

**China's future? The next Taiwan, the next Singapore, or make its own history?**

As the world's biggest authoritarian regime, China undoubtedly attracts the interest of most political scholars. Some people think that China's future is uncertain, and the continuation of authoritarianism in China is highly uncertain as well. For example, Loxton (2022) argues that there are three possible paths for China's future: “the Taiwanese path, the Singaporean path, and the Sui generis path” (p. 45). However, I believe that China's future path is fairly clear. China will not follow either Singapore's path or Taiwan's path. China will go with its sui generis path. Most studies on China have taken a western perspective and content to analyze. This essay will break through this limitation, but also combine some Western theories to get more objective analysis results. In the following paragraphs, I will examine that due to geographical differences, population differences, and different political systems and goals, following the path of Singapore and Taiwan is impossible for China. After that, this essay will focus on explaining why the sui generis path is feasible for China: China has developed a relatively mature succession system and China currently needs to maintain stable development.

Firstly, it is difficult for China to copy Singapore's model directly because of Singapore's unique geographical location, the different population size between the two, and China's established state system. To compare and contrast these two countries' politics, it is important to understand that Singapore is not a democracy because the PAP party silences dissenting voices against them so that it is a de facto

one-party state. According to Dahl (1971), it violates the requirement of being a democracy, such as the “freedom of expression” (p. 3). Besides, Singapore is developed, especially economically. It seems that this path would be ideal for China because maintaining its hegemony while making China rich is what the CCP wants. However, it should not be ignored that Singapore is located near the equator and in a very good geographical position. Singapore is small and also has a small population. On the contrary, China is big and has the largest population in the world with many of its neighbors being its ‘enemies’. In addition, China's population is mainly concentrated in the east, but natural resources are in the west. What are the consequences of these differences then? Singapore can develop some clean industries, such as machinery, trade, tourism, medicine, etc., while China needs to develop complete industries and a complete economic system, both private and state-owned. The two countries have different industrial and economic development directions and ways. More importantly, China's existing state system does not fit Singapore's model. After many adjustments, China has formed a state system of level-by-level management. Specifically, the levels are central, provincial, district, county, and street levels. It cannot be understood in terms of western concepts of democracy. Furthermore, it is known that a large number of Chinese people are sent to Singapore to study the “Singapore model” (Ortmann & Thompson, 2016 as cited in Loxton, 2022, p. 43), but learning is not copying. China is more about learning the civilization and innovation in the Singapore model. China cannot directly copy it unless China changes the whole national system and the industries it depends on, but the problem is that China's national conditions cannot allow such changes. To conclude, Singapore's geographical location allows it to only engage in clean industries, while China needs all industries to be complete. The unique level-by-level management system that

China has built to suit this big country also suggests that it will not directly follow Singapore's path.

Secondly, China will not follow the Taiwanese path because they have different political goals, they face different political competing pressures, and again, their population size is different. Taiwan is a typical example of Riedl et al.'s (2020) “authoritarian-led democratization” model. Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT), an authoritarian successor party, “perceived little risk” when it decided to make the transition to democracy. They knew that they could “define the terms and timing of their own exit” and “‘game democracy’ in their own elitist favor” (Albertus & Menaldo 2018 as cited in Riedl et al., 2020, p.316). Then let’s look at the CCP, they should also be confident because they have led China's rapid development. In addition, they have many supporters, there is Taiwan’s demonstration effect, and they can inherit a lot of financial resources too. In this case, why is Taiwan's path not suitable for China then? The point is that it is based only on whether the authoritarian party itself is willing to convert to democracy, which is a narrow perspective to analyze whether a country will transit to democracy. Even if the CCP is willing to make China democratic, is it good for China? The answer is uncertain. China is a big country on the world stage, and they need to compete with other big countries like the US. They want to be the hegemony of the whole world. On the contrary, Taiwan does not need to face competition and confrontation with big powers. Taiwan is attached to the US. With a small population and a small area of land, the economic system is easier to manage without so much external pressure. Moreover, Taiwan has been relatively developed many years ago. Generally, in a ‘mature’ country, political parties can compete at will without bringing big changes to the country. However, in less developed countries with large populations, such competition can bring a lot of

disadvantages to the country. Especially bringing disaster to the economic development, and also destabilizing society. Brazil and India are two examples. Therefore, the Taiwanese path is not suitable for China as the two sides have significant differences in political goals, national conditions, and the competition they face. Where will China go then? The next paragraph analyzes why the sui generis path is feasible for China.

A reliable succession system and China's current need to continue its current steady development are the keys. Nathan (2003) illustrates that “the concept of institutionalization” (p.6) can explain the “authoritarian resilience” in China at the time of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. He explains how China overcame the crisis that succession could bring to an authoritarian regime. It is worth noting that, this “norm-bound succession politics” depended on the fact that “members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) were simply elevated from outgoing Politburo” (p. 7). What does this have to do with the current Chinese political system? To a certain extent, the current Chinese leadership selection process is similar to that in the “institutionalized collective leadership” (Shirk, 2018, p. 34) period. In other words, the succession system in current China makes it possible for China to continue on the sui generis path. Even though “Xi Jinping is taking China back to personalistic leadership” (p. 23), all the leaders have to start at the very bottom level and then are elevated from the bottom to the top slowly. These leaders typically have extensive political experience and are attached closely to the CCP’s value, so there would be no substantial deviation from the core ideas of the CCP. However, one person cannot be right all the time. China's back to personalistic leadership has many disadvantages for China as well. An unprecedented concentration of power has been placed on Xi Jinping. He “cleaned up the CCP” (p. 24) by the means of cleaning up corruption. In

doing so, he also “purged his rivals” (p. 24). No matter how smart elected leaders are, if they make decisions based solely on personal preferences, they may hold back the country's development. Leaders need some adversaries and different opinions.

Therefore, the answer to the question of whether China's authoritarian regime could be thrown into crisis by a return to personalistic leadership is that it could. Nevertheless, unfortunately, a more centralised power is precisely what China needs now. It sounds strange, but it makes sense. With the faster development of China, it will face more constraints and challenges such as those brought by the US, which requires the CCP to strengthen policies and tighten management in exchange for China's continued smooth development. That is why there is a difference between China's current authoritarianism and that of the period of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao discussed by Nathan. There are stages in a country's political system. For different international and domestic situations at different times, the institutions displayed by a country vary. The sui generis path China is currently following is suitable for China now and also for some time in the future until it catches up with the US. Tightening control is also a lesson the CCP has learned from the collapse of the Soviet Union. For example, Wan (2013) argues that they learned to “focus on...the tight party control over the military”. Meanwhile, it also becomes understandable that the CCP is having “growing activities in the areas of video surveillance” (Qiang, 2019, p. 59), the CCP is establishing the “social credit system” (p. 54), etc. This is part of a tightening policy aimed at controlling public opinion in order to stabilize the rule of the CCP. Such a policy is unjustifiable. However, the CCP needs it. To sum up, China will not follow the western concept of democracy currently but follow its unique path.

In conclusion, among the Taiwanese path, the Singaporean path, and the sui generis path, the sui generis path has the highest probability that China will take. However, it is

unpredictable how the regime will change after China becomes even more powerful because at that time, some of the conditions on which this essay's analysis is based will no longer apply.

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