

China's modernisation: a unique path?

By Li Datong,
Created 2007-11-28 14:22

A few days ago I was invited to dinner with a western diplomat. In the course of a discussion about China and its future, the diplomat raised a very interesting question:

"I think a lot of the criticism of China in the western media is excessive and unreasonable. The critics are using western values to judge China. But what if China can find a new path to modernisation and development, totally different to that followed by the west?"

It seems to me that, in terms of economics, China has already discarded central planning in favour of a western-style market economy. Therefore, I interpreted the diplomat's question to be: can China follow a path to political development that is different to western-style democracy?

The Qianlong inheritance

Scholars from across the world have endlessly debated the issue of China's development since the [first Opium war](#) [1] in 1840. The predominant "stimulus-response" view was that China itself lacked internal stimuli to promote change, and that all the transformations in recent Chinese history have only taken place as a response to economic, cultural and military incursions from abroad. However, more recently, some academics have begun to argue that even without foreign input, [China](#) [2] would sooner or later have begun to modernise under its own impetus. Many of my academic friends hold this view.

I understand that these academic theories all have their own logic and reasoning, but, from my own layman's point of view, I don't believe China will ever manage to find its own uniquely "eastern" model of development. The past is the past, and there is no room for "what ifs". More than 2,000 years passed between the country first being unified under a central dictator in the Qin dynasty (starting in 221 bce) and the overthrow of the imperial system in 1911. In this period, what did China actually develop on its own? Virtually nothing. In the words of [Hegel](#) [3], China "has no history", but merely the cyclical rise and fall of various monarchs, out of which no progress can emerge.

Li Datong is a Chinese journalist and a former editor of *Bingdian* (*Freezing Point*), a weekly supplement of the *China Youth Daily* newspaper

Among Li Datong's recent articles in **openDemocracy**:

["The root of slave labour in China \[0\]"](#) (26 June 2007)

["Beijing *baozi* and public trust \[0\]"](#) (25 July 2007)

["The next land revolution? \[0\]"](#) (8 August 2007)

["Beijing's Olympics, China's politics \[0\]"](#) (22 August 2007)

["China's media change: talking with Angela Merkel \[0\]"](#) (6 September 2007)

["Shanghai: new history, old politics \[0\]"](#) (19 September 2007)

["China's leadership: the next generation \[0\]"](#) (3 October 2007)

["China's communist](#)

True, Hegel never actually went to China. He made his observations based on second-hand accounts, so there may be inaccuracies in what he says. In recent history, the first case of someone going to China to make observations of behalf of his country was that of Lord Macartney in 1793. He made his journey when the Qing dynasty [4] was at the height of its powers, under the Emperor Qianlong.

Macartney's mission [5] ended in abject failure. The reason for this was said to be Macartney's refusal to perform the "three kneelings and nine prostrations" in front of Qianlong, but in fact the failure was due to Qianlong's imperial [6] arrogance and ignorance, which resulted in his refusal [7] to see foreign countries as equals.

Macartney's mission may not have succeeded, but he at least had a chance to carry out a detailed first-hand survey [8] of this oriental empire. In Macartney's view, the Qing empire was a giant with "feet of clay" that could be knocked to the ground with the lightest of touches. He wrote that since the Manchus conquered China, not only had there been no improvement or progress, but in fact society had regressed. He bemoaned the fact that while Britain had been struggling daily for advancement in the fields of art and science, the Chinese were becoming half-savage. As far as Macartney was concerned, Chinese society was founded on an idiotic officialism which made the people "cowardly, filthy and cruel". He predicted that China would eventually [9] regress to savage depravity and poverty - a prediction that history proved to be all too accurate.

The French historian Alain Peyrefitte, author of *The Immobile Empire* [10], once wrote: "In around August or September 1960, I set off from Hong Kong on my first exploratory trip to China. I was immediately shocked by how similar this society was to the one described by Macartney and his companions. One could say that the genes of every Chinese still contain all of the hereditary information of the Qianlong era."

The wall of power

Repetition, immobility, regression, and the hereditary information of an unchanging society - all of these are particular characteristics of autocratic China. China's leaders since the overthrow of imperial rule - whether Sun Yat-sen, Yuan Shikai, Chiang Kai-shek [11] or Mao Zedong - have, without exception, been worthy successors to the imperial dictators. They all represent China's traditional internal stimuli.

Chinese academics see surprisingly similar motivations for the reform policies of the past thirty years, as for the reform period [12] of the late Qing [13]. They see that in both periods, China had reached a point where a continued failure to reform would mean losing even more ground on the west - a point where the country was on the verge of losing its security and status as a large power. The Tiananmen demonstrations of 1976 [14] showed that people were angry enough to challenge Mao Zedong's absolute power. Reform stemmed from the fears of those in government that they were about to lose control. The basis of the reforms - "accepting western science and technology, rejecting the western political system" - was simply a modern twist on the slogans of the Qing reforms.

The reforms were aimed at consolidating power, rather than improving the welfare of the people. This truth is exposed every time the government uses military violence to crush peaceful protests. This is the true essence of Chinese political tradition.

princelings [0]" (17 October 2007)

"China's Youth League faction: incubus of power? [0]" (31 October 2007)

"China's age of expression [0]" (14 November 2007)

The introduction of the market economy has released the Chinese people's previously-repressed desire for material wealth, and given them the means to attain it. China is more powerful than ever before. But rapidly-growing wealth is becoming concentrated [15] in the hands of a few wealthy people, and this is causing social problems [16]. Bureaucratic corruption has reached unprecedented levels, and in response, incidents of mass protest are becoming more frequent. The government is increasingly resorting to violence to deal with resentment at all levels of society.

In 2,000 years of Chinese political tradition, there has never been one enlightened sovereign who has been able to come up with policies leading to a long and peaceful reign. Violence from rulers is met with violence from the people, and dynasties fall after two or three hundred years, only to be replaced with something similar. I just don't believe that there is any internal stimulus that can release China from this cycle.

In the same way as Macartney carried out an in-depth survey of China, in the late Qing era Chinese ambassadors [17] and officials stationed abroad made their own observations of Europe and America. They saw that economic and technological prowess stemmed from the political system, and in particular from constitutions which empowered the public. Sadly, officials who advocated learning from the west were branded traitors.

Things are slightly different today. China is now integrated to a large extent into the global economy, and as a World Trade Organisation member [18], has to act according to international standards. However, changes in China still only come about as a result of international pressure. If this pressure recedes, China will revert to its "traditions", and will be left with the worst kind of market economy - crony capitalism. Therefore, international pressure on political reform is essential to China's future development. Without it, China's rulers (whether emperors or the party) instinctively reach out for the familiar comforts [19] of unlimited power.

A market economy combined with a democratic political system is now the only choice for countries looking for long-term peace and stability. It will be impossible for China to produce this under its own steam. The lesson of history is that in China, change only occurs as the product of intense pressure.

This article was translated from Chinese by Chris Allen

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/china_from_the_inside/china_modernisation

Links:

[1] <http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/%7Ejobrien/reference/ob36.html>

[2] <http://www.chinapage.com/map/map.html>

[3] <http://www.iep.utm.edu/h/hegelsoc.htm>

[4] <http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?groupid=182&HistoryID=aa21>

Also on China's politics in **openDemocracy**:

Andreas Lorenz, "China's environmental suicide: a government minister speaks [14]" (6 April 2005)

Lung Ying-tai, "A question of civility: an open letter to Hu Jintao [14]" (15 February 2006)

David Wall, "The plan and the party [14]" (29 March 2006)

Christopher R Hughes, "Chinese nationalism in the global era [14]" (18 April 2006)

Kerry Brown, "China's top fifty: the China power list [14]" (2 April 2007)

Kerry Brown, "China's party congress: getting serious [14]" (5 October 2007)

- [5] http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/china/modern/tch_mcem.htm
[6] <http://www.zhangshunhong.com/historicalanachronism.htm>
[7] <http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/%7Ejobrien/reference/ob41.html>
[8] <http://www.bl.uk/collections/china2.html>
[9] http://dspace-local.library.cornell.edu/web_archive/explore.cornell.edu/scene2945.html?scene=wason%2520collection&stop=WC%2520-%2520Narrative%2520Opium&view=a
[10] <http://www.evene.fr/livres/livre/alain-peyrefitte-l-empire-immobile-12309.php>
[11] <http://www.coldwarfiles.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=people.details&thisunit=0&peopleid=30>
[12] <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/KARRET.html>
[13] <http://www.indiana.edu/%7Ee232/Time2.html>
[14] <http://tsquare.tv/film/TNMpoems.html>
[15] <http://econ.worldbank.org/external/default/main?pagePK=64165259&theSitePK=469372&piPK=64165421&menuPK=64166093&entityID=0000164>
[16] <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Politics/ComparativePolitics/China/?view=usa&ci=9780195306095>
[17] <http://cjp.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/1/3/405>
[18] http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/countries_e/china_e.htm
[19] <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/PEICHI.html>



Copyright © Li Datong, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.