

Nov 04, 2016 by [Najla Al Awadhi](#)

Development in the Arab World: Lessons from China ^[1]

For nearly two hundred years the measure of a nation's progress has been its capacity to Westernize. Today, to a great extent, China has shifted this narrative.

In the last three decades, China has lifted over 500 million of its people out of poverty according to the World Bank. The scale and speed of China's growth are unprecedented. The world has never seen anything like the rise of China according to Martin Jacques, author of bestseller 'When China Rules the World: the End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order.'

The attraction of China is not just a question of its GDP. It's as Martin Jacques points out: that Chinese progress is a byproduct of a culture and a history that has almost nothing in common with the West. The attraction of China is in a narrative the developing world wholeheartedly shares. It is a narrative of humiliation and a seeming redemption; a narrative of transformation on one's own terms; a transformation that developing countries hunger for.

China was not always the giant it is today. Martin Jacques points out that the Chinese refer to the era between 1850 and 1950 as their 'Century of Humiliation.' During that period, China suffered growing economic weakness, near implosion, division, humiliation, and progressive loss of sovereignty. Foreign intervention and occupation were the single most important reasons for its decline.

So what did China do? While remaining deeply proud of their 5,000-year history, they also acknowledged their 'Century of Humiliation.' Reflecting on the inferior state of their condition created a sense of crisis and urgency. A sense that they needed to pragmatically reinterpret their fundamental beliefs, worldview, and the national narrative of who they are and who they want to be.

By 1949 the Chinese established a new system of rule. While there were failures and grave tragedies under the leadership of Mao, after his death, the Chinese leadership took on a more pragmatic path with a focus on policies that sustained rapid economic growth, ushering in the dawn of the China we know today.

China's narrative does not end here; it's not a country without its challenges and critics. Nevertheless, the Chinese framework of development provides many areas for policy consideration for the UAE and the larger Arab region.

The Arab region shares many of the same features of Chinese society: a similar legacy of colonialism and a dominant intellectual influence of a central ideology - Confucianism for China and Islam for Arab countries. In both societies there is an emphasis on the importance of unity and harmony. There is a lack of competition to the state from rival elites. There is also

an absence of a civil society or no mature culture of individualism, so the role of the individual is not as central as the role of government.

In spite of these many socio-political similarities, there has been a fundamental difference in the capacity for economic development, which also translates into political and military ability. This is where we can learn from the Chinese model of development.

Unlike China, in the Arab region there has not been an active and honest acknowledgement of the 'Arab age of humiliation,' especially amongst our younger generations. Consequently, there's no sense of crisis or that we are at a critical juncture that requires us to pragmatically re-interpret the fundamental beliefs of Arab societies; specifically in how our value system interprets and sets the social and political order, national development goals, gender roles and intellectual life. Martin Jaques notes in his book the Chinese sought to "re-vitalize" and "cross fertilize" Confucianism. I would argue this did not take place with modern Islam and, in turn, didn't take place within our Arab societies. This is a critical issue because for a society to develop it requires a dominant ideology, and therefore stagnation in ideology means stagnation in society.

We could argue that the persistence of foreign intervention in Arab states contributes to stagnation, but responsibility for one's destiny ultimately lies with one's self. I would argue the lack of legitimate progressive leadership in many parts of the Arab world (which is to a great extent the cause of the Arab Spring), the persistence of archaic socio-political dogma, and absence of an educated and empowered civil society have become major barriers to progress.

There is a fundamental need for our Arab citizens and our governments, while taking pride in our religion and heritage, to also acknowledge what represents our own history of humiliation, thereby creating a sense of national urgency that approaches nation building in a flexible and pragmatic manner. Policies are needed that emphasize sustainable economic development and that centralize the role of the educated individual citizen regardless of gender, ethnicity, or tribe as the nucleus of a nations' soft power. Also needed are policies that promote transparent independent institutions that diminish the concentration of power and ensure governments are accountable and are providing a dignified life for their people.
