

TOWARDS THE HISTORIZATION OF THE SINO-BULGARIAN RELATIONS

DIMITAR TZANEV

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR PHD IN HISTORY
AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA IN CHINA (1999 - 2003)

BULGARIA
DTZANEV@HOTMAIL.COM

ABSTRACT: THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA SINCE IT'S ESTABLISHMENT IN 1949 AND THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA (WHICH IN 1949 WAS A YOUNG STATE AND FOR THE MOST PART OF THE PERIOD SINCE THEN WAS A PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC) HAVE NOT YET BECOME HISTORY. THE PERIOD BETWEEN 1949 AND 1965 CAN BE DEFINED AS THE FIRST PHASE OF THE BILATERAL RELATIONS – IN GENERAL TERMS IT COVERS THE TIMES OF STATED POSITIVE WILL ON BOTH SIDES TO SEARCH FOR AND FIND DIVERS EFORMS OF COOPERATION. 1989 IS SIGNIFICANT IN THE HISTORY OF BOTH COUNTRIES AND IN TERMS OF THE NATURE OF THE BILATERAL RELATIONS. TODAY BOTH CHINA AND BULGARIA, WHILE SEARCHING FOR THEIR PLACE IN THE COMPLEX MODERN WORLD, WILL NEED MORE THAN EVER TO INTERPRET AND UNDERSTAND THE SIGNS AND CAPITAL OF THE RECENT PAST, AND BUILD ON THE ESTABLISHED AND PROMISING BILATERAL RELATIONS WHICH HAS BEEN MAINTAINED FOR DECADES DESPITE THE DIFFICULTIES CAUSED BY THE RELATIONS WITH THIRD COUNTRIES.

KEY WORDS: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, BILATERAL RELATIONS, OF SINO-BULGARIAN RELATIONS, CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN CHINA, REVISIONISM AND DOGMATISM

THE relations between the People's Republic of China since it's establishment in 1949 and the Republic of Bulgaria (which in 1949 was a young state and for the most part of the period since then was a People's Republic) have not yet become history.

THE conscientious historians would refrain from defining a given period as "historical" time and from applying the usual scientific criteria from the past to it, if the distance between that period and the present is shorter than at least one century – a period of at least 50 years is cited in the textbooks, but in fact for an event or a series of events to become "history", longer reflection and evaluation is needed. The rationale behind it is that the short distance in time would not create the necessary preconditions for making an objective and scientifically sound analysis of events and processes, for well-founded conclusions and hence, for developing a reconstruction of events which is close to reality. The considerations in that respect could be further expanded in terms of the nagging presence of subjective factors, the inevitable party affiliation of the authors as well as the understandably strong links between the past and the present. The prominent Bulgarian historian Nikolai Genchev used to say: "The recent decades havent not yet been detached from us to the extent that would make it possible to apply established historical methods and thus achieve a widely recognized historical narrative".

ADDITIONAL difficulties, typical for the historical analysis of the bilateral relations between any two countries, are in place with regard to the development of a full-fledged picture of the relations between China and Bulgaria: inaccessibility of the archives of the

diplomatic and other state institutions for a certain period of time; existence of classified archives whose declassification has been postponed for too long; discrepancies in the interpretation of facts, events and individuals which are present in the available documents and literary sources, etc.

ALL of the above points to the fact that there are serious obstacles blocking the efforts of any individual researcher to interpret the recent relations between Bulgaria and China. It is beyond doubt, however, that the historization of the period is an interesting creative task which, apart from having a social purpose in terms of assessing the opportunities realized and missed in order to evaluate their projection and outcome in the future, also brings unquestionable pleasure to the author, who is tempted by such excursions back to the past. The following text containing a number of observations and conclusions will be supported by a limited number of examples – accessible to all researchers. Those examples were the building blocks of the specific historical background during the time when they happened and are a convincing illustration, especially given the fact that their impact can be traced in a larger social context.

WE are not talking here about a detailed picture of bilateral relations which is well known, full textured and constantly updated with the perspectives of participants, observers and chroniclers on both sides. It is rather the bilateral relations as part of “history”. It is useful and important to put the relations in the contexts that make them a part of history: firstly, this entails incorporating them in the chronology of events in China and Bulgaria ranked according to the logic of dominant statehood ideas in the two countries; secondly, it means “to plant” them into the chain of regional priorities for each country and outline the way in which China and Bulgaria existed uniquely in their respective parts of the world, and shared and solved the problems in their regions; thirdly, the analytical approach entails looking into the intellectual motivation behind each country’s understanding of its place in the world processes and outline the areas of convergence, overlap or divergence in current and past periods.

IN the following pages I will attempt, bearing in mind the arbitrary nature of results, to present some ideas on the first important element in the history of Sino-Bulgarian relations – the different phases since 1949 accompanied by examples appropriate for each phase. The period between 1949 and 1965 can be defined as the first phase of the bilateral relations – in general terms it covers the times of stated positive will on both sides to search for and find diverse forms of cooperation; the second phase is the period between 1965-1984 – relations were strained; third phase – seeking opportunities for improvement between 1985 and 1989; and fourth phase – the time of reforms in the two countries – away from ideology and towards pragmatism as a sign of the new internal developments in the two countries and the new international situation.

THE beginning of the bilateral relations was put after the significant fact of the official Bulgarian recognition of the PRC and the establishment of diplomatic relations which took place immediately after the analogous act on the part of the USSR. This ground breaking event led to long-term positive consequences. Even to day, on certain occasions, it is being revisited in the form of half-joking, polite “claims” on the part of official Bulgarian representatives who would say something along the lines of: “Now that the USSR is gone, Bulgaria should acquire the status of being the first country to recognize the PRC world wide.” It is a known fact that Russia, and some of the countries bordering it, still carry the USSR legacy and would not give up their leading place in recognizing the PRC. On the other hand,

it is known that some Romanian officials claim that their country was the second – after the USSR – to recognize the PRC. Given the competition, I will summarize that this type of rivalry only serves to show China's place in the Balkan region and the aspirations of the Balkan countries to be considered old friends of China.

THE first phase puts the beginning of a long-lasting trend which would determine the nature of Sino-Bulgarian relations for decades onward – the factor of the Soviet Union and the attitude towards it. While the PRC went through different forms and extent of being close to and drifting away from Moscow, until 1989 Bulgaria was one of the closest allies of the USSR and this reflected on its image and had a serious impact on its relations with countries like China, Yugoslavia, Albania, etc. which also covered the whole spectrum of bilateral relations with the USSR – from close allies to confrontation.

AFTER the establishment of diplomatic missions in Sofia and Beijing respectively, wide-scope political, cultural, sports and information contacts were instituted and subsequently resulted in the creation of durable presence and the emergence of stereotypes in the public opinion in both countries. Beijing joined Moscow in the official propaganda as an active participant in the world march for peace and people's democracy as the then popular song Moscow-Beijing shows. Bulgaria was represented in the Chinese textbooks by two powerful images – the aromatic Bulgarian rose and the anti-fascist Georgi Dimitrov. Bulgarian medical specialists took part alongside Chinese volunteers in the Korean War in line with the official demonstrations of solidarity and internationalism. This was the time when an impressive group of Chinese students added color to the increasing number of foreign students in the universities with their typical ethno-psychological features – hard-work, modesty, friendliness, politeness and lack of pretence. Thus, the first phase of bilateral relations was unquestionably indicative of a durable tradition – tradition of interest in the mass media and the everyday life, positive attitude and sympathy, which was more than formal, but it also became part of the national stereotypes as a capital which was always in place throughout the years, regardless of the changes or even despite them.

THE sound social foundation of the bilateral relations established in the first phase, served as a prerequisite for one important feature of the second phase – the phase of strained relations due to the different attitudes towards Moscow of the government elites in China and Bulgaria: despite the official positions of the elites, the people in the two countries kept and passed as a spiritual and political legacy the mutual interest, fondness and even sympathy to the victims of the Cultural Revolution in China, on the one hand, and the so-called "Chinese way proponents" among the Bulgarian communists, on the other. Ever since those times, which are still very much alive in the memories of those who lived then, Bulgarians and Chinese have been trading stories and personal experiences as to how at the level of everyday life, intellectual interest and emotional ties, they managed to find the difficult way to one another.

BUT the picture of "top" intergovernmental relations is different and here, as an example, I would like to remind you of a little known or forgotten significant fact, which would be interpreted ambiguously by today's historians and analysts, but which illustrates well the main feature of this phase in the bilateral Sino-Bulgarian relations – their dependence on the relations with the USSR: in 1958 Valko Chervenkov, then deputy prime minister, made an official visit to the PRC. As his extensive memoirs – published in 2000 – tell us, Chervenkov was met at the airport by Chairman Mao Zedung in person, who then spent two hours of his time to have a personal conversation with Chervenkov. This is a historical fact

which also has a symbolic meaning – Valko Chervenkov belonged to the Stalinist guard in the Bulgarian Communist Party; Mao Zedong had great respect for the work of Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin and did not hide his attitude towards Stalin's critic and successor Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev. It would be interesting to see how this event was reflected in the diplomatic archives of the two countries, and in the reports of the foreign diplomats in Beijing, as well as what the assessment and reaction of Todor Zhivkov was – whether this episode added another “black point” in Chervenkov's file and served as one more reason for his elimination.

A privilege of old age and good memory for some of the Sofia residents is the recollection of the building of the Chinese Embassy all wrapped in protest posters in the 1960s and 1970s, when protest rallies were organized by students and workers against the negative aspects of the Cultural Revolution and the signs of the so-called revisionism and dogmatism, as well as in opposition to the Sino-Vietnamese conflict.

I would remind you of another episode which was also influenced by the relations between Beijing and Moscow: in 1980 the Chinese leader Hua Guofeng came for the funeral of Tito and visited Skopje, where he made critical remarks regarding the Bulgarian policy and claims to Yugoslav Macedonia. The government in Bulgaria was quite sensitive about the Macedonian issue – at that time it was organizing a large celebration of the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state, at the core of which were historicism and patriotism, and the Bulgarian Communist Party would get very upset every time the Macedonian issue was raised and outside criticisms were made. It is difficult to assess objectively the statements of Hua Guofeng but the fact in itself shows once again that the Sino-Bulgarian relations developed in a wider geographic, but narrow political, context with the attitude towards Moscow being the determining factor. In the 1990s Beijing and Sofia had joint positions on the recognition of Taiwan by the young Macedonian state and the subsequent return to the One China Policy.

At the end of his life the long-time government and party leader of Bulgaria Todor Zhivkov gave deserved, in his opinion, credit to the successful reforms in China, inspired by Deng Xiaoping and sent a copy of his memoirs to Fidel Castro and Jiang Zemin. In a personal letter to the Chinese leader Jiang Zhivkov suggested that his memoirs be published in China. The suggestion was accepted and a Chinese publication came in to being. It is an interesting fact that T. Zhivkov remembered how Deng Xiaoping told him once that the Chinese knew that the Bulgarians were making reforms secretly from the Russians. The meetings and talks between the two took place during Zhivkov's official visit to China in 1986. The Bulgarian leader expressed his admiration for the successful economic reforms in China. Zhivkov also shared in a comparative aspect his strong belief that the Chinese reform policies had turned out to be more successful than the ones in the European socialist states.

1989 is significant in the history of both countries and in terms of the nature of the bilateral relations. The reforms in China intensified; Bulgaria started the so-called “transition” to pluralism in the political and economic areas and to market economy. Bilateral relations were de-ideologized and acquired a more pragmatic character. Gradually, the concept of the place of the two countries in the system of their foreign policy priorities was promoted. Bulgaria placed China in the list of its priority foreign partners, and the official visits of prominent Chinese leaders and reformers like Wang Zhongui and Wu Yi at the beginning of the new century marked the highest peak of interest, attention and opportunities

on the part of the new Chinese foreign policy in establishing partnerships for a multipolar world.

TODAY both China and Bulgaria, while searching for their place in the complex modern world, will need more than ever to interpret and understand the signs and capital of the recent past, and build on the established and promising bilateral relations which had been maintained for decades despite the difficulties caused by the relations with third countries. But the diplomats can and should use the broad public support and consensus of the two peoples for friendship, cooperation and mutually beneficial business–support which I am convinced is still in place based on my Bulgarian and Chinese social experience.

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