

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

Chinese wisdom can be a source of inspiration

From a country that once suffered foreign invasion and occupation for a century, China now stands as the world's second largest economy, or even the largest if measured by purchasing power parity. It has contributed 30 percent to global economic growth in recent history and 70 percent to the eradication of poverty worldwide.

The rapid rise of China has made scholars in both the West and East wonder how a country could win wide public support to secure such phenomenal economic growth without having a Western-style electoral system. Is there a China model behind this exceptional rise? If so, can such a model be replicated and followed elsewhere? Also, is China's political system its Achilles' heel?

A civilizational state

The world today faces great uncertainty for reasons directly related to how the West defines a legitimate government. Some Westerners claim that China's strong planning and executive capacity is based on one-party governance or even "autocracy," and its government lacks legitimacy. In the West, it is widely assumed that a government's legitimacy comes from universal suffrage and competitive multiparty elections.

This assumption raises two issues: First, it is not true historically—universal suffrage is a recent development. One can claim, for instance, that U.S. administrations became truly legitimate only from 1965, when African Americans were allowed to vote. Furthermore, this practice is confined only to nation states. It is difficult to imagine, for example, the European Union establishing its legitimacy and playing its unifying role on the basis of universal suffrage.

For most of the past 2,000 years, China practiced a kind of one-party rule: governance by a unified Confucian elite selected through public exams (the *keju*). During much of this era, China was arguably better governed, more peaceful and more prosperous than the European states of the same epoch. China began to lag behind Europe when it closed its door to the outside world in the 18th century and missed the Industrial Revolution.

China is not a typical nation state, but rather, a

civilizational state. It is an amalgam of the world's oldest continuous civilization and a huge modern state with its sense of legitimacy rooted deeply in history. An apt analogy would be something like the Roman Empire if it had endured into the 21st century with regional and cultural diversities, a modern economy, a centralized government and a population nearly equal to that of 100 average-size European nations combined, speaking thousands of different dialects while sharing one written language.

This kind of state, a product of hundreds of states amalgamated into one over a long history, would become ungovernable if it were to adopt an adversarial political model. Such was the case in China, beginning with the 1911 Revolution that established the Republic of China (1912-49). The country attempted to copy the American model and degenerated into chaos, with rival warlords fighting one another and tens of millions of lives lost in the decades that followed.

The China model

The China model, in brief, is a set of governmental approaches that has ensured the rapid development of China. While the West has for so many years promoted the Western political model in the name of universal values, China has pursued its own experiments in the political domain since 1978, drawing lessons from the disastrous "cultural revolution" (1966-76), when ideological radicalism expunged China's governance traditions and dashed people's hopes for prosperity and order.



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China has since managed, with varying degrees of success, to reestablish a connection with its own past as well as borrow useful elements from the West.

China's meritocratic system today is essentially a mechanism of "selection plus election," with the former originating from its own traditions and the latter imported from the West. Pioneered by late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, this institutional arrangement has succeeded in ensuring an orderly transition of power over the past three decades. However imperfect, this system is in a position to compete with the Western political model.

China's experience since 1978 shows that the ultimate test of a political system is how well it ensures good governance, as judged by the people. The dichotomy of "democracy versus autocracy" sounds hollow in today's complex world, given the large number of poorly governed "democracies." China's experience may eventually usher in a paradigm shift in international political discourse from democracy versus autocracy to good governance versus bad governance.

Good vs. bad governance

Both good and bad governance may take the form of either the Western political system or a non-Western one. China emphasizes substance over procedures, believing that ultimately the pursuit of substance will evolve and produce the right procedures appropriate to each nation's own traditions and conditions. China's age-old wisdom and well-tested practices may

be relevant beyond China.

The success of this governance approach is due to its two strong capacities: first, the capacity for self-reform and self-innovation; and second, the capacity for planning and executing strategy. China has created its own development model and an important feature of this is "development administration," in contrast to public administration. China's five-year national development plans and the Communist Party of China's annual economic conferences are part of China's development administration. So are local development strategies and plans. China's universities may eventually offer courses and even degrees in development administration, just as degrees in public administration are common elsewhere.

However, China's case may be unique. Under its socialist market economy, it commands not only such Keynesian instruments as fiscal and monetary policies, but also other tools which may not be available in other countries, such as public ownership of land and strategic resources as well as a large state-owned sector. These tools give China more leverage.

Another highlight of the China model is openness and inclusiveness. China represents a secular culture where learning from others is virtuous. China has retained its long tradition of "selective cultural borrowing" from the outside world, but at the same time will never lose its own identity. It is a model that can advance with the times while seeking improvement step by step.

The Chinese Government puts people's livelihood first. The leadership has prioritized poverty reduction as China's first and foremost task and is pursuing a down-to-earth strategy to wipe out poverty. The reform started in the rural areas, where the majority of Chinese lived. It triggered huge productivity and created a series of chain reactions leading to the rise of millions of small and medium-sized enterprises, paving the way for the rapid expansion of the manufacturing industry and foreign trade.

Gradual reform is better than shock therapy. The Chinese development philosophy is often referred to as "crossing the river by feeling the stones." It encourages regional



Xi Jinping: *The Governance of China*, a compilation of President Xi's major works, is on display with multi-language editions during the 24th Beijing International Book Fair on August 23

and small-scale experiments before major reform measures are adopted. For example, the special economic zones are places where new ideas are tested and new methods tried out. The Chinese work with the existing, imperfect institutions, gradually reforming them to serve modernization, and avoiding the undesirable consequences that the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia faced after their shock therapy.

In addition, China has established its priorities and sequence. In line with a gradual approach, China's reform demonstrates a clear pattern of change: rural first, urban second; coastal areas first, inland second; economic reform first, political second; easy reforms before difficult ones. The experiences gained and lessons learnt in the first stage of reform create conditions for the next stage.

Universal applicability?

There is no such thing as a development model that fits all countries. To promote its own model, the West has spared no effort in aiding color revolutions worldwide. However, the painful consequences of Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" and the chilly "Arab Spring," as well as the 2008 global financial crisis have tar-

nished Western credibility. How can any model be universally applicable?

The China model is not universally applicable either, and China has no desire to urge other countries to follow in its footsteps as it has no messianic tradition of trying to save others. However, when you set a good example, others might be willing to learn from you, and China does have much valuable experience to share with other countries.

Today, many of China's neighboring countries—from Russia to Central Asian countries, and from India to Viet Nam—are drawing on development experiences from China. This influence extends further to Africa and Latin America. The China model, like other development models, has its drawbacks, but it can and surely will advance with the times and improve. It has a proven track record of making changes with high efficiency when faced with new problems.

In today's world, when a lot of countries are facing mounting governance challenges, they could certainly draw some inspiration from Chinese wisdom. ■



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