

Political Economic Implications of Historical and Philosophical China

Qingjie Xia* and Qi Tang**

To cite this article: Qingjie Xia and Qi Tang (2022). Political economic implications of historical and philosophical China. *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies* 11(2): 75-91. [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202212_11\(2\).0005](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202212_11(2).0005)

To link to this article: [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202212_11\(2\).0005](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202212_11(2).0005)

Abstract

This article attempts to explore what a “philosophical” China is like as well as its political economic implications in historical perspective since the age of the ancient sage emperors. The periodic floods of the Yellow River and the Yangtze River and the frequent nomadic incursions had created the “collectivism” character of the Chinese civilisation. To effectively fight floods, control rivers, and resist nomadic incursion, the political system of “collectivist” China gradually morphed from the enfeoffment system of the Western Zhou Dynasty to the centralised power system or the system of prefectures and counties during the Qin and Hàn Dynasties. To maintain the unified ideology of the country, Emperor Wudi of the Western Han Dynasty adopted Confucianism and banned all other schools of thought. Under the imperial examination system, and since the Sui, Tang, Ming, and Qing dynasties, China carried out the recruitment of imperial officials from the elites who studied Confucianism and had passed the examinations. Therefore, the emperors governed the country together with the elites collectively. This might be called a “Confucian open society.” After the middle of the seventeenth century, China fell behind in the tide of industrialisation, and hence was continually defeated by the West and Japan. After completing its political, economic, and social reconstruction in the aftermath of these defeats, the “collectivist” Chinese people finally ushered in the birth of the PRC in 1949. Since its foundation, the PRC has successfully realised industrialisation and the creation of its “open society” while also brought revolutionary changes.

Keywords: Collectivist China; Confucianism; open society, reform and opening up

Introduction

Western scholars such as Wittfogel (1957) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) often refer to China's political system as "despotism," "dictatorship," "autocracy," or "authoritarianism." Daniel Bell, a relatively neutral scholar, regards it as "meritocracy." The Chinese called it the centralised power system or the system of prefectures and counties. Fukuyama (2011) recognises the Shang Yang Reform during the reign of Duke Xiao of Qin around 350 BC that led to the first modern state in human history. Hence, ancient China should be set as the reference when studying political institutional development (Bell, 2015). Acemoglu and Robinson also concluded that liberal democracy would lead to prosperity and strength, and dictatorship would result in the failure of the country (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). However, Bell examined "meritocracy" in detail and argued that China's "meritocracy" might be an effective alternative to the West's liberal democracy. Notwithstanding these comments, for the period when the first Emperor Shi Huangdi of the Qin Dynasty unified China in 221 BC to the late Ming-early Qing Dynasties, China had been the most powerful country in the world in terms of political, economic, and cultural development (Maddison, 2007). During the period from the late Ming-early Qing Dynasty to the defeat of the Kuomintang in 1949, China failed to catch up with the world's technological development propagated by the industrial revolution. As a result, China was ignorant, poor, backwards, and had even been militarily defeated by the West and Japan during the hundred years between the Opium War in 1840 to the victory of the Chinese Anti-Japanese Invasion in 1945. With the birth of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the country proceeded to reconstruct its political, economic, social, and cultural systems. In the past 70 years, the PRC has become an industrialised country and the second largest economy in the world. For a civilised country that had existed in the world for over two thousand years, the judgments of the Western theorists such as "despotism," "dictatorship," "autocracy," "authoritarianism," or "meritocracy," simply cannot summarise the main characteristics of China. Similarly, the labels recognised by Chinese theorists such as "centralised power system" or "system of prefectures and counties" may not adequately address the question of "what kind of country is China?" To understand China from a philosophical perspective, we have to trace the origin of the Chinese civilisation and conduct an in-depth analysis and generalisation of its political, economic, social, cultural, and historical development. Only then can we discover the philosophical China in terms of its metaphysical meaning in addition to its political economic implications.

China's "Collectivism" and Institutional Changes

China evolved into a "collectivist" state from antiquity. This process involved the emergence of a power centre and accompanying political structure through the dynasties and the development of a state ideology. This ideology was to form the basis of bureaucracy by administrators selected from an examinations system that was open to all.

The Origin of “Collectivism” in China

Lao Tzu (571–471 BC), who lived in the late Spring and Autumn Period, said: “Human beings follow the Earth, the Earth follows the heavens, the heavens follow the Tao, the Tao follows nature” (para. 52).¹ Therefore, if the “Tao” is followed, the state of “ruling by doing nothing” can be achieved. In fact, Lao Tzu’s ideal social state is: “Neighbouring countries face each other, chickens and dogs hear each other, and people will never communicate with each other until they grow old and die” (para. 80). From the Qin and Han to the late Ming-early Qing dynasties, China was an agrarian society dominated by scattered small-scale farmers. So how did the traditionally small peasant-based China that mainly relied on foot transportation and communication become “collectivist” China?

Hobbes (1999) believes that anarchy (in which “everyone is against everyone”) causes huge loss of life and property, which in turn makes the people willing to cede certain rights to a powerful individual (the “*Leviathan*”) in exchange for peace and security. This is Hobbes’ hypothesis about the origin of the state. Is it possible that the yearly natural disasters and frequent foreign invasions (that are enough to cause massive losses of life and property) had forced the people to hand over certain rights to a central authority to combat natural disasters effectively and to resist external invasions?

Before the Xia (2070–1600 BC) and Shang (1600–1046 BC) Dynasties, the people of prehistoric China had already settled on the alluvial flood plain of the Yellow River. These people faced the deadly threat of periodic floods of the river and frequent nomadic incursions from the north (Deng, 2011).² The middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River had been occupied for agricultural production before the beginning of the Xia and Shang Dynasties. The middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River and its alluvial plains and warm climate were similar to those in the Euphrates and Tigris River basins in West Asia, the Nile Delta in ancient Egypt, and the Ganges river basin in India, and were suitable for cultivation and settlement. However, the Yellow River basin was subjected to frequent floods that took many lives. These floods had become the primary existential threat and a hidden danger to the tribes along the river. Hence no single tribe could confront the floods alone but had to combat the floods together. Flood control would require a unified command and the pooling of manpower and resources. This collective effort called for the tribes to cede their rights to a common leader or authority. The more advanced tribes gradually evolved into states some of which might come under strong leadership to develop their economies and build up powerful armies and devised ways to fight and control floods. They were in a position to respond readily to floods disaster and were able to come to the help of weaker tribes. Over time, the smaller tribes would acknowledge the authority of a major tribe and its chief. Progress in tribal integration would lead to the creation of a common authority and even national power institutions pertaining to military, tax, and judicial matters. Flood control and management would promote

technological and organisational advancements in the production of tools and equipment, building materials, food supply, and logistics. It thus became a major area of human affairs that provided a training ground for leaders and craftsmen in the early stage of tribal alliance evolving into a unified state in prehistoric China.

Apart from the periodic flooding of the Yellow and major rivers, the frequent incursions of nomads from northern grasslands were another security threat faced by the settled farming tribes of north China. Similar to efforts in flood control, resistance against nomadic incursions necessitated a standing military organisation under unified leadership and backed up by logistical support. These historical incidents strengthened the collective consciousness of every tribe that none could stand and survive alone and hence had to unite under a strong leadership. The road towards a unified state was most likely very uneven and interrupted by constant occurrences of instability and disunity as well as the constant collapse of tribal institutions and rebuilding. With each collapse and rebuilding, the idea that no tribes could survive or prosper alone became more apparent.

Once firmly in place, the central authority would develop and evolve in accordance with its own logic. This would include deploying military forces for defence and initiating civilian institutions for flood control, food production, handicraft making, and exchanges of goods, and even currency issuance. The central authority maintained public order and quelled attempts that undermined the unifying state. It would also use official positions, titles, and enfeoffment mechanisms to establish tribal nobles and leaders who in turn supported and strengthened the central authority. Finally, the unified state in prehistoric China would have attracted neighbouring tribes to join it or to establish good relationships with it to strengthen the development and stability of the unified state.

Whether it is to fight floods or to resist invasions, the central authority of the “Chinese collective” is required to unify the country’s human, material, and financial resources, and to set a permanent arrangement for the system. This is in sharp contrast with the principle introduced by Hobbes in *Leviathan* that suggest “everyone against everyone.” This may be the origin of the “collectivism” traditions in Chinese civilisation such as “mobilising the whole country’s resources to carry out big projects” and “support from all other places when one place encounters severe difficulty.” This would be the main reason for the emergence, development, and growth of “collectivism” in prehistoric China.

Power Centre and Political Structure

To carry out collective action, it was necessary to establish a central authority that could effectively mobilise the tribes and their resources. Since the Xia, Shang, and Zhou Dynasties, the Chinese state has continuously been evolving, improving, and optimising the collectivist central authority and its political structure. Chinese historical records shed little light on the political structure of the Xia and Shang Dynasties. During the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BC), the

King resided in the capital near present-day Xian to exercise power. The relationship between the central authority and the locality was a one-off enfeoffment. To administer the Mandate of Heaven, the King entrusted the administrative duties of government and justice to worthy and trusted kinsmen, and enfeoffed lands to his high-ranking royal family members and certain marital relatives bearing the royal title of “arch-lords” or *hou* in return for the latter’s pledges of allegiance. The latter were to pay homage to the King, paid their tributes to the court and, more importantly, to deploy their army and logistics to fight for the King. The King’s power and influence thus originated from entrusting the nobles with royal titles and enfeoffment. However, as more vassal states were created, the King’s direct control over land, people, and armies declined. After King Pingwang shifted the capital from Xian to the eastern city of Louyang in 771 BC to usher in the Eastern Zhou Dynasty. The enfeoffment of the Western Zhou Dynasty had failed to maintain unity and feudal Zhou empire could not accommodate the needs and burdens of a “collectivist” state. The King had lost control over appointments, taxation, and the armies of the arch-lords. China entered the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC) and later the Warring States Period (475–221 BC), the King had become a symbolic figure and the nobles were the *de facto* rulers of their respective territories. The vassal states forged alliances and waged wars against rival states in a protracted period during which individual states merged with or separated from one other.

During the Spring and Autumn Period, China had entered the Bronze Age and employed the grid or well-field system in agricultural production (well-field system, 2020).³ The use of primitive tools made of stones or bones required co-operative efforts in ploughing, planting and harvesting. The *Book of Odes* has the following: “The rain soaks our public lands, and then reaches our private fields” (Zhou, 2002). During the Spring and Autumn Period, China entered the age of iron and cattle ploughing. This means that a single family alone would have the capacity of organising and conducting farming independently. In the mid-fourth century BC when productivity had witnessed significant increases, Shang Yang of the Qin Dukedom introduced reform by abolishing feudalism, giving land to the peasants while taxing them, introducing a code of law that favoured no particular class, appointing government officials at all levels to replace the hereditary aristocracy, establishing a standing army, and promoting officers based on military merit. The core of the Shang Yang Reform was the setup of “the centralised power system” to replace the enfeoffment and noble hereditary system. At the same time, it was also the first attempt to build an “open society” in ancient China. Politically, all civil and military offices of the dukedom were open to all scholars and low-ranking army officers. Economically, the hereditary aristocratic territories system was transformed into small-scale household farming, and the central government levied land taxes and corvée on farming households.

Although the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BC) that unified China did not last long, the centralised power system (the system of prefectures and counties) that it had established was continued and

improved upon during the Han (202 BC–220 AC), Sui (581–618 AC), and Tang (618–907 AC) dynasties. Compared with the enfeoffment system of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the centralised power system, or the system of prefectures and counties, was a fundamental transformation in the development of China's political system. Under the enfeoffment system, the King had almost no effective means to control the vassal states. Under the centralised power system, the emperor was able to replace the governors of counties at any time. The centralised power system enabled the central government, firstly, to regain the power to appoint government officials from the “hereditary aristocracy;” secondly, to extend the appointment of officials to non-aristocratic scholars in the first step to create an “open” political system; lastly, to strengthen its control over national affairs. During the Qin Dynasty the empire was divided into three levels of administration of provinces, prefectures, and counties. Administrative orders of the central government were able to reach the county level. According to Max Weber's theory, the centralised power system established during the Qin Dynasty could be classified as a modern state governance system (Fukuyama, 2011). That is, the appointment of government official and the state administration were not based on blood relationship or hereditary succession, but on meritocracy of the candidates according to established rules.

The Ideology of Ancient Collectivist China

The early Chinese nation was already establishing its own national ideology. To deal with annual floods and nomadic incursions, collectivist China always required full-scale executive power to mobilise manpower and resources from all parts of the country. It looked upon its citizens, especially the elites, to co-operate with the emperor in thought and consciousness. According to Zuo Qiuming, a contemporary of Confucius, the most important affairs of a state were those of offering sacrifice to the ancestors and conducting wars.⁴ Under the patrimonial state, the King of Zhou and most of his nobles shared the same ancestors. The periodic rituals of worshipping and sacrificing to the ancestors helped the King of Zhou to retain the loyalty of the eminent fief-holding nobles. Under the centralised power system of the Qin and Han dynasties, the composition of government officials changed from aristocrats to meritocrats. Ancestor worship could no longer play the role of securing the officials' allegiance to the emperor. A state ideology was necessary to serve the needs of the centralised power system. During the Spring and Autumn Period, Confucius (551–479 BC) travelled among the dukedoms to revive the Zhou rites of propriety, ancestor worship, and respect to the Zhou King. The essence of Confucianism was concerned with core ideas including those of “loyalty to the emperor and care for the people,” “restrain one's ego and restore Zhou rituals,” and “the world is for the people all under heaven.” Compared with other schools of thought, Confucianism was more in line with “collectivism” and the needs of the centralised state. Confucianism emphasised the responsibilities of the elites to the state, such as “self-cultivation, the family harmony, governing the country, and bringing peace and security to all under heaven,” “every man should take his

responsibility when his country is in danger,” and so on. Personal interests were subordinate to those of the country and society. Confucius also advocated that “education should be open to people of all kinds.” During the reign of Emperor Wudi (156–87 BC) of the Western Han Dynasty (202 BC–8 AC), Confucianism was proclaimed a state ideology to the exclusion of other schools of thought. An Imperial College was established to train officials based on Confucian teachings. The elites who were selected through the inspection and recommendation system entered Tai Xue (the imperial college) to learn Confucianism and other skills to govern the country.

Collectivist Confucian Open Society of Ancient China

The institutionalisation of openness in ancient Chinese politics was initiated by the “inspection and recommendation system” and put into practice during the Western Han Dynasty in 134 BC. The inspection and recommendation system was a form of “limited openness” in politics when imperial officials and the local gentry class were granted the right of inspecting and recommending candidates for appointment. This right was extended to commoners. The power to recommend candidates gradually evolved into the hands of vested interest groups and “candidates” for appointment as imperial officials was largely confined to the descendants and relatives of imperial officials and the gentry class.

Between the collapse of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 AC) and the beginning of the Sui Dynasty, China experienced a period of division for nearly 400 years. This interim period was marked by the division of China into the Three Kingdoms (220–280 AC), the Western Jin (265–316 AC) and Eastern Jin (317–420 AC), and the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–581 AC). Among the many reasons for this protracted period of disunity was the control of the appointment of state officials by a small number of eminent large households. In the latter part of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the small number of wealthy households that owned extensive domains were the de facto “hereditary aristocrats.” The power of appointment of officials by these big households was a form of “disguised hereditary system” and which brought about the decline of imperial authority and the ensuing demise of the dynasty and eventual disintegration of the empire. This long period of falling apart might imply the following: that the political institutional building of the “collectivist” state had not been accomplished; that the centralised power system, Confucian teachings, and the “inspection and recommendation system” were not enough to maintain the unity of the country; that only by resorting to further institutional reform could the country be prevented from being torn apart; that certain vested groups controlling the power of the central government were not acting in the best interest of the country; and that any institutional arrangement that led to “hereditary aristocracy” would eventually result in the chaos of the country.

To avoid the flaw of the inspection and recommendation system, the Sui and Tang Dynasties

created an imperial examinations system as a means to recruit imperial officials. Recruitment was opened to people of all walks of life. The imperial examinations were continued during the Song, Ming, and Qing Dynasties and made an indelible contribution to the recruitment and administrative systems. The emperors of successive dynasties “took all talents under heaven and employed them” instead of appointing “hereditary aristocrats.” This gave rise to an imperial administration in which the emperor and the meritocrats would “collectively” govern the country.

The contents of the imperial examinations were anchored on the Confucianism classics comprising the Four Books and Five Classics.⁵ Aspiring students from all over the country devoted years of study of the classics and related works to prepare for the imperial examinations as the only means for appointment to official positions. From the inspection and recommendation system of the Western Han Dynasty to the abolition of the imperial examinations system in 1905, generations of students and scholar-bureaucrats played an indispensable role in maintaining and developing an official ideology based on Confucian teachings. It was the existence of the “Confucian open society” under “collectivism” that provided a powerful tool to resist “hereditary aristocracy” and avoid the country’s collapse.

Candidates who passed the imperial examinations would obtain the title of imperial scholar *Jin Shi* and were eligible for appointment to imperial positions. New appointees would begin their careers as county-level officials and to gain experience in handling administrative affairs. Officials who had contributed to the administration of a county or a prefecture would be promoted and some even attained the position of prime minister. All promotions were made by the imperial central government. In contrast to the system practised in modern western countries where presidents or prime ministers are elected from a pool of candidates (some of whom have never engaged in administrative matters), the traditional Chinese political philosophy was based on the previous performance of the candidates. It was based on the belief that invincible military generals rose from the ranks of soldiers and great prime ministers emerged from among prefecture or county officials. Compared with the popularly elected officials in the West, government officials at all levels in China were schooled in the ideology of the country and had years of experience in bureaucratic administration ranging from the county level to that of the central government. In general, administrative careers were determined largely by performance and promotion was made on the basis of meritocracy.

The imperial examinations that constituted the official channel for the selection of administrative personnel from the Sui Dynasty provided a fair and open system in recruiting the best talents of the land to serve the imperial government. Korea and Vietnam adopted this examinations system to recruit government officials from the eighth century onwards. However, a drawback of the imperial examinations system was the preoccupation with the Confucian classics and the neglect of natural sciences. This lack of balance stifled the path to scientific and technological progress. In

contrast, the rivalry between European countries from 1500 to 1900 (Kennedy, 1987) prompted much military-related scientific and technological research in the production of advanced weapons. These state-funded efforts gave birth to modern knowledges such as chemistry, physics, and related manufacturing technologies and eventually brought about the industrialisation of Europe. The relative peace and security enjoyed by China during the Ming and early Qing Dynasties quelled any urgency for the Chinese state to fund scientific research. When industrialisation began in England and other European countries, China found itself lagging behind technologically and economically (Wen, 2022).

Up to the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, “collectivist” China was basically an agrarian society and world power in terms of political, economic, social, and cultural development. However, the major mandate of agrarian China were feeding the people and resisting nomadic incursions. The struggle to feed the people required flood fighting and the construction of river embankments, the maintenance of countrywide grain reserves to stabilise food prices and to relieve famine. Resisting nomadic incursion called for a standing army, fortification of the Great Wall and the transportation of military logistics by canal. Besides collecting land taxes, China also required a large military and corvee labour. In fighting floods and defending against invasion and feeding the people, excessive demands on the people in national super fortification projects might threaten the stability of the country. Historically, the downfall the Qin and Sui Dynasties was caused by the expropriation of the country’s millions of labourers to build the Great Wall and construction of the canal respectively. Similarly, rapid population increase might cause large-scale food shortages that eventually led to the collapse of a dynasty.

Recreating Collectivist China and Its Open Society

The age of industrialisation that began in England in the 18th century. China was then politically corrupt, ignorant and backward in technology and industry, and economically poor. These were partly the consequences of the imperial examinations system that emphasised the Confucian classics at the expense of the sciences and engineering. Seriously lagging behind well until the early 20th century, China was unable to resist foreign aggression by West and Japan. China faced the arduous task of modernising its social and political institutions, economy, education, and culture. After suffering a series of foreign aggressions that ushered the end of dynastic politics, the rise of party politics, the resistance against the Japanese invasion, and finally the founding of the PRC, “collectivist” China introduced set of social, political, economic, and cultural institutions. In the face of domination by the West, China successfully recreated a resilient nation that, after the initial confrontations with the U.S. in Korea, the brief war with India, and the resistance to U.S. aggression of Vietnam, embarked on the road of reform and opening up.

In the PRC, anyone can participate in the Chinese government or even become a senior leader of the country. It has established a series of modern public initiatives that are available to all, especially the working class. Examples are the nine-year compulsory education system, the development of higher education, public medical service, retirement pension, gender equality, ethnic equality, religious freedom, among others. The reform and opening-up in the late 1970s have succeeded in building an open society that is committed to “guaranteeing people’s livelihood,” “enhancing human capital” and “practising ethnic equality.” These objectives are guided by the “people-centred” theory of socialism. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) stipulates that it will not accept any donations from individuals and organisations outside the party, thus ensuring that its decision making will not be influenced by any interest groups. In contrast, political parties in the West and Japan are always influenced by big benefactors who provided donations. On the other hand, the Chinese government also made mistakes in the first 30 years of the PRC that were associated with the famine of the Great Leap Forward period of 1959 to 1961, and the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. The latter brought about tremendous chaos to the people and a decade-long disruption to education, scientific research, the untold damage to the economy.

The reform and opening up policy initiated in the late 1970s was the turning point in the governance and development of China. The policy brought about domestic economic reforms and opening up of the market to foreign investments. The reform measures approved equal distribution of land to rural households on the basis of long-term lease, development of urban and rural non-state-owned enterprises, migration of rural surplus labourers to work in cities, expansion of enrolment in colleges and universities, abolition of agricultural tax that rural households were subjected to since the beginning of the Chinese civilisation, rebuilding the new rural co-operative medical system, and eradicating poverty through the “rooting out poverty campaign.” The main measures for “opening up” to the outside world included allowing foreign-funded enterprises to invest in China and to establish joint ventures or wholly-foreign-owned enterprises, sending students and scholars to study abroad, joining the World Trade Organization, hosting the Asian Games and Olympic Games, creating the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, establishing the Asian Investment Bank, proposing the Belt and Road Initiative, and other initiatives. China has since successfully industrialised to become the world’s second largest economy and had escaped from the curse of the “Malthusian population trap.”

The “centralised power system” or “prefecture system” of the Qin and Han Dynasties was arguably an advanced political system that was not encountered in other major civilisations during the same period. This “centralised power system” that was practised by successive dynasties, imperial governance stopped at the “county level” and failed to reach the grass root. The hierarchical structure was rigid, and awareness of the imperial ideology was confined to government officials, the scholar-bureaucrats and the gentry class, but could not penetrate the

labouring masses. During the Kuomintang period the situation was not much different from that of dynastic politics, as it was mainly to safeguard the interests of bureaucratic capitalists, comprador capitalists, and the land-owning gentry class.

With the birth of PRC after the end of the anti-aggression war and the revolution against bureaucratic capitalists, the most thorough land reform in Chinese history was implemented to root out farmers' deprivation of the core means of food. In addition to the central, provincial, prefectural, and county governments, the PRC also set up township government to administer surrounding villages through their branch party and village committees. Prior to the reform and opening up period, rural production was organised into a collective economy while township government was changed to the people's commune, the village became a production brigade with its individual production teams. In urban areas, sub-district offices and residents' committees were established under the municipal and district governments. "Collectivist" PRC's national governance network is strongly connected to every household of the country. It is precisely because of this strong organisation and the discipline of Chinese citizens and the influence of Confucian culture that China is able to decisively mobilise the medical personnel and resources of the entire country to defeat the Covid-19 pandemic and rapidly resume economic activities. China registered a GDP growth rate of more than 2% in 2020 while major developed countries experienced widespread negative economic growth.

Most of the political, social, and economic policies implemented since the founding of the PRC stemmed from Marxism-Leninism, which was closely related to the idea of equality of the French Revolution of 1789. The French Revolution of 1789–1830 led to the Declaration of Human Rights, emphasising the equality of human beings and the legal protection of private property. This is the so-called "the second generation of human rights" (Jiang, 2021).⁶ The equality concept triggered revolutionary struggles in European countries against feudal autocracy and led to the establishment of parliaments representing the interests of the bourgeoisie, the birth of the labour movement against capitalist exploitation, and the colonial people's resistance to colonial oppression and pursuit of national independence. The anti-aggression and anti-oppression revolution led by the CCP in China is also an important part of the revolution of the oppressed people and nations around the world since the French Revolution of 1789 (Jiang, 2021). Since the founding of the PRC, China has put more emphasis on the second generation of human rights, i.e., implementing the most thorough equality measures, such as equal distribution of land in rural China, universal access to compulsory education and medical care, gender equality, among others. Since the economic reform of the late 1970s, China has given more consideration to the first generation of human rights, including those of allowing private enterprises, foreign investments, returning arable land to rural household on long-term lease, allowing rural-urban migration, creation of the labour market and stock market.

China's Success: Some General Principles

In less than 70 years, China has successfully transformed itself from a backward agrarian country into one that is modern and industrialised. China's remarkable performance offers insights into its experience from which several principles may be drawn.

Scientific and Technological Capabilities

The history of scientific revolution and industrialisation in Europe during the early industrial period and found that major scientific and technological breakthroughs did not come about via “freedom, democracy, and the rule of law” nor were they simply a continuation of the scientific development that began in ancient Greece (Wen, 2022). Instead, it was rather the result of state-funded research projects. Similarly, the underdeveloped nature of science and technology in China prior to the founding of the PRC was not related to a lack of scientific thought or the so-called authoritarianism in ancient China, but because of a shortage of state funding. Modern scientific research is expensive and risky features and is not sustainable without state-funded support.

The success in the development of China's atomic bomb and hydrogen bomb, intercontinental ballistic missile, and artificial satellites plus the corresponding tests and launches that occurred in the 1960s was the result of the concerted efforts of the government under the leadership of the CCP along with the dedication of the people throughout the country.

State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are Core National Economic Development Tools

Wen (2022) noted that state-chartered enterprises were established in early European countries to promote economic growth. England and the Netherlands established their respective East India Companies that helped to expand their economies through colonisation. The increase in wealth also drove these countries to industrialise (Wen, 2022). In the PRC, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) also play an important role in the country's development but without having to colonise foreign territories, to enslave people of other nationalities, or to engage in drug trades to accumulate capital. Its SOEs were not intended to replace private firms and instead was utilised to produce goods and services that other countries were slow or unable to provide. The transportation, energy, and communication infrastructure and facilities that China's SOEs have built to contribute to the economic miracle that is taking place in the country.

Market Economy and Non-State-Owned Enterprises

Since the Industrial Revolution started in the 18th century, various industrial and commercial

enterprises have gradually replaced farmers as major players in state economies. While making profits, these private firms also provide society with capital and consumer goods, employment opportunities, and tax revenue for the state. In addition, agglomerations of strong high-tech firms are the main indicator of the country's international political and economic competitiveness. Improving the market mechanism and encouraging the development of non-state-owned enterprises have become the model of contemporary national development.

Adapting Institutional Arrangements to Change

Wen (2022) found that the various institutional arrangements that were made during the process of industrialisation in European countries, the United States, Japan, and other countries arose in response to the requirements of economic development. Technological progress and economic prosperity experienced by the West were not derived from the pre-existed “liberal democracy and rule of law” as claimed by new institutional economics (Wen, 2022).

In the PRC, various institutional arrangements are established and improved according to the needs of social, political, and economic development especially since the reform and opening up of the country in 1978. Rather than adhering to any borrowed doctrine, the country's philosophy is to “seek truth from facts.” The CCP found that the revolutionary cause had suffered setbacks and failure when policies were dictated by ideological dogma. Instead, the development process must be guided by pragmatism according to the needs of the time.

Competition as the Core Driving Force in Development

Wen (2022) highlighted the fact that European countries fought for over 100 years to expand territories and pursued other objectives after the Renaissance including the waging of wars among rivals.⁷ European governments established ordnance departments and state-funded academies of sciences to develop weapons during times of war. In fact, Italian scientist Galileo Galilei was an artillery expert at the Ordnance Bureau of Florence, while Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo were ordnance engineers. The chemist Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier discovered the role played by oxygen in combustion and which greatly improved gunpowder and led to the creation of modern chemistry at the French Academy of Sciences. It can be argued that the frequent wars in Europe after the Renaissance led to scientific and technological revolutions and the applications of these revolutions on businesses led to the Industrial Revolution (Wen, 2022).

The Open Society and Economic Development

China's development is achieved by empowering its citizens with land and other economic rights and access to public services in particular education and medical care. At the same time, it has

expanded opportunities for political participation and has made special efforts to bring development to rural areas. China implemented the most thorough land ownership reform in human history when land belonging to landlords and capitalists was distributed in equal amounts to landless peasants. Urban and rural land was later nationalised and collectivised. Large-scale infrastructure and industrial parks require large amounts of land and would not be easy to build without state or collective ownership of the resource. A nine-year compulsory education and access to healthcare have become available to citizens as affirmative social service initiatives. Nobel laureate in economics Amartya Sen (1999) noted that China laid a foundation of human capital in advance of the economic prosperity that began to occur after it started the reform and opening up.

Strong Governmental Structures

A government with an organisational structure and framework that is focused on a programme of comprehensive social, political, and economic progress that prioritises the interests of the people is a core prerequisite for successful development. Wen (2022) discovered that from the end of the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century, European countries which had centralised resources and decision-making processes tended to win wars against and survived better than those which remained decentralised (Wen, 2022). China's ability to head off the threats posed by the Korean War (1950–1953) and the Vietnam War (1964–1973) had helped to secure a peaceful situation that provided the essential base for development after the reform and opening up in 1978. Weak governance is detrimental to development and the loosening of government regulations in accordance with neoliberal economic principles can undermine political and economic governance and impede economic growth and development.

Conclusions

Historically, the annual inundation along the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers had necessitated a strong leadership to mobilise and co-ordinate various tribes to combat and control floods. Similarly, nomadic incursions from the north had called for a standing army to defend the border. The constant threats of floods and invasion were the fundamental reasons for the creation and existence of collectivist China.

Chinese history is marked by the feudal system of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the separatism of the vassals during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, and finally evolving into the centralised power system during the Qin and Han Dynasties. This political system has continued to exist in modern China. To enhance collectivist China, all the dynasties of China had continually carried out the construction of an “open society” in which appointment to administrative positions was through national examinations system. This appointment system based on Confucian teachings

lasted until the Qing Dynasty. Up until the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, China had the world's largest economy.

The patrimonial system in Chinese dynastic politics occasionally resulted in the installation of weak emperors whose power often fell into the hands of vested groups or eunuchs and leading to poor state governance and even eventual collapse. In addition, preoccupation with Confucian teachings in the imperial examinations and the marginalisation of the sciences and engineering did not allow China to fund scientific research and embark on industrial development that was happening in Europe between the 1500s to the 1900s.

An outdated China was eventually humiliated by the West and Japan from the Opium War in 1840 to the victory of the Anti-Japanese War in 1945. During this period, China evolved from dynastic politics to party politics, and from a patrimonial system to an “open” selection system for its top leaders based on meritocracy. It then completed the reconstruction of its political, economic, social, and cultural systems, culminating in the founding of the PRC in 1949. The core purpose of the CCP is to “serve the people wholeheartedly” and pay special attention to serving the toiling masses. It should be said that this is the most collectivist declaration of “openness” and “inclusiveness.” The “reform and opening up” of China that began in the late 1970s greatly accelerated the process of collectivist China's construction of an “open society,” allowing the free flow of labour, the establishment of non-state-owned enterprises, the investment of foreign-funded enterprises, and proactive integration into the process of economic globalisation, the setup of a compulsory education system and public medical services. The rapid advancement of the “open society” has enabled collectivist China to successfully realise industrialisation in about 40 years after reform and opening up, surpassing Japan to become the world's second largest economy in 2010.

China's economic miracle embodies general principles of national development. The scientific and technological progress of a country correlates with the amount of financial support provided by the state: as in institutional arrangements are formed as demanded by economic development rather than the other way around. In this regard, the SOEs are powerful propellants of a nation's social, political, and economic development, while non-state-owned enterprises are the main players of modern societies with international political, economic, and military competition enabling states to fund scientific and technological development and promote economic development. This guarantees economic rights and providing basic social services, such as education and healthcare, for economic and social development. Thus a strong, promising, people-oriented central government and its organisations are the most important prerequisite of a country's social, political, and economic development.

The history of the Chinese civilisation since the sage emperors indicates that China must hold on to the core of “collectivism” and to strengthen it through continual “openness” institutional

building. Today, the progress of China is the manifestation of the ideas of “collectivism” and “open society” acting as the core elements in the process of development.

* Dr. Qingjie Xia [夏庆杰] is Professor, School of Economics, Peking University. Email: qingjie.xia@pku.edu.cn

** Dr. Qi Tang [唐琦] is Lecturer, School of Health Humanities, Peking University. Email: tqi@hsc.pku.edu.cn

References

- Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2012). *Why nations fail: The origins of power, prosperity, and poverty*. New York: Crown Business.
- Bell, D. (2015). *The China model: Political meritocracy and the limits of democracy*. Princeton University Press.
- Chen, L. (2005). On the basic ideas of Confucius thought of education, *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 42(5): 198–205.
- Deng, Y. [邓云特] (2011). 中国救荒史 [*History of China's famine rescue*]. Beijing: Commerce Press. (First published in 1937).
- Fukuyama, F. (2011). *The origins of political order: From prehuman times to the French Revolution*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hobbes, Thomas (1999). *Leviathan*. (Renaissance edition). University of Oregon.
- Jiang, S.-G. [强世功] (2021). 贸易与人权（上）——世界帝国与“美国行为的根源”.[Trade and the human right (part 1): World empire and the “root of the U.S. behaviour”]. *Beijing Culture Review*, 5: 18–29.
- Kennedy, P. (1987). *The rise and fall of the great powers: Economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 1900*. New York: Random House.
- Lao Tzu [老子]. 道德经 [*The Book of Tao*] <https://www.laotzu.info/tao.html>.
- Maddison, A. (2007). *Chinese economic performance in the long run, 960–2030 AD*, second edition, revised and updated. Paris: OECD Development Centre Studies. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264037632-en>.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Wittfogel, K. A. (1957). *Oriental despotism: Comparative study of total power*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Well-field system (December 29, 2020). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Well-field_system
- Wen, Y. [文一] (2022). 科学革命的“密码”——枪炮、战争与西方崛起之谜. [*The code of scientific revolution: Guns, wars and the rise of the West*]. Shanghai: East Press.

Zhou, Z.-F [周振甫] (2002). 诗经译注 [Annotation of the book of odes]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

Notes

- 1 Tao is the basic concept of Taoism. The name “Taoism” itself comes from the word “tao”. Generally speaking, “tao” can be translated as “way,” “principle,” “method.” (<https://www.laotzu.info/tao.html>, accessed on June 5, 2021).
- 2 According to Deng (1937), there was a severe flood every three and half years for the period from 1766 BC (since recorded history began in China) to 1937.
- 3 The grid-field system was a land redistribution method put into practice between the ninth century BC (late Western Zhou dynasty) to around the end of the Warring States period. Its name comes from the Chinese character for a “well” and looks like the # symbol. It represents the principle of land division in which a tract of land was divided into nine identical sections comprising eight outer plots and one in the centre. The outer plots were privately cultivated by serfs and the central plot was communally cultivated on behalf of the landowning aristocrat. (Wikipedia, December 29, 2020).
- 4 Qiuming Zuo was a Chinese historian and a contemporary of Confucius. The *Zuozhuan* or *Commentary of Zuo* is traditionally attributed to him. *Zuozhuan*
- 5 The four books are *Da Xue*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Analects of Confucius* and *Words of Mencius*. The five classics are the *Book of Songs*, *Shang Shu*, *Book of Rites*, *Book of Changes*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*.
- 6 According to Jiang (2021), the core of the first generation of human rights theory was freedom, mainly for the bourgeoisie to oppose feudal lords and church rule. As a result, the European countries occupied and enslaved the colonies on a large scale, as well as severe wealth inequality.
- 7 These wars included the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453), the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652–1654), the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665–1667), the Third Anglo-Dutch War (1672–1674), the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1781–1784), and the Nine Years’ War (1688–1697).