

Book Review

Fang Cai., and Xiaojing Zhang, *Constructing Political Economy with Chinese Characteristics*. Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd, jointly published with China Social Sciences Press, 2022, 233 pp. + viii.

To understand the success of a nation's development, one must grasp the logic that emerges from within the nation itself. National success is shaped by a series of reflections and ideas, planning, experimentation, and the implementation of policies that yield profound experiences and valuable lessons for other countries. Each country possesses its own distinctive cultural characteristics and uniqueness, shaped by its specific situations and conditions. These, in turn, construct a country's self-perceptions and its outlook toward the international environment, which are then embodied in its vision, mission, and development practices. Therefore, understanding the culture and philosophy of a nation—elements that define its logic of thought and development vision—is crucial. Through this internal perspective, the success of a nation's development can be seen not only in terms of material achievements and infrastructure but also more profoundly in the cultural values, philosophical foundations, and mindset that shape its long-term national vision.

The same holds true for China. China's economic miracle was neither achieved overnight, nor did it follow a smooth path. Rather, it involved a gradual and continuous process, shaped by careful consideration and reflection that combined domestic perspectives rooted in Chinese culture and philosophy with external political ideas that influenced China's political culture—such as Marxism and even elements of capitalism, which offered lessons from both its successes and failures in economic development across different countries. These dynamics ultimately gave rise to a distinctly Chinese model of economic development, encapsulated in what is known as political economy with Chinese characteristics.

Fang Cai and Xiaojing Zhang offer an insider's explanation of the philosophy, logic of thought, and intellectual process behind China's economic development in their book *Constructing Political Economy with Chinese Characteristics*. From its very title, Cai and Zhang highlight China's developmental success through an understanding of two dimensions: political economy and Chinese characteristics. The former refers to the socialist political economy, while the latter reflects the distinctive features of Chinese thought that shape and lend uniqueness to its development model. The authors present an account of China's economic development that arises from an awareness of China's own circumstances and conditions, its tradition of political-economic thought, and the lessons learned from other countries. The result is a development model that not only bears strong national characteristics but also holds potential for adaptation by other states, particularly developing countries.

The book is organized into six chapters. The introductory chapter provides an overview of the foundations of the Socialist Political Economy with Chinese Characteristics. It begins with a discussion of the "new juncture" in China's development, the evolution of Chinese society, the idea of scientific socialism, and choices available to developing countries in pursuing modernization. This chapter also offers a detailed examination of Marxist Political Economy (MPE), as well as the history and philosophy of China's civilization, which serve as both the foundation and guiding principles for the country's development. In addition, lessons drawn from China's own reform and opening-up policies, together with insights from Western experiences of economic development, further enrich the construction of China's developmental model.

Importantly, this first chapter introduces Xi Jinping's concept of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, which represents a theoretical innovation building on and extending Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the Three Represents, and the Scientific Outlook on Development. This vision is articulated in fourteen points presented in the report to the 19th CPC National Congress, which functions both as a "road map" and a "methodology" for realizing the "two centenary goals" and achieving the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.

The second chapter focuses specifically on the epistemology and methodology of Xi Jinping's thought on the Socialist Economy with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. Cai and Zhang explain that Xi's ideas are articulated through a series of statements that illustrate his outlook. These include learning from and mastering Marxist philosophy, biding time while maintaining strategic focus, adhering to the general principle of pursuing progress while

ensuring stability, fostering innovative thinking, preparing for worst-case scenarios, combining problem-oriented and goal-oriented approaches, and employing pilot projects as a crucial method of reform.

The third chapter examines the concept of the “new normal” in China’s economic development, understood as a distinct stage in the country’s long-term development and a critical milestone in the broader process of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. In managing this situation, Xi Jinping’s thought emphasizes a comprehensive understanding of the new normal, the capacity to adapt to new circumstances, and reforms grounded in a thorough exploration of the key factors shaping this stage. This approach is presented as a significant milestone in the enrichment and further development of the Socialist Political Economy with Chinese Characteristics.

The fourth chapter discusses the new development philosophy in relation to the new normal. The 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China (2016-2020) sets out the long-term objectives, tasks, and measures for socioeconomic development, with a central focus on achieving innovative, coordinated, green, open, and shared growth. A series of speeches by Xi Jinping articulate this new philosophy of development, grounded in the CPC’s fundamental principle of “serving the people wholeheartedly” and its people-centered orientation. Xi argues that in order to ensure development has a comprehensive impact, China must prioritize innovation, coordination, sustainability, openness, and inclusiveness. This vision is structured in two states: from 2020 to 2035, with the goal of building a “moderately prosperous society in all respects,” and beyond 2035, with the aim of transforming China into a “great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful.”

The fifth chapter addresses the challenge of developing a modernized Chinese economy. China has achieved remarkable progress, with an average growth rate around 10 percent, making it the world’s second-largest economy. At the same time, however, China faces problems of imbalance, lack of coordination, and unsustainability, as well as exposure to vulnerability in the global financial system. These challenges have prompted China to focus on building a modern economic system that emphasizes competitive advantages in science, technology, and industry upgrading to improve its position in the international division of labor, compete globally, and expand its influence in the world economy.

In this context, at the 16th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping proposed “putting quality first and giving priority to performance,” identifying supply-side structural reform as the central task, and striving for better quality, higher efficiency, and stronger drivers of growth through reform. In practice, this vision has been translated into several key policies: advancing supply-side structural reforms, making China a country of innovators, revitalizing rural areas, pursuing a strategy of coordinated regional development, strengthening the socialist market economy, and creating new opportunities across diverse sectors.

While the first five chapters focus on China's internal dynamics, the sixth chapter examines the significance and global impact of China's economic development. According to Xi Jinping, China has now entered a new era that marks a historic achievement in its transformation into a modern socialist country. This milestone positions China as an influential global actor—one that contributes meaningfully to humanity, provides aids developing countries, and serves as a development model for them.

At the same time, Xi emphasizes that China does not aspire to become a hegemonic power, which is often associated with the use of military force to exert influence. Instead, his vision of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era is framed as a collaborative effort to build a “community of shared future for humankind.” In contrast to Cold War mentalities, hegemonism, and great-power competition—illustrated in Graham T. Allison's notion of the Thucydides Trap and Joseph Nye's Kindleberger Trap—China presents itself as committed to common interests, dialogue, and consultation in international relations, on the premise that all nations are inherently interdependent.

It is within this context that the Belt and Road Initiative is introduced as a framework for fostering connectivity and harmonious, mutually beneficial relations among states. The initiative is presented not only as a means of addressing global challenges such as hunger but also as a way of offering an alternative model of development that is more inclusive, equitable, and complementary to the development path of other nations.

Cai and Zhang's book is a valuable contribution for gaining deeper insight into both China's domestic economic development and its international vision, both of which are directed toward constructing a political economy model with distinctly Chinese characteristics. While much of the book presents a perspective that may appear subjective from a Chinese standpoint, this is precisely what makes it significant: it allows readers to understand why and how China's economic development has been conceived and implemented. By engaging with China's own perspective and logic, readers can grasp the intellectual

foundation of its development strategies as well as the broader international vision that accompanies them. For this reason, the book is highly recommended for students, scholars, and readers interested in international, development studies, and even cultural studies.

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