

Chapter 7

“China’s 70-Year Development and the Building of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind”: The United Kingdom Perspective



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In 1949, no one could possibly have comprehended that China’s Revolution would, over the next seventy years, utterly transform the world. That is hardly surprising. Ever since the early nineteenth century, China had been in remorseless decline, divided, partially colonised, hopelessly inward looking, left behind by the economic revolution that had transformed Europe, the United States, and Japan. China had become virtually invisible to rest of the world, largely forgotten, its grand history locked away in a box, its future potential dismissed. No one could have guessed what lay ahead.

The 1949 Revolution was part of a much wider global phenomenon. When the United Nations was formed in 1945, with much of the world still colonised, it had just 51 member states, compared with 193 today. India, for example, only gained independence in 1947. The most important global trend of the period between 1945 and 1965 was decolonisation, with China’s Revolution being an integral part of that process. Decolonisation marked the beginning of the enfranchisement of that great swathe of humanity who had been colonised and subjugated by the West and also Japan. For almost two hundred years, the world had been run by the West. That state of affairs was to continue to this day, albeit in a much weakened form, but decolonisation and national liberation created the possibility that, in time, the majority of the world’s population could become the decisive player in global governance. That prospect is now fast becoming a reality. In the mid-1970s, the developing world, home to 85% of the world’s population, accounted for only one-third of global GDP; today it is 60%.

The key factor in the transformation of the developing world has been China’s rise. It is demographically the largest. It is economically the most advanced. It has been an exemplar of modernisation, demonstrating to others what could be achieved. It has

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been by far the most innovative, rather than aping the West or being beholden to it, instead showing that there are diverse paths to modernisation. China is both an organic part of the developing world and also its leader. Its relationship with the developing world is the strategic axis of its foreign policy, as is graphically illustrated by the Belt and Road Initiative. Indeed, the latter, while neither being nor purporting to be an alternative international system, nonetheless powerfully demonstrates what a new kind of post-Western international system might be like, in terms of its composition, its very different priorities, and its norms and values.

We are witnessing the beginning of a new era, where the majority of the world's population—those that live in the developing world—will increasingly become the arbiters of our global future. New norms and values will become ascendant. Development will be the predominant theme of the present century. New institutions will be created, both regional and global. It is in this context that we should understand the idea of “a community with a shared future for mankind”. The rise of the developing world, with China at its core, creates the conditions for a more inclusive and democratic world. The fact that a growing majority of the world's population is now involved in the process of modernization means that they increasingly face common problems which require common responses, the classic and overarching example of this being the threat posed by climate change. The idea of a common destiny for mankind, indeed of being able to think in such holistic terms, lies deep in Chinese history. Unlike the West's overriding preoccupation with the nation-state, the ancient Chinese concept of *tianxia*, based as it was on the notion of the entire world, recognised no such boundaries. A concept of the world lay at the very heart of ancient China's way of thinking.

The fact that China was invisible until 1949, and in key respects until 1978 and beyond, meant that the great majority of the world knew very little about it. They knew all about the West, but virtually nothing about China. It takes a very long time for that kind of deficit to be overcome. There is still huge ignorance about China, and such ignorance can easily turn into prejudice. But as China has opened up, so the world is also experiencing something of a crash course in getting to know China. There are, of course, plenty of doubts and negative reactions. That is inevitable, as China is so different to a West with which the world is already so familiar and which hitherto has been the world's default mode of thinking. But as the world gets to know China better, it is on a voyage of discovery.

We will surely come to see the twenty-first century as the Chinese century, not simply because of China's economic rise and growing influence (that argument is already familiar) but, rather more fundamentally, as the moment when the modern world became familiar for the very first time with Chinese civilization and its novel characteristics: China as a civilization-state, its distinctive relationship between the state and society, its governing system and so forth. Familiarity with Chinese civilization will teach the world about civilizational difference and diversity, that modernity is plural rather than singular, that the Western way is but one way and certainly not the only way.

Nor is this simply a historical matter. China's extraordinary rise draws on the country's civilizational legacy, but it is also novel and highly innovative. Reform

and opening up, while rooted in the close historical relationship between the state and society, was a hugely creative response to the problem of China’s development. Without doubt, it is the world’s most influential and successful economic strategy since 1945. China has been criticised for its failure to provide public goods, though much less so since the AIIB and Belt and Road Initiative; but reform and opening up is precisely such a public good, a hugely important offer to the countries of the developing world on how to tackle the challenge of their own development. I would go further; I would argue more generally that as other countries become increasingly familiar with Chinese civilization and history, this constitutes an extraordinary gift to the rest of the world that can only enhance humanity’s knowledge and capacity. Just as China has been a wonderful learner, especially during the reform period, so the rest of the world will be enriched by learning about and from China.

Of course, China’s approach cannot be blindly copied or transplanted: it has to be adapted to a very different set of circumstances and conditions and applied in a creative manner. China has always been acutely aware of its exceptionalism, unlike the Soviet Union of old or indeed the United States: its extraordinarily long history and continuity, its sheer size, and its distinctiveness as a civilization-state mean that China can never be a model that can or should be blindly imitated or copied. But nonetheless, with this important stricture, the experience China has gained in the course of its own development has a huge amount to offer other developing countries. Indeed, while China’s experience is a source of both ideas and know-how for developing countries, its remarkable achievements at the same time increasingly serve as an inspiration for them.