

Enduring influence of EAST on Chinese society

A deep dive

- Professor Yasheng Huang’s *The Rise and Fall of the EAST* has shaken perspectives outside academia.
- He focuses on how exams, autocracy, stability, and technology (EAST) have historically shaped China’s governance, impacting both prosperity and creativity.
- The directions of Chinese politics and economy echo restrictive practices that may hinder China’s technological and economic competitiveness.
- Balancing traditional governance with modern needs for innovation could ensure China’s long-term prosperity.
- Encouraging policies that foster openness and creativity is crucial for China to remain competitive on the global stage.

It’s rare for an academic work to capture the attention of mainstream media. Comprehensive scholarly analyses are usually considered static, irrelevant or overblown by news publications keeping apace with shifting states of affairs. However, author and Professor Yasheng Huang’s *The Rise and Fall of the EAST* has shaken perspectives outside academia. His focus is on China, which matters, especially now, and his approach is provocative and unusual.

In *The Rise and Fall of the EAST*, Huang delves into the profound impact of four pivotal elements – exams, autocracy, stability, and technology (EAST) – on the development of Chinese society from ancient times to today. This comprehensive narrative traces how these factors



The Silk Roads were a vast network of ancient trade routes connecting East and West, stretching from China to the Mediterranean. More than just pathways for silk, these routes were a conduit for the exchange of goods, ideas, religions, and cultures.

have sculpted China’s political, social, and technological realms and emphasises the persistent influence of traditional governance systems. As China continues to assert its position on the global stage, one might wonder how the enduring adherence to the EAST framework has shaped its current international relations and economic strategies. Huang’s exploration aims to unravel the complexities of China’s historical practices and their continuing ramifications in the modern world. The result, in the words of Jordan Schneider, host of The China Talk Podcast, is ‘A deeply rich book, a product of a career of reflections that pairs with gripping anecdotes and systematic thinking, with each page delivering something novel and provocative that will leave every reader smarter and more thoughtful about China’.

Huang’s study primarily focuses on the historical and contemporary application of the civil service exam system, known in Chinese as Keju, initiated during the Sui dynasty and its evolution into the personnel management practices of the modern Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The aim is to understand how the interplay between exams, autocracy, stability, and technology has facilitated governance and control while occasionally stifling creativity and innovation. To the uninitiated, civil service exams may seem a rare course for compelling reading, but through ‘wit, colourful observations’ and his ‘direct style’, as observed by

Chinese policymakers could benefit from revisiting and reflecting on historical lessons to avoid repeating past mistakes.

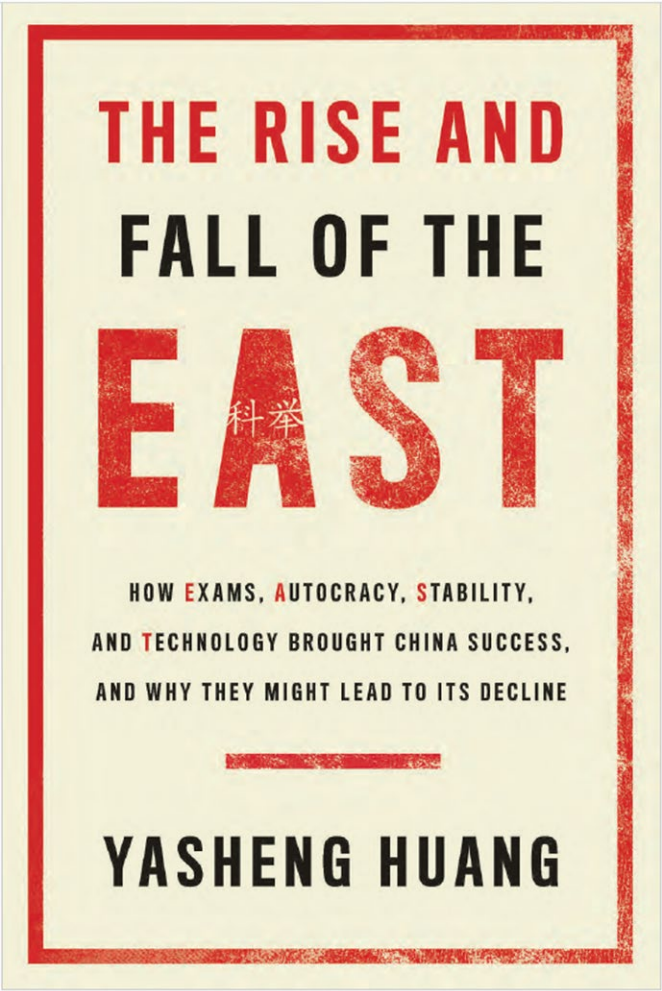
the Christian Science Monitor, Huang manages a ‘sweeping inquiry that both China scholars and a general audience will value’.

The history and findings

Huang’s analysis demonstrates that Chinese society has historically prospered when the rigidity of autocratic governance was tempered by embracing a diversity of ideas. Notable epochs such as the tumultuous period after the Han dynasty (202 BC–220 AD) and the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD) and

various reformist phases under the CCP illustrate the benefits of this equilibrium. The Tang era, known for its remarkable cultural and economic blossoming, benefitted from a relatively liberal governance approach that encouraged scholarly pursuits, artistic expression, and expansive foreign trade.

During the Tang dynasty, for example, the regime’s openness allowed the Silk Road to thrive as a commercial route and a conduit for cultural exchanges, facilitating the integration of diverse ideas from the East and West. This period also marked the initiation and maturation of the Keju system, which aimed



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to democratise the bureaucratic appointment process by selecting candidates based on merit rather than lineage, gradually weaving various intellectual traditions into the fabric of governance. The Keju at that time was relatively broad and open, attaining an appropriate balance between achieving a development of human capital and allowing some scope for diversity. The Tang dynasty was able to rule over a large territory while spurring advancements across multiple domains, including technology, literature, and public administration. It struck the right balance between what the book calls ‘scale’ and ‘scope’.

In contrast, certain historical periods were characterised by an excess of scale due to the narrowing of the Keju system and a lack of this balance have seen China experience stagnation or decline. For instance, under Empress Dowager Cixi’s conservative rule, the late Qing dynasty (1644–1912) saw significant resistance to modernisation efforts. This led to technological and cultural stagnation, which left China vulnerable to external pressures and internal strife. This resistance to change and innovation starkly contrasts with the dynamic growth seen during more open periods.

Notably, Huang’s research highlights a similar concern with the direction of the Chinese political and economic systems today, noting a regression to more rigid, conformist strategies akin to the narrowing phase of the historical Keju system, which prioritised rote learning

and ideological conformity. This shift from the more progressive, open policies of earlier CCP eras could dampen China’s economic and creative momentum, mirroring those less dynamic periods. Such oscillations between openness and restriction are crucial for understanding the trajectory of Chinese governance and its dual impact on historical and contemporary society. This cyclical pattern underscores the importance of balancing control and creativity to foster long-term societal prosperity.

Implications of historical governance trends on modern China

The resurgence of a Keju-like rigidities in China today marks a deliberate shift towards prioritising stability and uniformity at the potential expense of innovation. This dynamic reflects historical governance practices and indicates strategic decisions that may undermine China’s competitive edge in globally essential fields such as technology and creative industries. For example, the recent tightening of regulations around the technology sector and increased censorship could be seen as modern manifestations of the EAST framework’s emphasis on control and conformity.

These policies echo the historical autocratic tendencies to suppress dissent and centralise power, reminiscent of the Keju system’s focus on ideological uniformity through rigorous exams. While these measures might bolster short-term stability, they pose significant risks by potentially stifling the creative and technological innovation crucial for long-term economic resilience and global competitiveness.

Huang’s study highlights the critical need for a governance model in China that successfully balances the dual needs for order and innovation. It suggests that revisiting the more open and reformist policies of past leadership periods could help foster an environment where innovation is not just permitted but encouraged, ensuring that stability does not become a barrier to progress. Such a balanced approach would align with successful historical precedents and adapt effectively to the demands of the modern global economy.

The insights provided offer a critical perspective on the potential consequences of China’s current political strategies. By comparing historical successes and failures, Huang’s research is a cautionary tale about the dangers of excessive autocracy and the suppression of diversity in thought. As the Financial Times puts it, ‘[Huang’s] wry dedication to the autocrats of the world. They give us so much to write about’ – says it all.

The future

Huang suggests that important lessons can be drawn from revisiting and reflecting on historical experiences to avoid repeating past mistakes. Advocating for a more balanced approach to governance, the research calls for policies that promote stability while encouraging innovation and diversity of ideas. Such changes are essential for sustaining China’s growth and adapting effectively to the rapid changes in the global environment.

The Rise and Fall of the EAST offers a profound analysis of how the foundational elements of EAST have sculpted Chinese society over millennia. Huang’s collective research maps China’s historical and political evolution trajectory and serves as a vital resource for understanding the potential future paths the country might take. The consensus across reviews is that Huang has produced a critical and timely analysis of China’s past and present in a way that resonates with today’s global decision-makers. The result, in the words of The Japan Times, is a ‘Compelling and easily digestible argument.’ It’s an argument China should heed. By integrating lessons from the past into current policies, China can harness its full potential, ensuring a dynamic and robust future for its people and its place in the world.

Personal response

Based on your research, what specific policy changes do you believe the CCP should implement to foster an environment where innovation is tolerated and actively encouraged?

In science and technology, no country – including the United States – can do it alone. The advantage of the United States is that it is able to attract global talents, and its innovativeness is critically dependent on its openness. My book shows that China’s technological successes in history and during the contemporary period have also been rooted in openness and globalisation. Without globalisation, China can still succeed, but only in a few targeted areas and at massive economic and financial costs. The Soviet Union also achieved notable successes, but only in isolated fields and disciplines, and its economy stagnated. The CCP should return to its open-door policies during the reform era by reembracing globalisation across the board – economic and academic collaborations under the existing international framework. It should recognise that China has been the biggest beneficiary of the post-Cold War global order. In the longer run, the CCP should reform its system of governance by introducing transparency, more speech and academic freedom, and steps toward the rule of law.

Considering the current global geopolitical climate, how do you see China’s adherence to the EAST framework influencing its international relations, particularly with Western democracies that may prioritise different values?

In the current environment, there are some fundamental tensions among the components of the EAST framework. The autocratic stability – letters A and S – is ultimately detrimental to technology (T). Here, technology is

broadly defined, not just by referring to technologies in their engineering sense but also by technologies as ways to advance economic and human progress. One striking fact – noted in the last chapter of my book – is that Chinese productivity has deteriorated. This is a concerning development of the highest order. Technologies that do not improve economic progress are a cost, not a benefit, as the Soviet experience illustrated.

Given the vast scope of your study, what areas within the EAST framework do you think require further exploration, and what will be your next focus in researching Chinese political and social dynamics?

We should focus more on the dynamics of technology – T – in the next stage of China’s development. There is a widespread misperception among observers of China and among Chinese policymakers themselves that China achieved its technological successes by itself and through the power of the government. This is a fundamentally flawed view. A few years ago, there was a view that China was the AI superpower, yet large language models (LLMs) did not emerge from China. Chinese AI firms learned quickly and created their own successful LLM models based on the open-sourced models. The most recent example is DeepSeek, which is based on but has improved upon the pioneering work by OpenAI. Chinese electric vehicles also developed quickly, but their successes also owed not insignificantly to the open-sourced model of Tesla. Chinese learning and engineering capabilities are world-class, but in the vast majority of fields, China has been a beneficiary, not an originator, of pathbreaking inventions elsewhere. This phenomenon requires a deeper exploration.

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Bio

Yasheng Huang is a Professor and holds the Epoch Foundation Professorship of Global Economics and Management at MIT Sloan School of Management. From 2013 to 2017, he served as an Associate Dean in charge of MIT Sloan’s Global Partnership programmes and its Action Learning initiatives. His previous appointments include faculty positions at the University of Michigan and at Harvard Business School. This book project was supported by MIT and private philanthropy.

Further reading

Huang, Y, (2023) *The Rise and fall of the EAST: How exams, autocracy, stability, and technology brought China success, and why they might lead to its decline.* (London), Yale University Press. yalebooks.co.uk/book/9780300274912/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-east

