China in an Age of Radical Modernity:
Why the World’s Most Populous Nation Won’t Become Liberal

Mark Trifitt University of Melbourne
TWENTY years after the collapse of communism, Western-style democracy is still seen by the West as the only viable option to manage political order and organisation in the 21st century.

This is evident, for example, in its tenacious and hugely costly efforts to recycle Afghanistan and Iraq as proto forms of liberal democracy.

It could also been seen in its response to the so-called Arab Spring of 2011.

This was universally portrayed in the West as a vindication of liberal ideas and systems, as well as further proof that authoritarian states cannot sustain legitimacy, let alone functionality, in a 21st century world.

The West reserves its strongest warnings that 21st century development without liberal democracy is a chimera, for China.

The world’s most populous nation has accepted one-half of the liberal equation, it is argued, by recognising the superiority of liberal markets.

But Western media, political leaders and scholars alike have argued, and continue to argue, that without liberal
democracy, China’s bold trajectory of development is bound to slow, or even disintegrate abruptly.

The irony about these arguments is that the system the West is still intent on exporting to every country in the world is increasingly the subject of rising doubt and distrust within its own polities.

Across the vast majority of Western democracies, what I term the West’s ‘ripe for export, damaged goods at home’ narrative is underlined by growing distrust for elected representatives and governments.

Over the past two decades, citizens have been exiting en masse from political parties and participation in liberal democracies more generally, amid perceptions of malaise and gridlock as democracies fail to grapple with the big public policy challenges of our time.

Even in the new democracies of Eastern Europe, once seen as the epitome of Western democracy’s triumph over communism, the lustre of liberal democracy has largely turned to disinterest and cynicism.

All this has led to the coining of new terms such as the ‘democratic deficit’ or ‘disconnect’.

Many Western conventional accounts blame this disconnect on bad or errant leadership among our politicians.

Bad leadership is usually defined as short-sighted, misdirected, or malfeasant behaviour, focussed around a growing obsession with spin over substance, and a fixation on internal party or parliamentary machinations to the detriment of the collective interest.

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Better, more strategic leadership is seen as the solution to making what are otherwise optimal systems in the early 21st century live up to their post-communist promise.

I want to make the following contentions.

First, Western-style political systems are no longer optimal, nor even functional in the 21st century.
Nor can they be rescued by the panacea of better leadership.

This is because, over the last twenty years, these systems have become increasingly ‘stranded’ from the world around them.

As a result, Western-style democracies are increasingly ‘unfit’ for purpose for the 21st century.

Second Western democracy’s stranding is the result of fundamental and irreversible changes to the configurations of political and economic activity that have occurred over the past two decades.

These changes have emerged through a series of deep, interlinked macro-changes within political economies which coalesced worldwide from the early 1990s onwards.

The changes were particularly focussed around the rapid global rollout and take-up of interconnected communications, notably the Internet, combined with the rapid spread of liberal market systems on a global scale – otherwise known as globalisation.

The combined effects of globalisation and the rapid take-up and development of virtual interconnectedness have super-sped, super-scaled and made super-complex the dynamics of political and economic activity.

Many commentators and scholars recognise these changes.

The curious thing, however, is that they are typically viewed in a piecemeal way.

Few seem willing to combine these dynamics into a coherent framework, and in the process understand the full implications of what has been in effect a major disjuncture in political and economic dynamics over the past two decades.

Combined, these new configurations represent what I argue to be the transition from Modernity to Radical Modernity.

This is a world in which the combination of super-speed and super-scale – otherwise known as momentum - is not a rare event but a definitive daily, if not hourly characteristic of the political and economic environment in which we inhabit.

This is a world where super-complexity and super-interconnectedness create small tremors that can instantly morph, through momentum, into large earthquakes which are then sped to
distant, seemingly unrelated parts of systems, in the process shattering the stability of the entire system.

This is an environment in which political and economic systems, in general, find increasingly difficult to decipher, order and predict because torrents of unknowledge are propelled at them in increasingly faster and more complex ways which make forward-looking, coherent decision and policy making increasingly difficult.

In short, Radical Modernity has created a deeply de-linear environment of political and economic activity in which the past is increasingly an unreliable guide to the present, let alone the future, and that outliers are no longer exceptional, but, in post-GFC parlance, constitute the new ‘normal’.

The intensely de-linear environment of Radical Modernity, I would argue, creates particular problems for liberal political and economic systems.

We need to remind ourselves that Western democracy, otherwise known as liberal democracy, emerged from specific 19th century historical conditions and perceptions about how political world should be ordered and organised.

This was a linear world in which the sources of power and authority were hierarchically structured and organised around collective aggregates of voices and opinion.

This was a Modernity world in which the boundaries of systems were largely clear and separated, where cause and effect was relatively easy to discern and the temporal rhythms of political and economic activity were languid enough to be amenable to deliberative, forward-looking decision-making.

All these Modernity assumptions and organising principles are embedded in the structures and configurations of liberal democracy.

Liberal democracy assumes the world around it will and always move in a comparatively slow, sequential way - allowing political leaders and elected representatives sufficient time to decide on policy and legislate for it in parliament in a deliberative fashion.

It also assumes the political party system will always be the optimal platform to aggregate and adequately
represent and respond to the political voices and concerns of its citizens.

It assumes elected representatives and the parliaments they reside in are the prime decision-makers and policy-makers because they are best able and placed to understand, anticipate and shape the world around them.

Furthermore, it assumes that most political events will be contained within the geographical boundaries of electorates, states or even countries such that national parliaments will always be the dominant institution which decides what, in terms of policy, will have a major and ongoing impact on the citizens they represent.

In the context of globalisation and an exponential increase in connectedness, none of these assumptions and organising principles apply any longer with any consistently or coherency.

It has become nearly impossible for elected politicians and parliaments to know or anticipate what is going on in the super-fast and super complex world that now surrounds them.

It is also becoming more and more difficult for parliaments and representatives to create timely or coherent public policy or legislative frameworks to anticipate and manage it, or command consensus around major change.

Moreover, it has become increasingly difficult for political parties, organised as they are around 19th century social and economic cleavages of class, geography and ideology to relate to, let alone effectively represent the rapidly changing, fragmenting political voices and endlessly reconfiguring political identities of a social media-driven, globalised citizenry.

In short, the new 21st century dynamics of political and economic activity - the world of Radical Modernity - are fundamentally different to those which liberal democratic systems are geared to manage.

This has meant ultimately that the liberal democracy system, and political leaders and other elected representatives acting within it have become increasingly stranded from the world they are meant to steer and direct.

This, in my view, is the true meaning of the democracy disconnect.

So with these profound problems in mind, how can we expect China - whose super-scaled, super-sped and super-complex trajectory of development places it at the centre of Radical Modernity - to adopt a system that is profoundly struggling
to maintain functionality and legitimacy under comparatively more benign circumstances in the West?

For example, how could a functional parliament and representative system work in the world’s most populous country where, based on average electoral divisions that make up Western parliaments, a single representative in a Chinese national parliament would be required to represent one, two or even three million people.

How could the decision-making needed to sustain arguably what is the fastest, biggest and most complex development trajectory undertaken in human history occur within a system which many Westerners now acknowledge is largely incapable of delivering timely and consistent public policy solutions.

The logical answer to these questions leads to my third contention - that China cannot, and in fact should not adopt a Western-style liberal democracy.

Indeed, adopting the West’s stranded and increasingly sub-optimal system of democracy would most likely increase, not lessen the chances of China’s stagnation.

So if not Western-style democracy, where to for China?

The West views China’s one-party political system as inflexible and incapable of innovation, decaying in the face of centrifugal forces created by an increasingly restive population connected en masse to social media.

One of the interesting facets of China’s political system is that beneath the rock of the one-party state is a fascinating experiment in political innovation.

In essence, the Chinese Communist Party is instituting a major program of what Western political scholars would recognise as deliberative forms of democracy.

This is political participation that bypasses elections, political parties and parliaments and involves direct and extensive grass-roots discussion, debate and evaluation through town meetings, community-based assemblies and what we would recognise in the West as large-scale focus groups.

The reach and the scale of this activity is very large.

Although exact figures are hard to come by the total number of deliberative meetings held at a village
level, for example, exceeded 450,000 annually in the mid 2000s.

While most of these deliberative forums are held to discuss and decide local level issues, there is increasingly evidence these forums are slowly percolating upwards into decision-making processes of the party-state itself.

Each of these manifestations achieves a form of institutionalised conflict management.

Discussion is shaped in deliberative ways, thus achieving one of the core objectives of deliberative democracy - resolution through reasoned consensus rather than through liberal democratic forums which are geared to oppositional, winner-takes-all debates and decision-making.

The few Western scholars who recognise the trend toward deliberative democracy in China do not suggest that it is being implemented by the CCP on the basis of empowering of citizens for its own sake.

Most deliberative forums involve a high degree of party-state control, particularly in deciding which agendas and issues citizens can deliberate upon.

Nevertheless the slow but deliberate introduction of deliberative processes is seen to serve a number of functional purposes that speak to a continuous, consistent yet contained avenue for people to express their opinions and views.

Continuous deliberation at a grassroots level also elicits information that creates more functional decision-making because decision-making processes are more broadly informed.

In my view, these processes, while far from perfect, align much more with the dynamics of political activity of the 21st century that have irreversibly diminished the institutions of liberal democracy.

This is because they place a greater onus on systems that engage directly and continuously with a far more knowing and demanding 21st century citizenry.

In short, what I am ultimately suggesting is that China and the Chinese Communist Party is resisting liberal democracy, not just because of culture or history, or solely because the one-party state does not want a multi-party system to threaten its monopoly authority.

It is not adopting and will not adopt liberal democracy because the system
which the West still views as ‘ripe for export’ is becoming increasingly sub-optimal for the new political and economic conditions of the 21st century at which China is at the centre.

I want to turn briefly to liberal markets to argue that the same stranding that accounts for the deep problems encountered by Western liberal democracy likewise explains why liberal markets are also struggling to maintain stability and order in the 21st century.

This explanation accounts, in my view, for why the Chinese economy appears to have been veering away from economic liberalisation in recent years.

Far from a global order of economic stability and coherency predicted at the end of communism, liberal markets have encountered a systemic meltdown or near melt-down on average every four years over the past two decades.

The GFC and the subsequent European debt crisis are the latest in a pattern of events that also include the dot-com crash of 2002, the collapse of hedge fund trader Long Term Capital Management in 1998 and the East Asian financial crisis of 1997.

Market adherents interpret these events as either outliers or exceptions.

I would argue that these in effect represent a pattern of increasing disorder.

This disorder in the result of the highly linear nature of liberal market principles, based effectively on the purist tenets of 18th and 19th century classical economists such as Adam Smith, being increasingly unable to decipher or coherently explain what is in effect a fundamentally new environment of intensely de-linear economic activity.

The increasing unseeing and unknowledge on the part of liberal markets creates a pattern of repeated yet unpredicted and largely misunderstood financial and economic crisis whose magnitude and reach grow more impactful.

The observations I believe help to account for why, as a number of China watchers have observed, China in recent years has significantly veered away a linear path of economic liberalisation in key areas of its economy.

The irony is that the more China engages with increasingly de-linear and unpredictable global liberal markets, the more the party-state
seeks to reassert control in strategic sectors and industries to minimise the increasing scale and impact of 21st century market dysfunctionality on its economy.

In conclusion, I’m not suggesting China is an oasis of functionality.

The reality is that the rapidity of its transition into the world of Radical Modernity means it is being confronted with a myriad of large-scale, fast-moving and complex problems and dysfunctions.

What I am suggesting, however, is that without the shackles of stranded Western liberal institutions and processes, it has been able to rescue a greater degree of functionality from the bonfire lit under all political and economic systems by the deeply de-linear nature of the 21st century.

It has to because, being at the heart of the de-linear forces of scale, speed and complexity that define the new volatile and unpredictable world of Radical Modernity, it has no choice.

From this perspective of intense necessity, we may find in the decades to come that China has remade the world not simply in its own image, but has been forced to reconfigure itself and the world in the image of Radical Modernity.