

Flaws or not, the Chinese way has much to emulate

Developmental success has lessons for South Africa. **By Mills Soko**

THE RECENT leadership transition in China marked yet another milestone in the country's extraordinary economic transformation. China's development model has become a source of inspiration to many developing countries that are seeking alternative development paths to the discredited Western models.

The leadership of the ANC has voiced its admiration for the Chinese model. The Chinese model is not without deficiencies (including political authoritarianism, suppression of civil liberties, rampant corruption and environmental degradation) but it has positive features worth emulating. What lessons can South Africa draw from China's developmental success? There are many but I will highlight eight.

China's remarkable progress is the culmination of a bold vision set out by Deng Xiaoping, paramount leader and chief architect of China's economic modernisation. Under the tutelage of Deng, the Chinese leadership made a seminal decision in 1978 to embrace globalisation and set the country on a path to becoming an economic, scientific and technological superpower. It is this strategic orientation that has informed and permeated the actions, plans and programmes of the Chinese state, business and other societal actors over the past three decades.

Strong and able political leadership has been a key ingredient of China's economic renewal. The selection of leaders in China is based not only on traditional criteria such as age, geographic representation and patron-client relationships, but also on factors such as proven leadership credentials as well as administrative experience in the designated areas of responsibility. Political leadership in China is, therefore, more than about jostling for power. It is also about understanding government priorities and mastering policy detail, as well as having the technical ability to implement policies.

It is no coincidence that seven of the nine members (including President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao) on the outgoing standing committee of the politburo, the Chinese Communist Party's most powerful and highest decision-making body, are engineers. The preponderance of engineers in the top echelons of party leadership attests to the significance the country attaches to science and technology in economic development.

The Chinese understand that a competent bureaucracy is essential to effective policy execution.

The Chinese government has



GOING PLACES
The new General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping inherits a China on the rise. PICTURE: REUTERS

implemented measures not only to enhance the capacity and legitimacy of the state bureaucracy, but also to build a meritocratic civil service. The notion of a civil service based on meritocracy is not new in China, having been invented and originally applied by the country and later exported to Europe and the US. Despite some deficiencies, the Chinese state has proved itself to be supremely adept at harnessing national consensus, advancing modernisation, as well as carrying out policies efficiently and effective-

ly in ways that have significantly grown the economy and improved the living standards of hundreds of millions of citizens. Public sector employment is highly prized and competition for government jobs is fierce; in 2011, for instance, 1.3 million graduates sat the annual national civil service exam, hoping to fill 18 000 job vacancies.

Beneath the veneer of Marxist revolutionary rhetoric, Chinese policymaking is pragmatic. Evidence-based policymaking has played a central part since the late 1970s.

Inspired by Deng's maxim "seeking truth from facts", Chinese policymakers believe facts rather than ideological inflexibility should guide policy formulation and execution. A great deal of China's policy success stems from its people's phenomenal capacity for selective learning, experimentation and adaptation.

Education has played a vital role in China's economic revitalisation. In the aftermath of the devastation wrought by Mao Zedong's reign, Deng observed

that the Cultural Revolution had spawned "an entire generation of mental cripples" and called for a radical overhaul of the education system. Since then, successive governments have implemented far-reaching educational reforms.

China's education system still has weaknesses but it is far better than it was when Deng made his remark. In a survey report published in 2010 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which compared worldwide education standards, high school students in wealthy Shanghai came out tops in science, maths and reading.

China's progress is not limited to school education; it is also evident in higher education. Every year, for example, Chinese universities produce thousands of scientists, engineers and technologists. Moreover, thousands of Chinese students study at American and European universities.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) has been one of the motors of China's exponential growth and the country has become the largest recipient of FDI in the developing world. Yet China's approach to FDI has been discerning: the government has followed a selective policy limiting FDI to priority sectors in line with industrial policies, channelling foreign capital inflows into long-term investment projects and into greenfield sites to generate new productive capacity.

China may be a laggard in protecting the political and civil rights of its citizens, but it has done far more than any other nation to combat poverty. Casting poverty elimination as the most fundamental human right, China lifted almost 400 million people out of extreme poverty within one generation. The country still has a long way to go in eradicating poverty but its achievement so far shows it can be done.

During what is dubbed the hundred years of national humiliation, the Chinese suffered persecution and subjugation under Western and Japanese imperialism. Yet instead of wallowing in self-pity and blaming the world for their woes, the Chinese have pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and taken total control of their national destiny. The Chinese are not oblivious to their painful history but they have not allowed it to imprison them.

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