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China: The Civilization-State

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On the Reforms in China and the Soviet Union: From the Perspective of Comparative Civilizations

From the late 1970s, the communist world embraced a wave of reform. However, unlike the era of Stalin and Brezhnev, the action pace and the route selection in communist countries were not in a unitary way under the order by coercion from the Soviet Union. Instead, two typical reform routes emerged in the Soviet Union and China. In the Soviet Union, under the policies of the Perestroika and Glasnost, communists conducted their reform in a radical and thorough way, attempting to deal with political and economic realm in a short time. In contrast, China, with the Great Leap Outward (a more appropriate translation instead of The Reform and Openness, by James C. Hsiung, 2012), went on a relative gradual pace that they only focused the reform in economic realm and deemphasized political reform. Different choices resulted in opposite outcomes: the radical reform in the Soviet Union led to the collapse of communist regimes and trapped them in long period of economic pitfall and political instability; while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is still in power and the economic growth in China rocketed.

Questions arise here: what made the two major forces of communist world diverge into different routes which led to opposite outcomes? Are there any intrinsic

reasons that accounted for their choices? Several Scholars have presented explanations about why China and the Soviet Union shifted to different reform routes. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Anders Aslund (1989) had set his comments on the comparison between reforms in China and the Soviet Union. He presented three accounting factors to explain the obvious failure in the Soviet Union and the success in China. Firstly, China, after experiencing the disastrous Cultural Revolution, was eager to install reform but the Soviet Union did not have such incentive. Second, large scale of manual agricultural population gave China great potential to release her reform while the Soviet Union, who heavily relied on industrial governmental monopolized agriculture, had no alternative to reform her rural economy. Finally, the reestablished bureaucratic system was firmly controlled by Deng Xiaoping in China, which let Deng conduct his reform relatively smoothly than Gorbachev, who was only an inheritor of former Brezhnev system. Opinions above were boosted by later scholars. Nancy Tucker (1995) agreed with the third point that the over-centralized Soviet system impeded the reform while China whose bureaucracy was destroyed by the Cultural Revolution is more decentralized, which was easier for China to carry forward the reform. Huang Yasheng (1994) also focused on the difference between institutional issues of both China and the Soviet Union, arguing that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was better informed about economic conditions than its counterpart the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was, which made it more likely to enforce realistic economic policies. Such divergence accounts for the failure of the CPSU and the success of the CCP. However, both two articles did not explain why,

despite the institutional entrenchment, Soviet political reform moved rapidly after 1987 and in contrast China did it gradually as always.

In terms of the shortcoming above, Robert Strayer (2001) presented a plausible explanation about why Soviet elites did so dramatically that they totally abandoned their existing ideology but their counterparts in China did not. He mentioned that Chinese core executives were still the generation of revolutionary who were unlikely to deny their past by themselves. Situation differed in the Soviet Union: most of them are grandsons of revolutionaries and their lack of revolutionary experience resulted in the lack of motive to protect their legitimacy, which led to the tragedy. Scott Rozelle and Johan F.M. Swinnenb (2009) resolved this problem in another perspective. They firstly carried on analyzing Aslund's point on agricultural issue in political economy scope and further they provided an acceptable answer for why both executives took different degrees to propel the process of reform. They argued that different outcomes of agriculture reform determined opposite reform roads and fates of two countries. Both countries launched agriculture reform in the late 1970s. For the Soviet Union, the lack of incentives of grassroots and local official to reform, the less decentralized institutional arrangement and the long history of implementing collective farm hindered the agriculture reform and accounted for its failure. In contrast, because of the strong support from both executive officials and the grassroots to the reform, the decentralization tradition and the comparatively short history of collective farm, Communist government in China had fewer obstacles than the Soviet Union did and thus successfully conducted the agriculture reform. With this huge success, the CCP

established its new political legitimacy, being able hold on power and therefore control the process of reform in a gradual way in a stable political environment. For the Soviet Union, unfortunately, the loss of agriculture reform to an extent shook the foundation of communist rule, leaving the CPSU no chance to stabilize its domestic politics. To overcome this crisis, Soviet leaders altered to reform in a much radical way, intending to overthrow the old system entirely.

Opinions above provided reasonable explanation about why China conducted the reform gradually while the Soviet Union did it radically. However, scopes that have been already presented are not enough to illustrate this complex problem. Offering a novel angle, this paper aims at interpreting reasons that accounted for disparate reform choices between the two countries from the perspective of distinctions of the Russian and Chinese civilizations, arguing that were it different cultural traditions rooted in the two civilizations that fundamentally resulted in disparate choices of reform and their opposite outcomes. These different traditions contribute to hypotheses of this paper that are following: (a) the different living forms of Russian and Chinese ancient people, nomadism and agrarian economy, inherited opposite philosophies of the world in two civilizations. Exclusiveness and inclusiveness respectively in the Russian and Chinese civilization, to a large extent differentiated the level of intensity in two reforms. (b) The different views toward human nature salvation inclinations that largely shaped by religion or major thought in respect countries between the Russian and Chinese civilization influenced the strategy of political reform in the two cases. (c) The different tradition of governance, specifically the attitude of government toward

regulating the economy, made the key points in the two reforms differ. In sum, differences all above resulted in opposite outcomes of reforms: catastrophe in Soviet Union and prosperity in China.

Methodology used here is qualitative and comparative study, using reform in former Soviet Union and China as two cases to be examined. The rest of this paper will be organized in two parts. The following part will mainly discuss the concept and importance of civilization and different characteristics of the Russian and Chinese civilization. After this, assumptions above will be tested. In this section, I will present particular actions or words of executives of both sides and interpret them by different characteristics of the Russian and Chinese civilization, in order to prove that such differences accounted for the road divergence between two countries. A conclusion and prospective research outlook will be demonstrated in the last part.

Major Cultural Differences in the two Civilizations

The word civilization comes from the Latin *civilis*, meaning civil, related to the Latin *civis*, meaning citizen, and *civitas*, meaning city or city-state¹. Civilization is a sometimes controversial term that has been used in several related ways. In a material way, civilization can be understood as ancient human society with economic and social development in certain region, such as the Yellow River Civilization and Mesopotamia Civilization. In this paper, the term civilization is an abstract complex, which refers to the material and instrumental side of human cultures that are complex in terms of

¹ Larry E. Sullivan (2009), *The SAGE glossary of the social and behavioral sciences*, Editions SAGE, p. 73

technology, science, and division of labor. Samuel P. Huntington (1997) defines civilization as "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species."² This definition is parsimonious, but not specific, for it does not reflect characteristics of civilization and is usually confused with the term "culture" which is actually a subset of civilization. James C. Hsiung (2012) regards civilization as "a way of life, subsuming aspects such as means of subsistence, types of livelihood, forms of governance, exchange practices, literacy and a writing system, standardization of the measures of distance and weight, and above all sharing of a common Weltanschauung and aspirations even worshipping of the same folklore heroes and deities."³ This specific definition reveals that civilization contains a wide range of substance, not only the superstructure which is often regarded as culture. Means of subsistence, such as agriculture, lays the foundation of civilization and contribute to its development, evolving into culture.

Further, representing the superstructure of civilization, culture serves as a distinctive characteristic when comparing civilizations. In other words, civilization is more like a category, and culture is used to distinguish categories. As Hsiung continues to state, if we devoid the natural or non-social parts, the term culture can be an

² Samuel P. Huntington (1997), *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*, Simon and Schuster, p.

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³ James C. Hsiung, *China into its second Rise: Myths, Puzzles, Paradoxes and Challenge to Theory*. Singapore:

World Scientific, 2012. p.3

alternative of civilization. Hence, in this paper, I use “culture” to replace “civilization” in appropriate situation, especially when discussing about social factors of civilization.

Cultures in two civilizations are remarkably different. They own different origins, different dominant thoughts/religions, and thus, different historical traditions. Four of major differences can be identified as following:

(a) **Inherited by different origins of civilizations and the major thoughts of different points of major thoughts/religions in two civilizations, the Chinese culture has the characteristic of “inclusivism” while oppositely, the Russian culture obtains “exclusivism”.** For the Chinese civilization, the agriculture practice began significant early and made China an agrarian country. For settlers (mainly farmers) of such country, the biggest interest is inside their land, the crop output. Once the harvest is bad, what farmers focus is on how to improve their seeds or technology of irrigation, rather than migration, let alone the demand of others’ land. In other word, farmers prefer to integrate whatever advantageous factors they can utilize, instead of finding another place. In abstract, when facing the reality that contains two opposite parts, farmers consider more on how to reconcile them rather than to use one to overwhelm another. This resulted in a Chinese dialectics of “yinyang”, contributing to the characteristic of “inclusivism” in Chinese culture. In contrast, living in arid areas, ancient Russian nomads rely on oasis. When grass of one oasis is run out, they must turn to another. If the oasis they newly find is claimed by others, they are inclined to drive these enemies away from their target oasis. Such attitude leads to the “exclusivism” in Russian culture, that when facing conflict, Russians often intend to

eliminate the opposite part. The different origins of two civilizations also inherited “inclusivism” and “exclusivism” to the major thoughts/religions in two civilizations. Lots of historical records can be found to prove it. For Confucianism, there is no such “heresy” exists because Confucianism itself has include almost all kinds of thoughts, integrating them to contribute to its own doctrine. Foreign religions/cultures were never banned in China and they were even absorbed into the Confucian system. In Russia, the dominant religion is the Eastern Orthodox Church. Its origin, Christianity, in order to exterminate heresy, the church launched the crusade that cost thousands of lives.

(b) With the same reason of (a), in the Chinese culture, people tends to find their salvation from within while in Russian culture, salvation are found from outside⁴. For Chinese, because agrarian culture does not encourage people to migrate, farmers get used to find salvation from within their land. In contrast, Nomadism generates “Abraham culture”, which teaches people that the salvation is always outside (such as God). This can be resulted from the nomadic life because nomads always have to look for new oasis outside their previous place. Both thoughts was solidified in dominant thoughts/religions⁵, Confucianism and the Eastern Orthodox Church (one of branches of Christianity which originates from the Abraham culture), exerting more influence on people’s Weltanschauung in two countries.

⁴ See details in James C. Hsiung, “Meeting of Chinese & Western Civilizations: What Does It Reveal of People’s Virtues & Infirmities”.

⁵ See details in Feng Youlan (1948), *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (Collier-Macmillan) — reprinted 1997: Free Press

(c) The view of human nature differs in the two cultures. Christianity upholds the point of original sin while Confucianism believes in original goodness.

Such difference can be obviously identified in classic works of both thoughts/religion. Hsiung (2012) has done sufficient work in his article to compare the views toward human nature in classic works of both thoughts/religion to substantiate this point⁶.

(d) The Chinese culture has the tradition of government regulation of economy but the Russian does not. This distinction results from the difference of government power, which is determined by history trajectories of both civilizations. According to Hsiung (2012), the sequence of the founding of the major religion/thought and the establishment of centralized government affects the power of government. If the establishment of the empire system precedes the founding of the dominant religion/thought, the power of religion/thought can be used as unifier to strengthen the power of government. If not, the power of government will be relatively weak. The unitary regime in China started from 221 B.C., and the Confucianism was set as the “National teaching” in 136 B.C. For Russia, the Christianity was founded long prior to the establishment of the regime and acceptance of its branch, the Eastern Orthodox Church, as the national religion. Thus, the Confucianism contribute to unify the Chinese civilization and society, guaranteeing a powerful central government throughout the history but Christianity did not help Russian government in that way. Further, the tradition of government regulating economy also resulted from different

⁶ See details in James C. Hsiung: “The Human-Nature Premise: Is It Possible to Reconcile Christian & Confucian Cultures?”

functions between Confucianism and Christianity. Christianity is a divine thought, a religion, which focus mainly on appealing people's beliefs. Unlikely, Confucianism is a secular thought, showing its comprehensive concerns towards people's lives. When used by an established central government, its comprehensive concerns bring up an omnipotent government. One of the initial motives of government regulating the trade of salt and iron in China was guided by the Confucian concern of people's daily life: salt and iron are extremely important resources; if they are monopolized by profit-oriented businessman, the normal lives of people would be vulnerable.

As discussed, the Chinese and Russian civilizations have remarkable differences. In the following part, certain policy selection and conduction during reforms in China and the Soviet Union will be interpreted by cultural differences showed above, to explain why they shifted onto divergent reform routes.

Analysis of the two reforms from the angle of cultural difference

Coincident with the economic crisis in the 1970s, due to its systematic defects, the communist world fell into predicaments. To resolve the plights, communist countries began to look for reforms. After the death of Brezhnev in 1982, his followers, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko did plan to conduct some reforms in economic realm. However, because of their early deaths, such reforms were not thoroughly implemented until the inauguration of the young Gorbachev who pushed the reform further in 1985. After some personnel arrangement of using more reformists, Gorbachev announced his policy of Perestroika in 1986, by publishing his book

*Perestroika*⁷: *New Thinking for Our Country and the World*. However, the economic reform did not show significant positive effects. This made Gorbachev begin to hold the belief that without the accompanying political reform. Therefore, the more radical action, the Glasnost, which called for increased openness and transparency in government institutions and activities in the Soviet Union, came out in 1987. It also emphasized the freedom of speech for people, which meant citizens would have the right to express and debate on political affairs publicly without the fear of prosecutions. Hence, also under the effect of openness and transparency in government institutions which led more and more historical documents declassified (mainly are atrocity of Joseph Stalin), pouring critics toward the Soviet history and even the CPSU. Meanwhile, Gorbachev continued his political reform by establishing the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union as an independent legislative institution, which gave large part of power of the CPSU away. These made the CPSU out of control of the nation, which directly led to the collapse of the Union in 1991.

Prior to the reform of the Soviet Union, Deng Xiaoping, the actual leader of CCP, launched the policy of the Great Leap Outward in late 1978, attempting to get rid of the ruins left by the era of Mao. The reform was initiated in rural economy. The system of the People's Commune was abolished and substituted by the household contract responsibility system. In the early 1980s, the CCP summarized the Mao era, criticizing his cult of personality but still uphold Mao Zedong Thought. The economic reform

⁷ The literal meaning of perestroika is "restructuring", referring to the restructuring of the Soviet political and economic system.

broke through into cities in 1985, which allow partial market economy in cities. It revitalized the Chinese economy but also led to some voice urging the CCP to enact political reform toward the Western democracy. Unlike Gorbachev, Deng insisted on the leadership of the CCP and the importance of political stability, suppressing the demonstration in 1989. The political stability gave the CCP a safe environment to continue its economic reform and ultimately established the market economy in the 1990s, joining the World Trade Organization in 2001. After 30 years of the reform, China has been the second largest economy of the world, while successfully maintains the political stability and continuous economic growth.

It has been shown that the reforms in the Soviet Union and China have great differences. These differences can be sorted to three different aspects as following, which can be resulted from the cultural difference in two civilizations:

(1) The culture of the Russian civilization made elites in the Soviet Union believe that socialism and market economy cannot coexist simultaneously, but that of the Chinese civilization taught Chinese leaders to integrate them harmoniously. It can be explained in two aspects of cultural difference. The first one is related to the characteristics of “exclusivism” and “inclusivism” in two civilizations, respectively. The Soviet elites were influenced by the idea that "political and economic reforms were inextricably interlinked"⁸. Alexander Yakovlev⁹, perhaps the

⁸ Peter Nolan, *China's Rise; Russia's Fall* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 231

⁹ Alexander Nikolaevich Yakovlev was a Soviet politician and historian. During the 1980s he was a member of the Politburo and Secretariat of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. As the chief of party ideology, he was

most influential of Gorbachev's early advisors, spoke of the "synergism of politics and the economy."¹⁰ Thus, the "exclusivism" led the Soviet elites to think further, that the free market system of capitalism cannot coexist with socialism. Thus, once the reform is enacted toward opening the market economy, correspondingly, the political institutions should shift to the Western democratic system. Yakolev referred to Bolshevism as "social lunacy" and described it as "an anti-human precept, hammered in with the ruthlessness of an ideological fanaticism that conceals its intellectual and economic nullity."¹¹ Even Gorbachev and Shevardnadze¹² had early agreed that "everything is rotten" in the Soviet system, and that "it's no longer possible to live this way."¹³ Therefore, the power of "exclusivism" showed here incurring the inclination to expel socialism out of the Soviet political realm. Just under such cognition, the Perestroika was paired with the Glasnost, which ultimately led to the wave of denying socialism and the leadership of the CPSU.

Unlikely, the characteristic of "inclusivism" in the Chinese culture gave the reform in China a different look, providing a unique perspective to identify and absorb the commonalities between Marxism and market economy. While rehabilitating private sector of economy and the price system, without denying Marxism, the Chinese elites

called the "godfather of glasnost" as he is considered to be the intellectual force behind Mikhail Gorbachev's reform program of glasnost and perestroika.

¹⁰ Alexander Yakolev, *The Fate of Marxism in Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70

¹² Eduard Ambrosius dze Shevardnadze was former Soviet minister of foreign affairs.

¹³ See Paul Hollander, *Political Will and Personal Belief: The Decline and Fall of Soviet Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) for many examples of the waning belief of Soviet officials.

developed a theory of the Primary Stage of Socialism, arguing that since the ultimate goal of Marxism is communism, the major goal of the Primary Stage of Socialism is to develop the productivity, in order to achieve communism. Thus, economic development by the approach of market economy is justifiable to be utilized to reach this goal. Under this logic, two incompatible concepts in the Russian culture were compromised in the Chinese culture, which serves as the theoretical foundation to direct the way of economic development.

Another explanation is about the tradition of the Chinese culture of government regulating the economy that the culture of Russia does not have. For the Soviet Union, its economic reform is to thoroughly privatization and marketization, embracing the capitalism system with no interference from government. But for Chinese leaders, the Marxism doctrine of planned economy is compatible with the Chinese tradition of government regulating the economy, which gives a hand to the government to master the national economy. Therefore, Chinese elites avoided from abandoning Marxism, emphasizing on economic reform under the political control, and Gorbachev and his colleagues did not have incentives on that.

(2) The different characteristics of two cultures, “inclusivism” and “exclusivism”, also determined the ways of how leaders and people treated their history which contradicted the direction of reforms. For the Soviet Union, “exclusivism” toward history is significant in the nation’s political life. Historical records shows that the Russian leaders tends to take radical attack on policies or personality of predecessor when whose thoughts or actions are conflicted with the

incumbents'. After the death of Stalin, in the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, the successor of Stalin, criticized harshly on his predecessor in his "Secret Speech". But in the reform of the late 1980s, this tradition acted more severely. It harshly criticized not only Stalin's cruel and ignominious acts, such as mass killings and prison camps, and the covert accord with Nazi Germany, but also on the whole Soviet history, which made people feel shame of their country and lose sense of belonging. In contrast, the Chinese reform leaders took a more moderate approach to the past, attempting to "include" the positive aspect of the past into current use. Although there were some dissident intellectuals¹⁴ who used the theories of "humanism" and "alienation" to address the political problems of Chinese communism, intending to take thorough negation of the Mao era, they were purged out of the party. In 1981, the CCP passed the *Resolution of on certain questions in the history of the party since the founding of the nation*. It subtly criticized the utopian experiment and personality cult of Mao, but still high praised his feat as the major contributor of the establishment of the communist regime, as 30% flaw and 70% feat of his life. The "inclusivism" successfully integrated the Thought of Mao Zedong still as the flag of the CCP and continued to use it to unify the people, avoiding the tragedy in the Soviet Union.

(3) The different strategies of political reforms in two countries resulted from the different views toward human nature and attitude toward salvation in two civilizations. It should be noted that both leaders in two countries had the intention

¹⁴ Zhou Yang and Wang Ruoshui.

of political reform, although Deng de-emphasized it. However, two political reforms differed in not only scale, but also route. For leaders in the Soviet Union who were affected by the thought of original sin, because of the evil essence of human nature, they tend to believe that to a government, its power should be counterbalanced by an out-stander, to save the government from potential villainy driven by the evil nature of human. Again, such a salvation, under the view of “salvation from outside” in Christian thus Russian culture, should be outside the government itself. With such direction, Gorbachev conducted his political reform from outside, to establish new institutions to balance the CPSU. In 1989, the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union was founded as the highest body of state authority and the legislative institution of the country, replacing the former Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union controlled by the CPSU. It absorbed many dissidents and led many candidates in the CPSU lose the election, which gradually loosed the power of control of the CPSU. But for Chinese leaders, who believed in the original goodness in human nature, it was not important to let the government be checked and balanced, because the original goodness and moral power can help the leaders improve themselves, making good policies. As to the salvation of political reform, it should be found inside the organization. Therefore, Deng designed the first step of political reform in China from inside the CCP. Two actions can be identified here. First, Deng allowed competitive election in all level of congress of the CCP, even in the election of politburo. Second, he established an in-party institution to serve the role for check but not balance, Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Communist Party of China, charging with

rooting out corruption and malfeasance among party cadres. These actions promoted the democracy within the party and further prevent from losing the control of situation which happened in the Soviet Union.

In general, the cultural differences in two civilizations are responsible for the divergent reform route selections and specific strategies in two countries. Initially, the different characteristics of “exclusivism” and “inclusivism” shaped the core designs of the two reforms, that the leader of the Soviet Union conducted economic and political reform simultaneously while Chinese leaders only focused on economic reform and de-emphasized political reform. Further, the tradition of government regulating economy led the Chinese leaders treat political authority as means to intervene the economy, but the consideration of the Soviet leaders was totally release. The public critics on the Soviet history that resulted from the “exclusivism” made the CPSU itself unpopular, leaving no choice for them but continue to enlarge the scale of political reform. Meanwhile the “inclusivism” in the Chinese culture taught its leaders a moderate way to treat history, which enabled the CCP to continue its economic reform under political control. Finally, the different view of human nature and salvation inclination shifted the ways of two countries when they conducted political reform: the Soviet leaders found an institution outside the CPSU as salvation to check and balance the central authority, which Chinese leaders never did. All above ultimately resulted in different outcomes: the failure of the Soviet reform and the success of the Chinese one.

Conclusion

This paper analyzes the cultural differences in the Russian and Chinese civilizations, arguing that such differences explain why the reforms in the Soviet Union and China shifted to divergent routes. Since this article is limited to discuss the cultural factor, other contributors that are also responsible to the different outcomes are not included. Future studies are expected to combine the cultural factors with others, investigating their relationship and the co-effects on the two reforms.

An implication can be identified with a question: one would ask that, since the reform route of China has gained great success, can this route be duplicated? The answer is no. As this paper showed, the different reform routes in the Soviet Union and China were determined by different culture in the two civilizations. The Chinese reform route selection complied with its culture, and the Soviet one also reflected its culture characteristics, which means that the route of reform should be selected according to certain cultural background. Since culture is the core of civilization, its uniqueness cannot be replicated. The Chinese civilization, with its culture, has been standing and developing uniquely in the world history for thousands of years, so it is impossible for others to emulate it in a short time. A rational choice of reform route needs to take the cultural characteristic in certain country into consideration, explore a unique way that complies to the uniqueness of culture, not simply duplicating others.

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