

Book Review

Mark Leonard, *What does China think?*

- Rinzin Namgyal (Research Associate, FNVA)

Mark Leonard, *What does China think?* (HarperCollins Publishers UK, 2008), pp. 164, ISBN: 978-0-00-723068-6.

China's ascent to the global stage and its forging of a new world order—establishing what Professor Cui Zhiyuan from Tsinghua University (清华大学) calls “an alternative modernity”—is a today's reality and one of the most widely discussed and debated topics today. This conversation spans political leadership, academia, and the general public. We often pretend to understand everything about China, yet we know very little. While we recognise that China is transforming at such a pace that the maps of Shanghai seemingly need redrawing every two weeks, we don't truly understand how governmental policies were developed to effect this dramatic change in just three decades unseen in the history of mankind.

We frequently interpret China through a Western lens, viewing its government policies as products of authoritarianism, formed through a top-down system. However, the reality is far more complex, and this view often misrepresents conventional discourse on China. Mark Leonard's thought-provoking book- *What Does China Think?* offers a valuable framework for understanding the formation of Chinese policies, the Chinese thinkers that are shaping China, and the intellectual debates driving China towards a new Chinese revolution.

Mark Leonard is co-founder and director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, the first pan-European think-tank. He is also the current Henry A Kissinger chair in foreign policy and international relations at the US Library of Congress, Washington DC. His topics of focus include geopolitics and geoeconomics, China, EU politics and institutions.

The first part of this book, discussed under the theme of "Yellow River capitalism," elaborates on the dominance of economists within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the reform era, akin to the role of technocrats in contemporary China. It describes how economists came to shape CCP policymaking and influence Party institutions. The dramatic shift in China's policy towards reform and opening up is beautifully illustrated by Peking University (北京大学) economist Zhang Weiying through the allegory of "The Village of Zebras," where a village of horses gradually transforms under the influence of zebras – symbolising China's shift from a closed dogmatic system to a pragmatic & open society.



A parallel argument is drawn with former CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang's book "Prisoner of the State", in which he argued that "dual-track pricing" was essential for China's economic needs in the 1980s. The book highlights how the Tiananmen Massacre impeded significant economic reforms including "dual-track pricing", indicating that Tiananmen was not solely a struggle for democracy but rather the result of accumulated economic, social, and political grievances. It also acknowledges the liberal atmosphere preceding Tiananmen as a catalyst for the violent crackdown led by a conservative faction within the Party, including figures such as Li Peng.

The book further discusses the rise of the New Left in China – a faction 'new' in its support of a market economy, unlike the dogmatic left of Mao's era, and 'left' in its emphasis on addressing the inequality exacerbated by China's rapid economic growth. Figures of 'New left' such as Hu Angang, Wang Hui, and Wang Shaoguang advocate for equitable growth and green development, which later influenced policies under President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, such as the "Harmonious Society" and the "Scientific Outlook on Development." Under President Hu, the "New Rights" movement gradually receded in prominence.

Author also draws attention to calls from Chinese intellectuals for institutional innovation. They argue for adopting elements of Pearl River capitalism within the Chinese context to develop a "home-grown philosophy." Political economist Wang Shaoguang advocates for affordable healthcare, political theorist Cui Zhiyuan argues for socialised capital and the reform of property rights, and economist Hu Angang supports green development.



These ideas have influenced figures like Wang Huning, chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), who has promoted "ecological civilisation" within the framework of Xi Jinping's "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," now a guiding philosophy in contemporary China. The central question explored in the second part of this book, under the theme "Democracy in the Clouds," is whether a more responsive form of authoritarianism can evolve into a legitimate and stable form of government.



Initially, the text discusses incremental democracy, exemplified by a grassroots experiment in Pingchang, a town in Sichuan, where the local Party Secretary was elected through a democratic process. It also examines inner-Party democracy, which Peking University (北京大学) Professor Yu Keping addresses advocating for a "democracy first" approach within Party ranks before gradually extending it to wider society, in much the same way economic reforms were first tested in coastal areas before being rolled out inland.

The second chapter also presents alternative views on the Chinese governance model, touching on concepts like "high-tech consultative dictatorship" and "deliberative democracy." Scholars such as Fang Ning, Pan Wei, and Wang Hui argue for a governance model distinct from liberal democracy, emphasising the need for rule of law and solutions such as an independent judiciary, civil service, anti-corruption bodies, and the separation of politics from government as prerequisites for effective governance in China. Wang Hui, in particular, believes these elements are essential before democracy can be established in the country.

Mark Leonard provides a detailed account of China's experimentation with "high-tech consultative dictatorship" and "deliberative democracy" in cities such as Chongqing, under the direction of Li Dianxun (Director of City Government Legal Affairs), and in Zeguo, a town in Wenling City, Zhejiang Province, where high-level deliberative democratic practices were implemented based on mechanisms advised by Chinese political scientist He Baogang (Deakin University) as an alternative governance model.

The final section of this chapter addresses what it calls the "demythification" of the Chinese political model, urging a reassessment of Chinese governance from the Mao and Deng periods onwards. It highlights that one key reason for persistent, narrow views of China's political model is that China has not altered its political system in line with Western liberal democracy. Instead, as Wang Shaoguang (Chinese University of Hong Kong 香港中文大學) argues, China has adapted its system to fit its own unique conditions. The question of whether a more responsive authoritarianism can evolve into a legitimate and stable form of government remains open to debate, with scholars offering varied perspectives on this issue.

An endmost part of the book author primarily explores foreign policy, incorporating scholarly perspectives from prominent Chinese foreign policy experts like Zheng Bijian, Yan Xuetong, Pan Wei, Wang Jisi, Qin Yaqing, and Yang Yi. These experts discuss Chinese government foreign policy stances, such as the "New Security Concept," "Multilateralism," and "China's Peaceful Rise," which remain relevant today as President Xi Jinping promotes multilateralism and a win-win cooperation narrative in official foreign policy. The book also draws attention to China's pursuit of soft power, reflecting the belief of many Chinese intellectuals that American supremacy is closely tied to its soft power dynamics and urging China to enhance its own. This soft power emphasis is evident in Xi's era through the Global Civilisational Initiative. The text also touches on the ancient Chinese 'Wang and Ba' system, drawing parallels with current American global influence.

The last section delves into the "China model," a concept interwoven with discussions on deliberative dictatorship, Comprehensive National Power, and Yellow River Capitalism, where China aspires to build a "China Walled World" as an alternative to the American idea of a "flat world." The book concludes with a striking statement: for the first time since the Cold War's end, Europe and America confront a formidable alternative in the China model. The author also examines China's approach to foreign aid, particularly during Hu Jintao's era, with a focus on aid to African countries.



Mark Leonard book (What does China think?) raises several critical questions: will the China model become the next norm guiding the international order? Yan Xuetong posits that “if China wants to increase its soft power, it must pursue political reform,” prompting the question of how far the conservative faction within the CCP will support the development of soft power if it necessitates political reform. Pan Yue, currently Head of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, speaks of “Green GDP” and warns of “China’s environmental suicide,” advocating for Hu Angang’s ideas on environmental protection. Yet, how effectively is Pan Yue advancing environmental conservation and promoting an environmental agenda within the government, particularly given the serious environmental crisis in Tibet, including permafrost degradation and river pollution? If China’s consultative and deliberative dictatorship models prove successful, how will they influence one-party states in other regions? Why does the China model serve as an alternative to the established American order, and how safe is it for the world to embrace China’s vision of a multilateral world order? Moreover, the CCP’s stringent restrictions on the freedoms and religious rights of Tibetans, framed under a perception of “inferiority,” raises questions about how this fits within Wang Xiaodong’s “reverse racism” theory?

This book is an excellent resource for anyone interested in China’s governance model, domestic politics, and the Chinese system as a whole. It provides an insightful background on fascinating aspects of the Chinese system, such as democracy, rule of law, market economy, and foreign policy. Significantly, it explores debates among Chinese intellectuals on a broad range of issues, from foreign policy to grassroots democracy. The book serves as a guide to understanding the trajectory of official government policies, their foundational sources, how they develop, and the internal debates and obstacles faced at various government levels. However, the book lacks clarity and comprehensive explanations of key concepts, and the author does not clearly define the “China Walled World”—leaving it unclear whether this is a philosophy, a concept, or a vision of China’s or China’s world perception. Nevertheless, it is a valuable read for students of Chinese studies.



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Foundation for Non-violent Alternatives (FNVA)

143, 4th Floor, Uday Park, New Delhi, 49

office@fnvaworld.org