

## China Rashomon

**By Chen Kuide**

*Is China really as invincible as a recent article by a prominent Western observer suggests, or is it threatened by the same internal collapse that brought down the former Soviet Union and other authoritarian regimes?*

### How unprecedented is the “China model”?

China’s expanding presence on the international stage continues to generate debate, especially with regard to the “China model” that is credited with this rise in prominence. But what is the “China model”? And indeed, what is the “real” China? The diversity of views on this subject brings to mind Akira Kurosawa’s famous film “Rashomon,” bewildering the observer with a variety of mutually exclusive conceptions of China.

On May 20, 2007, the *Washington Post* published an article by James Mann entitled “The China Challenge: A Shining Model of Wealth Without Liberty.”<sup>1</sup> In his article, Mann pronounced China victorious in its “startling new challenge to the future of liberal democracy”:

We’re used to thinking of China as an economic miracle, but it’s also becoming a political model. Beijing has shown dictators that they don’t have to choose between power and profit; they can have both. Today’s China demonstrates that a regime can suppress organized opposition and need not establish its legitimacy through elections. It shows that a ruling party can maintain considerable control over information and the Internet without slowing economic growth. And it indicates that a nation’s elite can be bought off with comfortable apartments, the chance to make money, and significant advances in personal, non-political freedoms (clothes, entertainment, sex, travel abroad).

James Mann is a veteran China scholar and writer who headed the Beijing bureau of the *Los Angeles Times* in the late 1980s. He is the author of several books on

China, notably *Beijing Jeep* and, most recently, *The China Fantasy*. He is currently an author-in-residence at The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. Given his expertise and renown, Mann’s description of the China model as unprecedented and extraordinary in its aims and accomplishments is being taken very seriously. But I cannot dismiss nagging doubts about whether the China model is actually as pioneering as Mann claims it is.

Several decades ago, dictators Hitler and Stalin, each at the height of their powers, likewise stressed their nations’ unique rejection of Western democratic models of political and economic development. Hitler, for example, on the third day after taking office in 1933 delivered a proclamation to the German nation in which he affirmed the Third Reich’s unique (anti-Western) national character, and its forging of a path separate from those of England, France and the United States.<sup>2</sup>

China’s rapid economic growth has also not broken historical records. The Soviet Union maintained even more rapid economic growth from the beginning of the 1930s to the 1950s, while commentators around the world marveled at the new lifestyle that the Soviet system had apparently created for humankind. In Germany, Hitler declared that he would rescue German farmers from financial ruin while simultaneously launching an all-out offensive to deliver workers from unemployment. He actually did resurrect Germany from its economic morass and virtually eliminated unemployment; in 1938, Germany’s unemployment rate was only 1.3 percent, and between 1932 and 1938, Germany’s gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 102 percent. As in the case of today’s China, the rapid economic expansion of Germany in the 1930s was regarded with awe and trepidation, just as the burgeoning economies of South Korea and Taiwan, under their respective authoritarian regimes, dazzled the international community from the late 1960s into the 1980s.

Like today’s China, these totalitarian regimes suppressed organized opposition and spurned the oppor-

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tunity to establish legitimacy through an electoral process. Like today's China, they were not forced to choose between economic growth and a monopoly on power; they had both. But how has history judged them decades later? The Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, those extraordinary challengers of liberal democracy—where are they now? Like the authoritarian regimes that ruled South Korea and Taiwan, these unprecedented models have crumbled into the dust of history, while the countries they ruled with iron fists have shifted toward the mainstream of liberal democracy.

Looking back at history, it is hard to believe that China's current "miracle" is truly without precedent, and it is likewise difficult to believe in its inevitable "triumph" over liberal democracy.

### **"Five freedoms" and a complacent middle class**

James Mann noted five freedoms that China's urban elites now enjoy: the opportunity to invest and make money, to buy and wear what they want, to enjoy themselves, to see the world and to have love affairs. These freedoms certainly have more pizzazz than the four homely aspirations of the Roosevelt era.<sup>3</sup> Appearances would suggest that China's elite have all they need and could desire nothing further, and as a result, Mann observes, "the middle class supports or at least goes along with the existing political order; after all, that order made it middle class in the first place."

There is little to argue in Mann's description of China's middle class. In its situation and attitudes it is reminiscent of the Soviet elite during the late Brezhnev era; with access to the best cars, homes, food and clothing, what reason should they have for discontent?

It is this middle-class complacency that prompts Mann to discredit the seemingly naïve predictions of Western leaders that affluence might bring democracy to China:

In 1997, President Bill Clinton said China was on "the wrong side of history." Political change would come "just as, inevitably, the Berlin Wall fell," he predicted. President Bush has repeated many of these same themes: "Trade freely with China, and time is on our side," he once said. British Prime

Minister Tony Blair said two years ago that he thought there was "an unstoppable momentum" toward democracy in China. Not quite.

Are Mann's arguments strong enough to categorically rule out the validity of these Western politicians' predictions? Around 20 years ago, many Western Kremlinologists ridiculed President Reagan's speech calling for the toppling of the Berlin Wall. These scholars had observed the Soviet Communist Party's stubborn survival through various crises and saw the Soviet Union, with its formidable defense force, as a permanent fixture among the world's superpowers.

But it is not Reagan whom history has mocked; the dramatic changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in 1989–1991 left most of those Western analysts and experts scrambling for a new theoretical foothold.

As we now know, it was not external forces that defeated the former Soviet Union, but the Soviet Union itself; it was defeated by its own people, led, to a significant extent, by its apparently complacent elite. Why did these privileged classes contribute to the collapse of an empire that had brought them so much personal benefit? Because intellectuals and others of influence recognized where their long-term interests lay. The Soviet Union, like Communist China, was a fundamentally anti-intellectual regime, intent on monopolizing power, inherently unable to trust its cultural and economic elite.

Yes, the middle and upper classes can be temporarily bought off with comfortable apartments, the chance to make money, and significant advances in personal, nonpolitical freedoms, but eventually they will tire of their lack of representation in the power structure, the restrictions on freedom of expression, and their lack of control over their own fates and interests. After all, if your benefits derive largely from official whims, they can disappear just as suddenly and as arbitrarily. However comfortable their existence, those who live privileged lives under a totalitarian regime know that their castles are floating on air and that, lacking stable institutional support, they have no long-term future.

We have seen how many of China's wealthiest tycoons

have either been imprisoned or have fled into exile after being targeted by the Chinese authorities. Yang Bin, once listed second on *Forbes'* list<sup>4</sup> of Chinese business magnates, was arrested in 2002 on charges of tax evasion and was eventually sentenced to 18 years in prison.<sup>5</sup> Yang Rong, once third on the *Forbes* list, fled to the US in 2002 after being accused of economic crimes.<sup>6</sup> Former movie star Liu Xiaoqing, who made a fortune in real estate, ended up in Qincheng Prison,<sup>7</sup> and the enlightened Confucian merchant Sun Dawu has disappeared from public view after receiving a suspended three-year sentence for "illegally accepting deposits from members of the public."<sup>8</sup> Inclusion on the *Forbes* list is increasingly regarded as a kiss of death, and some entrepreneurs have reportedly quietly requested removal from the list.

What leads the Zhongnanhai authorities to sometimes turn against the "red capitalists" to whom they have previously extended a warm welcome? I suggest two main causes: (1) Beijing needs to confiscate the wealth of these tycoons in order to fill the huge gaps in the accounts of state-owned banks; (2) the government needs to acknowledge the grievances of China's underprivileged citizens regarding the growing gap between the rich and the poor.

The wealthy children of high-ranking officials, of course, manage to escape the noose, while even the most blameless private entrepreneurs can enjoy no feelings of security.

In an environment lacking constitutional guarantees of political and legal rights, and where bureaucratic whim can transform a "golden mountain" into a mirage, members of China's wealthy elite and middle class are forced to constantly reconsider their long-term interests. Under these conditions, political apathy cannot last forever, because only those with finely honed political intuition will be rewarded. We have seen that even a place with a reputation for entrenched political apathy such as Hong Kong has become more engaged in politics since reunification with the mainland. The reasons, I think, are self-evident.

## Are diplomatic achievements bringing China into the mainstream?

It should be acknowledged that Beijing has actually scored some significant diplomatic points in recent years. James Mann observes:

China's single-party state offers continuing hope not only to such largely isolated dictatorships as Burma, Zimbabwe, Syria and North Korea but also to some key US friends who themselves resist calls for democracy (say, Egypt or Pakistan) and to our neighbors of Cuba and Venezuela. . . . Repressive regimes elsewhere are increasingly looking to Beijing. And often the sympathy flows both ways: China has, in recent years, helped to prop up Zimbabwe, Sudan, Uzbekistan, Cuba and North Korea.

There is much truth in Mann's observations. Chinese civilization is well known for its focus on relationships and "face," its emphasis on the difference between "insider" and "outsider" and on the need to maintain appearances. Chinese officials nurtured in this atmosphere naturally develop exquisitely fine-tuned diplomatic skills. Zhou Enlai represented the pinnacle of China's achievement in this respect as he established and developed the CPC's basic diplomatic practices. China's economic boom has provided it with additional financial incentives to offer prospective allies, greatly enhancing Beijing's image of diplomatic prowess at a time when the United States has suffered an increasingly negative international reputation.

Does this diplomatic situation, however, really indicate that Beijing has created a new and attractive institutional model, or a new set of universal values to compete with those of democracy, freedom, human rights and the rule of law?

Let us be frank about exactly what image is created by the partnerships Beijing has formed with the regimes of countries such as Burma, Zimbabwe, Syria, North Korea, Sudan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela and Cuba. I think it is fair to say that the majority of Chinese people, particularly members of the elite, would be ashamed to acknowledge these "friendships." Is this really how Beijing plans to make China part of the "international community"?

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Everyone is familiar with the saying “birds of a feather flock together,” and if China has any real aspirations on the world stage, it will need to extend its partnerships beyond rogue nations. In any case, while the United States is constantly criticized for acting like “the policeman of the world,” whenever a crisis develops, even China’s “little brothers,” North Korea and Vietnam, are more likely to turn to the US than to China for help.

In the final analysis, the fact remains that since the collapse of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during the years 1989–1991, China has become an island, albeit a very large one, in the vast international mainstream. And it remains a deviant, despite its smiling face, just as a monkey retains its basic nature even when dressed up in a smart little tuxedo.

### **A nation of slaves**

The crux of China’s problem is internal. As a veteran observer of China, James Mann is certainly aware of the recent incident that shocked people throughout China and the rest of the world with revelations that migrant workers (including many children and teenagers) had, through deception or abduction, been forced to work under horrific conditions at brick kilns in the backwaters of Shanxi and Hubei provinces. This was not a recent phenomenon, but one that had been ongoing for some years over a broad geographical expanse. This case, along with the June 4th massacre and the SARS incident, has exposed China’s profound systemic flaws and raises real questions about the fundamental nature of China’s rise in wealth and influence. It alerts us to the need for China to reshape its system through a constitutional order capable of genuinely protecting basic rights of life, liberty and property.

If the Chinese government is confident that its model is really so desirable, why does it feel compelled, as James Mann observes, to “maintain considerable control over information and the Internet”? Why has it built its massive “Golden Shield” to block the flow of information from the outside world? If the Chinese have developed a winning system, why have so many CPC leaders chosen to transfer their financial assets and send their sons and daughters to the supposedly “outmoded” United States and other Western countries?

Beijing’s presentation of its “successful model” as a preferable alternative to universal human values merely delays the inevitable moment of truth. At present, this model is constructed from two main elements: (1) China’s control of information and the packaging of its image to the outside world; (2) the lessons China has learned from the collapse of the former Soviet bloc and other totalitarian regimes, regarding the need to quickly plug every leak in the dike of social control, rapidly address every symptom of discord and nip all buds of unrest. The root systemic causes of popular discontent, meanwhile, are largely ignored. But a dike can be built only so high, and it requires constant upkeep. The danger remains that the floodtides of unrest in China will continue to rise faster than Beijing can build new levees, threatening a social deluge of Katrina-like proportions that will have lingering and far-reaching consequences.

What then of this lustrous model of wealth without liberty?

### **Notes**

1. James Mann’s article can be read in full at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/18/AR2007051801640.html>.
2. A full English translation of Hitler’s proclamation is posted at <http://www.humanitas-international.org/showcase/chronography/speeches/1933-02-01.html>.
3. Franklin Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms,” outlined in a speech on January 6, 1941, were freedom of expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear.
4. For the most recent *Forbes* list of “China’s 400 Richest,” see [http://www.forbes.com/lists/2006/74/biz\\_06china\\_The-400-Richest-Chinese\\_land.html](http://www.forbes.com/lists/2006/74/biz_06china_The-400-Richest-Chinese_land.html).
5. See “Yang Bin Convicted of Fraud, Sentenced to 18 Years,” *People’s Daily Online*, July 15, 2003, [english.peopledaily.com.cn/200307/14/eng20030714\\_120183.shtml](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200307/14/eng20030714_120183.shtml).
6. See “Yang Rong Sues Liaoning Government,” *Epoch Times*, August 19, 2003, <http://en.epochtimes.com/news/3-8-19/2607.html>.
7. See “Actress Arrested for Tax Evasion,” *Shanghai Star*, August 1, 2002, <http://app1.chinadaily.com.cn/star/2002/0801/bz9-1.html>.
8. See Qin Hui, “Two Tycoons, Two Fates: Zhou Zhengyi and Sun Dawu,” *China Rights Forum*, No. 1, 2004.