank); economist Штибельман(6th from left, front rank); architect Кувырдин(5th from right; front rank); CAUPD president Lu Quqing (7th from left, front rank). Courtesy of Gao Dianzhu

The subway team was primarily responsible for technically directing Beijing subway design and construction. Their stay in China was relatively short and partially overlapped that of the third series of Soviet planners retained by Beijing. In cooperation with the Beijing Subway Construction Administration and the third series of planners who drafted the overall urban planning scheme for Beijing, they drafted the long-term subway construction plan, conducted engineering geological and hydrogeological surveys in detail, and submitted the Phase 1 subway plan. The subway team made a significant contribution to the subway planning for Beijing.

The planning team was retained by the Ministry of Urban Construction (a central government-level urban planning institute which was integrated into the Ministry of Construction Projects in 1958) and its affiliate, the Central Urban Design Institute. The team had six members, including Я. А. Салишев of the Moscow Urban Design Institute who succeeded Барагин as a consultant to the Ministry of Urban Construction. The other five specialists, working for the Central Urban Design Institute, included Jewish Soviet economist М. О. Штибельман who headed the Soviet planning team. Салишев and Штибельман came to China in May 1956 and returned in May 1959, serving three years in all in office. The other four came to China in the second half of 1955 and went back between 1957 and 1958, serving two years in office (refer to Figure 6). As with the second series of urban planners, the fourth series of specialists were hired primarily by Central government-level authorities to take up similar responsibilities in a wide scope of fields. They needed to conduct extensive technical

guidance for urban planning in many areas and major cities. Because most of them worked in China from 1956 onwards, the target of assistance shifted to industrial facility siting and urban planning in tune with the schedule of the second Five-Year Plan. Local planning trials also commenced. However, although the Soviets contributed significantly to China's People's Commune Initiative as well as local planning for a host of small-and medium-sized cities and counties, part of the activities failed to achieve the expectation due to a special historical and political background, e.g. the Great Leap Forward Movement.

The Soviet planners staying in China at the time also included urban highway planner А. Я.Тураева and rural residential community planner Бутены who were respectively hired by Tongji University and Northeast Agriculture College. Тураева worked in China for two years and Бутены for one year.

After the Sino-Soviet relations degraded in July 1960, the Soviet Union recalled all its specialists from China. Nevertheless, as the fourth series of planners had returned on completion of their tasks by May 1959, the incident did not impact very substantively on urban planning in China (refer to Figure 7).

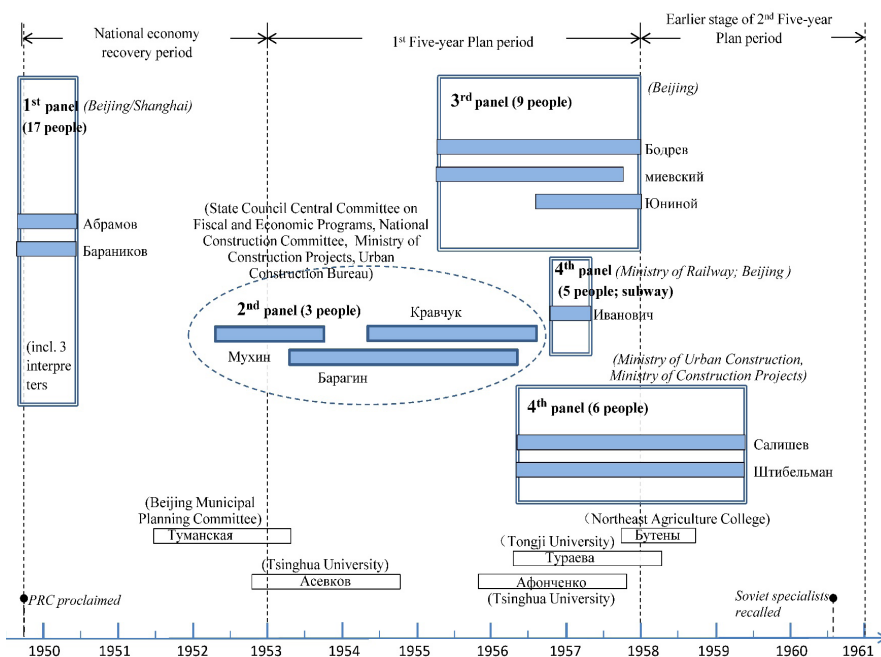


Fig. 7. The length of stay of the four series of Soviet experts in China

3. INFLUENCES OF SOVIET TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE ON CHINESE URBAN PLANNING POLICY

3.1 EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SMOOTH LEARNING OF SOVIET PLANNING THEORY

In addition to direct technical assistance of the Soviet planners, China learned Soviet urban planning theory also by translating Soviet works and journals, sending students to Soviet and exchanging short-term visits. Still, direct assistance predominated since the scarcity of written learning materials made the newly-proclaimed China heavily reliant on the onsite instructions of the Soviets. Besides, the Soviet planners offered many opportunities for their Chinese counterparts to ask questions and exchange views in time (refer to Figure 8). As is known to all, there was a heated academic debate in the Soviet academic community from the 1920s to the 1930s on Socialist urban planning topics.¹² The debate gave birth to a unique branch of international urban planning characteristic of Socialist cities. In like manner, what China learned from Soviet urban planning theory in the 1950s was remarkably characteristic of a planned economy and socialistic urban planning ideas. Nevertheless there was a significant dissimilarity, e.g. Soviet planning theory and methodology dictated by the Soviet planners was in a relatively mature form so that China managed to partially avoid suffering from the detours and throes typical of the creation of Socialist planning theory, therefore achieving certain singular transcendent effects in this field.

3.2 PARTIAL LOCALIZATION OF SOVIET PLANNING THEORY

While the Soviet specialists took the primary responsibility for the technical part of urban planning, China still predominated in the formulation of some planning policies. In the meantime, while directing the planning activities the Soviet planners must take account of a basic problem, i.e. whether Soviet theory was readily applicable to China and how they communicated with their Chinese counterparts on joint solutions. Мухин was an instance. As a specialist very sensitive about the situation of China, he often enumerated such cases as Beijing, Tianjin and Chengdu in his directions and considered planning traditions. This indicated that what the Soviets introduced to China included more than such fundamental relations as “foreign theory → Chinese practice” and “foreign experience → Chinese practice”. There were also such response logics as “Chinese practice → Chinese practice” and “Chinese theory → Chinese practice”, which were realized thanks to the assistance of the Soviet planners.¹³

Such a living mechanism enabled China to introduce some moderation and adaptations while in practicing Soviet planning theory. Take overall urban planning for instance. The Soviet Union set extremely high standards for scientific planning. Considering planning urgency and a lack of professional planners in the newly-proclaimed China, it was unlikely to replicate the Soviet model without change. Therefore, the Chinese planners had to resort to an “infantile” model as a theory based on which to simplify fundamental written materials, reduce the content and number of drawings, and set lower professional standards. In this way the

infantile model was made a more flexible alternative. Since the infantile model had quite a few remarkable features, like simpler procedures and distinct crucial points, it is still of scientific significance as a flexible response to emergencies, resolution of major problems and formulation of more pragmatic urban planning solutions.¹⁴

3.3 EXCELLENT DIRECTION AND COMPLETION OF A HOST OF IMPORTANT URBAN PLANNING PROJECTS

In offering construction assistance the Soviet specialists focused their energy primarily on Beijing and a few important industrial cities which concentrated the majority of the 156 Soviet-assisted important industrial projects. They kept track of the full implementation of the planning procedures of these cities, listening to reports in phases and giving directions on the fundamental course of the whole work. In especial, the Soviets attached very great importance to scheme design. They personally presided at plan comparison and validation procedures. Prior to completion, the submission and approval of all planning solutions must be subject to the review and approbation of the Soviet planners. Accordingly the Chinese government issued directives requesting strict compliance with the advice of the Soviets who, as chief urban planners, played an outstanding part in making technical decisions on a range of important projects and fulfilling a host of excellent planning schemes.

According to part of the statistics, the Soviet planners helped China complete over fifty key urban planning tasks between 1953 and 1957 and, by the end of 1957, China had approved the infantile plans and partial detailed plans of 15 cities.¹⁵ These included some of the most representative illustrious designs of the newly-proclaimed China. For instance, Luoyang located a new industrial estate in Jianxi District west of its city proper and avoided construction in the old part of the city. The Luoyang model was a design included as a classic case of Chinese urban and rural planning (refer to Figure 9). In Lanzhou, planners designed belt-like clusters along the long, narrow Yellow River valley and the plan was a frequent exhibit on display at the events of the International Union of Architects (refer to Figure 10). In Xi'an, planners laid a sound groundwork for old city protection by locating the industrial facilities on the eastern and western wings of the civil administration, business and residential areas of the old city (refer to Figure 11).

3.4 NURTURING OF THE FIRST-GENERATION WELL-EXPERIENCED URBAN PLANNERS

Chinese urban planning in the 1950s was conducted primarily by a few fresh graduates of technical colleges and technical high schools who were mobilized by the government to engage in urban planning. Under the direct instruction of the Soviet specialists, they practiced formulating specific plans. The structure of the urban planning teams featured a remarkable model of "Soviets-led young Chinese team".¹⁶ Owing to Soviet instructions and experience, the first-generation Chinese planners prospered quickly and gradually became capable of handling tasks in a relatively independent way. According to part of the statistics, the number of Chinese urban planners had surpassed 5,000 by the end of 1957.¹⁷

While the Soviets instructed the Chinese urban planners on site, they organized some professional training courses. Furthermore, a few Soviet specialists served full-time or part-time in some institutions of tertiary education. Under this background China began to set up urban planning as a major. In 1952, Chinese universities started to conduct school configuration based on the Soviet model. For example, Tongji University set up urban construction and administration as a major in 1955 based on the Soviet subject of *Городское Строительство И Хозяйство* which related to civil engineering; formal enrollment started in 1956. In the meantime, Tsinghua University, Nanjing Industrial Engineering College, Chongqing Engineering College and many other universities introduced professional urban planning as a specialty. It was in this context that China introduced and developed urban planning as a discipline.

3.5 FORMATION OF THE MODERN CHINESE URBAN PLANNING SYSTEM AND CULTURE

The technical assistance of the Soviet planners in urban planning resulted in China shifting from predominant Western ideas and theory in earlier modern times in a lopsided direction to Soviet ideas and theories in 1950. Take the urban planning system for instance. Thanks to the Soviet specialists, the New China set up its earliest state planning authority – the Urban Construction Bureau under the Ministry of Construction Projects – in the second half of 1952. From then on the Urban Construction Bureau was frequently upgraded in level before being administered along with the National Planning Committee. For a time it was accountable to multiple authorities, like the National Planning Committee, the National Construction Committee and the Ministry of Urban Construction. Meanwhile, China mobilized many human resources and supplies to set up the Central Urban Design Institute (the predecessor of the now China Academy of Urban Planning and Design) which was an urban planning institute concentrating massive technical resources. With the national urban planning system in place, the central government managed to develop a significantly greater capability in organizing, coordinating and administering urban planning activities nationwide. That resulted in some sort of a stereotyped model across China.¹⁸

As Chinese urban planning turned modern against the Soviet benchmark in the 1950s, modern Chinese planning culture came into being, deeply influencing the guiding philosophies, values, working models, management systems and many other facets of contemporary planning. Once in existence, the Soviet model instilled a powerful “cultural gene” into modern Chinese planning model. The instant the modern planning culture was born in China it was destined to subject planning activities to an intense reliance on historical Soviet paths and institutions which brought substantial impacts later on. The influential traits of the Soviet model in the early days of the New China are still appreciable in contemporary Chinese planning activities.

4. CONCLUSION

The Soviet specialists provided China with ten-year-long technical assistance in urban plan-

ning. In the interim, the perspectives of China on the Soviet planning theory and specialists varied with the historical backgrounds and social & economic contexts. When the first Soviet municipal engineer team arrived in China in 1949, a few Chinese planners, represented by Liang Ssu-cheng and Charles Chen, signified some dissents from their Soviet counterparts in several fields.¹⁹ In 1952, the first national urban development symposium definitely required entire replication of Soviet theory by way of the unification of guiding principles. In 1953-1957, a few queries were raised on Soviet theory, especially some planning standards, during the implementation of some specific projects (one example was the 9m²—6m² Controversy)²⁰. The influence of the Soviet model weakened substantially in 1958-1959 when the Great Leap Forward Movement stressed daring ideas and creations. After the Sino-Soviet relations worsened in 1960, China began to explore its own urban planning theory tailored to the background and completed and published *Urban and Rural Planning* in 1961, the first of its kind ever published by the New China.²¹ Urban planning in China represented a complicated history of evolution from academic controversy, then to gradual identification and imitation, then to reflection, and then to academic criticism. The history threw light on the development and changes of the bilateral relations, the different backgrounds of China and the Soviet Union concerning urban planning, and the growth and maturity of the Chinese urban planning force. Considering the length limits this topic will be dealt with in a separate paper.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My special acknowledgements are due to such following entities as the National Archives Administration of China, the MOHURD Office Archives, the Beijing Archives, the Beijing Urban Construction Archives, the Archives of the China Academy of Urban Planning and Design, and the archives of other cities for their robust support and assistance with archive retrieval.

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