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The Theory of Chinese Modernization. By Zhongmin Wu. Palgrave Macmillan, 2025

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Abstract. This book, written by Zhongmin Wu from the Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC, presents a comprehensive, theoretical analysis of China's unique path to modernization. The author argues that while modernization follows general laws, successful implementation requires an organic integration of these laws with a country's specific national conditions and historical heritage. The book chronicles China's "V-shaped" evolutionary trajectory, spanning the early modernization period in the mid-19th century, the experimental phase post-1949, and the initial takeoff period since the 1978 Reform and Opening-up. Key factors attributed to China's success include prioritizing modernization at governmental and societal levels, the continuous refinement of its understanding of modernization, and a harmonious synthesis of autonomous development with openness to the international community. A major theme is the formation of endogenous dynamics for modernization after 1978, propelled by designating modernization as the central task. The author also explores the "multiplicative effects" of large-scale modernization and the advantages and disadvantages of late-developer status. Ultimately, the book posits that the successful takeoff of China's modernization is a "century-making" event with profound, positive impacts on global modernization.

Keywords. Chinese Modernization (or Chinese Path to Modernization); Late-Developer Advantages/Disadvantages; Endogenous Dynamics; Modernization Multiplier Effect; Reform and Opening-up.

JEL. O10; P27; F43; N15; O33.

Book Review

Zhongmin Wu's *The Theory of Chinese Modernization* is a systematic and politically significant theoretical exposition on the unique trajectory of China's development. Drawing from the author's position at the Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC, this open-access volume is not merely a descriptive historical account, but a structured framework designed to articulate the *theoretical legitimacy* and *global significance* of the Chinese model. The central argument is that successful modernization requires a critical fusion of the universal "general laws of modernization" (such as industrial productivity, market economy, and urbanization) with the "specific national conditions" and historical heritage of the individual country. The book's core objective is to distill the principles behind China's "historic leap forward" since the late 1970s and position it as a substantial catalyst for global development.

Part I: Conceptualizing Modernization and New Trends

The initial chapters are devoted to defining modernization, establishing its multifaceted nature beyond mere economic growth. Wu argues that modernization signifies four key things: a monumental leap in economic productive capacity, the formation of a complex and robust social structure,

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the continual enhancement of people-oriented concepts, and the emergence of numerous social risks.

In the economic sphere, modernization is driven by modern mass production, detailed specialization, the market economic system, the swift progression of knowledge, and the incessant accumulation of capital. Crucially, the author emphasizes the shift toward human-centered realization, which includes vibrant mass consumption and the institutional safeguarding of fundamental human rights. A defining new trend is the necessity of balancing the logic of market competition and social protection. While the market is indispensable for vitality and ingenuity, the book stresses the importance of avoiding the "pitfalls associated with the dominance of capital" by fostering the value goal of shared prosperity. This foundational theory sets the stage for understanding the ideological underpinnings of China's specific approach, which seeks to integrate the market without adopting the perceived inequalities of purely Western models.

Part II: The "V-Shaped" Evolutionary Trajectory and Initial Takeoff

Chapter 3 provides a compelling historical narrative, describing China's modernization through a "V-shaped" evolutionary trajectory.

1. Early Modernization Period (Mid-19th Century to 1949): Characterized by "self-strengthening" efforts and Dr. Sun Yat-sen's call for rejuvenation, this period was ultimately constrained by China's semi-colonial, semi-feudal state. Modernization was rendered "unattainable" due to a lack of national independence, corrupt governance (e.g., the KMT's hyperinflation and "great robbery" after the Anti-Japanese War), and a vicious cycle of low capital accumulation.
2. Experimental Phase (1949–1978): Following national independence, this phase was "arduous and pioneering" in establishing material foundations and social institutions. However, the author characterizes it as a period where the process "relied more on artificial impetus and lacked an internal societal mechanism". Although the "Four Modernizations" (agriculture, industry, national defense, and science/technology) were crystallized as the national objective, the increasing prioritization of political movements, like "class struggle as the key link," prevented adherence to the laws of modernization, thus hindering success.
3. Initial Takeoff Period (1978–2018): This period of Reform and Opening-up marked the successful beginning of China's "genuinely significant modernization construction". The success is attributed primarily to the basic formation of endogenous dynamics. This was achieved by:
 - Designating Modernization as the Central Task: The Communist Party of China explicitly shifted the focus of the entire nation to socialist modernization, ensuring that all resources were concentrated on this "fundamental national policy".
 - Implementing a Gradual Path: China adopted a flexible, gradual approach, starting reforms in rural areas before moving to cities, thus navigating the risks of radical change.

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More recently, the approach has shifted to a "push-driven approach to social contradictions," focusing on top-down design and breakthrough solutions for key issues.

The result is a "monumental historical turning point" with globally recognized achievements.

Part III: Pillars of the Chinese Model

The remaining chapters delve into the specific mechanisms that powered China's successful takeoff:

- **Planning in Modernization:** Wu argues that planning is "imperative" for China's modernization, serving to avoid the harm of "market failures," promote coordinated development, and resolve uneven development. This strategic planning ensures the achievement of fundamental goals and the formation of modern economic structures, setting a reasonable boundary for public authority and development speed.
- **The Multiplicative Effect:** China's large scale is critical to its success. The book introduces the concept of the Modernization Multiplier Effect, whereby the combination of vast quantity and high quality accumulation leads to "a rapid and widespread diffusion trend" and an overall leap forward. This effect has facilitated the integration of various sectors, contributed to great domestic consumption demand, and increased China's international influence. However, the author warns against risks, such as losing the foundation of a comprehensive manufacturing production system, which serves as the "cornerstone of modern society".
- **Late-Developer Status:** China effectively managed the late-developer advantages (like the ability to draw lessons from developed countries, attract foreign capital, and introduce advanced technology) while avoiding the primary late-developer disadvantages (like dependent development, unbalanced growth, and disarray in the social value system). China's emphasis on autonomous modernization helped it steer clear of the "dependency development traps" observed elsewhere.
- **Valuable Historical Heritage:** The book stresses that China's success draws on its unique historical resources. Valuable historical heritage includes: high national cohesion, strong social control, the tradition of moderation and equilibrium, and strong social mobilization capability. These traditions provide a "solid foundation for growth rooted in the national conditions of China's reality".
- **The Role of Elite Groups:** The Chinese political elite are credited with having a "unique promotional advantage" in modernization. Their characteristics, such as the spirit of pragmatism, a strong capacity for reflection and error-correction during critical periods, and a strong social mobilization capability—all underpinned by the Party's absolute leadership over the military—are seen as crucial to maintaining stability and progress.

Overall Assessment and Conclusion

The Theory of Chinese Modernization is a significant academic work that encapsulates the official and scholarly perspective on China's development

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path. Its greatest contribution is the formalization of "Chinese modernization theory" by providing a structured analysis of the internal and external factors driving its success.

The book is rich in historical detail and policy-oriented discussion, particularly in its analysis of the Reform and Opening-up era. It provides a valuable, necessary counterpoint to Western-centric modernization theories by demonstrating how a large, late-developing socialist state can achieve economic takeoff and global influence while adhering to its own political and cultural legacy.

While presenting a largely celebratory account of China's achievements and the Party's role in governing social risks, the book remains a crucial resource for anyone seeking to understand the self-perceived theoretical foundations of China's political economy. It provides a robust, coherent intellectual framework for China's "century-making" event, arguing that its success will drive "positive enhancements and optimizations in the global landscape".



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