

# Neoliberal Reforms: China's Lessons for Western Democracy

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**Abstract:** The relevance of the article is determined by the need to study China's neoliberal reforms to deeper understand China's experience. The purpose of the article is a comprehensive study of China's reforms, a thorough assessment of the results and the possibilities of using China's positive experience. For the achievement of the specified goal, such methods as a corporate method, analysis and synthesis were used. The article concludes that western democracies have become neoliberal with all the disproportions of economic and political power that have emerged in capitalist society. It was found that the power acquired in the free market not only deformed the integrity of society and economic and political balance but also, it created the so-called recession of Western democracies. It is emphasized that proper education, changing the role of politicians and the activity of citizens, together with the emergence of new possibilities of digital democracy may give a glimpse of how to use the new opportunities for strengthening democracies. It is concluded that the reforms held in China in recent years have paradoxically shown that free market economics could also have positive aspects for society. The conclusions obtained in the article develop political science and contribute to the solution of questions regarding the choice of ways of development of Western democracies. The article can be useful in the educational process in the preparation of political scientists, as well as in work on scientific literature.

**Keywords:** Democratic Reforms, Free Market, Decentralization, Neoliberalism, Chinese Economic Reforms.

**JEL Codes:** P11; P21.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the controversial work "The End of History and the Last Man" which was written after the Cold War and became popular globally overnight, F. Fukuyama presents the end of the war as the universal victory of liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 2020). In his opinion, people in the West no longer need to consider alternative political systems. Fukuyama's notion is partially correct, as the number of democracies in the world is growing (Herre and Roser, 2021). Social and cultural and economic powers like those of Western Europe and North America with the highest living standards and liberal democracies indicate that they are correlated. However, liberal democracies created an economic phenomenon – a liberal economy, also called the free market (Nurtazina et al., 2018). Citizens can also become economic entities and use all the opportunities of the free market. Economic entities create asymmetries of information and capital in society known as neoliberalism (Fukuyama, 2020; Kostruba and Hyliaka, 2020; Shalbolova and Kenzhegaliyeva, 2018).

The coexistence of an economic subject next to a political subject is not a new phenomenon, but in the conditions of global neoliberalism, inequality and capital asymmetries have reached such a scale that the consequences have become serious threats to the survival of democracy in the

West. These processes determine the relevance of the chosen research topic. Thus, it is interesting to note that China has handled these challenges much better, where free markets and neoliberal economic effects have been used more wisely than in the West. China's free market capital has been distributed far more evenly across the country and all levels of society, liberating nearly 800 million people out of penury which subsequently created the conditions for the formation of the middle class, which became the largest in the world (Zhao and Jing, 2020; Jeong et al., 2022).

Some issues of neoliberal reforms carried out in China and Western democracies were considered in the works of scientists. Thus, Yuezhi Zhao and W. Jing carried out a comprehensive study of China's development path in the era of reforms, identifying the peculiarities of political, economic, ideological and cultural processes (Zhao and Jing, 2020). I. Weber studied the historical and economic aspects of the formation of neoliberal development in China, concluding that China was both neoliberal and an alternative to neoliberalism (Weber, 2020). F. Tianlu researched China's economic reforms, identifying the role of state property therein and the observance of the principle of the rule of law (Tianlu, 2020). L. Klarenbeek and M. Weide (2020) investigated the role of immigrants in the functioning of Western democracies, justifying their active participation in political processes. In their research, R. S. Foa et al. (2020) concluded that there was an increase in dissatisfaction with the existing democracies. At the same time, the issue of the experience of China's neoliberal reforms, which could be used Western democracies, was

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not given enough attention in scientific works. This topic was considered only partially.

The purpose of this article is a comprehensive study of neoliberal reforms carried out in China and in Western democracies intending to compare them, evaluate their results and provide scientific recommendations on the possibilities of using China's positive experience to solve current problematic issues existing in Western democracies.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To complete the research, general scientific and special scientific methods, including methods of political science, were used. Thus, dialectical materialism helped in the study of the development of China in the historical aspect and contributed to the study of the political, economic, and philosophical processes that took place in China in their relationship. Using this method, the political processes in modern Western democracies were also considered, taking into account the rivalries and development of these processes. The systematic approach in conducting this research made it possible to study the problems of democratic communities comprehensively. Using a systemic approach, the peculiarities of Western democracy, democratic communities and their institutions, and democratic administration, as well as problematic issues of biopolitics, the reasons for the success of China's neoliberal reforms, China's political model and the influence of Confucian ideas on it were considered. The analysis of scientists' works was carried out based on a discursive approach. The comparative method helped to examine the neoliberal reforms carried out in the USA, the countries of the European Union, the Scandinavian countries, Russia and China, as well as to reveal the difference in their philosophical and worldview foundations of political activity.

Philosophical, economic, political and other reasons for China's successful development are analyzed using an interdisciplinary approach. Factor discourse analysis has become a means for studying the scientific views of individual scientists. The history of the formation of China as a result of the neoliberal reforms was characterized by the method of systemic and structural-functional analysis.

The method of generalization helped in identifying distinctive features of neoliberal reforms carried out in various countries of the world, the reasons for China's economic growth, as well as distinctive features in the minds of citizens of Western countries and China. The historical approach used in this scientific study contributed to the identification of the influence of Confucianism and Marxist ideas on the political processes taking place in China and also helped in the study of the influence of Plato's teachings on politics.

Scientific statements were formulated using general scientific methods of logic: deduction and induction, analysis and synthesis. The research was conducted based on the principles of objectivity and historicism, having studied scientific, philosophical works and journalistic materials. The specified methods helped to achieve the goal defined in the article. Thus, the degree of scientific development of the research topic was characterized; scientific sources were studied, China's neoliberal reforms were comprehensively re-

searched, their assessment was made, a study of the problems of Western democracies was conducted, and the possibilities of using China's experience in improving the political systems of Western democracies were determined.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Neoliberal Phenomenon and Western Democracies

Before discussing why China's transformation has been so successful, it is important to review the results of the neoliberal reforms that have taken place in the US and Europe over the past 40 years. J. Stiglitz (2012), a geopolitical economist who received the Nobel Prize for his contributions to Economics, mainly for the development of the so-called environmental and harmonious sustainable economy, briefly summarizes that liberal Western democracies are not governed by governments, but by economic corporate entities. As B. Rogers-Vaughn (2016) notes, there is an evident increase in populist politics, when societal differences are used to divide, antagonize, and polarize society itself. The divisions between political influences do not only mark the interests and powers of politicians, but they have also begun to be identified with the dividing lines of society itself. Modern Western democracies are experiencing a fragmentation of society, civil society is disappearing, and democratic scepticism is growing (Kostruba, 2020). As noted by S. Levitsky and D. Ziblatt (2019), politicians use commercialized campaigns to create public opposition, although history shows that autocrats in most cases take advantage of deliberately created public opposition and crises.

Although democracy is impossible without the active participation of citizens, citizen participation in many modern Western democracies has been steadily weakening over the years, with each successive generation of voters, especially younger voters, less and less interested in political processes (Colin, 2007; Anđić et al., 2022). As dissatisfaction with democracies grows (Foa et al., 2020), politics are based not on a wise consensus, and binary votes are gaining strength in the West. Voting only "for" or "against" escalates the so-called politics of the winner, which not only does not consider the needs of the losing side but also consistently increases division and confrontation in society. The binary principle of the majority creates an elected and outcast society, which means that instead of solving problems, it exacerbates them. Most of the time, referendum questions are raised to divide society; subsequently, the voting results do not solve anything and serve the narrow interests of the political elite and not the public (Fukuyama, 2015). As F. Fukuyama (2015) says, in such an environment, populist and Nazi formations grow stronger and provoke anti-democratic processes leading to the recession of democracy.

Emphasizing the political incompetence of society creates a distinction between those who are allowed to participate in the political process and those who are excluded from it. The public is separated from the political elite armed with bureaucratic regalia (Parvin, 2018). As P. Parvin (2018) points out, not only are people disappointed with the meaningfulness of political processes but also the elections and referendums themselves are starting to be considered games of the political elite. In Western democracies zones of influence,

interests and political territories are shared by politicians. Political scientists are starting to worry about the active participation of citizens and the ability to democratically balance society in the future. They believe that it is not only unlikely but even impossible. In summing up today's Western democracies, G. Agamben (2019) calls them regimes that sacrificed freedom for so-called "security", but ultimately condemned themselves to live in a constant state of fear and insecurity (Shani, 2020).

A. Giddens (2010) notes that the laissez-faire effects of an uncontrolled free economy have created historically unprecedented social inequality, pushing ordinary citizens more and more radically to the margins of political life (Bartels, 2019). J. Stiglitz (2020) observes that for a long time, the United States has been considered the land of opportunity, however, the last 40 years of economic growth have increased inequality and antagonism of the country's population in an unparalleled way. In the history of the United States, this phenomenon reached its peak during the Trump administration.

K. Mahbubani (2020), a geopolitical scientist from Singapore, and former president of the United Nations notes that poverty in the world should disappear completely by 2030. However, seeing the positive phenomena in the East and other regions, he wonders why there is growing disillusionment and disbelief about the future in the West. The most telling indicator showing the country's attitude towards the future is the answer to the question of whether citizens expect to live better than their parents lived. In the US, only 1/3 of the public expects to live better, while in China 82% of the public expects a better life, and almost half of the American public thinks that they will live worse than their parents.

In ancient Greece it was understood that society could solve its problems democratically, citizens could come to an agreement and manage their country by consensus. However, ancient Athens was different from today's megacities, where unique and fundamentally incompatible worldviews collide. Therefore, common ground is needed where instead of everyone fighting for themselves, they search for mutual understanding. No consensus is possible at any political level if it is not possible in society itself. Therefore, as S. Levitsky and D. Ziblatt (2019) say, it is no coincidence that the best results are achieved by those democracies in which the written constitution is strengthened by unwritten rules based on wise agreements, mutual tolerance and institutional restraint. It is important to create a platform for dialogue, where a benevolent and open dialogue can be maintained.

It cannot be assumed that once democracy is established, there is no need to take care of it. Democracy ceases to function at the same moment when there is no longer an active democratic discourse. A country may be called democratic only to the extent that citizens actively participate in the management of their country. Any stagnation and passivity and withdrawal of citizens from active participation in the management of the country results in the collapse of democracy, even if the country is still formally called democratic (Sultanbayeva et al., 2013).

In the UK, the US and many EU countries, where neoliberal phenomena are particularly strong, polarization and confrontation between different civilizational, religious, cultural,

racial and social classes are getting unprecedentedly intense (Kostruba, 2018). However, in Scandinavian countries, where special attention is paid to the integration of immigrants, it turns out that the problem does not arise from the immigrants themselves, but from the lack of dialogue with them. For example, in Denmark, where programs for integration into the local community are created (Fernández and Jensen, 2017), immigrants are taught to respect and take care of not only their own but also the cultural heritage of the country they came to (Thomassen, 2019). Immigrants are informed of opportunities and responsibilities. In Sweden, completely different, but also effective solutions are used to adapt newcomers into society (Adman, 2020; Temirbekov et al., 2016). Although it does not solve all possible everyday problems, this attitude actualizes problematic issues. The community discusses concerns, looks for solutions, and makes the living environment safer and better to live in. However, this requires a strong local community.

### 3.2. A Democratic Community and a Democratic Administration

S. Levitsky and D. Ziblatt (2019) indicate that democracy does not start with the constitution but with citizens whose autonomy is based on dignity and awareness. The will of citizens can modify even the constitution. Actively criticizing or supporting specific political decisions changes the status of a citizen. Citizens not only observe changes, but also consider the consequences, gain experience, take responsibility, and learn from mistakes. The change here is fundamental; the ontology of society is, hence changing. Instead of being manipulated by depersonalized systems, citizens are beginning to create the systems themselves.

B. Emerson (2022) says that we hear much about how the administrative state undermines liberty and democracy and little about how it may preserve them. The actual perception of society is crucial. Instead of being divided and limited by strict borders of positions, society can actively strive to unite, openly discuss its problems, consider the multiplicity of different situations, and evaluate various scenarios, and not just one, as was the case with the Brexit binary referendum. Plato (2019) observed that if people are unconscious in making important decisions, such an arrangement cannot be considered a proper form of order. Plato advised entrusting state power to experienced hands. One should entrust their health to an experienced doctor, not to the unqualified one. The task of citizens in transferring the management of a democratic state into the hands of qualified people. Although in ancient Greece, Plato's proposal to educate society sounded revolutionary, because Plato explained that properly educated women could acquire the same understanding as men. Political education should not only be aimed at representatives of a narrow speciality. It is important to form a conscious and competent society. Citizens should be taught from the first grade not only spelling and mathematics but also civics in a democratic country, the art of politics.

A citizen should become an active subject in a democracy. However, in modern democracies, he is not in the first place. The main actor is the political elite. Here, however, something fundamental is deformed in a human ontology. This deformation leads to the humiliation of the citizen, and to the

natural human fear of a depersonalized system of government of overwhelming size, which is said to embody the law. As was discussed, a closer look reveals that these systems are not created for citizens, but rather to strengthen the political elite. They are made complex, confusing and unquestionable. The complexity of the sophisticated political nomenclature is not only confusing for citizens but often completely incomprehensible. It is intentionally made for lobbyists and makes corruption schemes easier to come into play (Sheryazdanova et al., 2020). H. Colin (2007) notes that such a situation leads to the inaccessibility of decisions made by the political elite for ordinary citizens.

Only citizens themselves via active participation in the management of the country can solve the problems of polarization and confrontation between different communities. No external forces can solve these problems; only the citizens of the country can do it.

### 3.3. The Success of China's Transformation and Chinese Political Model

As for the reasons for China's success, it is worth mentioning J. Stiglitz's observation that the Chinese authorities not only understood the importance of sharing and transferring ideas well, but also highly valued the importance of education, creativity, and innovation for the country's well-being in general (Stiglitz, 2012). About 10% of students at leading American universities are ethnic Chinese. It is also worth noting that most Chinese students return to their homeland, and there are many government programs and initiatives dedicated to this. The Chinese took their technological and scientific backwardness seriously and considering it as one of the most important state-level goals, they completely renovated their economic and educational systems not once, but many times (Sakibayev et al., 2019; Suleimenov et al., 2022).

Another significant reason for China's success lies in Zh. Weiwei (2021) (Shanghai University Professor of Political and Social Sciences, former State Adviser) observed that China's success is determined by completely different assumptions than what is generally believed in the West. Although China's success in the West is usually explained by the free market model and neoliberal economic reforms, Z. Weiwei argues that the most important flaw in China's reforms was the peculiarity of the Chinese model. Z. Weiwei interestingly argues that the Chinese model is paradoxically more democratic than Western democracies. He uses J. Stiglitz's ironic remarks that the popular expression "one citizen – one vote" is better illustrated in the West by "one dollar – one vote". Also, J. Stiglitz (2012) made another remark about Abraham Lincoln's definition of a modern democratic government. Lincoln said, "...of the people, by the people, for the people", bearing in mind the effects of neoliberalism and the scale of inequality, J. Stiglitz rephrases it: "from 1%, by 1%, to 1%".

According to Z. Weiwei (2021), China's focus throughout the growth period was not on formal procedures, but on public welfare. Western democracies, according to Z. Weiwei use democratic procedures only superficially, and all Western democracies are going through a period of democratic recession. China is focusing on the essence of democracy,

according to Zhang Weiwei, instead of mechanical procedures, and that is why it achieved much better results than the West. What Zhang Weiwei means by the Chinese political version of democracy?

The Chinese political model was almost uninterruptedly developed for more than 2,000 years. China is one of the oldest civilizations in the world with a continuous cultural heritage. In this country, every innovation was integrated into the structure of the world, and ancient wisdom gained importance. Each feature or innovation here is translated into its language and complements the tradition itself, rather than replacing it (Kim et al., 2020a; Sakibayev et al., 2016; Topalov et al., 2020).

Although China faces complex social and cultural challenges with no easy solutions, the adoption of the Communist paradigm, despite radical historical episodes, did not fundamentally reject Confucianism. In the same way, Communist principles were not rejected later when choosing the model of a Capitalist state. China might once turn to the path of democracy and show that democracy can also be reconciled with Capitalism, Communism, and Confucianism. Although neoliberal phenomena in China have provoked an unprecedentedly high gap between rich and poor Chinese, unlike in the West, as the economic, political, and social structure changes, instead of competing with and denying the old order, innovations complement in a completely unexpected way. In other words, instead of displacing the old consciousness, innovation enriches it with new aspects. So, here different consciousnesses are expressed at the same time, integrally combining archaic, Confucian, Daoist, Communist and Capitalist ideas (Kim et al., 2022). Hence, the order itself here seems to be adjusted to the order already prevailing in the country, which appears to be higher and more primordial than the new political system.

D. Keightley (1990) writes that classical Chinese culture traditionally strives for all-encompassing harmony of family, society, and different classes. The concept of a wise person who wants to achieve the principle of harmony is important, but this does not mean that he agrees with everything. In the famous formulation of Confucius (2019), the "Lun yu" text describes a noble person as someone who can always get along with others, but not become them, while a vulgar person is the opposite - they want everyone to be like them, but never agree with anyone. J. Ferguson and R. Dellios (2011) note that not only was social harmony considered the most important category in Confucian texts, but it was also used to examine civil servants in imperial China. Therefore, the emperor or the political leader of China was perceived as a noble sage, the "Great Harmonizer", passing laws, maintaining order and a harmonious living world of society.

Also, it is worth noting that Confucian ideas became the basis of the 19th century Kang Youwei's and Sun Yatsen's ideas of the Great Unity of Utopian Society, where hierarchy and power in the State become unnecessary because society is a community of equals. It is obvious that the idea of Great Unity also develops the same aspiration of harmony (Wechsler, 1985). So Communist China adopted Marxist ideas as a consistent example of the Confucian model of a harmonious society. The importance of a harmony and balance is also explained during the Han Dynasty in "In the

Zhongyong – Doctrine of the Middle Way” described by Zi Si. Starting with the idea of a balanced individual, one goes to a harmonious society and finally to a political balance. It is harmony that is the essential basis of everything here, covering the entire human living world. After realizing the harmony of everything from within, Heaven and Earth regain their place and nourish all living things (Arendt, 1973; Seo et al., 2022).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Based on the conducted research, it is possible to come to conclude that recessionary trends of neoliberal Western democracies can be resolved by understanding that democracy is being built every day. Therefore, modern democracies suffer not because their problems are unsolvable, but because they are not solved.

Today’s younger generation can assess how they live in their country, who and what is worth supporting or not. Political capital is not a material phenomenon; it is an active power to create the living world and can be easily transferred to society. Labelling society as incompetent instead of educating only delays the problem and is not the solution (Kharytonov et al., 2021). The politics of democracies can be clarified and created to inform society instead of accusing them of their lack of action or competence and understanding.

H. Arendt (1973) observed that society can refuse to do what is unacceptable, as a society can approve or disapprove, support, or reject political decisions. One preserves one’s humanity and dignity by refusing to support unacceptable politics. The position of a citizen would change fundamentally if he moved from a passive conformist position of obedience and reconciliation to an active position of reasoned support or opposition. This small shift would create a very different society and living environment. By obeying the government, the citizen does not take any responsibility. It is especially important to restore the non-conformist layer, which was destroyed during the Soviet era (Nurtazina et al., 2015).

It is concluded that the power of authority is not material, but a psychological phenomenon; an authority does not get power if no one gives it to him, only society can give it. It is normal to have a preconceived notion that information is false, and that it is important to verify it instead of blindly believing politics and the media. Society can demand that a portion of taxes be used for society’s internal needs such as public education, conducting independent scientific research, and hiring independent experts and advisors. Institutions of auditors that inspect the activities of politicians must also be created. It is especially important to audit how politicians manage to fulfil their electoral promises. It is possible to produce fake political problems only when citizens have neither power, understanding, nor means of verification. If it is possible to emphasize on education and the dignity of citizens, the conscious position, then it is possible to control neoliberal phenomena in politics.

One can agree with H. Colin (2007), who claims that in Western democracies now there is a strong decline in the participation of citizens in the political affairs of their country, which is especially evident among young people. However, citizens, taking an active part in the management of the

state, can influence the unification of society, and not its division, also through education, open discussion of political issues and search for compromises.

At the same time, positive trends are observed in some countries. J. Adman expresses thoughts similar to those shown in the present research by pointing out the advantages of the practice of the Scandinavian countries, where programs for the integration of immigrants into the local community work (Emerson, 2022). Thus, by clarifying opportunities and responsibilities, state authorities make a significant contribution to preserving the traditions of both their own country and immigrants, which reduces confrontation within the population and helps in identifying and solving societal problems (Kim et al., 2020b; Seok et al., 2020).

In general, it is worth agreeing with J. Stiglitz (2012), who notes that the last 40 years of economic growth in the United States of America have led to an increase in inequality and contradictions within the country’s population. Although China was based on the neoliberalist model of the free market, it was introducing its own carefully planned reforms, which differed from American neoliberalism. Chinese politicians and reformers were advised by the same Western institutions: the IMF, World Bank, etc., however, the results were so different that it is worth thinking about the neoliberal phenomenon itself which is not necessarily only reprehensible, and about modern Western democracy which can manifest itself, and not only in defective forms.

In the case of neoliberalism’s inequalities and societal deformations in China, they were completely different from what the West predicted. China’s economic transformations are difficult for Westerners to understand, primarily because the concept of pragmatism, which essentially underpins any economic process in the West, is perceived differently there. Regarding pragmatism and the concept of utility in Chinese culture, pay attention that the pragmatism developed in the Confucian and Taoist traditions is not only about the material or superficial utility (Li et al., 2022). Here, the utility has many aspects and many different levels, which cover not only the material world but also the entire ecosphere of the living world. Here a completely different ontology can be observed, the foreground is not things themselves, but their interactions, relationships, processes, and energy exchange, which creates a completely different whole. In other words, in the case of China, the GDP is not the priority, which is significant only in a certain sense (Shalbolova et al., 2012). At the utmost importance are public welfare, relations with other countries, technology, and ideas.

The world’s largest logistics system, not only in the country itself, but the so-called China Belts span the entire world and connect 139 countries which accounts for the largest share of the world’s GDP. However, what is more, important here is not the things that are produced, but the production itself that is not attached to any specific technology. Such an attitude is constantly changing and moves freely between different technologies, approaches, and visions, concentrating on the very movement. The same applies to politics – it is not the political order itself, not communism or capitalism, autocracy, or democracy that is important here, but its practical suitability in specific cultural and historical circumstances. One can agree with I. Weber (2020) said that China is neoliberal

and represents an alternative to neoliberal development. Different elements are used in a hybrid way, all at the same time. The goal is simply to make everything fit together in a living society.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In neoliberal Western democracies, some problems that provoke democratic scepticism and the so-called recession of democracies in all countries of the Western world can be seen. At the same time, society itself can get involved in solving the issues of concern, and this will pave the way to overcome the main difficulties of democracies. For this to transpire, it is important to properly educate society and prepare it for life in a democratic country as active and dignified citizens, instead of humiliating industrial resources. Citizens can change the prevailing neoliberal policy model in Western countries. Also, the possibility of the rehabilitation of democracy arises from changing the attitude towards society, making it the central active entity.

In assessing China's free-market neoliberal reforms, it should be noted that it has led to incredibly interesting outcomes. China's prosperity, economic development, the free market economy, neoliberalism phenomena, and at the same time democracy are developing completely differently than in the West. In China, not only different economic and political principles are observed, but also a different value system, a different concept of the individual, and consequently a different concept of the political and economic entity. The experience of China's neoliberal reforms can be successfully applied in Western democracies to bring them to a more balanced state.

This article examines a previously studied topic only in fragments and achieved the goal and task set before the research – a comprehensive review of China's neoliberal reforms, an assessment of these reforms and the possibilities of using such experience in Western democracies. The results of the study can be used both by the state authorities of Western democracies and their citizens in solving current political problems.

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