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Debating National Identity Through the China Model: An Ideological Spectrum Analysis

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Abstract

One of the key topics today is China's rise and its impact on the global order, as exemplified by the discussion surrounding the "China model." This article examines the discourse on the "China model" from a national identity perspective rather than a political economy approach. From this viewpoint, the "China model" can be understood as a continuation of the historical debate between "Sinification" and "Westernization," reflecting China's identity concerns during its modernization process. At the same time, it serves as part of the Chinese Communist Party's legitimation efforts. Thus, discussions about the China model provide a valuable lens for exploring national identity debates within China. This study emphasizes the role of ideology in shaping these debates and introduces a framework based on three ideological categories: Liberal, Left-wing, and Conservative. It examines the divergences among intellectuals and how official discourse utilizes the discussion by analyzing intellectual and official discourses. The findings indicate that official discourse has increasingly adopted left-wing rhetoric while reinforcing a more conservative ontological stance. In conclusion, this article analyses intellectual and official discourse in China, offering more profound insights into the nation's evolving self-identity and its vision of its role in the world.

Keywords: Intellectual debate, Official discourse, Self-identity, Ideological Contestation, Modernization

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Introduction

Since the late 20th century, China has emerged as a global power while deeply engaging in economic globalization, benefiting from the United States (US)-led Liberal International Order (LIO). At the time, liberal scholars and policymakers optimistically believed that their engagement policy—aimed at integrating a rising China peacefully into the existing international order while promoting trade and democratization (Lynch 2002)—would ultimately lead China to adopt a system similar to that of the West. However, China's behavior has diverged from these initial expectations over time, challenging the dominant norms of liberal democracy and neoliberal economic governance. In other words, China has emerged as a normative power (Yılmaz 2025), extending its global influence through various mechanisms, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Ünaldilar Kocamaz 2019) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Yağcı 2018). Consequently, many Western observers view China as a threat

to global democracy due to its "belief in the superiority of an autocratic Chinese model" (Beckley and Brands 2023).

The key question is how to explain China's divergence from the "liberal norm." Ramo (2004) introduced the term "Beijing Consensus" to describe China's unique development approach, positioning it as an alternative to the Washington Consensus.[1] His views sparked significant criticism, as many scholars argued that his characterization of the Beijing Consensus deviated from reality (Kennedy 2010; Naughton 2010). Nevertheless, the Beijing Consensus and the broader concept of a "China model" continue to attract scholarly debate on what precisely constitutes the China model. Some scholars have examined this issue through the varieties of capitalism approach. While Witt (2010) argues that China's experience aligns more closely with a liberal market economy, Fligstein and Zhang (2011) take a different stance, positioning Chinese capitalism at the opposite end of the established liberal market economies (LME) and coordinated market economies (CME) spectrum, identifying it as a coordinated market economy. Furthermore, Zhang and Peck (2016) move beyond a nation-centric perspective, emphasizing the "heterogeneous particularities" of the Chinese model. Similarly, Mulvad's (2015) study comparing the "Chongqing Model" and the "Guangdong Model"[2] further illustrates the internal variations within China's development path.

Despite the growing body of empirical research on "what the China model is," some scholars argue that the idea of the China model is better understood as "a symbol or a metaphor rather than a distinct and coherent model" (Breslin 2011). Just as empirical studies highlight the internal heterogeneity within China, scholars examining the intellectual debate surrounding the China model also emphasize these points of divergence. While some, like Chen and Goodman (2012), focus on debates within English-language scholarship, others, such as Fewsmith (2011), Ferchen (2013), and Zhao (2017), analyze domestic Chinese discourse, particularly intellectual debates from various camps.

Although the existing literature has explored the debate over the China model, two key aspects remain insufficiently addressed. First, the discussion is not merely about what China has done; it reflects a broader contestation over Chinese national identity with the "West." As Fewsmith (2011:35) argues, the China model debate "resonates strongly with debates over the past century," drawing parallels between contemporary discussions and earlier debates on "wholesale Westernization" versus the preservation of "Chinese essence" during the Republican era. Second, as Chen and Goodman (2012) caution, it is crucial to recognize the ideological dimension of these discussions. Therefore, we can uncover the underlying ideological competition among Chinese intellectuals by tracing the debate over the China model.

1 The Washington Consensus refers to a set of policy recommendations promoted by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the US Treasury since the 1980s, primarily in developing countries.The main focus was on free-market reforms, such as privatization, deregulation and trade liberalisation, as well as reducing the role of the state in the economy.

2 The Chongqing and Guangdong models refer to the contrasting political and economic approaches that were implemented in the Chongqing municipality and the Guangdong province between 2007 and 2012. While the Chongqing Model emphasized a strong state presence in economic and social spheres, the Guangdong Model was characterized by comparatively liberal economic and political policies.

Rather than engaging with the essentialist question of "what the China model" is from a political economy perspective, as existing literature often does, this article adopts an intersubjective approach, emphasizing national identity. From this perspective, identity and relational dynamics are co-constitutive, meaning that perceptions of the China model and its relationship to the liberal "Western" model are crucial for understanding shifts in the global order. Therefore, this article views the China model discourse as a continuation of the national identity debate and reassesses it from a historical and ideological perspective. In other words, the term "China model" is a marker that helps us trace the national identity debate and the underlying ideological contestation over the past two decades. This article uses a tripartite ideological framework (Liberal, Left-wing, and Conservative) to analyze varying attitudes among Chinese intellectuals toward China's position in the world, particularly in relation to the West. It focuses on two key questions: (1) Which historical periods should be included within the China model? and (2) Does the China model possess universal value? The article then examines how official discourse has incorporated or rejected various ideas in constructing national identity and official ideology.

This article is organized into six sections. Following the introduction, the second section situates the discussion of the China model within the historical context of China's modernization process and efforts at regime legitimation. The third section introduces an analytical framework based on the ideological spectrum, highlighting three key ideologies in the debate. The fourth section builds on this typology to analyze the discussion on the China model. The fifth section examines the emergence of the official discourse on the "Chinese path to Modernization" and explores how it incorporates ideas from various ideologies. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the article's main findings and discusses potential implications for future research.

Historical Context of the China Model

The emerging discourse around the China model is not new; it is rooted in a long-standing debate between "Sinification" and "Westernization." From the perspective of modern intellectual history, as articulated by Levinson (1958), China's modernization process can be understood as a transition from the ancient concept of *Tianxia* to that of a nation-state. Traditionally, *Tianxia* represented the distinctions between "Self" and "Other," "Civilized" and "Barbarian," "Ruler" and "Submissive," with China positioned at the center of this worldview. However, with the intrusion of Western powers, it became evident that China was, in reality, situated on the periphery of the international system and was often perceived as "barbaric." In this Western-dominated international order, China, like many other nations, was compelled to catch up with the West by adhering to its standards and internalizing a foreign worldview (Zarakol 2010). However, the "established-outsider" dynamic of the international system continues to evoke a sense of shame, creating a paradox. On the one hand, this shame has driven Chinese intellectuals to advocate for adopting Western systems.

On the other hand, it challenges China's self-identity, leading to resistance against full Westernization. Consequently, throughout history, China has experienced alternating waves

of "Sinification" and "Westernization." While proponents of Westernization advocate for universal norms and domestic reform, Sinification emphasizes China's unique identity and civilizational system, resisting the socialization of Western universal norms.

Since 1840, Chinese history has witnessed three major waves of "Sinification," each led by an intensive phase of "Westernization." The first wave of Sinification emerged in the late 19th century, primarily in response to the failure of the First Sino-Japanese War and the subsequent expansion of Western influence (Tang 1982). During this period, the widespread acceptance of evolutionary theory challenged the traditional reverence for the past. This shift in thinking instilled hope that China could catch up with the "civilized" Western countries through internal evolutionary processes, primarily by imitating and learning from the West—"Westernization" (Wang 2007). In response, conservative officials like Zhang Zhidong advocated the slogan "*Zhong Ti Xi Yong*" (Chinese Learning as Substance, Western Learning for Application) to mitigate the perceived threat to the existing system. Although this wave of "Sinification" did not last long, the idea of "*Zhong Ti Xi Yong*" became the foundation of later "Sinification" discourse.

In the 1910s, a second, more radical wave of Westernization emerged, driven by intellectuals disillusioned with the republican system in China, particularly after two failed attempts to restore the monarchy, which were widely seen as farcical. As a result, these intellectuals began to question the social and ideological foundations that could lead to restoration, with Confucianism becoming a primary target (Jin and Liu 2008). This questioning ultimately led to the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement.[3]

In response to this wave of Westernization, a resurgence of Sinification took place. A key catalyst was World War I, which, for many Chinese intellectuals, shattered their belief in the moral superiority of the West and inspired arguments that "China had a responsibility to contribute to a new world culture" (Fung 2009). Meanwhile, the rise of the Soviet Union led to a split in the "West," and, faced with the ideological conflict between capitalism and communism, many intellectuals contended that China's development model should be self-determined (Liang 1992). These thinkers, who valued the essence of Chinese culture, rejected both blind imitation of the West and a return to the past. Instead, they advocated for modernization rooted in China's context, believing in revitalizing traditional values to support modernization.

During the rule of one of China's major political parties, the Kuomintang (KMT), these waves of Sinification aligned with official discourse. Sinification supporters argued that a strong state and government were necessary, aligning with a form of neo-authoritarianism. In response, the KMT utilized Sinification to counter communist and liberal influences (Fung 2009). For example, Chiang Kai-shek, who succeeded Sun Yat-sen as the leader of the KMT, reinterpreted Sun's "*San Min Zhu Yi* (Three Principles of the People)". Chiang

3 The New Culture Movement was a progressive socio-political movement in China during the 1910s and 1920s that called for cultural and intellectual renewal. The May Fourth Movement was a student-led protest against the Beiyang government's failure to defend China's interests at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.

combined Confucianism with these principles by casting Sun as a synthesizer of Chinese moral traditions to promote an ethical hierarchy that reinforced his dictatorship (Bai 2003). In his famous book China's Destiny, he vigorously advocated for the superiority of Chinese morality (Chiang 1976).

Since the 1980s, with the relaxation of state control, a new wave of Westernization emerged, known as the "New Enlightenment Movement." Participants in this movement saw themselves as the successors of the May Fourth Movement, aiming to promote enlightenment and "Cultural Modernization" in China (Wu 2014). This movement echoed the idea of "wholesale Westernization," exemplified by the documentary River Elegy, arguing that China's reform and modernization required a thorough critique of tradition. Radical figures like Liu Xiaobo, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, equated Westernization with modernization and called for an end to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) one-party rule, posing a direct threat to the CCP's legitimacy. Unsurprisingly, this wave of Westernization came to an abrupt end following the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. Since the 1990s, there has been a resurgence of interest in national studies in China, combined with emerging nationalist emotion. As some scholars have observed, rather than wholly embracing Western knowledge as in the 1980s, Chinese intellectuals since the 1990s have begun to break free from the dominance of Western discourse. Regarding intellectual resources, the focus has shifted from "learning from the West" to seeking local cultural resources (Xu and Luo 2007).

Over the past two decades, the wave of Sinification has intensified, and the discourse on the China model can also be regarded as a form of Sinification, despite originating from outside China. In other words, the debate over the China model represents the contemporary iteration of Sinification. Within two decades, there have been two significant peaks in discussions on the China model within China. The first peak emerged in 2008, following the global financial crisis and coinciding with China's successful hosting of the Beijing Olympic Games. This period also marked the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and the 30th anniversary of the country's reform and opening-up policies. The second peak occurred after 2021, following the introduction of the term "Chinese Path to Modernization" (Xi 2021b), which can be seen as an official "Sinification" discourse that draws from the China model debate to legitimize the current system.

The emergence of the China model discourse is linked to international power dynamics. While China's growing influence has bolstered domestic confidence in its cultural heritage, the country remains outside the international community's core, particularly due to its divergence from two key tenets of the liberal-democratic norm: democracy and human rights (Rogstad 2022). This gap, combined with China's increasing resources, has led many to embrace Sinification over Westernization, as reflected in the rise of the China model discourse (Adler-Nissen 2014).

Similarly, as in previous waves of Sinification during the Late Qing dynasty and the KMT era (1890s to 1940s), concerns over regime legitimacy have played a significant role in shaping the China model discourse. Since coming to power, the CCP, as a revolutionary party, has relied on communist ideology as a primary source of regime legitimacy (Weatherley 2006).

In the post-Mao era, the CCP smoothly transitioned from a revolutionary party to a ruling party, gradually evolving from an ideology-based revolutionary regime into a performance-based authoritarian regime (Zhao 2009). For a long time, rapid economic growth in China provided sufficient legitimacy for CCP rule. However, this legitimacy is inherently fragile, especially when confronted with dramatic and potentially destabilizing developments (Zhu 2011). As a result, China faces choices between pursuing democratization to enhance legal-electoral legitimacy, which means "Westernization," or returning to ideological roots, which means using "Sinification" discourse to legitimize its regime. It is evident that since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, China has chosen the latter path (Zhao 2016).

Mapping Ideologies in Contemporary China

As discussed earlier, the ideological dimension is crucial for understanding the China model discourse. Following Maynard and Haas's (2022) definition, ideology is understood as "distinctive political worldviews that shape how individual and collective actors interpret, evaluate, and act in politics." Therefore, ideology partly constitutes the ontological foundation of national identity. Different views of history and space shape people's views on China's uniqueness, influencing the construction of the China model. For an extended period, the CCP adopted a pragmatic approach to governance, deliberately avoiding rigid ideological frameworks. This has allowed a "veritable market of ideas" to flourish in China, where intellectuals can present and sell their ideas to political elites (Frenkiel 2015). Chinese intellectuals often perceive gaps in the official ideology—intentionally or unintentionally—and attempt to fill them with preferred ideas (Wu 2014). Meanwhile, Chinese officials are likely to utilize the intellectual resources provided by these scholars to reconstruct official ideology. This paper aims to identify the key ideologies among intellectuals driving the China model debate.

In the existing literature, numerous works have attempted to map contemporary ideological groups in China, particularly regarding the debate over the China model. Most of these studies have continued the division between the "New Left" and "Liberals," a dichotomy rooted in the longstanding debate that began in the 1990s. Within this framework, those identified with the "New Left" advocate for the existence and virtues of the China model, while those aligned with liberalism reject the claims of the former (Fewsmith, 2011; Zhao 2017). However, as Mulvad (2018) rightly argues, relying on this one-dimensional model to capture the ideological cleavages in China is problematic. Building on the previous discussions, I propose dividing contemporary Chinese ideological groups into three categories: Liberal, Left-wing, and Conservative. It is essential to clarify that these three categories are not ideal types. On the contrary, they should be understood as three clusters with blurred boundaries. This means it is difficult to categorize individuals into a single ideological group. Instead, people may exhibit different ideological preferences depending on the issue, and their stance on a given topic can change over time.

Liberal scholars in China draw heavily from Western ideas and advocate for the transformation of the state into a constitutional democracy. They see this transformation as

an intrinsic requirement for becoming a modern state. Grounded in modernization theory, they believe that democratization is an inevitable next step in China's development, though they often downplay democracy due to its sensitive nature in China. Most of these scholars acknowledge universal values such as democracy, freedom, and the rule of law, and they tend to reject notions of Chinese exceptionalism (Ma 2012).

In contemporary China, liberal scholars generally agree that the country remains in the early stages of modernization and suffers from a lack of political and legal reforms (Ren 2008). Consequently, their primary goals are twofold: establishing the rule of law, as they believe China still operates primarily under the "rule of man," and promoting a free market, as they argue that the government still exerts excessive control over the economy (Xu 2003). To some extent, these goals do not directly challenge the CCP's leadership. On the contrary, many liberals view the CCP as a potential platform for promoting China's democratization, particularly through intra-party democracy (Li 2010).

Left-wing scholars, like their liberal counterparts, also borrow ideas from the West, such as those from the Frankfurt School, decolonization, and the far left. However, they envision a different blueprint for China's future. Most of them seek to maintain or restore China as a socialist state rather than a capitalist one, and they are vehemently opposed to the liberal international order, which they label the world capitalist system. Unlike liberal scholars, left-wing intellectuals view mainstream concepts like "democracy" and "rule of law" as products of capitalist or Western hegemony (Xu 2003). While they do not entirely reject universalism, they argue that China's practice aligns even more closely with the true nature of democracy (Wang 2014).

In the contemporary context, left-wing scholars are more critical of market reforms and Western countries than the CCP's leadership. They often place their hopes on the CCP to reverse the negative aspects of the current market economy. Specifically, they emphasize social justice and equality within the market reform process. While they remain critical of the current system and acknowledge its limitations, their critique is less focused on the CCP and more on the trajectory of China's policies.

Conservative scholars, in my understanding, include some so-called New Left intellectuals, some of New Confucianism, and New Authoritarianism. Unlike the two groups mentioned earlier, conservatives endeavor to integrate China's traditions, including Confucianism, with the current political-economic system. Compared to liberal scholars, conservatives stress that the market economy is not merely a Western import (Zheng and Huang 2018). Compared to left-wing scholars, these intellectuals emphasize "Chineseness" rather than "Socialism" in their defense of China's non-democratic political system. They stress the continuity from imperial China through the Maoist era to the post-Mao period, highlighting the unique cultural and historical factors that have shaped China's governance model (Gan 2007). In summary, they reject the notion of universal values and take pride in the distinct identity of Chinese civilization.

The concept of conservatism here encompasses two dimensions. On the one hand, conservative intellectuals uphold CCP leadership by emphasizing that "the China Path refers

to institutional arrangements that the CCP deems fit for China, with the ruling status of the CCP as its defining characteristic" (Libin and Patapan 2020). This perspective aligns with Samuel Huntington's (1957) situational definition of conservatism, which views it as an ideology that arises in response to a fundamental challenge directed at established institutions, with supporters of those institutions employing conservative ideology in their defense. On the other hand, although they emphasize "Chineseness," these scholars are inspired by Western right-wing thinkers such as Carl Schmitt and place significant emphasis on sovereignty, often with a preference for statism. In other words, conservative scholars engage in an ideological project that utilizes diverse ideas to counter further reforms, especially political reforms (Zhou 2022). In their view, the current political-economic system returns to Chinese tradition and does not require change.

Debating the China Model

Building on the three-ideology framework I proposed, the following two sections will examine the China model debate within the intellectual discourse and how China's official discourse has adopted the concept of the China model. It is worth noting that intellectual discourse refers to discussions in the public sphere, while official discourse pertains to official statements and documents. Therefore, intellectual discourse includes both pro-official scholars and international intellectuals who express their ideas in Chinese. As this article focuses primarily on national identity rather than political economy, I propose two pivotal questions regarding perspectives on history and space: Which historical period should be included within the China model? And does the Chinese model possess universal value? This section will first explore the intellectual discourse.

Which Period Should be Included within the China Model?

The question of which period should be included within the China model is crucial, as it examines the extent to which China's success can be attributed to its historical legacy and the role of tradition in its modernization process. Intellectuals from different ideological orientations provide varying interpretations, each offering a distinct view of the China model's temporal scope and historical foundation.

The first perspective, predominantly held by pro-liberal scholars, argues that the China model's history should begin with the economic reforms initiated in 1978. This viewpoint suggests that the current political and economic system is not a permanent solution but a transitional phase with significant limitations. These scholars often see China's development as a temporary state that may eventually evolve into a more Western-style system. For instance, Ding Xueliang (2010) posits that the China model took shape in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Before this period, even the top leaders were uncertain about the direction to take, leading to rapidly changing policies that lacked coherence. Similarly, Xu Xiaonian (2015) argues that the defining features of China's strong government model only became prominent in the 1990s. Zhao Suisheng's (2010) analysis supports this view by describing the China model as a "Third

Road" of political transformation, suggesting a unique path towards democracy, akin to the paths followed by South Korea and Taiwan, yet distinct from the Soviet Union's trajectory. In this perspective, the China model is seen as a relatively recent development potentially transient and could lead to further political reforms.

In contrast, left-wing scholars view the China model as encompassing a longer historical trajectory, incorporating both the Mao and post-Mao reform eras. These scholars argue that past achievements cannot be understood without acknowledging the foundations laid during the Maoist period. For example Zheng Yongnian (2009) emphasizes that establishing a sovereign state during the first thirty years (1949–1978) was crucial for the subsequent economic reforms and development. Zheng contends that the practices and policies initiated by Mao Zedong provided the necessary groundwork for later explorations and adjustments by Chinese leaders. He argues that while Mao's era laid a crucial foundation for China's subsequent development, Chinese history before the modern era can be seen as a case where "history simply repeats itself," implying that pre-modern history did not significantly contribute to the transformative shift that set China on its unique path in the 20th century (Zheng 2009). This perspective differs from that of conservative scholars, who emphasize the continuity and significance of China's ancient traditions and their influence on the modern era. Similarly, Hu Angang (2022), a scholar often associated with the "New Left," traces the China model back to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, underscoring the party's central role in China's development trajectory. This perspective highlights the importance of both ideological and institutional continuity in understanding the China model.

Conservative scholars offer an even broader interpretation, situating the China model within the vast continuum of Chinese civilization. They emphasize the enduring legacy of Chinese traditions and argue that the modern China model cannot be fully understood without considering this deeper historical context. Accordingly, Pan Wei (2010) argues that separating the Mao and post-Mao eras is a mistake, as both are part of a continuous historical process rooted in thousands of years of Chinese civilization. He views the Chinese model as the latest iteration of the "Sino-system," a long-standing political and cultural framework that has evolved over millennia. Gan Yang (2007) echoes this sentiment by integrating the legacies of Confucius, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping into a single historical continuum. He envisions the future of China as a "socialist Confucian republic," where ancient Chinese wisdom and modern socialist principles coexist.

In summary, the liberal perspective sees the China model as a relatively recent and potentially transitional phase in China's development, primarily beginning with the reforms of 1978. On the other hand, left-wing scholars argue for a longer historical trajectory that includes both the Maoist and post-Mao periods, viewing past achievements as essential to understanding the present and future of the China model. Conservatives extend this view even further, situating the China model within the broader continuum of Chinese civilization, emphasizing the ongoing relevance of traditional Chinese values and institutions.

While there is significant overlap between left-wing and conservative scholars in their recognition of the importance of China's historical legacy, they differ in their emphasis on

tradition versus socialism. Both groups agree that the China model is not merely a reflection of the past but also a guide for future development, distinct from Western models and focused on enhancing China's unique path forward.

Does the China Model Possess Universal Value?

This question reflects the relationship between the Chinese and Western models, incorporating an ontological proposition regarding various paradigms for achieving modernization. Based on this question, four types of answers can be identified, each grounded in different ideological foundations.

The first type emphasizes the unique conditions of China, arguing that the China model is distinctive and complex for other countries to replicate. Many old-school left-wing scholars support this view. For instance, Li Junru (2009), former Vice President of the Party School of the Central Committee of the CCP, suggested replacing the term "China model" with "Chinese characteristics," referring to a system tailored to China's conditions in socialist development. Some of these scholars deny the universality of the China model and believe that no universal model exists globally. Zhao Qizheng (2009), the former director of the State Council Information Office, stated, "The 'China Model' is not universal, just as the models of already highly developed countries are not universal." Additionally, some scholars prefer the "Chinese experience" or "Chinese path" over the China model. Wang Hui (2011), an influential thinker at Tsinghua University, often regarded as part of the "New Left," argued that the term "model" implies imitation, whereas "experience" suggests specificity, historical context, and uniqueness. In this sense, the "non-model" is a model compared to liberal universalism, representing the left's resistance to "Western Centrism."

The second perspective argues that the China model is neither unique nor a model. This viewpoint is common among pro-liberal scholars. For example, Huang Yasheng (2012) contends that the China model is not unique, as the performance and limitations observed in the past thirty years can also be seen in other countries. Unlike these more radical voices, some pro-official liberal scholars, such as Yu Keping (2008), who served as the Deputy Director of the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau at the time, affirm the value of the China model but remain cautious about its universal applicability. Their stance aligns closely with the first type of perspective, indicating that pro-official scholars tend to adopt a more cautious and measured approach when discussing the broader applicability of the China model.

The third perspective adopts a pluralistic ontology, emphasizing the differences between Chinese and Western civilizations and suggesting that wisdom from Chinese civilization can address gaps in the current world order. Aligning with conservatism's concern for identity, this perspective has garnered substantial support. For example, Zhang Weiwei (2011) describes the traditional world order as a vertical hierarchy where the West imposes its ideas and practices above those of other countries. He argues that this gradually shifts to a horizontal world order, where each country engages in equal cooperation and moderate competition

regarding ideas and practices. In this context, the China model is a participant in the new world order. Although other countries cannot directly emulate China's experience, China's ideas and practices will influence the rest. Zhu Yunhan (2009) also points out that China's rise and the emergence of its development model will accelerate the decline of the singular modernity framework and the establishment of a framework of multiple modernities. He uses Sudan as a case study to demonstrate that the China model can be practically applied to other countries. In more civilizational terms, Su Changhe (2009) argues that Chinese political philosophy emphasizes cooperation while the West emphasizes balancing. Therefore, "as part of human political civilization, the Chinese model can provide necessary references for some regions or countries" (Su 2009).

The last perspective, supported by more radical left-wing scholars who have more confidence in the China model, mainly due to China's rising capacity and the decline of the US, emphasizes the role of the China model in shifting global power dynamics, particularly in aiding the Global South or developing countries. For example, Zheng (2009) contends that there were only two development models after World War II: the Western and the Soviet models. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Western model became the sole paradigm. However, neither the US nor Europe succeeded in promoting their model universally. Developing countries that adopted the Western model did not achieve the desired social and economic development or political stability. Under these circumstances, "the China model has great significance for developing countries." The younger generation, represented by scholars like Yin Zhiguang (2024), argues that the China model offers an alternative for the Global South to resist Western hegemony and challenge the unjust global order.

In conclusion, conservatives argue that there are multiple paths to modernization, with the China model representing one of these distinct paths. They emphasize the uniqueness of China's approach as part of a broader, diverse global landscape. In contrast, liberals view modernization as following a more universal or established paradigm, suggesting that China's development aligns with this wider framework. Historically, left-wing scholars have challenged the idea of a single "modernization paradigm," highlighting the uniqueness of each nation's journey. However, more recent left-wing scholars have shifted towards a more affirmative stance, contending that the China model represents a distinct and potentially superior modernization paradigm, particularly relevant for the Global South.

Constructing Official Discourse

In the previous section, this article explored the significant divergence within the discourse surrounding the China model among Chinese intellectuals. During the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao administration (2002 to 2012), the Chinese government largely refrained from endorsing a specific China model, as Zhao (2017) noted. However, this stance has markedly shifted with President Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012. The concepts of the "Chinese Dream" and "The Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" signalled this change, and the "Chinese Path to Modernization" can be interpreted as a legitimation discourse that incorporates the

China model debate. This section uses the theoretical framework to examine how different ideological perspectives contributed to the construction of the official discourse between 2012 and 2024.

Firstly, in the official discourse, there is a pronounced emphasis on China's uniqueness, which often aligns with a form of Chinese exceptionalism. This exceptionalism, distinct from American exceptionalism, lacks a strong religious foundation and a solid political base rooted in liberal constitutionalism (Zhang 2011). Instead, it is deeply rooted in the perceived continuity and greatness of Chinese civilization, which is seen as distinct from others. This perspective shares an ontological foundation with conservative ideology in China. For instance, Xi (2023a) has stated, "Chinese civilization is the only great civilization in the world that has continued to develop in the form of a nation to this day." Xi argues that this continuity is evidence of the uniqueness and strength of Chinese civilization, which justifies China's distinct path to modernization. He contrasts this with other nations, stating, "We will not, however, accept sanctimonious preaching from those who feel they have the right to lecture us," emphasizing China's rejection of external models or critiques (Xi 2021a). Xi (2023a) further elaborates that "Chinese modernization seeks to build upon, rather than erase, China's ancient civilization; it has been cultivated within China, not imported from any other country; and it has stemmed from the renewal, not the disruption, of Chinese civilization." This narrative, deeply rooted in the idea of Chinese exceptionalism, reinforces the notion that China's path to modernization is unique and deeply intertwined with its historical and cultural legacy.

Based on this ontological foundation, the continuity of Chinese civilization is emphasized, positioning the CCP as an integral part of this historical legacy. A central challenge in this endeavor is addressing the relationship between Marxism and Chinese civilization, a task the CCP has pursued through its long-term project of the "Sinification of Marxism." As Xi (2023a) articulated, "Marxism and China's fine traditional culture have different sources, but they are highly compatible with each other." This perspective suggests that Marxism is not merely a Western import but is, in fact, consistent with the intrinsic context of Chinese civilization. Consequently, the CCP is portrayed as "not only a firm believer and practitioner of Marxism but also a faithful inheritor and promoter of China's fine traditional culture." The "Chinese path to Modernization" is thus viewed as emerging from the fusion of Marxism with Chinese traditional culture (Xi, 2023a). Xi's (2023c) assertion that "The Party's leadership determines the fundamental nature of China's modernization" further clarifies this point, underscoring the deep interconnection between the legitimacy of CCP rule, the continuity of Chinese civilization, and the process of China's modernization.

Secondly, left-wing ideology also contributes to constructing the official discourse. Given the rich legacy of the left-wing movement, Chinese officials cannot entirely abandon Marxist ideology. On the contrary, official discourse frequently employs the language of orthodox Marxism and Maoism. From this perspective, the Chinese path to modernization is a socialist one that "significantly shifted the worldwide historical evolution of and contest between the two different ideologies and social systems of socialism and capitalism in a way that favors socialism." Furthermore, echoing left-wing scholars' emphasis on developing

countries, the Chinese path to Modernization "has offered a new option for countries and nations who want to accelerate development while preserving their independence" (Xi 2021a). However, the extent to which these statements guide foreign policy remains questionable (Yan 2018). At a press conference interpreting the report of the 20th National Congress of the CCP, Sun Yeli, Deputy Minister of the Propaganda Department, stated, "China will not export its development model or require other nations to borrow its practice" (Luo 2022). Therefore, I argue that left-wing ideology is utilized more as a rhetorical tool rather than having real implications for China's practices. China does not aspire to return to the revolutionary mission of Mao's era or to promote its model globally.

Lastly, while ideas from conservative and left-wing perspectives are selectively absorbed, liberal ideology is entirely excluded from the construction process. As Xi (2023b) asserted, the "Chinese path to modernization breaks the myth that 'modernization = Westernization.'" Consequently, Western concepts such as competitive elections and constitutionalism are deemed irrelevant and considered dangerous "threats" to China. Xi (2021a) emphasized the need to "remain on guard against the erosive influence of Western trends of political thought, including the so-called constitutionalism, alternation of power between political parties, and separation of powers." By delineating the distinction between "self" and "others," the dichotomy between "Sinification" and "Westernization" has been essentialized and absolutized, resulting in the marginalization of liberal voices in both official discourse and the public sphere.

Conclusion

In this article, I situate the discourse surrounding the China model within a historical context, arguing that it should be better interpreted as a continuation of the national identity debate. By engaging with the historical dynamics of "Sinification" and "Westernization," this article examines the China model discourse from a national identity perspective, conversing with mainstream International Relations and International Political Economy scholarship. However, this article only briefly touches on these theoretical gaps, leaving room for further exploration in future studies, particularly on how the debate over national identity can be conceptualized within existing constructivist theory.

Building on existing literature, this article also analyses the complexity of intellectual discourse in China, particularly how the state attempts to manage diverse ideas through the China model as a case study. The construction of legitimation discourse has intensified the wave of "Sinification," which, in turn, has evolved into an ideological campaign influencing intellectual debates in the public sphere and leading to a reduction in freedom of expression (Zhao 2016). Intellectuals have quickly noticed this shift, with some gradually altering their positions. As some liberal scholars have observed, there is a growing trend among left-wing intellectuals to embrace "statism," aligning themselves with the party-state against liberalism (Xu 2024). Whether this trend undermines the framework of three distinct ideological types warrants further consideration.

Lastly, this article seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion surrounding China's rise and the global order. Through this analysis, I find that, with intellectual discourse and official rhetoric, China continues to emphasize its unique identity in contrast to the West, suggesting that the China model is not presented as a universal form of governance. Consequently, China appears to lack the ambition or missionary zeal to promote its model internationally, a stance supported by several empirical studies (Melnykovska, Plamper, and Schweickert 2012; Bader 2015; Chen and Kinzelbach 2015). From this perspective, many of China's practices should be understood as defensive strategies to legitimize its regime and foster a strong national identity.

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