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Friendly Assistance and Self-Reliance

The Hungarian Geophysical Expedition in China, 1956–1962

❖ Péter Vámos

The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 October 1949 was a milestone in the history of the Cold War. In accordance with the Stalinist model in the USSR, Mao Zedong and other Chinese leaders set out to transform a war-stricken, mainly agricultural country into a modern state with highly developed heavy and defense industries. Initially, they aimed to establish what they called “New Democracy.” This was followed in 1956 by the complete “socialist transformation” of the economy and society. Mao's regime enforced the collectivization of agriculture and the crash development of heavy industries in a highly compressed time frame—the latter mainly with Soviet assistance.

Following the example of the Soviet Union, Hungary promptly recognized the PRC and offered all the assistance it could manage. The discovery of China's largest oil field in 1959 was the most successful outcome of the Hungarian-Chinese cooperation that ensued. Although Mao Zedong had proclaimed in 1949 that China would welcome the Soviet Union's support, he and other leaders in Beijing were intent on achieving self-reliance and cooperating with other Communist countries in addition to the USSR. This article presents the historical background and daily routines of Sino-Hungarian technological cooperation, drawing on documents from Hungarian archives, notes taken by members of the Hungarian geophysical expedition, interviews with the Hungarian expedition's members, official collections of declassified Chinese documents, and Chinese publications and memoirs.

Chinese Modernization and Soviet Assistance

In 1949, the Chinese economy was in ruins. Recovery from the devastating war against Japan had barely begun by the time the conflict between the

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governing Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) intensified, plunging the country into a debilitating civil war. The fighting ended in 1949 with the CCP's victory, which forced Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang government to flee to Taiwan. However, because the new Communist regime had neither the experience nor the means necessary for reconstruction, Mao and his fellow leaders had no choice but to rely on foreign assistance. The only feasible solution for the CCP amid the tension of the Cold War was an alliance with the USSR. Three months before the PRC was founded, Mao published a policy-setting article in *Renmin ribao* declaring that China would lean to the side of socialism.¹ Mao's timing was intentional. The article was published to coincide with a trip to Moscow taken by Liu Shaoqi, the CCP's second-in-command. The Chinese Communist leaders hoped that the former glory and central role of the "Middle Kingdom" in the world could be restored with Soviet assistance after a "century of national humiliation," alluding to the unequal treaties China had felt forced to sign in the nineteenth century. Mao himself traveled to Moscow in December 1949—the first time he had ever traveled outside China. In the presence of Mao and Joseph Stalin, the foreign ministers of the PRC and the Soviet Union signed a treaty of friendship, alliance, and mutual assistance on 14 February 1950.² With the conclusion of the Sino-Soviet alliance, the PRC joined the Communist bloc.

The treaty stated that the Soviet Union would provide China with all possible assistance in the framework of economic cooperation. Stalin's decision was spurred by strategic, national security, and economic considerations. Soviet leaders saw great benefit in having China, the world's most populous country, on the USSR's side in the struggle against "imperialism." They believed that in the economically difficult postwar situation the assistance they would give to the PRC under the slogan of internationalism would increase the Soviet Union's international prestige. At the same time, by signing the new treaty, Soviet leaders were ensuring the continuation of privileges the USSR had been granted in a treaty concluded with the Kuomintang in August 1945. With that treaty, the Soviet Union had obtained leases on Chinese naval ports at Dalian and Lüshun, access to other military bases on Chinese territory, and concessions on mining, oil production, and railway construction in north-western China and Manchuria. Additionally, in the new treaty, the PRC recognized the sovereignty of Outer Mongolia—that is, the Mongolian People's Republic.

1. Mao Zedong, "Lun renmin minzhu zhuanzheng," *Renmin ribao* (Beijing), 1 July 1949, p. 1.

2. Andrei Ledovskii, Raisa Mirovitskaya, and Vladimir Myasnikov, eds., *Russko-kitaiskie otnosheniya v XX veke. 5/2, 1948–fevral 1950* (Moscow: Pamiytniki Istoricheskoi Mysli, 2005), pp. 296–304.

Soviet advisers and specialists were soon dispatched to China in the spirit of providing “friendly assistance,” but in reality they played a key role in securing Soviet influence and control. Strengthening China was important to the Soviet Union’s national security. However, leaders in Moscow were also determined to ensure that a modernized China would not threaten the USSR’s leading role in the international workers’ movement. Soviet concern about this matter grew throughout the 1950s, as bilateral disputes, initially wrapped in ideology, escalated into a bitter rift by the end of the decade.

Because the PRC’s interests were not in complete harmony with Soviet interests, Chinese leaders sensed that relying on Soviet economic assistance would pose political and economic risks. As early as the 1930s, Mao and others in the CCP had emphasized the importance of self-reliance.³ In the 1950s they had to figure out how to reconcile a policy of self-reliance with “leaning to one side” and accepting Soviet assistance.

The CCP had never intended self-reliance to mean that foreign assistance would be ruled out altogether. On the contrary, foreign assistance was regarded as a vehicle for attaining self-reliance and was to be used as much as possible so long as the conditions were dictated by China. Mao always made a clear distinction between a relationship based on dependency and a partnership based on self-reliance. In 1940, for example, he compared the process of taking foreign material assistance to consuming food and digestion:

We can benefit only if we treat these foreign materials as we do our food, which should be chewed in the mouth, submitted to the working of the stomach and intestines, mixed with saliva, gastric juices and intestinal secretions, and then separated into nutritional material to be absorbed and waste material to be discarded.⁴

Mao was essentially invoking a dichotomy between “essence” and “usefulness,” a theory from the late nineteenth century. Accordingly, Chinese culture would constitute the foundation, and only some components of Western culture—mainly modern technologies—would be adopted, provided they did not carry the risk of superseding traditional Chinese values.⁵

3. Izabella Goikhman, “Soviet-Chinese Academic Interactions in the 1950s: Questioning the ‘Impact-Response’ Approach,” in Thomas P. Bernstein and Hua-yu Li, eds., *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949–Present* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), p. 279.

4. Mao Zedong, “On New Democracy,” in *Selected Works by Mao Zedong*, Vol. 2 (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1954), p. 287.

5. On the origin of the theory, see William Ayers, *Chang Chih-tung and Educational Reform in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 152–160.

The advocates of Chinese modernization around the turn of the twentieth century were against Western dominance. Although Sino-Soviet relations rested on the same ideological foundations in the initial years after the establishment of the PRC, the restoration of self-reliance, sovereignty, and international prestige continued to be the medium-term goals of Chinese modernization. According to Marxism-Leninism, development in sciences and technologies constituted the foundation for economic and social change and, as such was indispensable to attaining Communism, the ultimate goal. Until 1953, when building socialism was put on the banner by Chinese leaders, official propaganda focused on “new democracy” and modernization. Scientific and technological development thus constituted key issues from the outset of the PRC. Revolutionary social transformation, the Chinese believed, could not be accomplished without importing high-level knowledge and advanced technologies.

Foreign Experts and Knowledge Transfer

The experiences of Soviet experts in China and Eastern Europe were similar in many ways, but with one fundamental difference. While experts were sent to Eastern Europe either on the initiative of the Soviet Union or at the invitation of local Communist leaders concerned about the scarcity of skilled cadres, foreign specialists arrived in China solely at the request of the Chinese.⁶ They not only specified in which fields they needed foreign contributions but also set out the details of cooperation. Donor countries were responsible for the selection of relevant experts. In the case of the Soviet Union, membership in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was a prerequisite, and the State Security Committee (KGB) also had to sign off on all such appointments.⁷ However, authorities in other East-bloc countries were not in a position to supervise the daily activities of their experts.

The first Soviet experts arrived in China in August 1949. Their official mission was to support the Communist takeover in Manchuria (northwestern China). Over the next ten years (until July 1960), 12,284 civilian (explicitly non-military) Soviet specialists and advisers were delegated to China. The duration of their missions varied from a couple of months to several years.

6. On the situation in Hungary, see Magdolna Baráth, “‘Testvéri segítségnyújtás’: Szovjet tanácsadók és szakértők Magyarországon,” *Történelmi szemle*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (2010), pp. 357–387.

7. Deborah Kaple, “Agents of Change: Soviet Advisers and High Stalinist Management in China, 1949–1960,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter 2016), p. 13.

(The USSR also sent more than 10,000 military advisers to China during this period.)⁸ Drawing on Chinese and Soviet statistical data, historian Shen Zhihua found that 89 percent (10,260 individuals) of the 11,527 civilian foreign experts working in China until 1958 came from the Soviet Union, and only 11 percent (1,267 individuals) came from countries in Eastern Europe.⁹ Sino-Soviet cooperation in the form of sending experts was discontinued in the summer of 1960, when leaders in Moscow ordered all Soviet specialists to be withdrawn from China. This drastic order, however, was not extended to experts from Eastern Europe, who returned to their own countries when their contracts expired.

In the early 1950s, the Soviet Union pledged to set up 141 plants and factories for heavy industry, chemicals, and defense. Forty-seven of these were completed during Stalin's lifetime. In addition to sending specialists, the Soviet Union also transferred a great number of technical drawings and descriptions free of charge and allowed tens of thousands of Chinese to pursue advanced studies at Soviet institutions. The Soviet Union also had a key role in the development and execution of the PRC's first Five-Year Plan (1953–1957). Nikita Khrushchev paid a visit to Beijing in October 1954 and promised to increase support. The number of industrial projects to be carried out on the basis of Soviet plans and with Soviet support and control was raised to 256 at this time, and the number of individuals sent to work in China also increased. China received half of all the Soviet aid given to Communist countries from 1953 through 1957. According to Soviet data from that time, the aid provided to China came to 7 percent of Soviet gross domestic product.¹⁰

For China, knowledge transfer, by virtue of its character, was perhaps even more important than the adoption of modern technologies. Once in possession of the knowledge needed for scientific development (and modernization in general), the Chinese aspired to improve on foreign technologies and introduce innovations.¹¹ The exchange of publications and translation of publications from Russian into Chinese constituted the main form of cooperation prior to 1953. Chinese statistical data reveals that only 1,093 Soviet

8. Shen Zhihua and Li Danhui, *After Learning to One Side: China and Its Allies in the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 118.

9. Shen Zhihua, *Sulian zhuanjia zai Zhongguo (1948–1960)* (Beijing: Zhongguo guoji guangbo chubanshe, 2003), p. 407.

10. This figure seems extremely high. The calculation was made by the Russian historian Sergei Goncharenko using data from former Soviet archives and figures included in Khrushchev's speech published in *Pravda* on 6 May 1960. See Sergei Goncharenko, "Sino-Soviet Military Cooperation," in Odd Arne Westad ed., *Brothers in Arms* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 160.

11. For more details on the subject, see Goikhman, "Soviet-Chinese Academic Interactions."

specialists worked in China until 1953.¹² After the death of Stalin, the institutionalization of scientific cooperation accelerated, an increasing number of joint research projects were launched, and opportunities grew for personal contacts. Soviet advisers worked at the highest levels of the PRC administration in central bureaus and provided strategic consultation, while specialists, including engineers, teachers, technicians, and skilled workers, mostly worked “in the field” at schools, factories, or machine centers, where they passed on their knowledge, skills, and experience to their Chinese counterparts.

However, problems mounted with the institutionalization of cooperation and increases in the number of specialists. Misunderstandings and personal conflicts ensued when issues of organization and coordination went unsettled. Moreover, problems related to the conduct of Soviet specialists also emerged, which caused Chinese officials to put greater emphasis on the necessity of self-reliance from 1956 onward. In January 1956, prior to Khrushchev’s secret speech before a closed session of the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, Premier Zhou Enlai attended a conference on the question of intellectuals in Beijing and stated that Soviet assistance was still very much needed to help China work out a great number of technical issues but that it would be wrong to draw solely on Soviet expertise.¹³ In February 1957, the Chinese state council (government) adopted a resolution calling for a reduction in the number of foreign experts. The principle of “fewer but better” was formulated in a document published in August 1957.¹⁴ Experts from East European countries were not specified separately in the resolution, but the same principles applied to them as to Soviet specialists, as the case of the Hungarian geophysical expedition demonstrates.

In accordance with the new policy, the number of foreign experts working in China decreased from 1957 onward. When the Great Leap Forward campaign was launched in 1958, self-reliance was the main policy component, and foreign assistance was considered complementary.¹⁵ Paradoxically, even this decision was proof of the success of the activities foreign experts conducted. Assistance from countries in the Soviet bloc had achieved its aim, laying the foundations for independent Chinese industry and scientific research.

12. Shen, *Sulian zhuanjia*, p. 408.

13. Zhou Enlai, “Guanyu zhishifenzi wenti de baogao,” in *Zhou Enlai xuanji xia* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1984), pp. 166–167.

14. Shen and Li, *After Learning to One Side*, p. 129.

15. Mao’s thoughts from 1958 were published in the Chinese press in 1978 as a quotation taken from a speech he delivered in 1962. See “Chairman Mao Tsetung’s Talk at an Enlarged Working Conference Convened by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, January 30, 1962,” *Beijing Review*, Vol. 21, No. 27 (7 July 1978), p. 17.

The ambitious plans of the Great Leap Forward could not have been conceived without the new knowledge and practical experience acquired through foreign help. That Mao, who openly admitted he was not competent in economics, led the country into disaster by introducing the Great Leap Forward, is another matter.¹⁶

The Hungarian Embassy in Beijing and Hungarian-Chinese Relations

Hungary strove to take its share in the knowledge transfer and provision of technical assistance. The bilateral Agreement on Scientific and Technological Cooperation was signed in Beijing on 3 October 1953. Personal contacts between the two countries were mainly restricted to official visits in the early 1950s. Hungary set up a complete machine center in Shandong Province and built a pipe production factory in Sichuan, and Hungarian engineers contributed to an international tropicalization project—adaptation of equipment designed for the temperate zone to extreme tropical conditions—in Guangzhou. The largest group of Hungarian experts conducted geophysical surveys from 1956 to 1962, first in Gansu Province and then on the Songliao Plain in northwestern China.

The Hungarian embassy played a key role in bilateral relations. Sino-Hungarian diplomatic relations were established within a few days of the establishment of the PRC on 6 October 1949, and the Hungarian embassy was set up in Beijing in 1950. From the outset, the Hungarian Foreign Ministry was dissatisfied with the activities of Hungarian diplomats in Beijing. Félix Pál, the head of the Foreign Ministry's Department for the Far East, which was set up in 1951, identified the core of the problem as "the failure to coordinate with the embassies of other friendly countries." Although regular consultations were held with the ambassadors of those countries, communication did not go beyond what was characterized as the "official fraternal tone."¹⁷ Hungarian-Chinese bilateral relations were characterized neither by complete trust nor by mutual exchange of information. Chinese Foreign Ministry officials were not allowed to maintain informal contact with foreigners, and, when the advisers officially contacted them with questions, the answers they

16. On the Great Leap Forward, see, for example, Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (New York: Walter and Co., 2010).

17. Memorandum from Félix Pál "Analysis of the Summary Report for 1950," in National Archives of Hungary (NML), XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 27. t., 00129/1951.

provided did not generally contain more information than was published in the press. Hungarian Ambassador Emánuel Safrankó said “you had to think twice about what questions to ask in need of information or about pressing for answers.”¹⁸ Caution and inflexibility on the Chinese side hindered economic cooperation as well. “It cannot be forced, because the Chinese response would be counterproductive and would lead to increasingly rigid refusal,” the ambassador stated.¹⁹

The development of relations was further impeded in 1953, when major changes in personnel took place at the Hungarian Foreign Ministry’s Department for the Far East. The political staff members of the embassy, with one exception, were all recalled. Ágoston Szkladán, the new ambassador, who was accredited in 1954, stated that the avalanche of changes, which disrupted the continuity of work and posed difficulties for the development of relations, had been a severe mistake, not least because “the new comrades sent [to Beijing were] inexperienced in diplomatic work.”²⁰ As a result of the changes in staff, by 1954 Károly Csatorday was the only staff member left at the embassy whose knowledge of Mandarin Chinese was sufficient to review newspapers and to “talk about political, economic, and general issues with Chinese who do not speak foreign languages.”²¹ Press attaché József [P.] Szabó took up Chinese, but his insufficient command of the language prevented him from reading the Chinese press, and he had to draw on English-language materials produced by Western news agencies when he prepared daily summaries.²²

Other staff members lacked a proper command of both English and Russian.²³ In November 1955, the staff of the embassy was joined by two diplomats who had completed their studies in China: Endre Galla, responsible for cultural affairs; and Barna Tálás, responsible for economic affairs. In contrast, the Czechoslovak embassy in Beijing had three-to-five-person work groups for each area of responsibility. Five staff members were responsible for political

18. Summary Report for 1951 from Ambassador Emánuel Safrankó, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 27. t., 00875/1952.

19. Summary Report for 1952 by Ambassador Emánuel Safrankó, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 12. t., 00309/1953.

20. Summary Report for 1954 from Ambassador Ágoston Szkladán, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 27. t., 003989/1955. In 1954, Safrankó was replaced by András Szobek, who was appointed minister for collecting surplus produce and livestock shortly after his arrival in Beijing.

21. Summary Report for 1953 from Ambassador Emánuel Safrankó, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 27. t., 003911/1954.

22. The journalist József Szabó adopted the name József P. Szabó after his diplomatic mission in Beijing and worked as an editor at Hungarian Radio.

23. Summary Report for 1954 from Ambassador Ágoston Szkladán.

matters, four were responsible for economic and cultural relations; and three were in charge of the press. Each work group also had its own Chinese translator. Nevertheless, Czechoslovak Ambassador Antonín Gregor complained that the Chinese Foreign Ministry did not provide sufficient information to the representatives of friendly countries.²⁴

Small wonder, then, that the Hungarian Foreign Ministry was dissatisfied with the work of its embassy in Beijing and considered neither reporting activities nor the relations built with the Chinese to be satisfactory. The ministry lamented that although the embassy “often stresses the difficulties encountered in developing relations with the Chinese . . . the situation is worsened if even existing opportunities are not fully exploited.”²⁵ Ambassador Szkladán’s report was more concrete and self-critical:

[O]ur Party policy makes no headway in practice in the People’s Republic of China. Our cultural agreement is poor, our publicity work is totally insufficient, and we do not make adequate efforts in our trade relations to have accurate and timely delivery; moreover, the goods we deliver are of inferior quality. The work of the embassy in terms of developing relations is also poor. Regarding the press, contacts between the press attaché and the representatives of the Chinese press have broken down completely. Without personal contacts established in the economic field, our staff member responsible for this area had no help whatsoever to draw on. The relations the embassy developed in the field of culture were also entirely insignificant.²⁶

The Hungarian ambassador, accustomed to “fraternal solidarity,” expressed incomprehension that “recently the Chinese have wanted to purchase only goods of excellent quality, and, therefore, they contact only the countries that can offer high quality. The principle of the best quality is asserted in every field.” The Hungarian diplomatic service tried to improve relations by organizing exhibitions or delivering tractor-driving courses, but despite all efforts, Hungary failed in 1955—as in previous years—to meet the export commitments it had agreed to in its annual trade agreement with the PRC.²⁷ This can be attributed to economic difficulties. Embassy counselor József Száll outlined major problems at a party meeting held at the embassy in June 1956:

24. Report from Chargé d’Affaires József Száll, “Beszélgetés Gregor csehszlovák nagykövettel,” Beijing, 22 January 1957, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 12. t., 00368/2/1957.

25. “Nagykövetség munkája” (ministerial order issued for the embassy in Beijing by Deputy Minister József Kárpáti), Budapest, 17 January 1956, in NML, XIX J-1-j, Kína, 12. t., 001575/1956.

26. Report for Foreign Minister János Boldoczki from Ambassador Ágoston Szkladán, “Points 5, 6 and 7 of the annual report,” Beijing, 18 January 1956, in NML, XIX J-1-j, Kína, 27. t., 003260/1956.

27. *Ibid.*

Unfortunately, it is a fact that we can see China as a good area for trading only in the next five years at the most. Then we might as well nicely withdraw [from the country.] The West will drive us out, and we will have no business whatsoever to do here.

In response to Száll's statement, Béla Éliás, the Beijing correspondent for the Hungarian Telegraphic Agency, said,

if this is the view adopted by one of the senior staff members of the embassy, we might as well leave China today because this approach excludes the future possibility of development and implies that senior staff members of the embassy and its commercial section make such statements only here, in Beijing; all this is wrapped in scented silk-paper when sent to Budapest.

Several other people joined the discussion as it progressed, and

Comrade Száll had the following, among other things, to say in order to calm down participants in the meeting, who were quite numerous. As a matter of fact, comrade Tálás [Third Secretary Barna Tálás] is responsible for contacting relevant ministries, mostly the ministry of foreign trade, whenever a state delegation arrives in Beijing to make inquiries about the purpose of their visit. Then, if possible, we put in a counterbid for the Chinese comrades. This method has worked numerous times in the past, and we are going to use it in the future too.²⁸

However, this approach was not efficient enough: Hungarian-Chinese bilateral trade turnover increased by only 11 percent in 1955–1960, whereas China's trade with Poland increased by 37 percent and with Czechoslovakia by 73 percent. Hungary's share of China's trade with countries of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) amounted to 3.6 percent in 1955 and dropped to 3.1 percent by 1960.²⁹ As a consequence of Hungary's limited economic performance, the Chinese were reluctant to expand trade relations. They were also displeased with the quality of Hungarian products and delays in delivery. Such problems characterized bilateral trade relations even though

28. Árpád Horváth, memorandum to Dezső Szilágyi, head of the Department for Foreign Affairs of the Central Board of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, Budapest, 20 December 1957, in NML, M-KS, 288 f., 32 cs., 5 ő.e., 1957.

29. Ministry of Foreign Trade, report from Head of Department Gábor Boldizsár, Budapest, 5 December 1961, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 25/c 00942/1962. Trade turnover between the two countries in 1957–1963 amounted to the following: 1957, 87 million rubles; 1958, 111.3 million rubles; 1959, 67.4 million rubles; 1960, 74.7 million rubles; 1961, 29.5 million rubles; 1962, 23.8 million rubles; 1963, 18.2 million rubles. Report for 1964 by Ambassador József Halász, Beijing, 5 February 1965, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, IV-142 001822/1965.

political relations between the two Communist countries were smooth and cordial.

Organizing the Geophysical Expedition

In the middle of the decade, an exhibition of Hungarian engineering technology was held in the park surrounding the Temple of Heaven in Beijing in the autumn of 1955. The Hungarian embassy had little to do with the event. In the autumn of 1954, the academic Tian Jiqun, the chair of the Earth Studies Department of the Chinese Ministry for Geology, headed a ministry delegation to Hungary to learn about the latest geological instruments and research methods.³⁰ The delegation also visited Hajdúszoboszló and Esztergom, where they were shown new instruments developed by Hungarian geophysicists and gained insights into fieldwork. In Esztergom, the Chinese guests were received by Károly Posgay, leader of the seismic workgroup. The members of the delegation learned about an improved variant of Loránd Eötvös's pendulum, the latest seismic equipment, and a geological survey method developed in Sopron to measure telluric currents. Hungary's technological advancement in this area had already been demonstrated by the establishment in 1951 of a factory to produce geophysical measurement instruments, which were intended both to meet the needs of Hungary's domestic industry and to provide equipment for export.³¹ The Foreign Trade Company for Heavy Industries (NIKEX) was put in charge of exporting the equipment, and the first shipment was sent to Czechoslovakia in 1954.

No documents about the exhibition in Beijing or this moment of cooperation are stored in the archives. Thus, the only available sources are memoirs, diaries, letters, and recollections by former participants. An article written by Ernő Takács presenting the work the telluric group did from 1956 through 1959 reveals that, at the request of Károly Kántás, a proposal to organize an exhibition was submitted by István Rusznyák, president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, to Guo Moruo, president of the Chinese Academy of

30. The practical application of geophysics is based on the physical properties various types of rocks possess. Gravitational measurement is based on the differences in density of subterranean rocks and the device used for measuring this is the torsion balance originally developed by Loránd Eötvös. Telluric measurement is based on differences in electrical resistance. Seismic waves created in different rocks by explosions result in different propagation velocities, which are measured by seismic instruments. For this purpose, the Eötvös Loránd Geophysical Institute (ELGI) developed a 24-channel measurement device, which was used in China as well.

31. Iván Polcz, *Az Eötvös Loránd Geofizikai Intézet története I* (Budapest: Eötvös Loránd Geofizikai Intézet, 2003), p. 94.

Sciences. At Guo's suggestion, the Chinese authorities gave permission to organize the exhibition and a reception for the Hungarian delegation.³² Planning details were delegated to NIKEX, which aimed to map the market in China.³³ The Hungarian delegation was headed by Vilmos Bese, director general of the National Directorate of Geology, and members of the delegation included, among others, János Gálfi, head of the Seismic Department of the Eötvös Loránd Geophysical Institute (ELGI); Géza Szurovy, geologist of the Company for Oil Exploration; and Károly Kántás, head of the Research Laboratory for Geophysics in Sopron. The Hungarian experts delivered presentations and conducted trial field measurements as part of the program. In Gálfi's opinion, the exhibition was hugely successful because "it attracted about 6,000 visitors even though it was closed to the general public, and the feedback we received was positive and encouraging." Gálfi added, "the Chinese are polite and smile all the time" and that, although he would not attribute much significance to such recognition, it was palpable proof of their interest. The Chinese bought all the equipment exhibited and initiated immediate talks on the "launch of a significant purchase program." Gálfi complained that "China is beautiful and interesting, but the roughly four months I have to spend here, far from home, were a bit too long." However, he was hopeful that the sacrifice he was making was not in vain and that, "by the end of the trip, we will have what we have been wanting for so long: the first measurements taken abroad."³⁴

Using Hungarian equipment mounted on trucks, the Hungarians conducted test measurements from 5 to 28 December 1955 in areas that had been surveyed earlier by Soviet and East German geophysicists with their own gear. The Chinese even organized a contest in which the Hungarian drilling truck "competed" against two Soviet trucks. The competition, Gálfi declared, "ended with our glorious success." Unfortunately, he added, because of the lack of proper detonators and explosives, "we could not demonstrate our overwhelming mastery as much as we had wished to." Nevertheless, the Chinese decided to have the area surveyed with Hungarian equipment and with the

32. Ernő Takács, "A kínai-magyar geofizikai expedíció tellurikus csoportjának munkája 1956-tól 1959-ig," *A Miskolci Egyetem közleményei: A sorozat: Bányászat*, Vol. 56 (2001), pp. 49–85. Rusznyák's letter cannot be found in the archives of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

33. No archival documents are available on the organization of the exhibition or on the export of instruments to China. NIKEX documents are archived by NML (XXIX-G-18-a: general documents; XXIX-G-18-b: classified documents). The classified documents section includes documents from 1957 to 1959, but none contain information related to China. (Many thanks to Zoltán Szőke for his assistance.)

34. Memorandum from János Gálfi to Loránd Sedy, Beijing, 1 January 1956, in possession of Judit Sedy.

assistance of Hungarian experts.³⁵ Impressed with the display, the Chinese placed an order for 60 units of telluric instruments from Hungary's Factory for Geophysical Measurement Instruments.³⁶

The successful exhibition encouraged the Chinese Ministry for Geology to initiate a joint Chinese-Hungarian oil exploration expedition. At the time of China's first Five-Year Plan (1953–1957), several areas in the northwest part of the country were designated for geological surveys, geophysical measurements, and test drilling. The Hungarians were invited to survey an area in Gansu Province on the southern border of the Gobi Desert. This region, a plateau some 1,000–2,000 meters above sea level, is surrounded on the west by 2,000–3,000-meter mountain ranges and on the east by a vast loess plateau, the Ordos Desert, which is almost completely encircled by the Great Bend of the Yellow River.³⁷ The Great Wall cuts across the survey area. The central headquarters of the expedition was set up in Wuzhong, a commercial hub and center of Islamic faith located along the old Silk Road.

Hungary's National Directorate of Geology was responsible for organizing the expedition, which included specialists from ELGI and the Mining and Forestry Engineering University in Sopron. Contrary to Soviet recruitment practice, party membership was not a key criterion for the Hungarians. Recruitment was focused on specialists who had contributed to the development and testing of the instruments to be used. In preparation for the expedition, the Hungarians undertook simultaneous measurements in Sopron and Beijing in January 1956, an unprecedented venture that yielded new scientific results.³⁸ A bilateral agreement between Hungary and China was signed the following month.³⁹ The preparatory committee for the expedition, consisting of Árpád Horváth, a seismic observer and party secretary of the group; Oszkár Ádám, a geophysicist; Géza Szurovy; and two staff members from ELGI, traveled to Beijing in May 1956. By this time, a Chinese group of some 300 specialists had already been waiting in the designated areas for six weeks. The Chinese hosts wanted to start work as soon as possible, so when

35. Ibid. The area designated for the Hungarian survey was later changed.

36. Antal Ádám, Pál Bencze, and József Verő, "A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Geofizikai Kutató Laboratóriumának története (1952–1972)," *Soproni Szemle*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (1998), p. 102.

37. The area was separated from Gansu in 1958 and was reconstituted as the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region.

38. Antal, Pál, and Verő, "A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Geofizikai Kutató Laboratóriumának története," p. 102.

39. Horváth to Szilágyi, 20 December 1957.

they learned that the Hungarians did not intend to begin until sometime between 15 June and 15 July, they grew “terribly worried and visibly angry.”⁴⁰

Initially, the expedition included 46 members, although some returned to Hungary and were replaced by new staff.⁴¹ A total of 58 Hungarian specialists—including geophysicists, geologists, engineers, technicians, master drillers, and blasters—worked in China as members of the expedition. The group was assisted by a Hungarian interpreter, Iván Petrik, who spoke not only Chinese but also English, German, and Russian. The specialists were almost all men. At the beginning, the group included only two women, the wives of Loránd Sédý and Ferenc Gellert, who accompanied their husbands but worked as technicians and had their own assignments.⁴² The PRC’s regulations at the time allowed only foreign experts who spent more than a year in China to bring family members. Still, nearly 150 Hungarians stayed in China as members of the expedition, including wives and children. Another two female family members were hired to work for the Chinese: István Komáromy’s daughter, Erzsébet Komáromy, who held a geology degree (the Komáromy family returned to Hungary in the summer of 1957); and the wife of Zoltán Szabó, Éva Kilényi, who joined the group in 1957 after earning her degree in geophysics.⁴³

The Hungarians were contracted for two years. The first group left for China in June 1956, followed by other members of the expedition in groups of three or four. They stayed in Beijing until August, where they prepared for the fieldwork, gathered information about the area to be surveyed, and then set out for Wuzhong. Perceiving active interest from the Chinese, the Hungarian embassy in Beijing called for additional equipment to be given to China and the number of experts working there to be increased, but Pál Félix, the head of the Hungarian Foreign Ministry’s Department for the Far East, rejected these proposals, arguing that “austerity measures have been introduced in all branches of the [Hungarian] national economy recently,” and, consequently, “similar donations have been cut to the minimum.” He added that the donation of further instruments “was not seen as commercially justified by relevant authorities,” implying that such gifts would not significantly increase orders from the PRC. Finally, on the matter of additional specialists, Félix stated that Soviet guidelines should serve as Hungary’s model; that is, any

40. Memorandum from Árpád Horváth to Loránd Sédý, Beijing, 19 May 1956, in possession of Judit Sédý.

41. Horváth to Szilágyi, 20 December 1957.

42. Judit Sédý, interview, Budapest, 3 May 2016.

43. Éva Kilényi, interview, Budapest, 9 June 2016.

increase should “occur only if it is requested by China within the framework of Cooperation in Science and Technology.”⁴⁴

Life and Work in the Field

The Hungarians were responsible for surveying the designated area and doing structural research related to hydrocarbons. They were also expected to train the Chinese staff to operate the Hungarian instruments and to process and interpret the data.⁴⁵ The expedition comprised a gravitational crew, a telluric crew, and two seismic crews. Each seismic crew included blasters, drillers, geodetic surveyors, stakers, seismic observers, and interpreters. Two or three Chinese worked alongside each Hungarian crew member.⁴⁶ The Chinese personnel who worked together with the Hungarian telluric crew of five remained almost unchanged for three years. The Chinese group was led by a veteran captain of the Korean War, and his crew included two geophysicists, four observer technicians, three interpreter technicians, three geodetic technicians, one doctor, one Chinese-Hungarian interpreter, two secretaries, twenty telluric and geodetic helpers, four cooks and kitchen hands, seven drivers, and four armed guards.⁴⁷

Because the Chinese specialists and support staff included few trained geologists or geophysicists, the majority learned the various work processes on site. In the first year, the Hungarians operated the equipment, and the Chinese watched. When fieldwork resumed in the spring of 1957, the Chinese no longer only observed but also worked. From 1958 onward, the Hungarian specialists mainly assisted in solving problems, and the Chinese crew operated the equipment.⁴⁸ Sédý even shot a film in the summer of 1958 to demonstrate that the Chinese had learned the intricacies of oil exploration and were able to do field surveys on their own. The film reveals that the Hungarians’ role was by then restricted to providing guidance, especially in the interpretation of results.⁴⁹

44. Memorandum from Head of Foreign Ministry Department Pál Félix to the Hungarian embassy in Beijing, “Geological work in China,” Budapest, 9 October 1956, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 140. t., 005538/1956.

45. Takács, “A kínai-magyar geofizikai expedíció,” p. 53.

46. László Pacsirszky and Éva Pacsirszky, interview, Budapest, 23 April 2016.

47. Takács, “A kínai-magyar geofizikai expedíció,” p. 57.

48. Pacsirszky and Pacsirszky, interview.

49. This film and four others shot by Sédý were digitized by Tamás Ormos, a professor at the University of Miskolc, and sent to the members of the expedition. The DVD containing the films, titled *A kínai-magyar geofizikai expedíció, 1956–1959*, was made available to me by Judit Sédý.

The crews traveled to sites with Hungarian-made Csepel survey trucks, off-road delivery trucks, and GAZ 69 jeeps. They worked in desert areas, grassy wastelands, and the Yellow River valley, spending nights in felt-lined military tents in field bases far from inhabited areas. In these severe circumstances and harsh climatic conditions, it was helpful to have a Chinese “uniform”: a cotton-quilted jacket made of blue linen, ankle-length blue linen coat with a lining of thick lamb fur, and a fur-lined hat. Depending on the weather, the crews lived in tents in camps along the measurement lines, mostly far from habitation. They worked ten to twelve hours a day for ten days, and then they had a four-day period of rest with their families at the central headquarters. The Pacsirszky family spent 1,155 days in China from July 1956 to September 1959, including 527 days when they were separated from each other.⁵⁰ Gálfi, who headed the expedition; Ádám, the senior geophysicist; Szurovy, the senior geologist; and the interpreters of the seismic group headed by Sédý worked in the office in Wuzhong. The interpreter unit comprised unit leader Károly Lendvai and two women, Judit Sédý and Éva Gellert. Senior staff members regularly went to fieldwork sites. Gálfi and Ádám visited the crews, and Szurovy conducted geological surveys.⁵¹ In addition to the surveying staff, the expedition was accompanied by two car mechanics and a radio operator who was responsible for the radio connection between the survey truck and the explosion sites. A surgeon, Endre Szentesi, from a hospital in Cegléd, Hungary, also worked alongside the group from the summer of 1956 until January 1958 and, in addition, performed operations on Hungarian and Chinese patients in hospitals located in the area where his group worked.⁵²

The specialists and the local staff developed good professional relations, but they were not supposed to make any personal contacts or friendships. The Chinese were barred from having any contact with foreigners, so the closest contacts developed with the interpreters. PRC inspectors strictly monitored the conduct of workers both during and after work, and the camps were characterized by military orderliness. Anyone who could not fit in was to be sent home and might have to face further consequences. Developing an intimate relationship with foreigners was especially forbidden. Such relationships were, in any case, difficult because of language barriers. Officially, English and German were the common languages. Most of the Chinese staff, however, did not

50. László Pacsirszky, “A család együtt töltött napjai az 1956. 07. 22. és 1959. 09. 21. közötti időszakban,” unpublished manuscript.

51. Sédý, interview.

52. Memorandum from Endre Szentesi to the Minister of Health, 18 May 1958, in NML, XIX-J-1-k, 5/k/9–1/1958.

speak any foreign languages. English and German interpreters were assigned to the expedition by the Chinese. One of the English interpreters, “Pici Li” (Tiny Li), was a Protestant pastor; another called Tommy Gu worked as an accountant at a U.S. firm in Shanghai. Lu Linsen, who used the English name Charlie and had a Czech father and a Chinese mother, joined the expedition after completing his university studies. One of the German interpreters was also born to a mixed-marriage couple. Gu Kefu, who used the German name Gustav, was born in Darmstadt to a German Jewish mother and a Chinese father who moved to China after Adolf Hitler’s takeover. Language skills, however, were no substitute for expertise. A mixture of Hungarian, Chinese, English, and German that was comprehensible only to the staff members evolved within a couple of months.

An international family was also formed as a result of the collaboration. László Facsinay, who was awarded the Kossuth Prize in 1953 for his research on gravitational exploration and development of the oilfield in the neighborhood of Nagylengyel, Zala County, Hungary, met his future wife, Song Xizhen, a German interpreter, in 1959, and the two of them returned to Hungary together in 1962.⁵³ The central headquarters did not resemble a camp at all. The women and children lived in a large house encircled by a high wall in Wuzhong—the place might have formerly belonged to a wealthy merchant. The whole group stayed in hotels in winter months, when fieldwork was suspended because of harsh weather conditions; they stayed in Lanzhou in 1956 and in Xian in 1957. Catholics had the opportunity to attend Christmas mass in Lanzhou, and a Christmas tree was erected in the People’s Hotel in Xian. Members of the expedition traveled all over China during their annual holidays. They visited Beijing and Shanghai several times and also went to Nanjing, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Guangzhou, Qingdao, and Shenyang, and even to Hainan Island.

As the accommodation included only rooms and no kitchens, none of the Hungarians could cook. Instead, three meals a day were prepared by Chinese cooks. The Hungarians had all their needs fulfilled, even in 1959 when the disastrous Great Leap Forward resulted in mass starvation and severe shortages of food, even in towns. The only consequence of the shortage of supplies perceived by the Hungarians was that the interpreters were constantly hungry, especially on rest days, when they had only one meal per day.⁵⁴ Every now and then cultural events were organized for the women, or they were taken to the

53. Song Xizhen (wife of László Facsinay), interview, Budapest, 7 June 2016.

54. Pacsirszky and Pacsirszky, interview.

theater or cinema. In such instances, nannies or childminders looked after the children.

Apart from the adverse climate and poor sanitation, the Hungarians enjoyed a lifestyle that they could not have attained back home, with secure accommodations, cooks, cleaners, servants, nannies, bodyguards, cars, first-class travel on trains, tennis courts, and playgrounds for their children in the courtyard of the expedition headquarters. All of this was more akin to the colonial lifestyle enjoyed by communities of foreigners living in Shanghai or Tianjin a couple of decades earlier. Kilényi recalls that the female community

was like a big harem with its own hierarchy, and ubiquitous cliques and bickering, with the only difference being that rank in the hierarchy was determined by the position of the husbands. Another important factor that divided these women was their husbands' attitude during and after the 1956 revolution.⁵⁵

Counterrevolution in Wuzhong?

Archival records related to the geophysical expedition and interviews conducted with its members reveal that internal conflict, which intensified after the uprising in Hungary was crushed, and the “retaliation” initiated by the Hungarian embassy in Beijing were more important to the members of the expedition than the fact that they had contributed to the discovery of China’s largest oilfield. From the outset, the expedition had a tense relationship with the embassy and the commercial representatives. The first disputes developed around salaries. Details of the payments to specialists were regulated by an intergovernmental agreement signed in February 1956. Accordingly, the specialists were to receive the equivalent of their monthly salaries in Hungary during their mission, a rate calculated on the basis of their average income over the last twelve months prior to their departure (including any extra payments such as overtime pay or fieldwork allowance). The Chinese government was obliged to pay the specialists an extra daily fee of 13 yuan for specialists with higher degrees and 11.30 yuan for those without higher education. In contrast, the Chinese staff were paid 30–50 yuan a month.

Moreover, although the Hungarians paid a couple of yuan each day to the Chinese for the costs of three meals, they did not have to pay for accommodation or travel and did not even pay for medical care (which was also free for the Chinese). In addition, the Chinese agreed to pay 50 percent extra for

55. Éva Kilényi (wife of Zoltán Szabó), unpublished memoirs.

fieldwork. However, the agreement was not clear on whether the Hungarians were entitled to receive this extra payment during their entire stay in China or only for the approximately eight months they spent on fieldwork. The agreement was written in two language versions, and the contents of the Hungarian text differed from the contents of the text in Chinese. The Hungarian version said that “because of the nature of the difficulties of fieldwork, the daily fee is to be supplemented with 50 percent extra pay,” whereas the Chinese version said only “50 percent extra pay is due for fieldwork.” In the understanding of the Hungarian specialists, they were entitled to 50 percent extra pay during their entire stay in China because of the nature of the field surveys that had to be performed in remote locations far from Beijing. The Chinese text, however, referred only to the period spent undertaking field surveys.

Although the embassy staff did not have a say in the agreement regarding payments, the diplomats, envious of the high compensation the specialists were to receive, opposed the extra pay. László Újházy, the commercial counselor, tried to “soften” the members of the preparatory committee staying in Beijing and persuade them to do without the extra pay for fieldwork. Horváth, who represented the interests of the specialist group, insisted on receiving what was stated in the agreement, and his position was endorsed by the Chinese. He wrote, “As it turned out subsequently, the Chinese comrades, with the approval of their own higher authorities, accepted the Hungarian text about 50 percent extra pay without a hitch, and the payments were made accordingly.”⁵⁶ Száll, the embassy counselor, commented on the issue in August 1956: “the comrades are overpaid at home and in China alike, and they will have to exert significant efforts in their work to even out the balance.” Horváth reported that Száll’s “statement not only disrupted but substantially worsened the atmosphere in the group.”⁵⁷ News of the disagreement reached senior Foreign Ministry officials in Budapest, who disapproved of Száll’s comment and indicated that the embassy should avoid interfering with the specialists dispatched to China.⁵⁸

The relationship between the specialist group and the embassy further deteriorated during and after the Hungarian revolution of 1956 as extreme tension developed between the embassy staff and members of the expedition over the embassy’s failure to provide information during the crisis. From 10 December onward, the embassy forwarded only press telegrams reflecting the

56. Horváth to Szilágyi, 20 December 1957.

57. Ibid.

58. Memorandum by József Száll, “Gazdaságpolitikai munka, geológus kutatócsoport munkája,” Beijing, 19 October 1956, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 140. t., 002563/3/1956.

official stance on events. When news of the revolution reached Wuzhong on 24 October, Gálfi, the head of the expedition, and Horváth, the party secretary, decided to continue work “as usual and with discipline.” At the same time, they decided to send Imre Herbály, a technician and party committee member, to Xian, 400 kilometers from the central headquarters, to locate the radio set that had been ordered from Hungary and to ask for information and guidance from the Hungarian embassy in Beijing.⁵⁹

The lack of information was attributable to failures in radio and telegraph communication during the first few days of the revolution, when news from Hungary was not reaching the embassy, either. Furthermore, the embassy was mired in confusion. Ambassador Ágoston Szkladán had been recalled before the revolution and was in Hanoi paying farewell visits. After returning to Beijing on 30 October, he stated that he no longer regarded himself as the ambassador and would begin packing up his things.⁶⁰ Counselor Száll, the second in command, was on an official trip to Japan, so a diplomatic secretary, Endre Galla, who had joined the service barely a year earlier, acted as *chargé d'affaires* in the interim. In these circumstances, Commercial Counselor Újházy suggested to Herbály that they should listen to news broadcasts on foreign radio stations “for the necessary information,” and he urged members of the geophysical group to follow the example of Hungarians living in Beijing who had “offered substantial funds in yuan to support the freedom fighters.”⁶¹

The members of the expedition did not join the initiative, but Lajos Reich, a geologist, and Miklós Pálos, the head of one of the seismic crews, were sent to Beijing to contact relevant institutions and family members. During the revolution, Hungarians from Beijing and all over China contacted the embassy to receive news from home. Tálás recollects the days of the revolution in his memoir:

On 1 November, our fellow-countrymen from the capital and all over the country, around 40 to 50 people, who had gathered at the embassy, convened a special meeting in the reception area of the embassy, where some of the tone-setters put forth the proposal that the management of the entire foreign representation should be taken over by a “revolutionary committee” to be set up right away, since the diplomats and other employees working here were delegated by the previous regime and, therefore, not one of them was trustworthy. Some of the

59. Horváth to Szilágyi, 20 December 1957.

60. Barna Tálás, unpublished memoirs.

61. Horváth to Szilágyi, 20 December 1957.

hotheads even demanded to have the key to the safe and the cipher key. Luckily, the majority was clear-headed and shouted the hotheads down, asking them who else if not the previous regime had sent them there. Others warned them that the Chinese authorities for foreign and domestic affairs would not watch such a “takeover of power,” without taking action and they would be “bundled off” immediately. In the end, it was agreed that, on the one hand, we would try to get authentic information from the ministry and, on the other hand, we offered to anyone who felt it necessary that they could give us their home telephone number and we would try to inquire about the health of their family members via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁶²

The news that the revolutionary committee of the Hungarian Foreign Ministry had been set up was received after the meeting. The committee members included Félix, the head of the ministry’s Department for the Far East; Sándor Józsa, a staff member of the department and former fellow student of Galla; and Tálás in Beijing. The next day, the embassy staff also set up a revolutionary committee and sent a telegram to Budapest:

The staff of the embassy set up a Revolutionary Committee on 2 November whose members consist of Endre Galla, István Szirtes, and József Szabó. On behalf of the staff of the embassy, the committee hereby sends the following telegram to the Revolutionary Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: On behalf of the staff of the embassy, the Revolutionary Committee of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of Hungary in Beijing expresses sincere admiration and compassion for the fight our Hungarian countrymen are waging for an independent, free, democratic socialist Hungary. The Revolutionary Committee vehemently condemns the anti-national and treasonous policy followed by the gang of Rákosi, Gerő, and Hegedüs, who became distanced from the people, and whose policies brought about a severe disaster for the Hungarian people. The Revolutionary Committee fully agrees with the program and goals defined by the Revolutionary Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Until we receive detailed instructions concerning our foreign policy work, we shall exert all efforts in our field to help achieve the aforementioned goals. The Revolutionary Committee of the Embassy.⁶³

After returning, Reich informed the group that during the revolution the staff members of the embassy and its commercial section

- a) sent a salutatory telegram to [József] Dudás, president of the National Committee; b) sent a salutatory telegram to Prime Minister Imre Nagy to welcome

62. Tálás, unpublished memoirs.

63. Sándor Szobolevszki and István Vida, eds., *Magyar-kínai kapcsolatok, 1956–1959: Dokumentumok* (Budapest: MTA Jelenkor-kutató Bizottság, 2001), pp. 84–85.

the declaration of Hungary's neutrality and withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact; and c) sent a telegram of protest to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union to protest against the massive intervention of Soviet troops in Hungary's internal matters."⁶⁴

The situation deteriorated when "some hot-headed young embassy staff forcefully removed the former coat of arms of the People's Republic from the façade of the embassy building." Horváth reported that

members of the embassy's party organization and especially the non-party members of the commercial section attacked the ideological views of the others in fierce debates interspersed with profane words, which was unprecedented in Comrade Reich's view and probably induced other Hungarians and non-diplomatic staff to engage in heated political arguments.⁶⁵

Géza Lajos, the deputy head of the commercial section commented, "the people here and at home expected party members and various officials to denounce the Rákosi-Gerő clique and condemn the mistakes committed by the Rákosi regime, and so we must take a clear standpoint in this regard at this meeting." Ambassador Szkladán, in his strong, northern Hungarian dialect, responded: "Now, how am I supposed to know what Comrade Rákosi's mistakes were? I haven't been home in seven years. I was the ambassador in Prague for a year, then in Moscow for four years, and now I have been here for more than two years." Tálas commented: "I could not let that pass without comment and I made the following remark half-aloud in the tense atmosphere that had developed: 'What mistakes did Comrade Rákosi make? Among other things, he appointed fools to be ambassadors and even sent them to important places.'"⁶⁶

The following day, when Szkladán paid a farewell visit to Zhou Enlai, he complained about the actions of his Hungarian compatriots. He said that supporters of the revolutionary committee were in the majority at the embassy and that he belonged to the minority. He called Tálas a "wild revolutionary," and, regarding Száll, said, "he too agrees with the initiatives taken by the revolutionary committee" because "he too has been dissatisfied with the party in

64. Horváth to Szilágyi, 20 December 1957. József Dudás (1912–1957) was one of the leaders of the armed resistance in Hungary. He was arrested and executed in January 1957.

65. Ibid.

66. Tálas, unpublished memoirs. Gálfi could have participated in subsequent debates insofar as he also stayed in Beijing from 23 November onward. Gálfi returned to the group on 12 December and Pálos on 22 December.

the past.” As for the removal of the coat of arms, Szkladán said, “these young people do not even comprehend what the significance of the coat of arms is.”⁶⁷

The Chinese did their best to ease tensions and to bolster conditions for a good atmosphere and efficient work. Headed by the minister, Li Siguang, a goodwill delegation from the Ministry for Geology visited the group in Wuzhong from 19 to 23 November. The minister expressed “the Chinese government’s appreciation of the good work the Hungarian specialists performed despite the events of the counterrevolution” and distributed gifts to members of the group and to their wives and children. The minister also agreed to the requests of specialists who had originally decided not to bring their families on the mission but had changed their minds because of the events taking place in Hungary. Their family members arrived in March 1957.

In another step to improve the atmosphere, the Chinese hosts organized a dance party for New Year’s Eve. However, because Soviet officials were also invited to the event, the Hungarians were reluctant to attend. One of them said “he would leave the place if a Russian asked his wife for a dance,” and another asked, “What was he supposed to do if there were toasts to celebrate certain countries? Was he to throw the wine on the floor?” In the end, they agreed to Horváth’s proposal to attend the party, but they left about half an hour after the salutatory speeches.⁶⁸ Subsequently, this episode constituted one of the charges in the disciplinary procedure initiated against Horváth.⁶⁹

In the spring of 1957, the Hungarian specialists went on a tour of China in four smaller groups, financed by the Chinese Ministry for Geology. Three groups traveled to Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou, and a fourth group went to Guangzhou and Hainan Island. The trips were not without incident. The embassy, using details gathered from the Chinese, reported that some specialists had refused to board a train because the sleeping car did not have separate compartments with cushioned beds and thus they would have had to share the space with Chinese passengers. Others were resentful that Chinese and foreigners paid different prices for the same service; and in Shanghai some

67. Document 93, “Memorandum on the Talks Between Resigning Hungarian Ambassador (Ágoston) Szkladán and Prime Minister Zhou (Enlai),” in Péter Vámos, *Kína mellettünk? Kínai külügyi inatok Magyarországról, 1956* (Budapest, História—MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 2008), p. 202.

68. Pacsirszky and Pacsirszky, interview.

69. “Minutes taken on 5 June 1958 at the headquarters of the Party Committee of district XIV. The case of party members, especially that of Árpád Horváth, sent to China by the Geophysical Institute,” in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 140. t., [no ref. no.].

of the Hungarians had demanded to be taken to a nightclub even though all such places had been shut down years earlier.⁷⁰ Despite these incidents, the specialists recalled the trips as the best part of their stay in China.⁷¹

In January 1957, the leaders of the expedition traveled to the Ministry for Geology in Beijing to discuss the survey program they were about to begin. Three embassy staff members, Száll, Újházy, and Tálás, traveled to Lanzhou for the ostensible purpose of setting up a branch of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP). However, they did not have authorization to create a local party organization, and it soon became clear that their real aim was to make inquiries about who had said what and how people had behaved during the "counterrevolution." Horváth suspected that diplomats who feared the Hungarian Foreign Ministry would cut staff were eager to fend off their own recall by stressing their significance. "Exposing" a few rightwing Hungarians and initiating their recall would do just that. Horváth formulated his opinions about all this in a firm tone and sometimes in a style that was unrepeatable in print.

In April, the embassy decided to have Horváth and Pálos summarily recalled, but Gálfi managed to have the decision put on hold until Bese, the head of the National Directorate of Geology, arrived in China for a scheduled visit. Száll, who sent the first telegram to the embassy staff from Tokyo on 5 November 1956 (the day after Soviet troops moved back into Hungary to crush the revolution) with the message that "we are only to support a Hungarian government that is faithful to socialism and allied with the Soviet Union," feared that the dispute over the recalls "would cast extremely bad light on the work our embassy and our domestic authorities perform."⁷² In a report dated 9 May 1957, Száll assumed that

such phenomena might prompt the Chinese comrades to draw the additional conclusion that the system of proletarian dictatorship in our country is far from consolidated if the actions and cadre policies of certain of our authorities are so much out of line with the policies and measures adopted by our government in order to definitely counter all manifestations of rightwing and counterrevolutionary elements. . . . Consequently, in such circumstances, the embassy and the commercial representatives as well as the party organization of the expedition cannot bear the political and moral responsibility for the conduct of the above

70. Report from József Száll, "Jelentés a geofizikus csoport személyi problémáiról," Beijing, 9 May 1957, in NML, M-KS, 288. f., 32. cs., 6. ő.e., 1957.

71. Kilényi, interview.

72. Tálás, unpublished memoirs.

individuals [Horváth and Pálos] or for the damage that they have caused to the prestige of our people's republic and government.⁷³

Száll presented Horváth as primarily responsible and as someone who “perpetually intrigues against upright Communists, makes derogatory statements about members of the foreign representation and closely collaborates with rightwing elements in the group.” The chargé d'affaires passed judgment: “Horváth's role fully amounts to what the role of a counterrevolutionary would be in the given circumstances.” Then, to reinforce this negative assessment, he added that Horváth had “packed one of the thermos flasks that belonged to the hotel in his personal luggage because his own had been broken during his stay in Lanzhou” and that Gálfi had “packed two bath towels with his personal belongings.”⁷⁴

The power struggle between Gálfi, the highly respected head of the expedition and his deputy, Szurovy, probably contributed to the escalation of the conflict. The relationship between the two men was characterized by constant disagreement. They hardly spoke to each other and tended to upset the plans the other had made. Szurovy was unpopular, in general, with members of the group, because everyone knew him by the pretentious-sounding name of Géza von Szurovy.⁷⁵ He had worked for the Hungarian-German Mineral Oil Works Company during World War II, and then in 1948 he was an expert witness for the prosecution in the Hungarian-American Oil Company (MAORT) trial against Simon Papp. An internationally renowned geologist and former colleague of Szurovy, Papp was sentenced to death, although his sentence was later reduced to lifetime imprisonment and then to time served. Papp was released from prison in 1955, the same year Szurovy traveled to China.⁷⁶ Members of the group drew an analogy between Szurovy's betrayal of Papp and his intrigues against Gálfi.⁷⁷

Bese, the head of the National Directorate of Geology, arrived in China in June 1957 to clarify the situation. Disciplinary procedures were conducted,

73. Száll, “Jelentés a geofizikus csoport személyi problémáiról.”

74. Ibid.

75. The March 1943 issue of the journal *Ungarn* (Monatsschrift für Deutsch-Ungarischen Kultur-austausch der Ungarisch-Deutschen Gesellschaft in Budapest) includes a review of the book *Ungarn im Donaumaum*, and Géza von Szurovy is also mentioned. Szurovy wrote the chapter “Budapest, der ungarische Seehafen” in the book.

76. Szurovy tried to clear himself in connection with his role in the MAORT trial in an article published in 1990. See Géza Szurovy, “A MAORT per a tények tükrében,” *Bányászati és kohászati lapok: Kőolaj és földgáz*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (May 1990), pp. 129–139.

77. Pacsirszky and Pacsirszky, interview.

and Gálfi, Pálos, Horváth, and Zoltán Proch were summoned back to Budapest. Sándor Nagy, who “could be fully relied on politically,” was appointed leader of the expedition, and the ELGI geophysicist Posgay was sent to replace the senior observer. Horváth was allowed to stay with ELGI. Moreover, his party membership was restored in 1958. By contrast, Gálfi’s life was ruined. He was forced to leave ELGI and was held responsible for instigating the pro-revolutionary actions. The legal proceedings in his case ground on through early 1960.⁷⁸ Ferenc Fábián, a correspondent for the daily newspaper *Népszabadság*, described the expedition in February 1958:

This is a tiny bit of Hungary here. The truth of this statement was best demonstrated in October 1956 when it was possible to succumb to the extremely amplified siren song of [Radio] Free Europe even along the Yellow River. And many were taken in. . . . But there still remained some . . . and quite a great number of true men and Communists. Such as the master driller Pál Rumpf, the engineer Ferenc Honfi or Géza Szurovy, a prominent scholar of geological sciences, who was a non-party member at the time. . . . The small party organization of 12 members was born while fighting and has not lost any of its combat spirit ever since.⁷⁹

The “Great Leap” and the Discovery of the Daqing Oil Field

In 1956, the Hungarian specialists were contracted for two years to survey an area of northwest China. The work they performed in 1956 and 1957 indicated that “the strata are heavily faulted, and there are deep, extensive fault lines in the structure.” These findings prompted Szurovy to conclude that “although some of the shallow drilling revealed traces of mineral oil, the area did not seem to be very promising.”⁸⁰ Because heavy-industry centers were located in highly populated regions, especially near rich coal and iron ore reserves in the northeast, continuing the exploration did not seem expedient. Even if oil had been found, it would not have been enough to justify the cost of building hundreds of kilometers of pipelines to far-away industrial centers.

Before the group completed the survey of the area, someone proposed to continue the exploration elsewhere. Szurovy claimed that he had proposed to relocate the expedition to northeast China because he was convinced

78. Polcz, *Az Eötvös Loránd Geofizikai Intézet története I*, p. 151.

79. Ferenc Fábián, “Magyarok a Sárga folyónál,” *Népszabadság* (Budapest), 6 February 1958, p. 2.

80. Géza Szurovy, *A kőolaj regénye* (Budapest: Hírlapkiadó Vállalat, 1993), p. 355.

that oil exploration would be far more promising in that area. In his book, Szurovy states that the Chinese government approved his proposal in November 1957.⁸¹ Existing archival records do not contain any references to the antecedents of the relocation, however. Apart from the recollections of participants, the single written evidence of the decision is an article published in *Népszabadság* on 6 February 1958 by Fábíán. The article states as fact that the Hungarian group would be relocated to the northeast, where they would be in charge of coordinating the exploration:

Geologists also express the result of their work in numbers. In the last quarter of 1957, their performance was much higher than the average at home, even though they worked in far harsher conditions: one of the seismic crews covered a distance of 165 kilometers a month, the torsion crew that works with 6 torsion balances covered 540 stations at two-kilometer station intervals. However, real appreciation of their work came from Comrade He Changgong, Deputy Minister for Geology. He said that “Seeing the results achieved this autumn, the Chinese government has decided that the Hungarian geophysical group would be put in charge of coordinating the work of a Chinese group of one thousand and would be responsible for the extensive exploration of the Songhua Valley.”⁸²

The official Chinese version is somewhat different. It says that CCP General Secretary Deng Xiaoping convened a meeting to discuss the situation and future of the petroleum industry on 27–28 February 1958. After listening to the reports of experts, Deng stated that the great importance of oil exploration meant they should focus on areas in the northeast, in north Jiangsu, and in Sichuan that were especially promising. “Explorations in the northeast should be a priority. We should be a little more active with the explorations in Songliao and northern Jiangsu, we should get the first results there,” he added.⁸³ The Chinese publication also reveals that 32 crews began to work in the Songliao Plain in the spring of 1958. Among them was “the Chinese-Hungarian group number 116, quite a modern one, which was transferred from the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Basin to support geophysical work.”⁸⁴ Curiously, the Hungarian specialists had never heard of “Group 116”—they were always referred to as the “Geophysical Group of Northeastern Oil Exploration.”⁸⁵ Even the memorial plaque erected by the Chinese Ministry for

81. Ibid.

82. Fábíán, “Magyarok a Sárga folyónál.”

83. Liang Hua and Liu Jinwen, eds., *Zhongguo shiyou tongshi*, Vol. 3, 1949–1978 (Beijing: Zhongguo shihua chubanshe, 2003), pp. 43–44.

84. Ibid., p. 45.

85. Kilenyi, interview.

Geology to acknowledge the activities of the Hungarian group uses this name. The text on the plaque reads:

To all the Hungarian specialists of the Geophysical Group of Northeastern Chinese Oil Exploration! In the spirit of a high degree of internationalism, you have excellently contributed to the great leap in the production of our country in 1958. Long live Chinese-Hungarian friendship! The Ministry for Geology of the People's Republic of China, January 1959.⁸⁶

The plaque mentions the Great Leap Forward, which was introduced in 1958. The relocation of the Hungarian geophysical group to the northeast coincided with the launch of Mao's new economic policy. He and other Chinese leaders wanted to accelerate the pace of building socialism in order to achieve Communism ahead of the Soviet Union. People living in rural areas—roughly 85 percent of the country's total population—were forced into communes as the last step in collectivization. The backyard furnace movement was promulgated with the intention of developing local industry. All units of production, including schools and offices, built their own furnaces and melted iron ore brought from faraway areas. When raw materials ran short, families melted their own iron pots and pans and produced low-quality steel. Foreign Minister Chen Yi said in June 1958, “we would rather not use the term building socialism; we prefer to call the process that is taking place in China a socialist revolution.”⁸⁷ When Chen spoke to the ambassadors of other Communist countries at the end of November, he claimed that “the people's communes have socialist features,” but that

[t]his is not yet Communism. At the same time, we can see that the people's communes will function as the best forms of transition into Communism. . . . We will need to build socialism in the next 15 years from 1958 to 1972. . . . However, a) after we have built socialism, we must see some of the questions related to the transition into Communism, and b) we must already see some of the buds of Communism.⁸⁸

In the late 1950s, tensions between the PRC and the Soviet Union gradually increased. However, reports prepared by the Hungarian embassy in Beijing gave no indication that such problems were emerging. In early 1959,

86. The photograph of the plaque is in the possession of Károly Posgay.

87. Report from Ambassador Sándor Nógrádi, “Beszélgetés Csen Ji elvtárrsal,” Beijing, 4 June 1958, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 5/e 004036/1958.

88. Report from Ambassador Sándor Nógrádi, “Beszélgetés Csen Ji külügyminiszterrel,” Beijing, 28 November 1958, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 5/e 004036/1/1958. Because of the report's significance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs forwarded it to the MSZMP International Department.

Ambassador Sándor Nógrádi prepared a 93-page report on China that described the main feature of Sino-Soviet relations as mutual support: "Soviet foreign policy has always been backed by the world's second largest socialist country and in turn Chinese foreign policy could always enjoy the support of the Soviet Union."⁸⁹ The year 1959 was the high point for Hungarian-Chinese bilateral relations. A decade of good relations since the founding of the PRC was reinforced by the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance the two countries signed on 6 May 1959. At a reception held by the Hungarian embassy after the ceremony, Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Münnich stated in his toast that, "next after the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China is the socialist country for which our people demonstrate the greatest and most profound interest." In a gesture to the Chinese, Münnich averred that "today our people know China as the country whose industrial production will surpass that of Britain in a few years' time and whose agricultural production already rivals that of the United States." He claimed that "today's China is already one of the great powers. And we say this with pride and delight while the imperialists have no option but to grit their teeth and acknowledge this fact."⁹⁰

The reality of the situation, however, was not so bright. Mao's Great Leap policies caused disastrous famines. Dutch historian Frank Dikötter estimates that 45 million people fell victim to the Great Leap.⁹¹ Without question, Chinese leaders were aware of the scale of the catastrophe. The bulletin for CCP elites, *Neibu cankao* (Internal reference), regularly reported on the situation in rural areas. In Mao's birthplace, Hunan Province, an area particularly suitable for agriculture, peasants starved. Economic difficulties gave rise to disputes within the Chinese leadership. However, Mao insisted on pushing forward, and rather than trying to alleviate the starvation he spent more than a year ruthlessly targeting anyone who criticized his economic policy.

Tensions surged between a radicalized Mao and Soviet leaders. Many of the Soviet specialists left China. In June 1959, officials in Moscow advised the Chinese that the USSR would disregard preliminary agreements to provide China with a prototype of the nuclear bomb. Mao perceived this as evidence of the Soviet leaders' ideological weakness.⁹² Leaders in Czechoslovakia and East Germany, like their Soviet counterparts, were skeptical about

89. Report from Sándor Nógrádi, "A Kínai Népköztársaság 1958-ban," Beijing, 9 February 1959, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 5/a 001647/1959.

90. Pohárköszöntő Kínában, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 4/bc sz.n./1959.

91. Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*, p. x.

92. Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 137.

developments in China. Czechoslovak officials had kept track of the economic difficulties and mass famines in China by the end of 1958. Reports prepared by the Czechoslovak embassy indicated that the rapid pace at which the Chinese economy was supposedly developing was baseless. The reports made clear that the Chinese had failed to engage in quality production and had therefore harmed not only China but also other Communist countries.⁹³ Yet there are no indications in Hungarian Foreign Ministry documents or in MSZMP records that the Hungarians viewed the Chinese aspirations and Sino-Soviet disputes as problematic. At a meeting of ambassadors in December 1959, N6grádi discussed the state of Hungarian-Chinese relations by declaring that

the spirit of internationalism is advanced to a very high degree in China. The prestige of the Soviet Union is great and the emergence of some kind of conflict between China and the Soviet Union is obviously only a pipe dream on part of the imperialists. It is out of the question.⁹⁴

In the meantime, China's attitude toward foreign specialists began to shift. Visits by trade delegations were reduced to mere formalities and functioned as occasions for receptions during which hardly any meaningful discussions took place. An embassy report reveals that the 25 Hungarian advisers who worked permanently in China perceived "a certain change in the atmosphere" and a steady decline in cooperation on science and technology. In addition to China's political motives for scaling back cooperation with foreign specialists, the change in atmosphere also stemmed from the Hungarians' frequent tendency to withhold documentation of new products.⁹⁵ The Hungarian group relocated to the base in Changchun in northeastern China in the spring of 1958. There, in the capital of Manchukuo, the one-time Japanese puppet state, the Hungarians were accommodated in modern brick houses surrounded by a park and walls, all built by the Japanese. By 1958, the Chinese were ready to work independently. When the two-year period set in the contract expired, the number of Hungarian specialists was reduced. From that point onward, the Chinese were responsible for performance, and the Hungarians only supervised and inspected the work. At the time of the Great Leap, the Chinese group members offered to work continuously without rest days. The Hungarians essentially agreed to work a period of twenty days straight

93. Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), pp. 139–140.

94. Sándor N6grádi's Speech at the Meeting of Ambassadors, Budapest, 8 December 1959, in NML, M-KS, 288. f., 32. cs., 6. 6.e., 1959.

95. Report from Ambassador Ferenc Martin, "A magyar-kínai politikai, gazdasági és kulturális kapcsolatok jelenlegi állása," Beijing, 7 November 1960, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 4/b t., 004252/2/1960.

followed by four or five days of rest, but in practice one of the seismic crews did fieldwork for nearly two consecutive months from July to September in 1958.⁹⁶

The study and interpretation of geophysical data involved teamwork, but the Hungarian specialists had a key role. On the basis of seismic profile HI-7K, the group of seismic interpreters headed by Posgay concluded that there was a very high probability of finding oil near Datong Town.⁹⁷ Posgay explained the geophysics of the discovery:

The deeper strata demonstrate anomalies between kilometers 25 and 30 in the profile. Refraction survey along the profile suggest faults and a higher velocity raised horst [a fault block]. The location of the third exploratory drilling (Songji 3) in the Songliao Plain was defined in the profile after we combined and interpreted the results of reflection, refraction, gravimeter, telluric, resistivity and aerial magnetic surveys.⁹⁸

“Songji 3” was the deep test hole that hit “oil deposits of industrial significance” on 26 September 1959. Because the discovery coincided with the tenth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, the area was named “Daqing,” or “Great Celebration.”

The significance of the Hungarian contribution was acknowledged by the Chinese government. In January 1960, the Ministry for Geology presented the Hungarian group with a banner that said: “The oil of industrial significance found in the Songliao Plain is the crystallization of Chinese-Hungarian friendship.”⁹⁹ Confounding all expectations, the oil field discovered with the help of Hungarian geophysicists and geologists was incomparably richer than other oil reserves in China. Moreover, it was situated near the major centers of heavy industry in the northeast of the country, adding to its economic significance. Consequently, information related to the oil field was classified as a state secret by the Chinese authorities.

After the discovery of the field, the Chinese attitude toward the Hungarian experts changed. Mistrust that ensued from disputes with the Soviet Union might also have played a role in diminishing the importance of friendship and internationalist assistance in the PRC’s eyes. In late 1959, the Ministry for Geology began withdrawing Hungarian experts from the field. Posgay and

96. Pacsirszky, “A család együtt töltött napjai az 1956. 07. 22. és 1959. 09. 21. közötti időszakban.”

97. The tracing paper with the data for the profile is in the possession of Károly Posgay.

98. Károly Posgay, “A kínai expedíció (1956–1961),” in Polcz, ed., *Az Eötvös Loránd Geofizikai Intézet története I*, pp. 290.

99. The original banner was lost. A color copy can be seen at the ELGI Museum.

Ádám were transferred to Yanan, the CCP headquarters prior to 1949, in the hope that they could achieve similar success there.¹⁰⁰ But as soon as the Chinese realized the full value of what they had found with Hungarian assistance, Chinese specialists were forbidden to share accurate data with the Hungarian experts. The interpreter working with the Hungarian group recalled that “this made the work of Chinese experts extremely difficult because they lived under constant threat and did not know what data they were allowed to share, and at the same time this prevented Hungarian experts from performing their tasks successfully in the last few months as they would have obviously needed accurate data for their scientific work.”¹⁰¹

The first signs of secrecy were perceived by the Hungarian authorities in 1960. Barely a month after the withdrawal of Soviet specialists from China, First Deputy Geology Minister He Changgong headed a six-member delegation to Hungary. After the visit, He informed the embassy in Beijing that Szurovy wanted to publish a book about his experiences in China as the senior geologist in the Hungarian group. In connection with the book, He warned that

the Chinese government has classified all research work done by Hungarian geologists, and the relevant agreement stipulates that no related material can be unilaterally published without prior consent from the Chinese government. It was also stated by He that the Chinese would lodge an official protest if the book was published.

Therefore, the Hungarian Foreign Ministry demanded that Bese, the general director of the Hungarian Oil and Gas Trust, take “effective action” so that “Comrade Szurovy’s aforementioned book would not be published, if such plans ever existed.” The Foreign Ministry also urged Bese to launch an immediate inquiry to find out “how and in what form Deputy Minister Comrade He learned about this information.”¹⁰² Although no archival records regarding the outcome of the investigation are available, the Chinese deputy minister’s

100. Posgay contacted typhoid fever in Yanan and could not contribute to any further work. He returned to Hungary in August 1960 following his recovery. Interview with Károly Posgay, Budapest, 11 May 2016. Ádám and two new specialists, László Körössi and Fácínay, worked as advisers in China until 1962. They traveled to Yanan several times. Song, interview.

101. Report from Ambassador Ferenc Martin (prepared by György Ujlaki), “Beszélgetés a Nagy elvtárs vezette magyar geológus csoport tolmácsával,” Beijing, 25 October 1962, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 140. t., 008212/1962.

102. Fifth Territorial Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Memorandum from Head of Department János Nagy, “Szurovy Géza geofizikus készülő könyvével kapcsolatos kínai észrevételek,” Budapest, 3 January 1961, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 140. t., 00130/1961.

source was likely Szurovy, who, as one of the Hungarians accompanying the delegation, might have talked about his plans for a book.¹⁰³

The Eighth Plenary Session of the Committee for Hungarian-Chinese Cooperation in Science and Technology was held in Budapest in November and December 1963, long after ideological disputes between the Soviet Union and the PRC had erupted.¹⁰⁴ Secretarial-level talks took place first, and the Chinese secretary proposed that the practice of holding plenary meetings as part of the session should be abandoned and that talks should be conducted with two secretaries and experts only. This was an indication on the Chinese part that ideological and political disputes would affect other bilateral inter-governmental relations sooner or later. The Hungarians insisted on the need for plenary meetings by arguing that this longstanding practice had always been reliable, and the Chinese eventually consented. The first plenary meeting, which lasted for about 90 minutes, was held “in a friendly atmosphere all along,” according to the Hungarian report. László Földi, the Hungarian chairman of the committee and first deputy minister of light industries, delivered the opening speech, which was organized around topics the Hungarian Foreign Ministry had previously proposed. Földi recalled the major landmarks during the ten-year period of cooperation, including the successful activities of the group of Hungarian geologists in China. In response, the Chinese chairman tried to avoid citing concrete results, but he did talk about cooperation in a positive tone. He admitted that China had benefited from working with the Hungarians, but he also highlighted that “perhaps China has also achieved some results, which the Hungarians have used in building their own country.”

The Chinese delegation traveled to Zala County, the site of Hungarian oil production, where they inspected hydraulic rigs, including one capable of drilling to a depth of 5,000 meters. In Budapest, the delegation visited the Ministry of Heavy Industry’s drilling rig factory. Three of the resolutions adopted at the previous (seventh) session were canceled, among them the transfer of manufacturing schematics for an automatic “carottage” (borehole logging) apparatus, which had earlier been included in the agreement at the request of the Chinese.¹⁰⁵

103. Fifth Territorial Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Memorandum from Head of Department János Nagy, “A kínai geológiai miniszter I. helyettesének magyarországi látogatása,” n.d., in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 140. t., 003612/1/1960.

104. Fourth Territorial Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China Desk, Memorandum from Sándor Pataki, “Magyar-kínai MTEB 8. Ülészaka,” Budapest, 3 December 1963, in NML, XIX-J-1-j, Kína, 140. t., 177/1963.

105. A borehole is drilled to study rock strata. With this method no samples are taken to the surface; rather, geophysical measurements are performed in the borehole itself.

After 1960, China put great effort into becoming self-reliant and strove to meet all its needs for oil and gas from its own resources. No official statistics were published in China at the time, but the annual oil production of the Daqing oilfield is estimated at around 50 million tons, enough to have met one-third of domestic needs. Primarily thanks to Daqing, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai stated in December 1963 that the period of dependency on oil from abroad was over. China was self-sufficient.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

Daqing became a model town in the mid-1960s, an exemplar of self-reliance and rapid transition to Communism. During China's Cultural Revolution, visitors from all over the PRC traveled to Daqing to learn from its residents how an industrial town also managed to provide agricultural products for its population without central investment. In the spirit of "leaning to one side," Mao Zedong expected and received assistance from the Soviet Union in building up modern industries after the Japanese occupation and the years of civil war. The energy resources China could draw on were also developed on the basis of Soviet plans and with Soviet assistance. More than half of the refined oil China needed came from the Soviet Union, and assistance in science and technology were also provided by East European countries. Valuable as all this aid was, Chinese leaders were determined to embrace a policy of self-reliance.

Cooperation in science and technology between the Soviet Union and China and between Hungary and China differed in several respects. The real challenge faced by the Chinese was how to strike a balance between access to foreign assistance and avoidance of political and economic dependence on the Soviet Union. Soviet and Chinese considerations were occasionally at odds, but the PRC's relationship with Hungary was much smoother. Hungary was seen by the Chinese as an ideal partner that strengthened its political alignment with China when needed, and the quality of Hungarian instruments was exceptionally high by world standards. The Chinese thus gained access to the knowledge and technology they needed for geophysical exploration while avoiding excessive reliance on the Soviet Union. The knowledge China gained was helpful in attaining national independence and self-reliance. Surprisingly, despite Moscow's intentions to exert control over knowledge transfer from the Warsaw Pact states to the PRC, the archival record contains no indication

106. Liang and Liu, eds., *Zhongguo shiyou tongshi*, p. 100.

that the Soviet Union tried to control or intervene in Hungary's geophysical expedition to China.

Although the geopolitical and ideological framework was set for possible cooperation, both the Hungarians and the Chinese had a pragmatic approach to collaboration in science and technology. For the Hungarians, "internationalist assistance" was underpinned by the "interests of the national economy": gaining access to the vast Chinese market for the export of Hungarian technical equipment. However, this aspiration proved counterproductive for Hungary. Even as the best Hungarian experts worked in China, research and development in geophysics gained new impetus in the capitalist West in the 1950s. This left Hungary using old methods and old technical equipment until the early 1960s.¹⁰⁷ The development of technical instruments resumed only after the Hungarian experts returned home. Furthermore, work relations with the Chinese were discontinued, and no further joint projects were implemented after the Sino-Soviet split. Although the activities of specialists were presented in official propaganda as the unselfish exchange of expertise between Communist countries, China also viewed cooperation as a long-term investment, and its investment with Hungary yielded significant returns indeed.

107. Polcz, *Az Eötvös Loránd Geofizikai Intézet története I*, p. 189.