

Summary: The reconfiguration of global power suggests two likely future trends. Firstly, there will be a decline in the relative weight and influence of Western democracy as the West decreases in importance. Secondly, democratic forms in the developing world may well prosper, but they are quite likely to be increasingly hybrid in form. They will become less Western in inspiration and more indigenous. China is not a product of Western democracy and shows very little sign of moving in that direction. How will the West adapt to a world, after two centuries, in which it is no longer dominant? Until now, the idea of China offering an alternative form of governance to the Western liberal order has seemed sufficiently implausible to be ignored. Sooner or later, the West will be obliged to come to terms with the reality of China as it is rather than as the West would like it to be and thinks it should be.

How China Will Change the Global Political Map

by *Martin Jacques*

China has the world's second largest economy. As it overtakes the United States in the relatively near future, and becomes the world's largest economy, China will exercise a growing global influence. Meanwhile, the West — the home of Western liberal democracy — is in relative economic decline. By 2030, it will, by one estimate, account for only 28 percent of global GDP, compared with 33 percent for China and 67 percent for the developing world.¹ In such circumstances, the West's political influence is bound to decline. China is not a product of Western democracy and shows very little sign of moving in that direction. There are numerous examples of Western-influenced democracies in the developing world — most notably India, but also Brazil, Indonesia, South Korea, South Africa, and many others. But while these countries have some key features of Western democracy (by which I mean here universal suffrage and a multi-party system), they are also distinctive. Japan, for instance, is often classified as a Western-style democracy but it also displays some typical characteristics of a Confucian-style polity. In addition, there are many countries where the features of Western-style democracy are worn

relatively lightly and combined with markedly authoritarian modes of rule, Russia, Ukraine, and Singapore being obvious examples.

The reconfiguration of global power suggests two likely future trends. Firstly, there will be a decline in the relative weight and influence of Western democracy as the West decreases in importance. This is irrespective of whether democracy in the West prospers or not, a point I will return to later. Secondly, democratic forms in the developing world may well prosper, but they are quite likely to be increasingly hybrid in form. They will become less Western in inspiration and more indigenous. They will draw from other traditions and values. We should remind ourselves that ideas of accountability, representivity, and transparency are not specific to the West but are shared with many other cultures. In other words, democracy will become increasingly pluralistic in form and subject to a much wider range of cultural influences. The Western form will become one of many rather than the dominant type and influence. Or, to put it another way, accountability, representivity, and transparency in governance are likely to become increasingly commonplace, perhaps one day even universal, rather

¹ Hu Angang, *China 2030*, Springer, forthcoming.

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than simply the specific forms of democracy that we associate with the West.

Future of Western Democracies

This brings me more specifically to the prospects for democracy in the West. After two centuries of global dominance, how will the West adapt to a world where this is no longer the case? That dominance allowed Europe and later North America to enjoy a position of privilege, determining the ground rules of an emergent global economy and the terms of trade between manufactures and natural resources. A key consequence was the long-run depression of commodity prices during the colonial era and then in the second half of the 20th century. In the early 21st century, these privileges have been in rapid retreat. Commodity prices have risen since around the turn of the century as a consequence of growing demand from the developing world, most notably China. This has greatly enhanced the bargaining power of commodity-producing nations, most of which are developing countries, while at the same time obliging Western countries to pay much higher prices for their commodities. This shift in the balance of power is permanent; the weakened bargaining position of the West is the new norm and it will continue to deteriorate over time.

Although the question has received relatively little attention, the Western financial crisis should be seen, in important measure, as an expression — the first, in fact — of this new global era and thereby also a portent of what is to come. Its prolonged nature (with the outlook still bleak for many European countries in particular), the fact that most European economies are still smaller than they were in 2007, and with living standards having declined markedly in most Western countries — and in some very considerably — suggest a grave crisis that has deep structural causes.

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The rise of the developing countries and the relative decline of the developed countries is one of the most fundamental of these, characterized by the increase in commodity prices, the shift in manufacturing from west to east, the indebted state of Western economies, the credit-worthy condition of many developing countries, especially in East Asia, and the intensifying and widening competitive pressures on Western economies from the developing world.

Not surprisingly, even long-established Western democracies are showing the political strains of these economic pressures, perhaps most acutely in Italy, but also in Greece, Spain, and elsewhere. Ultimately, the support enjoyed by a political system is a function of the ability of that system to meet the needs and aspirations of its citizens. If a democratic system persistently fails to do this, then its principles and precepts are likely to come under growing threat.

The prestige enjoyed by Western democracies in the eyes of their people has been because, in global terms, their nations have been economically highly successful and, as a consequence, have been able to dominate the world for over two centuries. But how will their present systems survive not only the growing economic pressures I have outlined but also a situation where these countries are no longer dominant in the world? What will be the effect of having to live with a China that is based on a very different political system and that becomes the dominant economic power in the world? Perhaps this will not come to pass: but it is an increasingly plausible scenario.

Until now, the idea of China offering an alternative form of governance to the Western liberal order has seemed sufficiently implausible to be ignored. The Western hubris that flowed from its sense of democratic virtue has meant that all other alternatives have been dismissed out of hand, especially since the ignominious implosion of the Soviet Union and its various acolytes. Furthermore, it has been widely held — still is, in fact — that as China lacked these democratic attributes, its economic transformation would in time prove unsustainable. But the certainty with which this view is held has been steadily weakening, as a result of the Western financial crisis and the toll this has taken on the standing of its political, financial, and business elites, combined, of course, with the continuing rise of China, notwithstanding the endless stream of Western prognostications to the contrary. Following the Western financial

crisis, it is now projected that China will overtake the U.S. economy in size in 2018, and threatens to be twice the size in around two decades;² since 2000, China has emerged as a major global economic player and arguably now has a bigger impact on the shape and nature of globalization than the United States. Sooner or later, we will be obliged to come to terms with the reality of China as it is rather than as the West would like it to be and thinks it should be. We will probably bear witness to this process of grudging acceptance over the next decade, as the West acquiesces in China's difference not as some transient phenomenon but as a permanent feature of the global landscape. China will, in the process, be taken increasingly seriously as offering an alternative form of governance to the Western liberal order.

Chinese Governance

The starting point here is to understand the nature of Chinese governance. Surprising as it may seem to many Westerners, Chinese governance enjoys great legitimacy, arguably more than any Western country.³ Unlike the West, the legitimacy of Chinese governance does not rest on democracy. Notwithstanding the conventional wisdom in the West, which tends toward the belief that democracy is more or less the sole source of legitimacy, in fact it has a range of different sources. What are its sources in China? Most fundamentally, it is bound up with the idea of Chinese civilization. China has called itself a nation-state for little more than 100 years, but China is at least two millennia old, dating back to 221 BC. China's sense of what it is and who the Chinese are has been overwhelmingly shaped not by its experience as a nation-state but by its civilizational history. Its sheer longevity, its huge geographical and demographic scale, its diversity, and the overarching nature of the Han identity are some of the features of China as a civilization-state.

Holding such a vast country together for two millennia has been hugely difficult: the underlying dynamic that lies at the heart of Chinese society is the conflict between the centripetal forces that hold it together and the centrifugal forces that threaten its unity. This is why the most important political value for the Chinese is the unity of the country, which is intimately linked to the priority attached to order and stability. The institution charged with maintaining the unity

² Ibid.

³ For example, surveys by Tony Saich, Kennedy School, Harvard University (based on 4,000 respondents, 2003-2009).

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of the country — and Chinese civilization — is the state. This is by far its most important responsibility and gives it a unique status and importance in the Chinese mind. The state is regarded as the embodiment of Chinese civilization; and is seen by the Chinese as, in effect, an extension and expression of themselves.

The family is crucial to an understanding of how the Chinese see the state. For Confucius, the family was the template for the state. The state was the family writ large; with the emperor's role akin to that of the father. In the West, the state is seen in utilitarian and instrumental terms, whereas the Chinese state, modeled on the family, is regarded quite differently. The Chinese view the state as an intimate, or literally, the head of the family, the family that is China. The relationship between the state and society in China, in other words, is entirely unlike that in the West.

This helps to explain the relative absence hitherto of democracy in the Chinese tradition. Confucius, in fact, believed that the state should be immune from popular pressure, that it should govern according to ethical principles rather than popular demands. To this end, he believed the very best people should be selected on a meritocratic basis to run the state. The examination for the selection of the imperial bureaucracy dates back to the Han dynasty two millennia ago. While the West holds dear the notion of democracy, the equivalent for the Chinese is the principle of meritocracy. To this day, it continues to suffuse Chinese culture: the huge importance attached to examinations, the nationwide competition to enter the top universities and the fact that gaining admission to the civil service — again done by open examination — is seen by the Chinese as the most prestigious form of employment. Not surprisingly, the Chinese state is a highly competent institution attracting the brightest and best talent. It is worth reflecting, in this context, on the extraordinary achievement of the Chinese

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state in masterminding the economic transformation of the country over the course of the last three decades.

Nor is the Chinese state a static or inert institution. The extent to which it has been subject to a constant process of reform and re-engineering⁴ over the last three decades has been hugely underestimated in the West, basically, one suspects, because the only reforms that the West has really been interested in are those that would move China in the direction of a Western-style democracy. There has been a growing professionalization of both the Communist Party and the state: the performance of party officials is now subject to an exhaustive system of regular review and evaluation while the selection of officials has become an intense and protracted process, overseen by the Organization Department, which, under Li Yuanchao, has introduced many new innovations. By the time the top officials become members of the Standing Committee, they have invariably acquired a very wide range of experience of running the party, the government, and often state-owned enterprises as well. Xi Jinping, the new general secretary, has previously been in charge of two provinces and the governor of another, as well as holding a range of lesser posts. This is very different from most elected Western politicians, who often have little previous experience in running anything.

Its Strengths

Little attention has been paid in the West thus far to the underlying strengths of Chinese governance. Instead, we have been overwhelmingly preoccupied with its democratic deficiencies, in particular the absence of universal suffrage and a multi-party system, but also the issue of human rights and the problem of rampant corruption. But if we are to understand Chinese governance, then we have to appreciate its strengths and not just what we perceive to be its weaknesses. These strengths can be summarized as:

- the sheer competence of government; the ability to think long-term and take a strategic view of development;
- the ability to get things done;
- the willingness to experiment and make choices on a very pragmatic basis as according to what does or does not work;

⁴ David Shambaugh (ed.), *The Modern Chinese State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 167, 174-81.

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- the capacity to undertake great infrastructural projects that have been crucial to China's transformation; and
- the relative immunity, compared with the United States for example, from the lobbying of powerful vested interests.

These strengths contrast with some of the obvious weaknesses of Western democracy:

- the priority given to short-term popularity and pressures rather than long-term needs as a consequence of the competition for votes;
- the related inability to think strategically rather than tactically, illustrated for example by the neglect of infrastructure;
- the relative absence of a forward-looking and strategic culture;
- a tendency toward conservatism and the preservation of the status quo;
- the lack of relevant experience and qualification that is typical of elected officials with the resulting adverse effect on state competence; and
- a failure to attract the brightest and best talent into public administration because of their low status in comparison with elected officials.

The assumption in the West is that as China becomes increasingly prosperous and its population better-educated and informed, then there will be growing pressure for democratization. This seems likely to be the case, a question to which I will return shortly. We must also ask, however, what the impact of China's rise will be on the West. On the assumption that China's ascent will continue as roughly charted earlier — its economy growing to twice the size of the United States' by 2030 — then it will increasingly be seen as some kind of template for the West: what we need

to learn from China will become a constant refrain. This is likely to revolve around a cluster of related issues: government should be more strategic, a greater priority should be given to infrastructure, and much more importance should be attached to the competence of government and those who run and manage it, in other words meritocracy. In the mid-19th century, Britain, in particular, drew on the model of the Chinese imperial civil service, and especially its examination system, in the reform of its own civil service. It would not be surprising if, 200 years later, this exercise was to be repeated on a wider basis in the West, albeit not when China was in decline as then but when it was in the ascendant as now and in the future. In summary, Western governance, under the impact of China's rise, is likely to seek to combine greater meritocracy with democracy.⁵

And what of China? It seems likely that it will, over time, move toward becoming increasingly democratic. But what will this mean? What forms will it take? How will this be combined with China's very long tradition of meritocracy? Given China's history, it seems unlikely, probably very unlikely, that it will replicate Western forms. Instead we are likely to see a more hybrid development, one that reflects and builds on Chinese traditions while combining these with democratic practices drawn from elsewhere — notably the West and East Asia, for example Japan and Singapore. It seems probable that at some point in the future, voting will be extended from the present village elections to municipalities. And it is not difficult to imagine that this could slowly be extended, perhaps rather rapidly if political pressures should so demand. It is generally assumed in the West, however, that eventually the Chinese political system will come to resemble our own, with popular sovereignty based on universal suffrage and a multi-party system. This should not be taken for granted or even regarded as likely.

While China has a very powerful tradition of state sovereignty, it has no tradition of popular sovereignty, the nearest being the notion of the mandate of Heaven. Japan, similarly, has a very strong tradition of state sovereignty but, unlike China, it also has a tradition of popular sovereignty, as evinced by universal suffrage and a multi-party system. But the latter does not operate in the same way as in the West: in practice, state sovereignty takes precedence over popular sovereignty, with the permanent bureaucracy running the

⁵ For example, Nicolas Berggruen and Nathan Gardels, *Intelligent Governance for the 21st Century: A Middle Way Between West and East* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

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country rather than its elected politicians. This is a legacy of the Confucian tradition imported from China many centuries ago and that was subsequently nativized. If this is the case in Japan, it is likely to be even more true in China where Confucianism is both home-grown and more deeply rooted. In recent Confucian-influenced writings, the idea of two or even three national assemblies has been suggested, only one of which would be elected.⁶ And the latter would not enjoy any precedence over the others, which would be composed of experts and scholars. It seems likely state sovereignty will continue to take precedence over popular sovereignty in China.

There are other questions that deserve attention, including whether and in what ways China is likely to remain a one-party system, or at least predominantly a one-party system. But I want to conclude by considering another crucial feature of Chinese governance, namely the huge demographic size of the country, the implications of which are rarely discussed in the West. China has twice the population of Europe and four times that of the United States. It accounts for one-fifth of the world's population. It is not just another country but a near continent or, to put it another way, a sub-global region. Hitherto, democracies have been confined to nation-states. There are no successful examples of democracies on a transnational level, as is well-illustrated by the problematic example of the European Union. India, as frequently cited, offers the clearest alternative to China:

⁶ Daniel A. Bell, *Political Meritocracy is a Good Thing*, Parts I and 2; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-a-bell/political-meritocracy-china_b_1815245.html and http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-a-bell/political-meritocracy-china_b_1815288.html; Daniel A. Bell, "Democracy at the Bottom, Meritocracy at the Top, Experimentation in Between," *China-U.S. Focus*, January 22, 2013. Jiang Qing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

it has been a vibrant democracy for over 60 years, although in terms of governance, its state has been a huge disappointment and in key respects a failure. In the era of globalization, the Chinese experience of effective governance over a huge territory and population has been sadly neglected in Western discussions. With the European project mired in deep crisis, the example of China — not just in a contemporary context but over the last 2,000 years — is highly relevant and instructive, even if it offers no easy answers.

About the Author

Martin Jacques is a Transatlantic Academy nonresident fellow and the author of the global best-seller *When China Rules the World: the End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (2009). He is a senior visiting fellow at IDEAS, a center for diplomacy and grand strategy at the London School of Economics, and a visiting professor at Tsinghua University, Beijing. He was a Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, and a Bosch Public Policy Fellow with the Transatlantic Academy in 2010-2011. He has been a columnist for many newspapers, made many television programs and is a former deputy editor of *The Independent* newspaper. He took his doctorate while at King's College, Cambridge.

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