

## **THE ENIGMA OF CHINA AS A CIVILISATION STATE**

By Martin Jacques, the author of 'When China Rules the World: the Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World,' Allen Lane, June 2009.

There is a standard western reflex to any discussion about China: it is not democratic. True: but that does not get us very far. Nor was any western country during its economic take-off; nor was Japan; and nor were the Asian tigers. The great majority of countries have not been democratic during their period of take-off: the most obvious, and remarkable, exception is India. As for China, around half the population still lives in the countryside, meaning that its economic take-off – the shift from agriculture to industry, from the countryside to the cities – still has a long way to run. And there is a very good reason why developing countries – those that are engaged in the process of take-off – are not democratic. It demands and involves an overriding concentration on the escape from poverty, not least in the minds of the people, thereby rendering questions such as democracy rather academic.

China's lack of democracy, then, should be seen in its historical context. Democracy might be regarded as desirable during take-off but in practice it has not proved to be a realistic option for most countries. If we choose to ignore this historical context we stand guilty of being hypocrites: requiring of others what we did not practice ourselves.

Systems of governance must also be seen in their cultural context. Western democracy was a product of European history and traditions. Some of its principles are no doubt universal, but it would be cavalier to think that the political systems we are familiar with in the west can and should be mimicked everywhere. Politics is culturally specific; indeed, it is one of the most provincial and least cosmopolitan of all major activities.

Let me illustrate the cultural issue by reference to Japan, a country that is at least as economically developed as the most advanced western countries. Japan is seen in the west as a western-style democracy: it has universal suffrage, regular elections and a multi-party system. Despite having the trappings of a western democracy, however, it does not operate like one. Ever since 1955, the Liberal Democrats have been in office, apart from a brief interval of less than a year. The LDP's factions, furthermore, are rather more important than the other parties. Nor do the Diet or cabinet enjoy much influence. In practice power is overwhelmingly vested in the state: in other words, in an institution that is not subject to periodic election. Although on the face of it legitimacy resides in popular sovereignty, Japanese governance does not actually work like that. Popular sovereignty embellishes what is essentially a Japanese Confucian-style state. This is not because the ruling elite has hoodwinked the people but because these assumptions are part of the Japanese psyche.

This brings us to China. In the long run, there can be little doubt that Chinese governance will become increasingly accountable, representative and transparent; indeed, this has palpably been the case over the last twenty years. The kind of discussions that now take place on the internet would have been inconceivable even ten years ago. But it is highly unlikely that Chinese democracy will ever mimic western democracy, and will certainly never work in the same way. The state occupies a very different position in Chinese society to that in the west. China cannot be regarded as a conventional nation-state but as a civilization-state – defined by its longevity, vastness and diversity. The state is seen not so much as the guardian of the nation but as the embodiment and representative of a civilization. Even when China at some point in the future enjoys universal suffrage, it is extremely unlikely that legitimacy will lie

in popular sovereignty: it will always reside in the state, more so even than in Japan because of China's nature as a civilization state and the fact that Confucius's influence, as an exponent of state rather than popular sovereignty, has been much greater. The fact that the state – in stark contrast to the west – has had no serious rivals for around a thousand years only serves to reinforce this point.

There is a further factor to consider. In terms of scale, both demographic and geographical, China is more like a continent than a nation. The vastness of China means that it should be considered both as a single country and as a collection of many countries. Yet the home of democracy has invariably been the nation-state. There are no multinational instances of democracy, as the example of the European Union tellingly illustrates. Once again the nearest to an exception is India. In this context, it may well be that democracy in China spreads, at the instigation of the state, in a relatively piecemeal fashion, in the same manner as the economic reform process initiated by Deng Xiaoping after 1978. The most obvious candidate would be Hong Kong, where already half the Legco is elected and there is a commitment to electing the chief executive in 2017. If China and Taiwan should come to a deal – no longer such a distant prospect as it once seemed – then this could be another instance. Given that one of the characteristics of China as a civilization state is its great diversity, this scenario potentially lies within rather than outside the Chinese tradition.

Finally, we should take care not to conflate democracy and the competence of the state. Notwithstanding the lack of democracy, the Chinese state is – and has for centuries – been a highly competent institution. Arguably, China is the home of statecraft. The state, for example, has proved remarkably able in masterminding China's economic transformation. The reasons for China's sophisticated statecraft lie deep in history: the fact that it enjoys more than two millennia of history, the early teachings of Confucius on the subject, and the sheer challenge of governing such a huge country. As a result, the Chinese state has a competence that far exceeds that of western states, especially bearing in mind that China is still very much a developing country. Indeed, its state-competence will be one of the ways in which China comes to exercise a growing influence on the world. Hitherto, certainly in the west, this has been largely ignored because the question of the state has been reduced to one of democracy. With China's rise, it will not be neglected in the future.

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