

The compare and contrast of China and USSR's collectivization

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Abstract: When discussing the communist economy during the Maoist era in China, agricultural reform is an indispensable topic. Over the course of half a century, China underwent significant transformations—from a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society through periods of warlordism and resistance against Japanese invasion, to the Nationalist-Communist civil war—ultimately transitioning toward the beginnings of a modern state. The normalization and reform of the agricultural economy began in rural areas under the de facto control of the Communist Party before gaining control of mainland cities in 1949. With the establishment of New China and the deepening influence of Maoist ideology, Soviet-style collectivization gradually became the cornerstone of agricultural production. Despite the high degree of similarity in systems and ideological proximity, equating China's agricultural collectivization entirely with that of the Soviet Union is inappropriate. This paper aims to objectively compare the agricultural collectivization in China post-1949 with that in the USSR circa 1932, using both primary and secondary sources to explore the similarities and differences between agricultural collectivization in Maoist China and Stalinist-era Soviet Union. It will examine the processes and outcomes of implementing similar agricultural systems in these two distinct countries, as well as the underlying social factors

1. Introduction

Whenever we talk about the communist economy under the Maoist era, agricultural reform is an inextricable proposition. Over the course of half a century, China experienced many major and minor upheavals as it moved from a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society to warlordism, and later resistance to the Japanese invasion to the Nationalist-Communist civil war, as it moved from a traditional agrarian society to the beginnings of what was conceptualized as a modernized state. The normalizations and reform of the agricultural economy began in the rural areas under de facto control before the Communist regime gained control of the cities in the mainland in 1949. With the founding of New China and the deepening of Maoist ideology, Soviet-like collectivization of communist agriculture gradually became the mainstay of agricultural production. Due to the high similarity of systems and ideological proximity, many scholars arbitrarily equate China's agricultural collectivization entirely with that of the Soviet Union, which is very inappropriate. This article will objectively compare the collectivization of agriculture in China after 1949 with that in the USSR in 1932, combining primary and secondary sources to explore the similarities and

differences between the collectivization of agriculture in Maoist China and in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era, exploring the process and results of the implementation of similar agricultural systems on the ground in these two different countries, as well as the social factors behind them.

2. Comparison and contrast of basic national conditions and reasons for collectivization

In both China and the Soviet Union, the agricultural revolution and collectivization were closely linked to political and economic motives. They were seen as important steps towards socialism or communism, where collectivization was used to consolidate political power and to industrialize and modernize the country. In both models, agricultural revolutions and collectivization were often accompanied by the construction of rural infrastructure. This included the construction of irrigation systems, the preparation of farmland, and the improvement of rural roads and transportation networks to increase the efficiency of agricultural production and the living conditions of farmers. Both China and the Soviet Union used a state-planned economy in their agricultural revolutions and collectivization. The government centrally managed and regulated agricultural production by formulating agricultural production plans, harmonizing prices of agricultural products, and allocating resources.

From the point of view of national conditions, the Soviet economy in 1925 had just recovered from the devastation of the First World War due to the New Economic Policy^[1], and modern industry was extremely backward; at this time, the industrial output of the USSR was less than half of Germany's and 1/8 of that of the America. On the agricultural front, there were less than 30,000 tractors in the country, and 99 percent of the country's agricultural production had to be accomplished by manpower and livestock^[2]. Stalin proposed that in order to defend Soviet power from imperialist aggression, the Soviet Union would implement a Five-Year Plan at the end of 1928 under the direction of the State Planning Committee in order to strengthen the country's industrialization. In 1931, Stalin proposed the slogan of "technology determines everything,"^[3] and everything was prioritized in the service of industrialization, and the Soviet Union's entire system of agricultural collectivization was designed to centralize the production of agricultural products. The entire system of collectivized agricultural production in the USSR was set up to pool resources to supply industrial production in the cities.

Land, for thousands of years in China, has always been the greatest asset and the most important means of production^[4], in fact, for China during the feudal era, and even, let's say, for China today. In China, the establishment of successive dynasties was basically marked by a redistribution of land, i.e., the complete collapse of the previous dynasty's agricultural system in the course of social reorganization (wars, calamities, etc.), and the reintroduction of an equalization of land by the new dynasty. 1950's land reform, which resulted in an equal distribution of land on the basis of the number of people in a household, made equalization the basic connotation of the land system after the founding of the nation, and 70% of China's land areas have been re-collectivized^[5]. In 1950, the land reform realized an equal distribution of land based on the population within a family, and equalization became the basic connotation of the land system after the founding of the PRC. However, why did China move into collectivization and take back the land rights of the peasants that were originally decentralized? On the one hand, the Communist Party of China (CPC), with socialism as the core foundation of its statehood, pursued collectivization to meet its political needs. On the other hand, this brings us back to the historical context of the Korean War in the early 1950s^[6], which led to the importation of the Soviet Union's military-industrial system into China, creating a military-heavy industrialization^[7-8]. This made it impossible for China to maintain its

industrialization through marketization, because heavy industry products, unlike light industry products, could not receive timely feedback in the market^[9]. In other words, the military and heavy industry is a serious capital-intensive industry, not to mention that China's overall scientific and technological strength lags that of the international market, so China has to invest large amounts of capital in order to maintain its industrialization^[10]. However, the only way for China to make up for the lack of industrial capital at this point in time was to follow the early Soviet model of agriculture and extract as much surplus as possible from agriculture^[11]. Although the collectivization of agriculture proved to be insufficient in terms of farmers' motivation, it was still the most efficient way for China to harvest the surplus of agricultural production to support industrialization, and China plunged headlong into the reform of collectivization of agricultural production.

3. Comparative analysis of agricultural collectivization units in China and USSR

In the Soviet Union under the Stalinist model, agricultural production organizations were mainly collective farms, also known as “kolkhozes”^[12]. In the Soviet system of collectivization of agriculture, people were grouped into production units called “collective farms”, also known as kolkhozes, where all land and fields, means of production (tractors, working animals, etc.) were nationalized and distributed under the direction of the State^[13]. In Collective farms, peasants worked together in agricultural production and other economic activities, sharing the tools and means of production belonging to the collective, cultivate the land belonging to the collective, and then share equally the surplus food in addition to the food paid to the State. During the first five-year plan, 90 per cent of the rural surplus was forcibly collected by the State apparatus, concentrated, and made available for urban development and industrialization^[14].

In China under the Maoist era, the main organization of agricultural production was the people's commune. A people's commune is a large collective organization that includes several rural communities in which peasants collectivize their land and means of production and work together in agricultural production and live as a community^[15]. While both countries aimed to achieve collectivization, the degree of voluntarism differed. In the Soviet Union, collectivization was characterized by coercion and forceful measures. Peasants were often compelled to join collective farms, and resistance was met with severe consequences, including violence and repression^[16]. In China, while there were instances of coercion during certain periods, such as the Great Leap Forward, collectivization was also promoted through persuasion, incentives, and the appeal of shared resources and communal living^[17]. In the Soviet Union, only 1 percent of the land was collectivized in 1928, but by the early 1930s the collectivization rate had reached a staggering 60 percent^[18-19]. The Soviet government sent 25,000 industrial workers to the countryside to assist in agricultural production in order to reach the goal of 100 percent collectivization in the first five-year plan^[20]. However, from an agricultural point of view, despite the First Five Year Plan, which was a huge increase in wheat production in the USSR, a large number of livestock was lost. This was largely due to the uncooperative nature of many farmers, some of whom preferred to slaughter their livestock rather than turn them over to the government^[21]. In response, the Soviet government under Stalin lined up many secret police to violently fight against the cleansing of those who opposed the collectivization of agriculture. In China, however, despite the Great Leap Forward, which was the most radical of the Maoist era, the violent apparatus of the state was not involved in forcing individuals to participate in collectivized labor but was only responsible for taking ownership of the land from the landowners, and the peasants joined the people's communes for production more on

their own initiative. This is because before the Communists came to power, the problem of land annexation in China was far more serious than in the Soviet Union^[22].

Statistically more than 95 percent of the peasants in China were either landless sharecroppers or poor peasants with so little land in their hands that they were unable to support themselves at all. Years of warlordism and the Anti-Japanese War devastated the agricultural economy^[23], which led to the collapse of the original landlord-controlled agricultural production system. Later, as a large number of landowners retreated to Taiwan China with the Kuomintang, the Chinese government faced limited obstacles in nationalizing the land. Unlike the Kuomintang government, which was rooted in the cities, the Communist government had a clear understanding of the rural ecology due to years of guerrilla warfare in the countryside, and their early distribution of land from the landowners to the landless peasants gave them a great deal of prestige among the proletarians at the bottom of the hierarchy^[24], which led to a much smoother process of collectivization of the agricultural sector.

4. Analysis of the deeper reasons for the peculiarities of the implementation of agricultural collectivization in China

Does that mean the collectivization of agriculture in China implemented more smoothly than in the Soviet Union? However, the timing and pace of collectivization between the two countries tells a different story. In the Soviet Union, collectivization was implemented more rapidly and forcefully under Stalin's leadership during the late 1920s and early 1930s^[25]. China, on the other hand, began its collectivization efforts in the early 1950s but pursued a more gradual approach, with the process spanning several decades^[26].

What, then, makes the difference in the time taken to complete the collectivization of agriculture so great between China and the Soviet Union? How did the communist creed adapt to the socio-cultural and country-specific contexts that differs the result in the two countries?

It is possible for the Soviet Union to reach collectivization of agriculture in just a few years due to two reasons, Stronger means of enforcement and fewer constraints imposed by traditional values of the society.

Firstly, this was due in part to Stalin's repressive policies. Stalin utilized the secret police to its fullest extent, making it a powerful tool of domination^[27]. These secret police, on the one hand, monitored and supervised labor and production, and on the other hand, executed those who seriously disobeyed orders, forcing the peasants to obey the order. Secondly, in contrast to the fledgling New China, the Soviet Union of 1929 had already undergone more than 15 years of communist reforms^[28]. For the transformation from Tsarist Russia to the Soviet Union's intermediate Russian bourgeois Duma had been in power for a very short period of time compared to the Nationalist government that had held China for 40 years, not to mention the fact that the Soviet Union had actually purged a large number of traditionalist royalist parties opposed to communism during the civil war, which gave Stalin more leverage to carry out sweeping reforms.

However, when we look back to China, the forces of traditionalism are much stronger. Thousands of years of feudal rule and deep-rooted Confucianism in an agrarian society have made China naturally conservative at the ideological level, and this conservatism is particularly evident in the reform of the agricultural production system^[29].

Between the 1950s and 1970s, the socio-political and economic model that became the people's commune was born out of the collectivization of Chinese agriculture. This model of production, which combined a communist-type with a Soviet one, sought on the one hand to destroy the traditional structures of production and, like the Soviets, to create a new system of production in

accordance with communist dogma, namely a communal collective system of production.^[30] However, unlike the Soviet Union, China's tension between the modern state and family traditions has led to inherent paradoxes in communal architecture, with the "remodeled ancestral halls becoming collective canteens" of the Wuhan Shi gu shan production brigade, and "communal housing still designed in the traditional three-room style".^[31] China's deep-rooted traditional social attitudes and historical baggage have led to a distortion of the Soviet model of production in China, and the inertia of the system has begun to tilt towards localization. Critically analyzing these social and cultural differences, it becomes apparent that the implementation of agricultural collectivization in China deviated from the Soviet model to accommodate the complexities of Chinese society. While the Soviet Union pursued collectivization with a focus on centralization and standardization, China's approach encountered resistance from deeply ingrained social attitudes and cultural practices. We note that two very important roles in the traditional agricultural production organization of the feudal era in southern China were the local squires and landlords, who usually held large amounts of the means of production, invested in education and monopolized the path of upward mobility through the system of imperial examinations, and assumed the position of leaders in their families and communities^[32]. After the agricultural system passed through the communist model, unlike the old royal aristocracy that was destroyed in the Soviet Union, the grassroots leaders of China's agricultural production units were transformed into the captains of the brigades in the townships, the village chiefs, and the political commissars, and, just as the grassroots leaders of the old era were closely linked to the Qing government, these new-age leaders were inextricably linked to the fledgling communist regime, and in many cases, were among the revolutionaries^[33]. Many of them were even among the founders of the regime. These grassroots leaders often enjoyed a high reputation in their localities and even held the power to distribute collective property, not only as local powerhouses but also as representatives of the Party's influence at the local level. Unlike the Soviet farm leaders, most of the grassroots leaders in the Chinese countryside were probably not well educated in modernization^[34], and some of them had only a vague understanding of the communist creed, and their managerial skills were mostly based on empiricism and their own local credibility. When viewed in this way, this shift in power is just a change in the names of the positions in charge of agricultural production, and essentially the entire management system of agricultural production is still maintained by very similar means^[35]. The shift in power can be seen as a change in the names and roles of those responsible for agricultural production, while maintaining similar management approaches. Understanding these shifts provides insight into the complexities of China's agricultural revolution and the broader socio-political changes it brought about.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the comparison of China and the Soviet Union's collectivization efforts highlights their shared goals of consolidating power, industrializing their economies, and modernizing agriculture through rural infrastructure development and state-planned economic management. Despite these similarities, significant differences in policy execution and societal responses underscore the complexities of collectivization in different national contexts. This analysis enhances our understanding of 20th-century socialist practices and informs modern agricultural development strategies.

However, the timing and pace of collectivization differed significantly between China and the Soviet Union. The difference in timing can be attributed to various factors. The Soviet Union had stronger means of enforcement and faced fewer constraints imposed by traditional values. Stalin's regime employed coercion and force to rapidly collectivize agriculture, often met with resistance

and significant social disruptions. China, on the other hand, faced challenges related to deeply rooted traditional social attitudes and familial structures. The Chinese collectivization process required adaptations to accommodate these cultural considerations, ultimately resulting in a more gradual approach.

The adaptation of the communist creed to socio-cultural and country-specific contexts played a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of collectivization in each country. China's collectivization efforts incorporated elements of traditional rural society, allowing for the continuation of traditional management system, and emphasizing self-sufficiency at the commune level. This approach helped maintain social stability and garnered support from local leaders who played essential roles in bridging the gap between the communist regime and the rural population. In contrast, the Soviet Union's collectivization campaign aimed to eradicate traditional social structures, resulting in significant social upheaval and resistance.

In summary, the differences in the time taken to complete agricultural collectivization between China and the Soviet Union can be attributed to factors such as means of enforcement, constraints imposed by traditional values, and adaptations to socio-cultural and country-specific contexts. These factors influenced the methods, pace, and outcomes of collectivization in each country, shaping their respective agricultural revolutions and the broader socio-economic changes that followed.

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