

FEATURE

Understanding Modern China

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By Rodger Winn

Many Americans don't know what to think about modern China because it is not covered well in our history classes. I lived in China twice as a child, toured China in 2003 and 2008 with my wife, and taught Business English in the MBA program at Xiamen University during the 2007-2008 school year. Recently I joined the Asian Education Foundation in Portland, and realized that I need to have a coherent response to the question of what I think about modern China.

Here is my answer.

One of the major heart burns in America is that the Chinese have a command economy instead of a democracy. What we need to understand is that despite having a five thousand year old history, the modern Chinese government should be considered only thirty years old, and it is an experiment that rejects both our American model of government and the Russian communist form of government. In criticizing the Chinese for their form of government, our most jingoistic Americans perhaps fail to grasp the notion that our own American democracy is itself a fairly new experiment, and it is still evolving.

Part of what's needed in understanding modern China is the influence of Confucianism. Confucianism is and was concerned primarily with the needs of society, and is the philosophy behind modern China. It guides both the government and the individual by emphasizing the values of hierarchy and hard work. Confucianism is not a religion, but it is a philosophy and a guide to morality and good

government. Confucius championed strong familial loyalty, ancestor worship, and respect of elders and the family as a basis for an ideal government, and, surprisingly, Confucius expressed one of the earliest versions of the *Golden Rule*.



Chinese history has been one of stability and continuity that is hard for Americans to comprehend. Few of us understand the importance of China's having only seven dynasties over 2,300 years of history.

Our American history arises out of our taking over a basically empty continent (after European diseases reduced the population by 95%) and is in fact quite new. Our religious background includes the adoption of our monotheistic religion, starting with Constantine, the Crusades, the Inquisition, and continues with our aggressive attempts to impose our chosen religious preferences upon the heathen others out there (e.g. subjugation of all the indigenous natives in the past and Bush era restrictions on foreign aid in the present). Our European background and the heritage of Christianity have led to a dogmatic belief in the primacy of the individual over the needs of society, which has serious ramifications in our over-crowded and complex modern societies.

For help in understanding modern China, below is my paraphrasing from an article by Zhang Wei-wei in the Editorial Opinion section

of the *International Herald Tribune*, entitled “Eight Ideas behind China’s Success.”

1) *Seeking truth from facts.* Beijing concluded from facts that neither the Soviet communist model nor the western democracy model really work for a developing country to achieve modernization. They concluded that democratization usually follows modernization rather than precedes it. So in 1978 China decided to explore its own path, using a pragmatic, trial-and-error approach.

2) *Primacy of people’s livelihood.* Beijing embraced an old Chinese governance concept that poverty eradication is the most fundamental human right, whereas the west focused on civil and political rights.

3) *The importance of holistic thinking.* The holistic strategy from the 1980’s established a pattern of easy reforms first, followed by more determined and difficult reforms, in contrast to the populist, short term politics so prevalent in much of the world today.

4) *Government as a necessary virtue.* In China’s long history, prosperous times were associated with an enlightened, strong state. Contrary to the American view of the state as a necessary evil, China’s transformation has been led by an enlightened developmental state. Deng Xiaoping reoriented China’s old state toward promoting modernization and pursuing hard strategic objectives, such as enforcing banking sector reforms, developing renewable energies and stimulating China’s economy against the global downturn.

5) *Good governance matters more than democratization.* China rejects the stereotypical dichotomy of democracy vs. autocracy and holds that the nature of a state, including its legitimacy, has to be defined by its substance, i.e. by good governance, and tested by what it can deliver.

6) *Performance legitimacy.* Inspired by the Confucian tradition of meritocracy, Beijing practices legitimacy across the whole political stratum. Criteria such as performance in poverty

eradication and cleaner environment are key factors in the promotion of officials. China’s leaders are competent, sophisticated and well tested at different levels of responsibility.

7) *Selective learning and adaptation.* China represents a secular culture where learning from others is prized. The Chinese have developed a remarkable capacity for selective learning and adaptation to new challenges, as shown by how quickly China has embraced the IT revolution and then excelled in it.

8) *Harmony in diversity.* Beijing has revived the old Confucian ideal for a large and complex society. Rejecting western-style adversary politics, Beijing has worked hard to emphasize commonality of different group interests, to defuse social tensions associated with rapid change and to establish as fast as it can a social safety net for all.

Our fear of Chinese hegemony is best understood by looking in the mirror. America has a history of interference and aggression towards other countries, starting with the War of 1846, in which we just took away from Mexico (with a payment of \$15 million) the territory that is now much of our southwestern states. We made American territories out of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam, and others. We annexed Alaska and Hawaii into the union of states. We have invaded Panama, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Our history of domestic violence against our own people is not very pretty, either, starting with the treatment of the native Indians when we first settled America. Since then we’ve had The Trail of Tears, Ruby Ridge, Kent State, the Civil Rights violence, the Japanese internment, McCarthyism, etc, just to mention some of the more obvious civil liberties violations exercised by our own government and our fellow Americans. Most people choose to forget that universal voting rights in the U.S. are less than one hundred years old, and lynching of blacks took place until about 60 years ago.

Between 1405 and 1433, the Ming government in China sponsored a series of seven naval expeditions to establish a presence and control trade. Admiral Zheng He's voyages involved 27,000 men and 240 to 300 ships. These huge ships might have been as big as 416 ft long and 170 ft wide, more or less the size and shape of a football field. (By contrast, Columbus' ships some years later were about 55 ft long, which is about lifeboat size on Admiral He's Chinese ships.) The Chinese could have conquered a lot of territory with a force like that, but they didn't. Since the original consolidation of the Chinese territories into a single empire, the boundaries of "China" have waxed and waned, but the Chinese have not been guilty of expansionism as have the empires of Portugal, Spain, England, and the U.S.

China has been too smart for that in recent years. It is my belief that the Chinese government can and does buy the best business minds available, and their behavior is what any good MBA student would advise. Tie up all the resources that will soon be in short supply. Establish trading partnerships with those who are willing to overlook minor details like civil rights issues. Control your own people but make life better for them so they are less likely to revolt. The government's philosophy is that as the modernization continues and the life style gets better for everyone, then you can gradually introduce more and more freedoms to the people

When I hear an American complain about the centralized political control in China, my response is "Would you really want to give 800 million peasants an equal vote?" If we are really honest, we would realize that the Chinese government is really only about 30 years old and is still experimenting to see what works. China could still experience social unrest, banking failure, etc. and must overcome problems like corruption, mis-allocation of investment capital, wealth inequality, etc., but these are solvable problems.

The U.S. has been experimenting for over 200 years, and we have a dysfunctional government,

failing schools, high unemployment and homelessness, an unsuccessful war on drugs, etc. Personally, I think that it is an open question as to whether or not, in the long run, the Chinese will pull out of this better than we are able to. Both economies are based on the assumption of continued growth, and it remains to be seen which will do better when we acknowledge that such an attitude is no longer valid.

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Rodger Winn lived with his missionary parents in China in '38-'41 and '47-'48, and was forced to evacuate both times. They were evacuated from the Philippines by submarine in '44. He was an engineer in a steel mill, oil exploration, aerospace, and was a high tech engineering salesman for 26 years. He lived two years in Bolivia and two years in Iran, and has visited over 50 countries. He toured China with his wife in '03 and '08, and taught Business English in the MBA program at Xiamen University during the '07-'08 school year.