

# Lessons for America from China?

By Ezra F. Vogel



**EZRA F. VOGEL** is the Henry Ford II Professor of the Social Sciences Emeritus at Harvard. After graduating from Ohio Wesleyan in 1950 and serving two years in the US Army, he studied sociology in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard, receiving his PhD in 1958. From 1960 to 1961, he was Assistant Professor at Yale University and from 1961 to 1964 a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard, studying Chinese language and history. He remained at Harvard, becoming Lecturer in 1964 and, in 1967, Professor. Vogel succeeded John Fairbank to become the second Director (1972–1977) of Harvard's East Asian Research Center and Chairman of the Council for East Asian Studies (1977–1980). He was Director of the Program on US-Japan Relations at the Center for International Affairs (1980–1987) and, since 1987, Honorary Director. He was Director of the Fairbank Center (1995–1999) and the first Director of the Asia Center (1997–1999). A book based on several years of interviewing and reading materials from China, *Canton Under Communism* (1969), won the Harvard University Press Faculty Book of the Year Award. The Japanese edition of his book, *Japan as Number One: Lessons for*

*America* (1979), is the all-time bestseller in Japan of nonfiction by a Western author. He spent eight months in 1987, at the invitation of the Guangdong Provincial Government, studying the economic and social progress of the province since it took the lead in pioneering economic reform. The results are reported in *One Step Ahead in China: Guangdong Under Reform* (1989). His *Reischauer Lectures* were published in *The Four Little Dragons: The Spread of Industrialization in East Asia* (1991). He has visited East Asia every summer since 1958 and has spent over six total years in Asia.

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Having written a book in 1979 suggesting that Japan had institutional practices that provided lessons for America, I am often asked if there are lessons the United States could learn from China. Learning institutional practices from another country is, at best, difficult. In the 1980s, as I argued that there were lessons America could learn from Japan, I was often asked how we could learn from a country with such a different culture. My answer was simple. Yes, there are large cultural differences, but the Japanese bridged those differences to learn from us. Why could we not do the same?

Nations that have successfully borrowed practices from other countries have studied not only the practices themselves but also the context in which they are embedded. Those nations that successfully borrowed from elsewhere had to adapt those practices to be suitable for their own country, and they have experimented until they found what worked. Prior to World War II, the United States was accustomed to learning advanced practices from Europe. In the 1880s, for example, we set up our first modern medical research and training programs based on German models. Since World War II, we have exuded confidence about the superiority of our system, and we have not been in the habit of surveying foreign systems as a source of ideas about how we might improve our systems.

In the 1980s, Americans did, however, learn some things from Japan. Many companies held study sessions to understand Japan's competitive edge. Our companies found ways to reorganize to improve quality control, simplify supply lines, alter the relations between suppliers and manufacturers, and strive for continual improvement. In the area of semiconductors, which the US government and many in the private sector considered important to our economic future, a research consortia similar to those in Japan was established in Austin, Texas. Japanese success helped focus attention on our problems of educational achievement in our population as a whole. Japanese success in crime control inspired some of our municipal police forces to study how Japanese police worked with neighborhoods to reduce crime.

Americans are now aware that the size of the Chinese economy will probably surpass that of the United States relatively soon, but there has been little interest in learning from China. I do not know any American

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who would want to trade our free access to information for the contemporary Chinese systems of restricting information available to the public. I do not know any American who wants to trade our system of voting to elect individuals to high political office for the Chinese system whereby government officials are selected secretly by current officials rather than by the public. Nor do I know of anyone who would trade our legal system for a system where top officials can change laws without a transparent process that allows for the input of public opinion. We Americans do not want a system that has the high levels of corruption found in China today.

But the Chinese role in world affairs continues to grow, and we Americans would do well to acknowledge that there are some things China does well. Would it not be healthy for our nation to respond to China's rise not only by finding peaceful ways to engage China but by focusing on areas where we as a nation might profitably learn from China's successes? What are some areas where Chinese successes are worthy of study?

### **Building and Repairing Infrastructure**

To be sure, the world leaders in high-speed rail transportation have been Japan and European countries. But in the last decade, no country has moved as quickly as China to build facilities for high-speed railway service. In the 1990s, China had no high-speed railway service. In 2007, China introduced its first high-speed railway service—defined as trains that travel at an average speed of 200 kilometers (approximately 124 miles) or more per hour. As of December 2013, China had 6,800 miles of high-speed railway track. China expects to have 11,000 miles of high-speed railway track in service by the end of 2015. The United States currently has no high-speed railway service. The ride from Beijing to Shanghai, over 800 miles, takes less than five hours. On the Acela Express, the fastest train on

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the East Coast, the ride from Boston to Washington, DC, some 457 miles by train but less than 400 miles as the crow flies, takes over six hours and thirty minutes.

Efforts to introduce high-speed rail from Boston to Washington, DC, and from Los Angeles to San Francisco have been under discussion for some years, but plans for moving ahead with the construction remain stalled. Certainly, the construction of high-speed rail requires the railways to get access to the land, as well as the physical construction work itself. The issues required to reduce regulations so as to make land available for high-speed rail are extremely difficult, but is it not in the general interest to focus on how this might be achieved? Is it not of interest to see how China has achieved this goal? If we are not willing to use some means utilized by Chinese leaders to achieve their goals, are there not other ways we might use to achieve the same goals, with methods appropriate for our democratic country?

In the last two decades, China has constructed far more large, modern airports than any other country. In the 2011–2015 period, plans call for the construction of eighty-two new airports. In the 1980s, check-in procedures were far behind world standards, but procedures in many of China's airports are now up to world standards. Major Chinese cities have put in a large number of new subway lines over the last two decades. In several cities, an entire new subway line has been introduced each year for several years.

### Speeding Up Urban Reconstruction

In recent decades, China has completed far more urban construction projects than any other country in the world. Chinese leaders have brought many of the world's most famous architects to China to participate in planning for construction. China has also invited large numbers of specialists on urban development from around the world. New buildings in China are constructed far faster on average than in the United States. Not all such construction has been done safely, but many construction projects have achieved international standards, and Chinese officials have made rapid progress in improving construction safety.

### Learning from Abroad

In virtually every sector of the economy, government, science, technology, and education, the Chinese send not only large numbers of students abroad to learn but also dispatch missions of senior officials to all parts of the world to study best practices. Chinese in every field invite large numbers of foreigners to come to China to teach best practices. They provide interpreters and an infrastructure to host foreign specialists. They invite universities from around the world to set up programs and even campuses in China so that they learn the best practices around the world.

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### Grooming Officials for High Office

Before officials in China rise to high positions, they must first hold a variety of executive positions with broad responsibilities. They also study in special training programs where they were prepared for the issues they will confront in their higher positions. There are party schools at the municipal, provincial, and national levels where officials are given general and specialized training. Some of the officials will have been sent abroad for additional specialized training. They will have participated in discussions at various levels examining the appropriateness and execution of overall policies.

Officials completing these schools will have learned to give speeches that reflect authority and that are consistent with the policies enunciated at higher levels. In the United States, many business firms and the military also have special training programs in which people are prepared for leadership in general and in the issues they will confront in their new assignments.

But in the United States, members of Congress and even the president do not necessarily have executive experience. Although many have received training in law, business, and public administration, they have not necessarily received training in the kinds of issues they will confront when in office. They may be very skilled in making speeches that attract public support but not necessarily prepared for executive responsibilities they will face as leaders.

### Rapid Diffusion of Best Practices

In China, programs and policies that have been effective in one locality are systematically studied in other localities. Reports of successful programs are widely distributed to other localities. Officials who have led successful programs in one area are invited to talk in other localities. Officials from other localities are brought to areas where programs have been successfully introduced in order to study and observe.

In the United States, successful programs are often reported in our media, and academics and other officials may learn about them, but the effort to learn from successful cases is not done in the systematic way that it is in China. To be sure, it is our job as academics specializing in Asian countries to report objectively on developments in those countries. But can we not give special attention to critical areas in which we as a nation might learn? ■

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