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Book review

Unparalleled Reforms: China's Rise, Russia's Fall, and the Interdependence of Transition

by Marsh, Christopher

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This is a timely book in the western countries to reflect on what happened in the former Soviet Union, and what is going to happen in China. The author, as stated in the preface, has tried to avoid the 'archive' view of the orient and 'let the Communist and post-Communist world speak for itself' (pp. xi). So from the very beginning, the author puts aside the dominant 'communist vs. capitalist' doctrine debate, and allows readers to relax while reading through. This downplaying of the somewhat traditional but biased standpoint has helped him to take a much more neutral route of digging into the used to be and the current Communist Giants, namely, the Soviet Union and China. It also forces the author to find a different theoretical framework and a more plausible methodology for comparing the similarity and dissimilarity between the two countries and their reform processes.

The tool that the author has found, as elaborated in the first two chapters, and stressed repeatedly throughout the book, is the necessity to look at the individual social/political events as links of a chain that are interdependent with each other. Equally emphasized is the importance of 'lesson drawing' by policymakers. Chapter 1 starts with the popular proposition of 'communism collapse' (pp. 2) and its basic assumptions. For the author, however, these assumptions are unrealistic because they either lack comprehensive comparison or fall into the trap of 'teleological fallacy' (pp. 2). Three sets of questions are of particular interest: first of all, what were the initial circumstances on reform in the Soviet Union and China, which is dealt with in chapter 3; second, what were the reactions after the crises in both countries, which is discussed in chapter 4; last but maybe most important, what were the effects of interactions and lesson-drawing between these two countries, on which all the last three chapters put their focuses.

The literature review in chapter 2, as acknowledged by the author, is loosely organized covering political studies, international comparison, and political comparison (pp. 16). This may be due to the emerging nature of the paradigm itself, namely the 'transitology', which refers to the examination of 'the processes of reform and transition with the goal of identifying common causes and outcomes' (pp. 15). The focus of the author here is on the evidence of interactions between political changes and transition process. While previous researchers reached the conclusion that there might be different

consequences between the Soviet Union and China's reform process, they too often had to refer to the initial structural conditions and cultural differences. The author, on the other hand, points out that lesson-drawing between the policymakers in these two countries also played a decisive role.

The methodology used for justifying the author's argument in the following chapters is mainly documentary analysis. Chapter 3 starts with China's reform practice. The author deliberately distinguishes between political reform and economic reform in China, because these two were carried out unbalanced in both scope and scale. In the case of the former Soviet Union, in comparison, the reforms in economic and political domains were closely intertwined and were undertaken almost simultaneously. The main components in Gorbachev's reform systems were '*glasnost*', '*new political thinking*', and '*perestroika*' (pp. 47, emphasized in its original form), all of which penetrated into the political system. Focusing on individual countries, the author is able to take into account the specific conflicts within each system and how they were resolved. However, the extensive time span has confined the author's exploration on the turbulence between upper-level authorities and the grassroots, while the focus is restricted to the most important individuals in each country and their close circles.

Chapter 4 continues with the transition process after China's Tiananmen Square Crisis and the collapse of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991. Again, detailed documentary analyses are used to record the most dramatic political transformations, various economic and political remedies, as well as their effects on citizens' daily life. The most interesting part comes when the author tries to deal with the question: is China undergoing an evolution or revolution after the Tiananmen Crisis? Here, the author refutes those scholars who are eager to forecast the collapse of China by relying on a simplistic analogy with the fall of the Soviet Union, without taking into account the root causes of that fall.

Even among specialists who have better knowledge of the Communist regime, however, the idea of the unavoidable collapse of China is still popular. One of the most plausible reasons suggested by the author is that these scholars tend to think of events in one country isolated from those in others. As the

discussions in chapter 5 and chapter 6 go on, readers are well informed about the close surveillance conducted by the leaders in the Soviet Union and China. The practice of observing, interacting, and lesson-drawing revealed in these two chapters not only explains why some specific actions were taken in these two countries, which is left untouched in the previous chapters; it also sheds a light on the different outcomes of their reform processes. While the Chinese leaders were very willing to critically draw lessons from the Soviet Union as well as other communist countries, the latter on the other hand had turned a blind eye to China most of the time. In China's case, the party leaders started to learn since as early as the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia (pp. 102), but they were also able to doubt the Soviet model at an early stage, and thus processed the reform based on China's character. In the case of the Soviet Union and later Russia, various factors such as cognitive prejudice, biased information, and misunderstanding resulted in the decision of 'reform without Chinese characteristics' (pp. 130). The vast and convincing evidence collected by the author from internal reports, statements, as well as earlier publications all add weight to his positive prediction on China's future.

The author has a smooth style of conveying his argument. The theory chapter is not burdened with obscure terminologies, and substantial and well-organized anecdotes make this book highly readable. It is thus very much recommended for a wider audience either for entertaining or for academic learning and research.

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