Undesired Outcomes: China’s Approach to Border Disputes during the Early Cold War

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This presentation will explore the evolution of China’s border policy through the 1950s and 1960s. Drawing on newly available archival sources and recent secondary literature, it will argue that during the early Cold War, the PRC leadership lacked a clear sense of the concept of national sovereignty, and often attempted to use territorial negotiations with China’s neighbours to bargain for broader foreign policy objectives. The presentation will also examine the historical and political assumptions underlying Mao Zedong’s approach to border questions, suggesting that Mao combined longstanding imperial assumptions about universal emperorship with the modern, Marxist idea of a world revolution.

SHEN ZHIHUA is an historian greatly admired in China as a pioneer of archival research on the Cold War, the Korean War and Sino-Soviet relations. Internationally renowned for his scholarship, Professor Shen Zhihua first attracted significant media attention in 1995 when he committed some 1.4 million yuan of his own money to buy declassified historical archives from Russia. A six-year project (1996-2002) grew out of this acquisition, which Professor Shen Zhihua undertook in collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), involving the translation, collation and editing of the archival materials. The project led to the publication of the thirty-four-volume Selected Historical Documents of the Soviet Union, released in instalments from 2002 to 2008. This massive anthology has shaped mainland scholarship about the Cold War ever since. Professor Shen Zhihua is currently researching and teaching at the Center for Cold War International History Studies, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China.