
Is the real China the one building skyscrapers and lifting itself out of poverty at breakneck pace, or is it the authoritarian country that disregards citizens’ rights? Legal scholar and consultant Randall Peerenboom takes up this question in order, according to the jacket flap, to: “...bridge the gap in understanding about China and to create a firmer foundation for mutual trust.” In the book’s eight substantive chapters, the author appraises China’s record in industrialisation, human rights, social and economic rights, the rule of law, and democracy. The book takes a comparative approach, placing China’s experience in a worldwide, but especially a regional, perspective. Peerenboom’s mantra is that on these issues China does well for its income level, and that those pesky Western liberals should stop giving China a hard time.

In the chapter on China’s industrialisation, Peerenboom describes the country as following the East Asian Model (EAM) of development. He defines this approach as an emphasis on economic growth before the protection of rights and competitive leadership selection, which may happen later (pp. 31–32). As China pursues this path, it is also making improvements, appropriate to its income level, in governance and rule of law. Since other East Asian countries now score quite high on governance indicators, the author is optimistic about China’s future if it continues to follow the EAM. The argument here is unfortunately not grounded in the rich literature on East Asian political economy. The parallel between China’s development path and those elsewhere in East Asia is thin, at best. At worst, it is a classic case of orientalist logic, lumping together diverse East Asian development patterns precisely because they are different from Western models (in this case, the Washington Consensus).

On human rights, Peerenboom tells us that China has been held up to a double standard, which he attributes to a bias against non-liberal regimes. Another giant country, India, scores far worse in rights indicators but does not get nearly the rap that China does. In the sections on rights, as in most of the chapters, the author stays close to legal issues. On one hand, this tendency is welcome because law is what Peerenboom knows. But law is not everything, especially when a comprehensive assessment of China is the goal: what about practices that do not make it into courts? His approach leaves notable gaps. In the chapter on social and economic rights, for example, there is no mention of important themes, like the breakdown in rural healthcare in the 1980s and the continuing absence of new alternatives.

Peerenboom leads off his discussion of democracy with the claim that: “Chinese leaders and citizens... are more likely to conclude that the best approach is to continue to follow the EAM and postpone democratisation until the country is richer and more stable” (p. 233). India and the Philippines are held up as warnings to China as countries that democratised too early, only to find they could no longer promote economic growth (pp. 236–237). Who are these citizens Peerenboom finds hesitant about democracy? He cites no surveys or interviews. The reader is left to imagine that the author, as a consultant, has spent most of his time in China with the educated and articulate elite rather than the ‘common people’ — farmers, shop-keepers, housewives, industrial workers, the unemployed, retirees, and so forth. How does he know what they want? Honesty about whom the author has spoken with would help readers make sense of his generalisations.
Income, however, is not China’s only reason for not democratising now, Peerenboom tells us. For cultural reasons, “China is likely to develop its own variety of democracy, which will most likely be closer to the non-liberal elitist democracy found in other Asian countries than to the liberal democracy found in Euro-America” (p. 244). (The next sentence is, unsurprisingly, about Singapore.) Even the wealthier democracies in the region are seen as fundamentally flawed, and those flaws are catalogued. The orientalist in Peerenboom pushes him to make hasty negative assessments of Asian democracies. He cites, for example, South Korea, where voters are too Confucian to support law-minded leaders (p. 245), and also mentions the reinstatement of impeached President Roh Moo Hyun as evidence of democratic problems (p. 235). The 2004 impeachment episode, on the contrary, reveals the maturity of democracy in Korea: when the opposition impeached the increasingly unpopular Roh, middle-class families took to the streets, not because they liked the President necessarily, but because he was elected through legitimate procedures. The public in Taiwan and even in Hong Kong — within the People’s Republic of China — have shown similar sensibilities. But Peerenboom is too keen to claim that Asia is different to note these points. If 1995’s *Coming Collapse of China* was the work of an overseas Chinese who abhors the country, then *China Modernizes* is the answer of a Westerner who thinks he’s gone native.

The conclusion, then, is that China remains too poor and is culturally too different from the West for liberal politics, for higher human rights standards, for more comprehensive social and economic rights, and for a more developed legal system. For a book with scholarly pretensions, value judgments abound. Further, Peerenboom’s exoticisation of China brushes aside the work of academics, for whom China is just another country to be studied. The whole project of the book deserves to be questioned. Is it really useful intellectually to ask if China is fundamentally good or evil? China is not an idea; it’s a place where 1.4 billion people live. The author rarely refers to particular actors within China — parts of the government or social groups or organisations — and seems content with China as a collective as the sole protagonist. *China Modernizes* makes virtually no references to the academic literature on Chinese politics and society. No mention is made of fieldwork or interviews, though the author has lived and worked in China. A handful of Chinese-language articles are cited, but they are supplementary sources at best.

More troubling than the lack of evidence for Peerenboom’s sweeping claims is his failure to understand the politics behind them. What Peerenboom has done is to provide the most comprehensive articulation in English of the political views of China’s conservative intellectual elite. It is one thing if an outsider has these ideas about China; it is wholly another when they come from the mouths of China’s elite. For the latter, the idea that China is not ready for democracy or protecting individual rights — for economic or cultural reasons — is useful: it helps them maintain power. China’s leaders put forth these ideas about ‘Chinese characteristics’ or about not being ready for political change because they fear that liberalisation would cause them to lose power to currently disadvantaged groups. Rest assured that when the Chinese translation of *China Modernizes* arrives, it will be a hit. Their political justifications legitimated by an American university professor, China’s conservative leaders will have additional fodder for their political battles.

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