

Joergen Oestroem Moeller: China's Model

Continuing on the [World without the West theme](#), and a recent post by Dan Drezner on [China's weight gain](#), some recent comments by Joergen Oestroem Moeller, Visiting Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore and an Adjunct Professor, Copenhagen Business School. As he notes, the views expressed are his own. I post them here as part of a growing discussion about the extent to which China is beginning to acquire "soft power" in terms of providing an alternate to the West.

The conviction is widespread in the West that there is no alternative to the combination of American capitalism as the global economic model and democracy as the ultimate political model. Eventually this model will reign albeit editions around the world may differ according to history and geography, but not much. Islamic Fundamentalism is the only barrier to pole position.

... [While] Islamic Fundamentalism may challenge the Western model, but is not deemed attractive by the non-Islamic part of the world. Another model though is being scrutinized and analyzed as an alternative: The Chinese model.

The two differ at the core. Islamic Fundamentalism seeks to destroy or obliterate the Western model in what is believed to be a God inspired historic mission. If successful only one model will be left: Islamic Fundamentalism. It cannot be a global model for two reasons: there is no room for non-believers and it cannot deliver economic development, which is what the world wants.

The Chinese model is a global alternative to the Western model. The two can co-exist in a duel or rivalry or in competition just like Socialism versus Capitalism did, vying for support and in the spirit of letting the best man win. It has delivered, it works and it has proved itself. It draws the logical consequence of global Capitalism and shies away from politics in the old fashioned sense of distribution of income, who owns production factors etc. All these questions harassing political life for a century or more have been settled.

The job now is to manage the economy inside the existing framework. Many people name meritocracy as the prime gift of the US to the world, but the Chinese with more than one thousand years of mandarin rule got there first. And what they offer now is a mix and combination of meritocracy and management, an extrapolation of the Chinese system or model given finishing strokes and refined over centuries and now adjusted to the modern world.

It has worked extremely well in China since 1979 when Deng Xiaoping coined the phrase that 'Whether it is a black cat or a white cat, as long as it can catch the rat, it is a good cat'. This is the key to understanding politics in the future.

China and the Chinese do not explicitly offer this model in their political and economic offensive abroad. They do not follow the Western powers or Islamic Fundamentalists insisting that they alone know what is right not only for themselves, but for everybody else. They are not 'preachers', but 'doers'. The mere fact that China has succeeded disregarding the basic philosophy of Western political culture attracts the attention of many countries outside North America and Europe.

The Western philosophy overlooks that the principles (democracy, free elections and human rights all as defined by the West) may be sacrosanct for the Western world, but does not look equally attractive in the eyes of other nations with other traditions, history and circumstances. Part of this misunderstanding may be subscribed to the near monopoly of the Western media looking and reporting at the world through Western glasses. Another part, the almost Marxian belief in having history on its side. There may be set backs and disappointment, but the end result is known and given.

In comes the Chinese saying that what counts is economic growth, increasing standard of living and better human security, bringing along a better standard of living for everyone. It looks like a carbon copy of the prescription for the West's victory over Communism.

Certainly there are rising expectations especially among the young people in Asia, Africa, Latin America and other parts of the world to gain more fundamental rights of freedom enjoyed in the Western world. Certainly they want to be consulted to forward their input to the political decision-makers. The point is, however, that they do not associate this with a particular political model. In the West it is seen as two sides of the same coin. Not so in many parts of the world outside the West. Maybe, the grassroots whisper, it can be gained with a non-Western political model.

If the Chinese political model built around management and meritocracy captures this trend it will turn from potential challenger to a real alternative. It will need to 'universalise' its 'particularistic responses' to reach beyond China as a genuine global model.

If so the world will see a new duel just like the one we had between Socialism and Capitalism, but this time between:

A Western political model emphasizing human rights and a large degree of personal freedom and not the least these principles and the selection of political leaders through free elections as two sides of the same coin.

A Chinese inspired model focusing upon management and meritocracy without much emphasis on selection of political leaders as long as they live up to these expectations and offer the citizens personal freedom albeit not necessarily as defined in the Western model.

With luck the world may see no winner, but an amalgamation of the best elements from each of these two models. With luck. And if politicians and statesmen make an effort to get there.

Posted by Nikolas Gvosdev at 10/09/2007 02:07:13 PM |
