

The Post-Collective Village: A Tale of Two Transitions

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Summary. — This paper provides an ethnographic look at economic change in rural areas of remote regions of Russia and China. While the structural conditions of agriculture at the outset of reform partially explain the dramatically different trajectories of reform seen in my study sites, the current state of economic stagnation or economic development in these areas should not primarily be seen as a legacy of pre-reform conditions. It is largely the economic policies pursued by the Russian and Chinese governments that have created or failed to create the conditions that enable post-socialist farmers to take advantage of market opportunities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Toward the end of the 20th century, the world's two largest and most powerful socialist economies, the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, embarked upon major market-oriented reforms. This economic liberalization in Russia and China has taken shape in very different ways. While China's economy has steadily expanded, Russia's in the 1990s dramatically contracted. According to official Russian statistics, Russia's GDP declined by some 60% during 1989–97, while China's average GDP growth since 1979 has been around 9% (Cohen, 2002). While recognizing that there are problems with both Russian and Chinese government statistics, these numbers, if not completely accurate, illustrate the dramatically different trajectories these economies took after economic reforms were initiated. It was not until 1999, with increases in world fuel prices and the depreciation of the ruble in 1998, that GDP in Russia began to steadily increase (Cooper, 2006). In agriculture, the focus of this study, from 1989 to 1994 production decreased by 25% in Russia (Friedman, 1996). By contrast in China, Lin (1992) estimates that agricultural production (excluding the enterprise sector) increased over 7% a year in the first few years after rural reforms.

In both China and Russia, the cornerstone of reform in agriculture was the decollectivization of collectivized farms, the *kolkhoz* in the Soviet Union and the *gongshe* in the People's Republic of China. Although there is evidence that the process of decollectivization in the two countries met with both resistance and enthusiasm on the part of cultivators and cadres, in general, cultivators in China have been more enthusiastic about withdrawing from the collective farm and engaging in market-oriented private farming (Kelliher, 1992; Zhou, 1996), while Russian cultivators, who have continued to engage in subsistence farming on household plots, have been more reluctant to give up the security of the collective farm (Wegren, 1996).

Why such different paths and processes have been seen in the two countries has been the subject of debate for numerous scholars (Burawoy, 1996; Johnson, 1994; Macours & Swinnen, 2002; Nolan, 1996; Pei, 1994; Sachs & Woo, 1994). Are these differences explained by pre-existing institutional arrangements in the countries, the way reforms were implemented, or by cultural differences between the rural people of Russia and China?

This paper is an ethnography of change that illustrates some of the salient differences between the experiences of rural people in remote, peripheral areas of Russia and China which, unlike the coastal regions of China or the major Russian cities, Moscow, St. Petersburg, and the famous poster child for successful market reforms, Nizhny Novgorod, are places that may have been less able to take advantage of new opportunities that have opened up with reform. Through an examination of agriculture and rural life in Amur Province in the Russian Far East and in Guizhou Province in southwestern China, this paper compares structural conditions, reform policies, and the implementation of reforms in these two relatively poor areas. The very different ways in which agricultural reform has been experienced in the Russian villages of Muraviovka and Kuropatino in Amur Province and the Chinese hamlets of Weining County in Guizhou Province help illuminate debates over why economic reform in rural areas of Russia and China has had such divergent outcomes.

Ethnographies examining the impacts of economic reform have generally focused on change within a single country, while scholars comparing economic reforms in China and Russia have generally used aggregate data, not specific ethnographies that they have completed in both the countries. In contrast, this paper, comparing rural reform in Russia and China, is based on twenty-nine months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted during successive field visits during 1997–2005. While Muraviovka and Kuropatino and the hamlets of Weining are not necessarily representative of all agricultural villages in their respective countries, an ethnographic study of agricultural reform in these sites reveals many fundamental differences in the paths and processes of reform in rural Russia and China that are potentially generalizable to many areas in both the countries. This paper will not be the final word on why there are such differences between the rural experience of reform in Russia and China, but it will give faces to a debate where much of the discussion has focused on aggregates.

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This study has found that the dramatically different choices that collective farmers in Russia and China initially made with regard to rejecting or embracing something resembling family farming are explained by a combination of the very different pre-existing institutional arrangements in agricultural production in the two countries at the time of reform and the different ways the governments have implemented reform policies. However, I claim that the current state of economic stagnation or economic development in rural areas in Russia and China cannot be simply attributed to historical legacies or pre-reform conditions. It is the economic policies pursued by local and central governments that have either created or failed to create the conditions that enable post-socialist farmers in my study sites to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the market. While President Vladimir Putin has made substantial changes to the agricultural policies pursued by the Yelstin administration, these changes have not yet made major impacts in distant province of Amur, where Muraviovka and Kuropatino are located. I also argue that the differences in rural development in the two countries cannot be explained by characterological differences between the Russians and Chinese. While Chinese peasants are often characterized as market-oriented and entrepreneurial, with Russian peasants characterized as risk-averse and anti-capitalist, this study has found that former collective farm members in Russia have been just as willing to engage in market activities as their counterparts in China.

2. ECONOMIC REFORM IN RUSSIA AND CHINA

Scholars have offered a variety of reasons to explain why China has apparently succeeded with economic reforms while Russia has not.¹ Scholars have debated whether the apparent “gradualism” of economic reform in China might have been a more appropriate model for Russia than the so-called “big bang” approach, while some assert that the so-called “advantages of backwardness” in China help explain the different outcomes the countries have experienced (see McMillan & Naughton, 1992; Sachs & Woo, 1994). While these well-trodden debates inform my case studies, in general, they are beyond the scope of this paper, which will focus on rural issues and not the broader issues of industrial, urban, and financial reforms.

Following experiments in Sichuan and Anhui provinces, agricultural reform in China began in 1979 with the “Two Documents on Agriculture.” These moderate reforms increased procurement prices and created new incentive and responsibility schemes (Kelliher, 1992). In October 1980, the central government officially endorsed the household responsibility system (*baochan dao hu*) whereby the government directly contracted with households for the production of grain and other crops.

In the Soviet Union, the “All-Union Law on Land” of 1990 allowed for the creation of individual farms for lease, while the Russian “Law of the Peasant Farm” of 1991 allowed for the division of a collective farm’s land and a division of capital into shares (Wegren, 1998). Private farming was legalized in the “Law of Property” of 1991 (Kiselev, 1993). With these reforms farmers could withdraw from the collective and undertake private farming, or they could remain as a collective by reorganizing into a joint-stock company or other similar arrangement.

Shortly after official support for agricultural reform was announced in each country, collectivized farms in China and Russia were restructured, but in completely different ways.

By mid-1983, 93% of rural households in China were involved in a contracting system that resembled family farming (Hartford, 1985). In Russia, practically the opposite was the case. By 1994, 84% of Russian collective farms had reorganized as cooperative farms similar in structure to the original collective (Wegren, 1998).

Although most Russian collective farmers remained in their collectives, they expanded their subsidiary household plots. Today household plots account for nearly 50% of total agricultural output, up from 25% in the 1980s (Lerman, 2002). However, increases in household production do not make up for losses in the collective sector. While collectives focus on grain production, household plots produce vegetables.

Explanations for these divergent paths center on the different institutional structures created by the socialist states, cultural differences between Russian and Chinese cultivators, and the different ways in which the two states have adopted market reforms. While there are numerous debates about the differences between Russian and Chinese economic reforms, this paper will focus on only those debates that are most relevant to the current situations in the Russian villages of Muraviovka and Kuropatino and the Chinese hamlets around Weining.

In the Soviet Union and pre-reform China, there were major differences in agricultural conditions and institutional structures in the countryside. Without making an environmental determinist argument, it should be noted that there are very different climatic conditions in the agricultural regions of Russia and China. One of the most significant differences in agricultural conditions between the two countries, however, is that Soviet farms were part of a command structure emanating from the central government (Van Atta, 1994), whereas rural areas in China were more autarkic (Burawoy, 1996). Ioffe and Nefedova (2001) note the highly integrated and interdependent components of the Soviet economy, particularly the collective farms, which were vertically integrated with the food-processing industry.

Soviet-Russian agriculture was more dependent on state-subsidized and industrial inputs than the more labor-intensive Chinese agriculture (Johnson, 1994). In the Soviet Union, economically weak farms were subsidized by the state (Wegren, 1998), while Chinese communes were taxed by the state (Macours & Swinnen, 2002). Members of the Soviet *kolkhoz* were also integrated into the state welfare system, receiving retirement pensions, a minimum wage, and health insurance (Fitzpatrick, 1994). The members of the Chinese rural commune were never fully incorporated into the welfare state (Pei, 1994).

The “entrepreneurial” character (or lack thereof) of Russian and Chinese rural people has been employed by some scholars as one way of understanding the extent to which collective farm members have been willing to embrace private farming. While most Soviet collective farms were created in the 1930s, in the People’s Republic of China, the collectivization of farms began in the early to mid-1950s. Johnson (1994) suggests that since Russia spent some 30 more years under communist rule than China, less of its entrepreneurial culture survived. Many of China’s rural areas have a long history of being tied to markets, with rural people regularly traveling to periodic markets (Skinner, 1964). In recent years, China’s former collective farmworkers have been depicted as “farmers”—market-oriented, independent, and entrepreneurial (Zhou, 1996), while Russia’s have been characterized as “peasants” who are “inert, heavy, passively resistant to change” (Fitzpatrick, 1994, p. 320), lacking an entrepreneurial spirit. Amelina (2000), however, focuses on the benefits, services, and in-kind payments received by collective farm workers as one explanation for

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