

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Monday, February 25, 2019.

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Opinion

Why China's model of development offers Asia an alternative playbook and need not inspire fear in the US

- China's path to economic development, despite a rigid political system, has been successfully replicated in Vietnam and could be a model for North Korea to follow too



Tom Plate

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A boy looks at models of China's Fuxing bullet train at an exhibition marking the 40th anniversary of the country's reform and opening up at the National Museum of China in Beijing in November 2018. Photo: EPA-EFE

A friend of mine, someone I've known for decades, is a most patriotic American. But unlike what many in China might imagine lurks in America's secret heart, he's not rooting for China to sputter, much less collapse. He's not hoping for economic disaster, Maoist reversion, Japanese invasion or a great jolt backward of any kind. On the contrary, he hopes China is now well clear of the worst of the past. Excluding nasty Communist Party hacks, militaristic admirals and the like, if the Chinese as a whole deserve anything, they deserve a break.

He is but one American, he believes, of many who know there's more to China than the trade deficit,

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South China Sea and intellectual-property scamming that dominate the Western media narrative. The Chinese have brought to the world immense learning, thought-experimenting dialectically long before Hegel started synthesising his theses.

If the modern world had tried practising the Mohism of the ancient Chinese philosopher Mozi, who emphasised impartial concern for all, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 might not have been needed. Western philosophy has much to offer, but isolated, if not alienated, from Eastern philosophy, it is parochial and incomplete.

The Chinese government's extravagant, glitzy Belt and Road Initiative may wind up derailed by political and financing potholes, but it strikes my American friend as exhibiting at least some genuine measure of optimism. At the very least, there must be more than one way of looking at it besides the inevitable Eurocentric assumption of old-fashioned empire-building that the West tends to excel at.

My friend recalls reading that China, not the US or Britain, is the top higher-education choice for English-speaking African students. Most Americans would be shocked to hear this, assuming as they do that their institutions of higher learning are the best in the world. Maybe this astonishing educational migration is due to programmatic Beijing subsidies as part of a self-serving soft-power push in Africa? Many Americans might suspect a communist brainwashing campaign. However, my friend notes, it is also possible some people might wish to go to China simply because they feel they might have much to learn there.

China's rise has had no small part to play in Asia's ascent. In case anyone's been nodding off for the last decade or three, there's a new book just for them entitled *The Future Is Asian*. My friend points out that Kishore Mahbubani's very first book on the global geopolitical revolution, ironically titled *Can Asians Think?*, was published back in 1998. This former Singaporean diplomat was the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, considered one of the top schools in the field worldwide after just 15 years of its founding. That's the new Asia, and the speed of its rise.

Asia is where the president of the United States plans to deplane later this week. Donald Trump is to touch down in Hanoi for a meeting with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. It's a fitting, telling location. The economy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is booming and that of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is not. This suggests that not all communist governments run their countries into the ground.

Beijing, my friend points out, has been offering a copy of its economic playbook to Pyongyang for years. Today's Vietnam has profited from taking pages from that book to heart, as Kim now must if he wishes to survive. My friend argues that if the Nobel committee still handed out prizes posthumously, it could award Deng Xiaoping something nice for showing how economic innovation is possible even in a rigid polity.

Yes, China's economic "miracle" has underwritten the refurbishing of a once-dilapidated military machine, especially its surging navy and air force. My friend is surprisingly unruffled and makes two points. First, with its history of being exploited and invaded, its leaders would have to be brain-dead – or perhaps Central Intelligence Agency double-agents – not to devote substantial resources to the defence sector. Second, if a country's aim is to become a global power, choosing the pacifist route is not exactly a time-honoured formula. China deserves no Nobel Peace Prize for its military build-up, but it is anything but senseless. The West will just have to deal with it.

Finally, my friend offers this advice on how to view China to understand it – psychologically, don't park yourself on the outside looking in, try to imagine being on the inside, looking out. That's hard for Americans,

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who spend much of their time staring at themselves. If China has nothing to teach us but one thing, it is that there is usually more than one way to achieve the same objective.

By now many of you have concluded that my close friend is quite an odd fellow, and some of you may suspect that he might be me. Yes, I have been practising the dialectic myself – East meets West, in this peculiar methodology. I can say I try never to lie to myself; my hope is that I am not just talking to myself. Then again, what are good friends for? Peace is hard work; war is for simpler, cruder minds.

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