1955

Starting in the mid-1950s, Beijing experimented with 'proletarian diplomacy' as a new form of international relations with other socialist countries. By sending Chinese workers abroad, the Chinese authorities were not only pursuing pragmatic goals, but also responding to broader ideological imperatives rooted in the communist belief in internationalism, with all the paradoxes this entailed. This essay tracks how Chinese labour diplomacy panned out in Mongolia, in a short-lived experiment launched in 1955 and prematurely cut short by the Sino-Soviet rift of the early 1960s.

The Short-Lived Eternity of Friendship: Chinese Workers in Socialist Mongolia (1955–1964)

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Opening ceremony of the China–Mongolia–Russia railway in January 1956. The locomotive carries the portraits of Nikolai Bulganin, Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal, and Mao Zedong. Source: Ch. Dashdavaa and Ch. Bold. 2015. *Jou En'lai ba Mongol oron* [*Zhou Enlai and Mongolia*]. Ulaanbaatar: Selenge Press, 52.

Long Live the Eternal Friendship between the Mongolian and Chinese People!

蒙中人民的永久友谊万岁!

In early May 1955, Chinese workers departed on a three-year extendable contract to 'assist' (支援) in the socialist construction of their fraternal neighbour, the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR, 1924–92). A few months later, on 24 September 1956, Mao Zedong explained to a visiting Mongolian delegation: 'Our ancestors exploited you for three hundred years, oppressed you, they ran up quite a debt; therefore, today we want

to repay these debts.'[1] In the same speech, however, Mao also referred to China's aid to Mongolia as a model for the attitude of his own government towards China's national minorities, sowing doubt about how he conceptualised Mongolia's status and relationship with China.[2] Despite these misgivings, which permanently haunted Sino-Mongolian relations, labour assistance was celebrated as an expression of 'internationalist spirit' (国际主义精神)[3] and 'eternal friendship' (永久友谊).[4]

This eternity was short-lived, however, as Mongolia stood on the Soviet side of the Sino-Soviet rift that engulfed the international communist movement in 1962.[5] Although the Sino-Soviet split is an undeniable cause of the breakdown of Sino-Mongolian relations at the state level, in this essay, we look beneath the surface of international diplomacy to the lived experiences and realities of workers. Chinese workers were expected to do more than labour; they were to become models of socialist friendship that transcended national identities and overcame attitudes of 'big-power chauvinism' (大国主义). Chinese workers were expected to feel at home in Mongolia while remaining *Chinese* workers—a configuration that would later prove untenable. Instead, friendship between Chinese and Mongolian workers ran into mundane obstacles, such as language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and less than desirable living and working conditions. Diplomatic disputes inflamed and instrumentalised these underlying tensions but were not the origins of them.

In this essay, we first establish the framework of big-power chauvinism, which the friendship intended to overcome. Next, we examine the lived realities of Chinese workers that hindered the realisation of international proletarian solidarity, and eventually culminated in a series of strikes, between 1961 and 1963. By 1964, when the agreement was suspended and most Chinese workers were repatriated,[6] the project of socialist friendship was already a failed experiment.

Between Internationalism and Chauvinism

Communist internationalism requires the abolition of borders. As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued in *The Communist Manifesto*, under capitalism, the proletariat is 'stripped of every trace of national character'; therefore, under communist leadership, in their own countries, the working class would struggle for 'the common interests of the entire proletariat, independent of all nationality'.[7] The problem with this rosy view has been that workers tend to identify as national subjects and not

international proletarians. Because of the geographic confinement of the October Revolution, the principle of internationalism had to work with a complicated diplomatic patchwork of national identities. In his final years, Lenin realised that proletarian internationalism was also being undermined by Stalin's policies, which risked reinforcing deeply ingrained attitudes of Russian big-power chauvinism and the alienation of different nationalities historically oppressed by Tsarist Russia and were antithetical to the promise of anti-imperialism. As a result, Lenin declared 'war to the death on dominant-nation chauvinism'[8] and espoused a policy of national autonomy according to which, as historian Moshe Lewin puts it, 'in order to make amends for the wrongs committed against the small nations, the big nation must accept an inequality unfavourable to itself'.[9] According to dialectical logic, the path to internationalism could only be achieved by resisting big-power chauvinism and respecting the autonomy and independence of smaller nations.

The dialectical tension between proletarian emancipation and national liberation was rendered in the paradoxical status of borders. As the border between China and Mongolia was being demarcated in 1963, the General Secretary of the MPR, Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal, and Chinese Ambassador to Mongolia, Zhang Canming, had the following exchange:

> Tsedenbal: Now they are putting up these border markers. In the future, during the communist period, borders will not be needed anywhere. They will remain as historic reminiscences for young people to study.
>
> Zhang: This is the law of dialectics. For example, now we have a proletarian dictatorship. Its aim is to annihilate classes. Now we are erecting border markers. Their aim is to annihilate borders in the future.
>
> Tsedenbal: Yes. It has to be like this. Borders are a product of class society. During that period, nation-states separated from each other. Now such borders are also needed. In the future, in the communist period, they will not be needed. In the future there will be no nation-states that close themselves up in a box.[10]

Within a few years, both sides would be militarising their borders in preparation for possible conflict.

In the Sino-Mongolian case, the contradiction between international solidarity and big-power chauvinism was particularly acute for historical reasons. Since Mongolia declared its independence from the Qing Empire in 1911, and obtained Lenin's blessing for national independence in 1921,[11] Mongolian leaders have been wary of China's irredentist ambitions—directly asserted by the Republican government and ambiguously insinuated by the Communist one.[12] As the Sino-Soviet relationship deteriorated, Mao's uncharacteristically aggressive remark to a delegation of Japanese communists in 1964 that the Soviet Union had annexed territories, including Mongolia, which historically belonged to China did the opposite of assuaging their fear.[13] According to historian Xiaoyuan Liu, Chinese Communist leaders had difficulty accepting Mongolia's socialist credentials and letting go of the belief that it would return to China by its own volition. As a result, the Sino-Mongolian friendship was internally fractured by a 'contradiction between their nationalist practices and internationalist pronouncements'.[14] As Cold War historian Sergey Radchenko puts it: 'Chinese claims on Mongolia did nothing to strengthen proletarian solidarity between the two parties.'[15]

Viewed from the perspective of proletarian internationalism, the sending of Chinese workers to Mongolia was intended as a gesture of good faith and friendship (although historian Gu Jikun points out that the origins of the arrangement were actually part of a failed negotiation to repatriate Chinese who were stranded in Mongolia after World War II).[16] When seen from the perspective of big-power chauvinism, however, it could appear as a Trojan horse for China's revanchist ambitions, as indicated in Soviet first deputy premier Asastas Mikoyan's confidential warning to Tsedenbal in March 1956: 'In order for you not to end up with a mainly Chinese working class, you should develop your own working class.'[17] It is no wonder that Mongolia initially requested China send ethnically Mongolian workers—a request the Chinese side rejected.

There is reason though to trust that the Chinese side ideologically believed in the project of proletarian friendship. In the 1956 speech in which Mao raised the issue of historical debt, he addressed the need to overcome chauvinist attitudes among Chinese workers:

> Some Chinese workers have gone to Mongolia. You should carry out propaganda work with them so that they do not commit the error of Great Han nationalist thinking, so that they do not

> ride roughshod over you [*chengwang chengba*]. If the Chinese workers or laborers there commit mistakes, you should make this known to us.[18]

For the Chinese side, big-power chauvinism was an ideological problem that needed to be remedied through political education. In one of its April 1957 issues, the Chinese-language newspaper based in Mongolia, *Workers' Way* (工人之路), directly raised the question: 'What is big-power chauvinism and why must we oppose it?' (什么是大国主义, 为什么必须反对它?).[19] The article defined chauvinism as a form of international relations in which larger countries 'look down' (卑视) on countries with a smaller population and surface area, and less-developed levels of cultural experience and economic development, resulting in a 'blind sense of superiority' (盲目优越感), which 'lacks the spirit of equality' (缺乏平等的精神) and 'does not respect the independence of other countries'.[20] Chinese workers were expected to receive 'equal pay for equal work' (同工同酬),[21] cultivate 'mutual solidarity, mutual respect, and mutual love' (互助团结, 互敬互爱), and 'criticise big-power chauvinism in thinking and emotions' (批评某些员工大国主义的思想情绪),[22] while adhering to Mongolian law, factory norms, work discipline, and local customs. Conceptualised in this way, proletarian diplomacy was carried out at the level of workers' lives, thoughts, emotions, habits, and interactions.

Construction and Deterioration

For nine years (1955–64), China sent an estimated 26,000 Chinese workers and their families to Mongolia to engage in construction, industrial production, mining, agriculture, and numerous other professions. At that time, Mongolia relied on the Chinese workers to supplement its acute labour shortage and help it transition from a pastoral mode of production to build the industrial base of production necessary for 'socialist construction'.[23] For Mongolia, the main reason for the labour exchange was its desperate need for workers.

Chinese workers' contribution to the construction of Mongolia is still evident today. In the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, Chinese workers built the Peace Bridge, the Ulaanbaatar Hotel, the State Department Store, numerous downtown apartment complexes, several factories, and an electric generator. That the urban core of Ulaanbaatar was built by the Chinese is an uncomfortable and seldom discussed reality in Mongolia's current

atmosphere of Sinophobia.[24] In the countryside, Chinese workers were engaged in the construction of cultural facilities, schools, and hospitals, in addition to working on farms and at factories of various kinds.[25]

When the diplomatic relationship started to fray, unsurprisingly, the status of Chinese workers became the subject of diplomatic disagreement. At the end of December 1962, Zhou Enlai and Tsedenbal engaged in a heated—to the extent of nearly coming to blows—exchange over China's relationship with the Soviet Union, the Sino-Indian border dispute, and the Albanian question. Aware of Mongolia's dependence on Chinese labour, Zhou attempted to leverage the issue of Chinese workers to extract diplomatic concessions. Tsedenbal refused this pressure by stating: 'We will not retreat in ideological terms and will not change the correct policy line of our party because of 8,000 workers.'[26] As a result of the breakdown in negotiations, Chinese workers were sent home ahead of the termination of their contracts. Their absence did in fact set back Mongolia's development, especially in the construction industry, resulting in campaigns to recruit and train Mongolians to engage in construction work as a civic duty, and utilisation of the labour of Soviet soldiers.[27]

The Mongolian side blamed the collapse of the friendship on the revival of Chinese big-power chauvinism and its willingness to 'destroy the internationalist Communist movement'[28] with the Sino-Soviet split looming in the foreground. But as Sergey Radchenko points out, on many issues, the Mongolian side took a *harder line* than the Soviets,[29] which suggests the possibility of deeper historical and political tensions—namely, the Mongolian fear of Chinese encroachment. For instance, on the fortieth anniversary of the MPR, Mongolia's state newspaper, *Ünen Sonin*, accused 'Chinese leaders [of] denying [Mongolia's] non-capitalist path of development, which in essence disregards the Mongolian people's historical experience of struggle'.[30] This dismissive attitude was due to the fact that 'Chinese leaders fell into the trap of big-power chauvinism' (中国领导人陷入大国主义).[31]

The ambiguous status of Chinese workers in Mongolia is perhaps best illustrated by the disagreement over how to handle the corpses of 89 Chinese workers who died on Mongolian soil due to labour-related accidents or natural causes. The 'Mongolian representative did not accept the Chinese suggestion to ship the remains of dead Chinese workers to Beijing but instead made accommodations to build a public graveyard for Chinese workers on Mongolian soil'.[32] Questions about soil, burial, and national identity undermine the putative international identity of

the proletariat.[33] As Benedict Anderson famously argued, a 'Tomb of the Unknown Marxist' is absurd to imagine in contrast with the passionate linkages between nationalism, death, memory, and identity.[34] Thus, the deaths of Chinese workers in Mongolia were ambiguously framed as a *national sacrifice* on behalf of *proletarian internationalism*. At the Seventh Conference of Chinese Cadres held in 1962, Liu Runshen, an official within the Chinese Embassy in Mongolia, commemorated the 'many comrades [who] shed their blood, lost their health, and even gave their lives for the sake of the socialist construction on behalf of the Mongolian people' and consecrated them as 'labour warriors' (*khödölmöriin baildagch*).[35] In 1963, a Chinese newspaper suggested that Mongolia should construct a memorial for the dead workers, comparing their sacrifice to that of martyrs in the Korean War.[36] This did not sit well with the Mongolian comrades, who felt it overshadowed and minimised their own participation.[37] Only in recent years have representatives from the Chinese Embassy in Mongolia begun paying annual official visits to the graves of Chinese workers buried in Ulaanbaatar, as a patriotic ritual of tending to one's own dead.

Rough Conditions

Although Chinese workers were expected to treat Mongolia as their home, they had difficulty adapting to the strenuous living and working conditions. On arrival in May 1955, one month after the signing of the intergovernmental agreement, the first group of Chinese workers were confronted with an acute shortage of material facilities. Zhou Changchun, son of a carpenter from Changchun who arrived in Mongolia with his parents, recalled their first night.[38] Dispatched directly from Ulaanbaatar to Nalaikh, around 40 kilometres east of the capital, they discovered neither houses nor yurts prepared for them. Instead, they slept under the moon, in the duvets brought from home, surrounded by their luggage as a makeshift fence, and listened to the gunshots fired by Mongolian guards to ward off wolves.

The second day, they were welcomed by a Mongolian cadre, who outlined the blueprint of a new city they were invited to build on the very ground on which they were standing. Following the convention in their hometown, Changchun, the Chinese workers named the place 'New City Construction Site' (新街工地)—a name that was in use until 1964. Zhou's father, a skilled carpenter, joined his colleagues in building wooden

houses for temporary use, with the hope of building brick houses before winter. However, they were soon disappointed to learn about the shortage of building materials such as cement and steel in Mongolia, making their plan virtually impossible. Faced with the coming winter, they decided to dig partially subterranean dwellings on a slope. Zhou recalled:

> A cave for a family measured three metres in width and four metres in length. The bachelors' dormitories were much more spacious. There was a *kang* [bed-stove] and a cooktop inside. The front of the cave was covered with a wooden door and window frames. The top was secured by logs and felt to be waterproof. They looked like buns from a distance.

The workers and their families lived in the caves for three years before moving into brick homes, with some of them developing rheumatism due to underground water seeping into the caves in spring. Soon, a Mongolian commercial cooperative opened on the construction site, providing a steady supply of flour, oil, salt, beef, mutton, and dairy products. Combined with regular official deliveries of staple and non-staple foods from China, the sustenance of Chinese workers and families was assured.

With the improvement in their material living conditions, social life on the construction site also expanded: an elementary school for the workers' children was started, along with a night school for the workers, many of whom were illiterate. In the Chinese literacy class, the workers were taught to read; if they did not learn, their salaries would be docked for poor performance. Zhou jovially remembered:

> My mother enthusiastically volunteered to take the class and earned an elementary school diploma after a few years. But my father, a model worker during the day, often dozed off during class at night and lost a considerable amount of salary as a result.

In addition, workers organised a Peking opera club and a dance group in their spare time. Despite the varied geographic origins of the Chinese workers, they cultivated a strong sense of solidarity and camaraderie through collective work and life in Mongolia.

The material conditions of Chinese workers living in apartments were also spartan and rough. According to an official Mongolian report dated 1 February 1962, Chinese Ambassador to Mongolia Xie Fusheng conducted

an inspection of apartments in Zuun Ail district of Ulaanbaatar, where more than 800 Chinese workers and their families lived. The report found that the 'building's wall was cracked' to such an extent that 'when the ground thaws in the spring, it might collapse'.[39] Additionally, 'the steam heating system had deteriorated. In some buildings, there wasn't any heat at all and frost started to appear inside', which was exacerbated by the fact that 'water leaked from the ceilings' in several apartments. The report concluded that 'even Mongolians would not want to endure living in such a building, let alone Chinese' (*ene bairand khyatad baitugai mongol khün ch tesej suumaargüi baina*), who were not used to living in an environment where the temperatures in winter could easily drop to minus forty degrees. To make matters worse, the Mongolian Deputy Minister of Construction, who was supposed to accompany the inspection team, was several hours late—a 'disrespectful situation' noted by the Chinese side. The lateness was not out of character for Mongolian diplomats, who, according to Balázs Szalontai, frequently engaged in 'subtle insubordination' towards their more powerful neighbours; in 1960, for instance, Soviet diplomats lodged a 'formal complaint against their ill-treatment at the hands of various Mongolian cadres', while North Vietnamese diplomats complained about 'recurrent shortages of electricity and water'.[40]

Three Chinese workers on the Sukhbaatar Square, circa 1960. Courtesy of Wang Guangsheng.

The rough living conditions and diplomatic tensions, however, did not eliminate the possibilities for interpersonal amity. Li Zhi'an, who lived in Zuun Ail with his family from Changchun during his childhood, fondly remembered their friendly Mongolian neighbours.[41] As there was no tapwater in Zuun Ail when they first arrived in 1955, they relied on Soviet *gaz* cars to transport water specifically for Chinese workers. A few Mongolian neighbours would ask the Li's family to fetch water on their behalf, to which they gladly agreed. After transferring the water to other containers at home, their Mongolian neighbours would always return the basin full of food and snacks to thank the Chinese family.

Remittances

According to the labour agreement, Chinese workers were permitted to remit only 30 percent of their monthly salary and take with them no more than one month's salary when they permanently returned home. In addition to salary remittances, Chinese workers also disputed customs regulations over what they could take with them back to China. Given the conditions of scarcity in Mongolia, the Mongolian side expected Chinese workers to spend the majority of their salary in the country and to either consume or leave behind what they purchased.[42] Since their salaries in Mongolia were much higher than they would have been at home, even though the allowed remittance was a fraction of what they made, it was sufficient for supporting their families in China. Although most workers complied without complaint, disputes did occur, especially as the economic situation worsened in China.

In the context of the early 1960s and China's Great Leap Forward, in which millions perished, the question of remittances and customs took on necropolitical ramifications. According to historian Sang Ye, during the Great Leap Forward, 'Chinese people were sending meat back to China, which worried Mongolian officials about food security'.[43] At the border,

> people would cram their suitcases full with things they couldn't get in China at the time. This was a nightmare for the customs officials who eventually made them get down from their rail car, and open up their luggage right there in front of them. The luggage bulged so much, it was difficult to close.[44]

From archival materials in the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is clear that Chinese workers were aware of the horror unfolding at home. One file contains dozens of requests to return to China due to a 'death in the family' or 'severe illness'; Mongolian officials observed, to their consternation, 'a dramatic increase' (*ers nemegdsen*) in the number of such requests. One report notes that, while it was acceptable for Chinese workers to leave before their contracts expired due to emergency situations, the frequency of this kind of occurrence peaked between late 1961 and early 1962.[45] Those workers who used their forty-five-day holiday once every three years to visit home were shocked by the abysmal state of famine, despite the information they had already been given by their family members via correspondence. 'If I had known people were suffering so much, I would have brought more food from Mongolia,' an interviewee who worked as an electrician in Mongolia recalled.[46] While famine caused starvation and deaths at home, in Mongolia, the food supply was reliable and offered items that would have been considered luxuries in China. He felt too ashamed to describe to his family the availability of cosmopolitan products he saw in Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian sausages, Soviet flour, North Korean rice, Vietnamese peanuts, and so forth. Tormented by the stark contrast in food supplies at home and in his host country, he was glad his hard-earned remittance—albeit a fraction of his income—could help his family survive the difficult period.

Tension Afoot

Despite initially rough conditions of material scarcity, most Chinese workers and their families interviewed for this chapter fondly recalled their lives in Mongolia. Worker diplomacy was beginning to bear fruit. However, the workers on both sides were not immune to the enveloping political context. Mongolian leaders accused the Chinese of politicising ordinary tensions into diplomatic disputes, insinuating that the Chinese Communist Party was behind Chinese worker unrest in Mongolia. A Mongolian report from the end of December 1963 concludes:

> But in the last few years, the Chinese side has magnified even small issues using various manners and artificially turned them into political conclusions. They have attempted to prove that the Mongolian government was intentionally organising these debatable problems against Chinese workers. Moreover, it is extremely

> regrettable that some Chinese officials and organisations have supported Chinese workers who on their own or in a group are disrespectful, engage in illegal activities, infringe, and slander the internal affairs of border inspection, police, customs, and the factories and economy of the People's Republic of Mongolia.[47]

From the end of 1961 to the first quarter of 1963, there were twenty-six strikes involving Chinese workers, ranging from seven to 180 participants, the shortest strike lasting a few hours and the longest fourteen days. The 1964 summary report by Mongolian officials expressed regret over the decision to compensate Chinese workers for the days they missed during their first strike, mistakenly believing it was a one-time event.

Although Chinese officials attempted to leverage the strikes during diplomatic negotiations, the reasons for the mobilisations varied and most were work-related disputes about issues such as insufficient wages, workplace accidents due to the inadequate operational safety of equipment, lack of transportation to the worksite, and complaints over basic necessities, such as the absence of cotton or 'wood to heat steamed buns', and shoes that did not fit.[48] Chinese workers were also upset over what they perceived as mistreatment and bullying by Mongolian bosses and other workers; on one occasion, forty-three Chinese workers went on strike and demanded to return home after a fellow worker was beaten by a Mongolian. At the Tolgoit Brick Factory, nine workers went on strike for a day because of fears that the Mongolian guard might 'shoot them'.[49]

Chinese workers also went on strike to protect their own interests and protest restrictions on remittances and customs regulations, the importance of which we discussed in the previous section. One strike, which included the occupation of a government office, from 16 to 18 April 1962, successfully petitioned the Mongolian authorities to allow the workers to send 'cotton, milk, and meat through customs without restrictions'.[50] From these cases, it is possible to see that not all mobilisations were politically motivated, despite the Mongolian side's accusation that Chinese workers 'seized the slightest pretext' (*neg ül yalikh shaltgaanyug dalimduuldag*) to organise strikes.[51]

On the other end of the spectrum, several strikes were directly related to thorny issues of political and national identity. In Khövsgöl Province, Chinese workers went on strike demanding that Mao's picture be placed at the same height as that of Mongolia's leader, Tsedenbal. In Arhkhangai Province, on 6 December 1961, wind blew an official Chinese banner to

the ground, causing a brigade of twenty-four Chinese workers to go on strike for two days. The workers complained to the provincial governor that: 'This was a deliberate action by the Mongolian people to undermine the Chinese government. As a result, Chinese workers have lost interest in working anymore.'[52] The Mongolian side considered these actions to be of a 'non-friendly nature' (*nairamdalt bish*).[53]

In the acrimonious dialogue between Zhou Enlai and Tsedenbal as the Sino-Mongolian friendship collapsed, neither side could agree on the nature of the strikes carried out by Chinese workers. Zhou explained that Chinese political culture permitted workers to strike even under socialism. Evidence for this can be found in Mao's 1956 proposal that: 'The workers should be allowed to go on strike and the masses to hold demonstrations.'[54] Although the right to strike would not be included in the Chinese Constitution until 1975—only to be removed in the 1982 version—under certain conditions, the Chinese Communist Party promoted a 'tolerant attitude towards strikes' on the basis of a 1957 policy document, 'Instructions for Dealing with Strikes of Workers and Students', issued by the Central Committee.[55] Anxious about the possible contagion of unrest, Tsedenbal's response was to insist that 'Mongolia has its own laws. We cannot agree that some workers can break and ignore the established order. Such a situation could, in the end, negatively influence the Mongolian workers.'[56]

Whereas Tsedenbal suspected political influence, Zhou attributed the strikes to hurt patriotic feelings over criticisms of China in the Mongolian press:

> As they were in touch with the Mongolian population, they are familiar with the Mongolian press, and this caused certain difficulties. 8,000 Chinese workers were in the midst of the Mongolian population. Zhou Enlai stressed that a man was not an inanimate commodity [Russian: *mertvy tovar*], but a living, politically thinking individual. We brought our people up in such a way that if they did not like something, then they could give up work. Therefore, we allow such order [of things]. Now, let's look at the situation of the Chinese workers in Mongolia. What you publish in Mongolia disposed the Chinese workers critically towards the [People's Republic of China]. This caused difficulties. What are we to do with these workers? Leave them in the MPR? But I already said these are people and not commodities.[57]

Neither side acknowledged that Chinese workers may have had their own reasons to strike.

Lost Alternatives

In today's global capitalist economy, in which transnational migrant labour is precarious, degraded, and hidden from view, the exchange of workers as a gesture of socialist friendship appears like a hieroglyph from another planet. In our current age of simmering ethnonationalist passions, the spirit of internationalism is even more remote, like an incandescent blur from outer space. For these reasons, it is imperative that we study these experimental formations of labour for clues to what might have been, what went wrong, and what could be.

Although the official archives and diplomatic history record a bleak story of failure, this is an incomplete picture. Several Chinese workers and their descendants described in interviews with one of the authors their fond relationships with their Mongolian neighbours, coworkers, and labour apprentices, despite the rough working and living conditions, and the political earthquakes shaking the communist world. If it were not for the ideological split, they would have remained in Mongolia not only as workers but also as cultural ambassadors. The underlying desire to live, work, and learn from one another is the key to any future proletarian internationalism.

That being said, socialist friendship was ambiguous and unstable because its aspiration for internationalism was articulated and felt as a patriotic duty. The utopian goal of moving beyond the framework of national identity was never achieved or earnestly pursued. One of the casualties was that the friendship could not withstand the geopolitical rifts between both countries. Even at the height of state socialism in China and Mongolia, workers were *national subjects* before they were *international proletarians*. A revolutionary politics of the future will require the inversion of these terms.