



Cultural Validity and Reform Routes: A Comparative Study of the Chinese and Russian Reforms in the Light of the Occurrence of the "Ten Thousand Yuan Household"

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Abstract: At the end of the 20th century, both China and Russia began the transformation from a planned economy to a market economy, but the results were completely different. China's reform and opening up have brought about decades of rapid growth and social stability, while Russia's reform has been accompanied by severe economic recession, social unrest and political instability, seriously affecting the living conditions of its residents. This article holds that the reason for the different reform outcomes cannot be merely explained by economic strategies. The more crucial factor lies in whether the reform process has achieved cultural legitimacy. This paper, by examining the symbolic phenomenon of the "ten-thousand-yuan household" in the early stage of China's reform, further explores how the Chinese leadership embedded market reform into traditional cultural narratives, such as Confucian values, family ethics and national rejuvenation, which are related to culture, thereby enabling the reform to gain wide recognition among the general public. In contrast, Russia's "shock therapy" reform is relatively lacking in cultural support, resulting in its loss of moral and emotional legitimacy in the minds of the general public. Through a systematic review of relevant literature, this article mainly expounds the profound connection between cultural narratives, symbolic signs and the path of national reform.

Keywords: cultural validity; reform routes; ten thousand yuan household

1. Introduction: The Cultural Dimension in Comparative Reform Studies

The comparison between the transformation of China and that of Russia has always been one of the central topics of research in post-socialist transformation. Traditional explanations often revolve around the economic and institutional choices of the two countries, especially the difference between the "gradual reform" in China and the "shock therapy" in Russia [1]. But this article believes that this point of view is not sufficient to explain why Chinese society can more easily accept the market logic and contradictions of income inequality, while there has been a great backlash, nostalgia and sense of loss in Russian society. In recent years, the academic circles pay great attention to the deeper structural and conceptual factors of the transformation,[2] especially in terms of culture, national identity, legitimacy and other aspects of reform. For example, Callahan believes that the success of reform depends largely on seeing whether it is possible to establish an organic connection with the local "cultural-historical identity". This article follows this thought and takes the representative symbolic case of the early reform of China, the "ten-thousand-yuan household", as the center, to elaborate how the role of cultural legitimacy shaped the process of institutional transformation.[3]

The label "ten-thousand-yuan household" indicates those rural families in China during the period of the 1980's and the early 1990's whose annual income first exceeded 10,000 yuan. They came to prominence, thanks to either the household contract responsibility system or individual business operations. These families were also not only economic forerunners, but also were deliberately formed by the state into a symbol, a piece of culture, for the reform. Their emergence and acceptance become a concrete microcosm by which we may present an idea of the cultural uniqueness of China's reform.

This paper is broken down into three parts. The first gives an interpretation of the way in which China has arrived at a cultural embedding of reform by means of an economic, political and narrative process, making use of the "ten-thousand-yuan household" motif. The second depicts the contrast presented in the reform experience of Russia, where "shock therapy" philosophy was followed, in conjunction with the legitimate crisis arising from the fact that there was lacking the cultural narrative support. The third section gives a summary of the results of this comparison and reflects upon its significance, in theory and/or in practice, for institutional change and points out that a looser form of cultural work is a necessary condition for successful reform.

2. The Cultural Embedding of China's Reform: The "Ten-Thousand-Yuan Household" as a Symbolic Narrative

China's reform did not occur in a cultural vacuum but was actively woven into a complete set of symbols representing system, value reinterpretation and national narrative strategies. Scholars generally believe that the phenomenon of "ten-thousand-yuan households" became a key node where economic legitimacy, political symbolism and cultural narrative intersected.

2.1 Economic Foundation: Pragmatism, Institutional Empowerment, and Broad-Based Benefits

The emergence of this symbolic significance could not have taken place without real material change. Studies by Justin Yifu Lin and Chen Xiwen, show that the household responsibility system for agriculture greatly liberated rural productive potential, thus greatly increasing income for a number of peasant households. In many places farmers were allowed to sell their surplus products freely after having filled their quotas of state procurements. This "two-track" incentive mechanism caused many family incomes to be increased, making "getting rich" the goal of many families. [4][5]

Further land reform clarified the usage right of the land and reduced the risk of the farmers, thus encouraging greater accumulation of capital and commercialization of agriculture. Research by Shi, Gao and Fang, points out that a clearer structure of land ownership enabled the farmers to optimize their input-return decisions and to increase their returns. Thus, the emergence of the ten-thousand-yuan families was no accident, but rather a natural result of the inclusive results of systemic institutional change. [6]

The reason for this success was that the wealth of these high-income families was not the result of privilege or privilege seeking, but of hard work and ingenuity under institutional incentive, and their success had an economic legitimacy, that is, they had become rich through their "own ability".

2.2 Political Strategy: Symbolic Management, Ideological Reconstruction, and Exemplary Role Modeling

The second dimension involves the more overt political tactics involved in shaping public perception through symbolic construction and ideological redefinition. The ten-thousand-yuan household, according to Zhou Xiaohong, has served the state individually well in "redefining social values" and converting the accumulation of private property from something "suspicious" to something "praiseworthy". Moreover, private property gets clearly situated in the national narrative of rejuvenation. [7]

Deng Xiaoping's slogan "Let some people get rich first so that some may achieve later common prosperity" initiated a basic transition in terms of political legitimacy. The basis has shifted from ideological correctness, from class struggle, to economic performance and developmental success. In such a context, the state had need of visible exemplars to demonstrate what it meant in social terms to be "rich", both in the sense of inspiration and of symbol.

The state media is specifically important in this respect of symbolic management. The ten-thousand-yuan households are described as labourious, thrifty, devoted to family, you have the "moral rich", the socially responsible successful rich. The image of them has ultimately dominated publicity in the rural areas over the years and the moral tone of reform has become what it is.

By converting private property from being a mark of different wealth to a moral virtue which can be imitated the state has been successful in dissipating possible jealousy and converting methods which lead to resentment into prompters for aspiration. Thus, through the construction of a type of narrative the Chinese government has made successful private property a cultural symbol of progress in contemporary times, thus managing to ensure social stability at a time when economic development has resulted in greater inequality.

2.3 Cultural an narrative: Ethical reinterpretation of meaning, bridging of values and national importance.

Reform, in its deeper implications, is based on the rehabilitation of the narrative and cultural meaning. Economic or political change alone will have no permanence; it must be based on a moral and cultural footing having reference to the public mind.

Callahan shows that China's reform was based on the Confucian ideas of harmony, order, social responsibility and hierarchy. The market liberalization was not presented as giving up the idea of collectivism, but as a new means to attain the old end of "enriching the state and strengthening the people." [3]

In the narrative of the ten-thousand-yuan household the farmer was shown as being filial to his parents, belonging

readily to the community and a loving father who worked hard to educate his children. This picture taught society that individual effort and family well-being did not conflict with the welfare of the community, but were its expression. Thus personal success became linked with national rejuvenation. The symbol made possible a cultural bridge between collectivism and individualism; personal success in the field of public morality was conceived of as a contribution to the common good. By this means, it easily coped with the fears and tensions caused by inequality, and mentally secured the cultural legitimacy of the plan of reform.

All this made the ten-thousand-yuan household a powerful nexus of meaning, uniting economic advancement, political strategy and moral order. In the result, China's market-oriented reform came out as being not a wrecking of socialist ideals, but a modification of them that made possible a relation of modernization that was meaningful and worth imitating in the nation's old framework of moral meaning.

3. Russia's Reform: "Shock Therapy," Narrative Vacuum, and Legitimacy Crisis

Russia's experience is, in complete contrast, that of institutional upheaval without the assistance of a cultural narrative — the results of which have been very serious.

3.1 Radical economic reform and misaligned institutions.

The Russian model of reform (called "shock therapy") was characterised by speed in privatisation, liberation of prices, and opening of markets. Roland and Korhonen state that the result was an immediate economic collapse, hyperinflation, and oligarchic concentration of wealth. [1]

As a result of the overly rapid transition there had not yet been time for the institutions of the old order to become sufficiently discombobulated, whilst those of the new institutions had not taken form. The social safety net was destroyed and public faith disappeared. Production collapsed, unemployment soared and inequality widened enormously.

Such violent economic turbulence made it impossible for society to internally construct positive reform narratives within a short time-frame, as the public were unable to ascertain hope through the popular "growing pains".

3.2 Political and Cultural Vacuum: Narrative Collapse and Moral Disjunction

Russia's reform, taking place almost at the same time as the breakup of the Soviet Union, led to the breakdown of the established systems of ideological and national narratives. As shown in studies like "The Cultural Roots of Russia's Reform Failures" and "Gorbachev's Reform: A Failure in Timing and Culture," Gorbachev and his followers did not offer a new united national narrative to fill the ideological vacuum created by reform. [8]

As a result, economic liberalization was perceived merely as a technical and procedural project, rather than as a morally legitimate social mission.[9] Without a value-laden explanation of why one should suffer pain and inequality, the reform came to be thought of by the population as a manner whereby the elite could pillage public wealth rather than a collective effort at national rejuvenation.

Under conditions of weak state governance and a lack of effective control of public discourse the rapid accumulation of wealth by an emerging oligarchic class could not be logically related in any way to a positive, social value, but was viewed as a manifestation of corruption and exploitation. Accordingly, the reform lost not only its political legitimacy but also its cultural legitimacy, by which is meant the emotional and moral basis which would render society tolerant of any change.

The loss of legitimacy resulted in a loss of social trust, a rise of mass nostalgia, and a return of strong man politics stressing order and stability - most notably under the Putin system. Russian shock therapy reform thus serves as a paradigmatic ideal of a "reform without narrative."

4. Learning implications for institutional reform.

Reform, particularly when associated with high risk or mass participation, has to generate symbols, moral justifications, and narrative meanings at the same time. The central points are:

Reform must have meaning, not just technique: Policies must be translated into stories, metaphors, and symbols that the public can comprehend and feel empathy for.

The choice of symbolic nodes is crucial: Representative figures, such as "ten thousand yuan households," can be used as anchors of social cognition, thus enabling people to interpret abstract reforms through concrete others.

Cultural continuity and reinterpreting values: Reform need not break with tradition, but rather incorporate new institutions into old value structures, such as those of family, responsibility, and harmony, through reinterpretation.

Discourse capacity and institutional capacity are equally important: The state must create not only economic institutions but also narrative institutions—propaganda, education, and media—which will sustain the legitimacy of the reform.

Using narrative to absorb the shock of inequality: Marketization produces inequality inevitably, but only by moralizing “success” through cultural discourse can a society lessen social fragmentation and maintain unity.

5. Conclusion

This paper posits that the major divergence in outcomes for Chinese and Russian reform is not a result of a divergence in the design or pace of policy implementation. The question is whether the reform is culturally legitimated.

In China, the state, by means of symbols such as “ten-thousand-yuan families,” has succeeded in integrating the economic reform with moral narrative and political identity thereby legitimating and justifying the market economy.

In contrast to the above, it can be seen that within the Russian economic liberalization drive there would not have been the corresponding cultural structure which would allow an adequate narrative framework to support the reform. The economic reform would therefore lack social legitimation in the popular mind and would result in political backlash and a crisis of trust.

Success in institutional transformation cannot therefore be seen merely as an economic and structural project, but needs also to be seen as a cultural and symbolic project. Without recourse to the myths and narratives that resonate with the feelings of the public, even soundly formulated policies of economic liberalisation may seem to be totally deficient in legitimation. China’s own reform experiences are important, but the avenue which the phenomenon of the “ten-thousand-yuan household” opens up to us, reveals particularly serious avenues for the scrutiny of the cultural preconditions of national transformation.

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