

## WHAT DOES CHINA THINK? Mark Leonard

Mark Leonard became interested in China as executive director of the European Council on Foreign Relations. He found that only with much patience and effort could he make true friends with the Chinese, whose culture differs from the openness of the west. By spending this time, he gained access to some of China's greatest intellectuals, who can and do influence Chinese policy and is able in the book to explain why China has not taken the western route to democratisation and may never do so. Despite this, China is still likely to end up being a superpower with as much, or possibly more, influence on world affairs than a western world in potential decline.

### **Introduction**

Following 9/11 there were some heated debates about Europe's relationship with the US as they went down the route of being the sole superpower. Europe went for security through interdependence whilst China, with its size and economic dynamism appears to be competing to be the next contender for global leadership.

Leonard argues that China's rise is the big story of our age and historically may rival that of the rise and fall of the Roman, Ottoman, British Empire or the Soviet Union. China has joined the US and Europe as a shaper of world order. Its economic rise is illustrated by the facts that it manufactures 50% of the world's clothes and uses 40% of the world's concrete and coal, 30% of its steel and 12% of its energy. The story of China's intellectual awakening is much less well documented but China has in Beijing alone a dozen or so think-tanks each with a few thousand members. The author has observed them taking western ideas and adapt them into a new Chinese approach for dealing with the world, studying the way that China itself can shape its own destiny.

### **Economic growth**

In 1982 Deng Xiaoping went for growth averaging 9% a year over 3 decades. They did this by using multiple short steps so that the population gradually adjusted to the new ways and the new ways could likewise be adjusted, Rather than closing down the old central planning system they first created an alternative alongside it and when things went well reformed the old system.

For 20 years prior to this collective farms had been closed down and replaced with family owned smallholdings. This led to a huge surge in productivity which enabled thousands of labourers from the fields to work in new privately run factories. To allow for a new China economic reform there was a need to look away from the inland and concentrate on the coastal regions. This started close to Hong Kong, opening up foreign investment and mass producing goods that could compete directly with the west.. As a result the eastern provinces were allowed to cut

themselves free from the impoverished inland creating large differences in the distribution of wealth.

### Tiananman Square

This was seen in the west as a confrontation between a brutal unreformed communist state and students longing to be part of the capitalist world of liberal democracy. In fact they wanted price stability, social security and an end to corruption and speculation.

The brutal put down was seen in the west as a return to the old order of communism but in fact it allowed market forces to be pushed through at unprecedented speed without opposition. This allowed a strange alliance between the communist party and the right (the capitalists) whilst the left (the socialists) during the 90's had to bide their time until they could influence the party once more.

### The Rise of China's New Left

Tiananman allowed the continuation of massive growth and a decentralisation of power from the centre to the regions. The questions asked by the left were whether the price of such economic growth is worth the wealth differentials, the unemployment, the economic migration and the corruption. This leads to the question whether it continues to be maintained without a local population that will spend its money rather than save it. China's economy has grown so far mainly from exports the concern is that without price stability, social security and an end to corruption and speculation then its population will not feel secure enough to spend but will continue to accumulate their savings. There is a need to return to a more centralised government to combat this alongside a further key concern, pollution as due to decentralisation of power locally it comes second to growth and the centre is powerless to curb it. However the balance of power is subtly shifting back to the left and it may be that growth rates will slow as wealth differentials, corruption and pollution are tackled.

### **Political Changes**

China's politics has changed almost as much as its economy and in a direction that the west is not comfortable with as it challenges the liberal democracy that the west assumes is superior is a more sophisticated variant of dictatorship. From the days when Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping made decisions on their own, China has moved on to a style of policy making that is remarkably open to the influences of experts, the media and even public opinion (mainly via opinion polls).

Experiments with democracy have included the local election of party secretaries in one city, a flagship programme of awards (800+ in 2006) for examples of local democracy and election of leaders at village level. However often there is only one candidate and every official post is shadowed by a party position. Spending on local

public services has increased by 20% and admin costs have reduced by 18%. Whilst more recently there have been elections in provincial and national conferences with 15-30% more candidates than positions.

In the 1980's and 90's many scholars argued that democracy was the necessary prerequisite for wider and political growth but in recent years- not least because of China's own economic success, this link has been increasingly questioned.

Four fears of democracy are

1. How the Soviet Union collapsed after democratisation
2. The memory of the Cultural revolution and the fear of recurrence if China collapses
3. The influence of Taiwan who would become a recognised independent state if they could and the fact that this could then lead to other rich areas the same and the break up of China
4. The affluent middle classes fear that their wealth may be appropriated by the masses.

The west, it is argued, assume that stability is due to democracy, but the author states that we confuse the benefits of democracy from those we get from the rule of law. He says that in the west we have sufficient wealth to keep a balance between the influences of law and modernity. Countries such as Hong Kong and Singapore, which have kept benign dictatorships have developed rapidly, whilst other developing countries such as Yugoslavia, Lebanon and Rwanda have gone down the democratic route and disintegrated,

Many of the new right want to promote the rule of law, as this will lead to reducing the size of the state and its effects on the market. There is still a long way to go before China develops the rule of law, but China is the only one party state where the state can be taken to a court and sued..

In the long term China's one party state may collapse, but in the medium term the regime seems to be developing increasingly sophisticated techniques to prolong its survival and pre-empt discontent.

### **China's Rise in Power in Global Terms**

China's leaders were terrified that the rest of the world would see China's rise as a threat to the world and turn against it. How to interface with the rest of the world has been discussed by many of China's think tanks, including an unusual one where foreigners, including the author were present, to devise a formula that measured Comprehensive National Power (CNP). This takes in soft measures such as cultural attraction, as well as military might. It was noted that the USSR, with half the GNP of Japan, was a superpower because of its military might. Initially, China chose to bide its time, stay in the background of world politics and build its capabilities and

concentrate on economic development. Deng Xiaoping quietly stopped support of communist “fifth columns” fighting against India and Vietnam. China instead opened its arms to any country that could assist it in its quest for markets, natural resources and political support.

From old times Chinese thinkers have seen war as a failure of strategy preferring to use manipulation to get what they want. But with such a large population and such economic growth it was hard to maintain a low profile strategy, so instead to avoid being seen as an aggressor China looked at soft ways of influencing the world, such as Confucious Institutes similar to the British Council and Foreign TV stations. The “China Dream” they offered to the world was an attempt to associate the People’s Republic with three powerful ideas; economic development, political sovereignty and international law.

### **Influence through relationships with the Developing World**

Using these three powerful ideas, China now has moved to a major player with influence in the world and moved out from behind its great wall. Once China realised that the USA prefers to deal with its allies in SE Asia separately (Japan, Australia, The Philippines, Korea and Thailand) China called for an ASEAN-China free trade area, to help build a free trade area with a common currency with similarities to the EEC. It has allowed the smaller less powerful nations in the area to have influence and set the pace for direction of the new body.

In the world as a whole China has built relationships with many developing countries, it is argued that some, such as the Sudan, Zimbabwe and Burma are able to continue their disregard of human rights because of this support. China’s foreign investment now dwarfs that from the west. It is setting up four special economic zones, the first in Zambia, that will attempt to copy the success of stimulating the economies of poor countries and repeat the China model of economic growth, allowing these countries, who have had poor experience with aid bodies from the west, particularly the World Bank, to show that democratisation is not the route to development.

Using the three powerful ideas and guarding sovereignty in particular has gained China support throughout the developing world and in particular in the United Nations where China is now winning the majority of its resolutions, whilst the US is now winning a minority and less and less as time goes on. .

### **Managing the West’s Decline**

With the economic rise of China, they are now asking themselves a serious question, about how China will manage a decline in the west, precipitated by the rising cost in oil and competition for natural resources. The Bush administrations ‘forward agenda for freedom’ which linked democracy promotion to regime change, is bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan and has sapped the legitimacy of democracy promotion. It has provided a pretext for governments to crack down on human rights and democracy activists. The US is being increasingly seen as a superpower who dominates with conditions, whereas China’s foreign aid leaves nation states to

control their own agendas, whilst still giving China access to resources such as oil and minerals. Ironically, it also means that China has more influence with rogue states such as Burma, the Sudan and Zimbabwe, because it maintains relationships with them unlike the west and there is evidence it has used this influence, under pressure from the west, to at least moderate what has happened in these states. China has certainly used its influence to solve the nuclear problem in North Korea worked with the EU, the US and Russia on Iran and sent 4000 soldiers to take part in UN peacekeeping actions.

## **Conclusion**

With China's ever rising political influence, on top of its economic growth, the questions must now be asked, will China be able to shape the behaviour of Western powers to advance Chinese interests and values, a complete turnaround from the west believing it can shape China into being like us. How might China also prevent too rapid a decline in US power? Those who argued that the People's Republic would become more western have been proved wrong. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, Europe and America face a formidable alternative, the Chinese model.

## **Interpretation and critique**

I found this book fascinating and have totally reframed my attitude towards Chinese political policy. Unlike the health service China seems to genuinely listen to its intellectuals, pilot things properly to test their effectiveness and move forward step by step rather than by revolution, ready to change direction and approach when things aren't working.

The author produces a pretty good argument that without having given up democracy and human rights, China would never have grown towards prosperity and power. He also argues that the developing world is more likely to succeed with this model, especially as China is offering huge financial support. As a humanist I abhor China's support of regimes such as Burma, Zimbabwe and Sudan, I can see the authors viewpoint that with China having close connections to these regimes, it can and has more influence than the west over them and has at least used its influence to tone down their worst excesses.

Carl Marx said that, "The end justifies the means", and the author makes a great argument which really supports China's case that they have put this into practice.

Ian Walton May 2008