

CHINA US Focus

If China Wants to Lead the World, It Must Trust Its Own People

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The People's Republic of China dominates trade in Asia, plays an increasingly important economic role in America and Europe, and is a major investor in Africa. Beijing's military strength also is rising as it asserts once dormant territorial claims. But its international sway has yet to match its economic resources.

The challenge is not just influencing foreign nations. It's also appealing to younger ethnic Chinese in ethnic Chinese enclaves such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. Beijing is far more effective at inspiring fear than generating loyalty. To change that, the PRC must demonstrate greater trust in its own people.

The Chinese Empire once dominated East Asia. Other states sought Beijing's favor, paid it obedience, and followed its lead. Chinese culture and science were advanced and reached well beyond Asia. But the empire turned inward, leaving "China" as little more than a distant and abstract bit of exotica for Westerners.

Not much changed after the last emperor's fall. China was consumed by internal conflict and hobbled by foreign invasion. The communist revolution marked another sharp turn inward, to which the Cultural Revolution amounted to a giant exclamation point. Only after Mao Zedong's death and Deng Xiaoping's rise did China seriously reengage the world.

Even so the PRC's influence remains primarily economic. When analysts speak of the "Beijing Consensus," they mean a governing philosophy adopted by leaders, not peoples. China's military power is on the rise, but threatening to use it has pushed people away in lands as diverse as Japan and Taiwan. Ancient Chinese culture is venerable and sophisticated, but an artifact to most people, including younger Chinese. The popular culture that appeals is a mix of Western and newer Eastern, such as from South Korea, at least until the recent contretemps over the latter's participation in the THAAD missile defense system.

Yet there never has been a greater opening for increased Chinese leadership. With the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president, the world's greatest economic power is abandoning the open trading system which it helped create. Moreover, Washington policies are likely to deter not only immigration but travel to America. Although the U.S. global influence won't disappear, Washington appears ready to allow others to set the international rules of economic engagement.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has responded by backing "openness" and "economic liberalization," using the January forum in Davos to appeal to business and political elites around the globe. He said protectionism was like "locking yourself in a dark room." Although his message was welcome, many in the West observed that his government followed a very different course at home, cracking down on contact with foreign people and thoughts. Zhou Qiang, president of the Supreme People's Court, warned against falling "into the trap of false Western ideas." Chinese people are supposed to adopt Chinese ideas, as defined by the CCP.

Indeed, the PRC's leadership seems particularly sensitive to the lack of support for Beijing from ethnic Chinese elsewhere. In early March Yu Zhengsheng, number four in the Chinese Communist Party hierarchy announced a program to attract young people in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.

The government plans on organizing trips for residents of the first two "to visit the mainland on study trips and experience it for themselves" in order to "strengthen the love of both region and country among the people of Hong Kong and Macau." Moreover, Beijing will push for increased exchanges with youthful citizens of Taiwan, currently ruled by a party long dedicated to independence. The objective will be to "build up public support for the peaceful development of cross-strait relations." In fact, last fall Xi attacked anyone who sought "to split out any piece of land of China at any time and in any way."

However, it will take more than free trips to build loyalty to Beijing. China is a land worth visiting and the Chinese people are worth engaging. But the young in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan have tasted political freedom. Democracy is a flawed system, but it has one overriding advantage: it trusts people to rule themselves.

And this concept is not a Western import. As a student Hu Ping was sent to labor in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. On his return to the city he advocated freedom of speech, later received his doctorate at Harvard, and eventually settled in New York, where he edits the journal *Beijing Spring*. He contends that Chinese support for liberty grows out of the Chinese experience. He cites the example of Xi's father, Xi Zhongxun, who was purged during the Cultural Revolution. The latter's "concept of tolerance and freedom arose mainly from personal experience," and not from reading Western thinkers, old or new.

Acknowledging this universal desire to determine one's own future is necessary to appeal to younger Chinese at home and especially those in territories which recognize the importance of individual autonomy and liberty. The rising generation has not been corrupted by the West. Instead, its collective demand reflects a basic and enduring human experience. Despite the efforts of governments of all sorts, people around the world insist on controlling their own lives. It is a powerful, unquenchable human desire.

Thus, respecting the demand for self-government would be the most effective response to separatist sentiments. People who do not trust those who govern are unlikely to embrace the government. If people believe the only sure protection for individual liberty is geographic independence, they will back the latter. Beijing cannot compel genuine loyalty.

America started down the path to global dominance a century ago, with the collapse of Europe's traditional empires in World War I and eclipse of Europe's new states in World War II. Since then America has enjoyed unusual economic and cultural dominance.

With Washington turning its back on its international role, China has an opportunity to play a larger role in shaping foreign attitudes and institutions. However, taking advantage of that opportunity requires living up to the ideals being advanced. If Beijing wants to lead, it must appeal to those determined to control their own destinies.

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