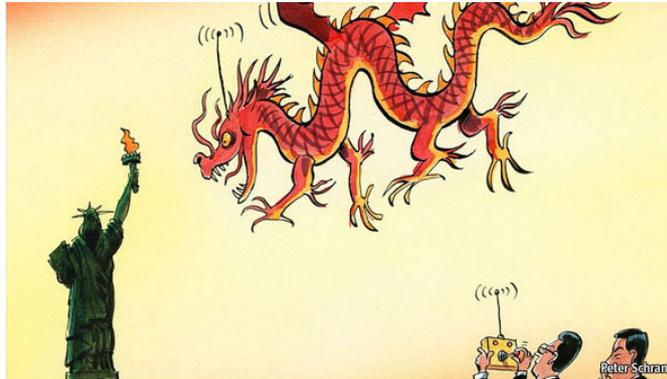


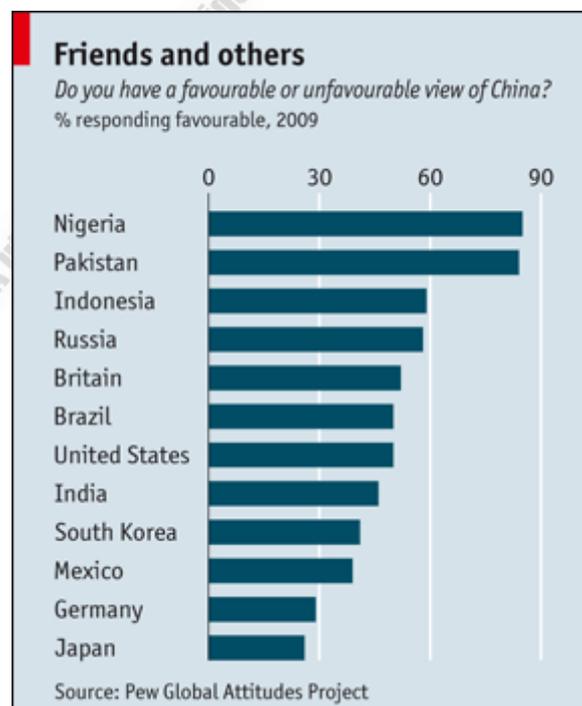
The Beijing consensus is to keep quiet

In the West people worry that developing countries want to copy "the China model". Such talk makes people in China uncomfortable.



CHINESE officials said the opening of the World Expo in Shanghai on April 30th would be simple and frugal. It wasn't. The display of fireworks, laser beams, fountains and dancers rivalled the extravagance of Beijing's Olympic ceremonies in 2008. The government's urge to show off Chinese dynamism proved irresistible. For many, the razzmatazz lit up the China model for all the world to admire.

The multi-billion-dollar expo embodies this supposed model, which has won China many admirers in developing countries and beyond. A survey by the Pew Research Centre, an American polling organisation, found that 85% of Nigerians viewed China favourably last year (compared with 79% in 2008), as did 50% of Americans (up from 39% in 2008) and 26% of Japanese (up from 14%, see chart). China's ability to organise the largest ever World Expo, including a massive upgrade to Shanghai's infrastructure, with an apparent minimum of the bickering that plagues democracies, is part of what dazzles.



Scholars and officials in China itself, however, are divided over whether there is a China model (or "Beijing consensus" as it was dubbed in 2004 by Joshua Cooper Ramo, an American consultant, playing on the idea of a declining "Washington consensus"), and if so what the

model is and whether it is wise to talk about it. The Communist Party is diffident about laying claim to any development model that other countries might copy. Official websites widely noted a report by a pro-Party newspaper in Hong Kong, *Ta Kung Pao*, calling the expo “a display platform for the China model”. But Chinese leaders avoid using the term and in public describe the expo in less China-centred language.

Not so China’s publishing industry, which in recent months has been cashing in on an upsurge of debate in China about the notion of a China model (one-party rule, an eclectic approach to free markets and a big role for state enterprise being among its commonly identified ingredients). In November a prominent Party-run publisher produced a 630-page tome titled “China Model: A New Development Model from the Sixty Years of the People’s Republic”. In January came the more modest “China Model: Experiences and Difficulties”. Another China-model book was launched in April and debated at an expo-related forum in Shanghai. Its enthusiastic authors include Zhao Qizheng, a former top Party propaganda official, and John Naisbitt, an American futurologist.

Western publishers have been no less enthused by China’s continued rapid growth. The most recent entry in the field is “The Beijing Consensus, How China’s Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century” by Stefan Halper, an American academic. Mr Halper, who has served as an official in various Republican administrations, argues that “just as globalisation is shrinking the world, China is shrinking the West” by quietly limiting the projection of its values.

But despite China’s status as “the world’s largest billboard advertisement for the new alternative” of going capitalist and staying autocratic, Party leaders are, as Mr Halper describes it, gripped by a fear of losing control and of China descending into chaos. It is this fear, he says, that is a driving force behind China’s worrying external behaviour. Party rule, the argument runs, depends on economic growth, which in turn depends on resources supplied by unsavoury countries. Politicians in Africa in fact rarely talk about following a “Beijing consensus”. But they love the flow of aid from China that comes without Western lectures about governance and human rights.

The same fear makes Chinese leaders reluctant to wax lyrical about a China model. They are acutely aware of American sensitivity to any talk suggesting the emergence of a rival power and ideology—and conflict with America could wreck China’s economic growth.

In 2003 Chinese officials began talking of the country’s “peaceful rise”, only to drop the term a few months later amid worries that even the word “rise” would upset the flighty Americans. Zhao Qizheng, the former propaganda official, writes that he prefers “China case” to “China model”. Li Junru, a senior Party theorist, said in December that talk of a China model was “very dangerous” because complacency might set in that would sap enthusiasm for further reforms.

Some Chinese lament that this is already happening. Political reform, which the late architect of China’s developmental model, Deng Xiaoping, once argued was essential for economic liberalisation, has barely progressed since he crushed the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. Liu Yawei of the Carter Centre, an American human-rights group wrote last month that efforts by Chinese scholars to promote the idea of a China model have become “so intense and effective” that political reform has been “swept aside”.

Chinese leaders’ fear of chaos suggests they themselves are not convinced that they have found the right path. Talk of a model is made all the harder by the stability-threatening problems that breakneck growth engenders, from environmental destruction to rampant corruption and a growing gap between rich and poor. One of China’s more outspoken media

organisations, Caixin, this week published an article by Joseph Nye, an American academic. In it Mr Nye writes of the risks posed by China's uncertain political trajectory. "Generations change, power often creates hubris and appetites sometimes grow with eating," he says.

One Western diplomat, using the term made famous by Mr Nye, describes the expo as a "competition between soft powers". But if China's soft power is in the ascendant and America's declining—as many Chinese commentators write—the event, which is due to end on October 31st, hardly shows it. True, China succeeded in persuading a record number of countries to take part. But visitor turnout has been far lower than organisers had anticipated. And queues outside America's dour pavilion have been among the longest.

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