[**What to learn from China?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1634259/what-to-learn-from-china)

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WHEN Prime Minister Imran Khan [categorically endorsed](https://www.dawn.com/news/1632539) China’s line on Uighur Muslims he succumbed to political expediency: “Because of our extreme proximity and relationship with China”, he said, “we actually accept the Chinese version.” A savvier politician facing the Chinese media might have tried a little hemming and hawing rather than dispense with truth, human rights and Muslim solidarity. Still, one must not be too harsh on the PM; any country which owes its life to a powerful patron has little leeway.

Much loved by some but feared by others, China today is an economic superpower. Geopolitics changed in 2017 when its GNP shot above that of the US. But what accounts for its phenomenal rise and ferocious progress? Equally, one may ask: why has Pakistan been on external life support from 1947 onward and barely limped along? The difference cries out for an explanation.

Max Weber, the 19th-century German sociologist, would have an answer. Since his pioneering work, social scientists know economic growth goes hand-in-hand with a society’s collective worldview and culture. Through data-driven research, Weber explained why Protestants and Calvinists had far outpaced Catholics in generating wealth and industrialising Europe. He concluded that progress-friendly cultures demand belief in rationality, rule of law, planning, punctuality, deferred gratification, and expectations of reward in this life rather than the next.

Certainly not how minorities should be treated! But there’s much else that China can teach Pakistan.

Were he alive today, how would Weber see China in relation to Pakistan?

First, China’s worldview is — like that of 19th-century Protestants — entirely future-focused and this-worldly. Notwithstanding the pride Chinese people take in their ancient science and civilisation, there is no deep nostalgia and no calls for Ertugrul-like men on horseback to resurrect some ancient kingdom. Whether for good or bad, and whether under Mao’s revolutionary communism or under Xi Jinping’s capitalistic communism, the Chinese are a plain, hard-headed lot.

**Read:** [*The Chinese economic miracle*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1601556)

This attitude sets the tone for education, both in school and university. Knowing that universities are the engines of progress, China is super-careful about who gets admitted. At the level of language, reasoning and math skills, Chinese students are expected to know everything that American students learn — but better. Today’s gaokao — the cheating-free university entrance exam — is a carryover from the rigorous exam system (keju) of ancient China’s civil service.

Reputed to be the toughest in the world, gaokao beats even that for various IITs (Indian Institute of Technology). Unfortunately, educated in a memorisation-heavy culture steeped in religious matters, most Pakistani university professors — including those who are HEC certified and with hundreds of research publications — would not clear Chinese university entrance exams.

Second, a reborn Weber would see China clearly defining its national interest with economic advancement being at the very top. As a rationalist-materialist country China aims at becoming the world leader in space exploration, brain science, quantum computers, electric cars, biopharmaceuticals, renewable energy, etc. Five-year plans are followed to the letter; there is no empty chatter or arbitrary wish lists.

At the next level of priority is politics. To reunite with Taiwan, China rattles its sabres from time to time. Nevertheless, China-Taiwan economic links are strong. Taiwanese companies have invested about $60 billion in China, and one million Taiwanese people live in China with many running Taiwanese factories. The Chinese political leadership keeps its military in check. There is no history of Kargil-like dead-end adventures and the military stays clear of trade matters. The warrior ethic is firmly subordinated to the capitalist ethic.

In Pakistan’s case, warriors define the national interest. Googling ‘national interest’, I found occurrences in speeches, university theses and in National Defence University publications. All such references were security and India related. In this single-minded approach, Pakistan-India trade remains hostage to Kashmir being resolved on Pakistan’s terms. Nowhere to be found is a plan for where the country hopes to be 20-30 years from now. No one takes the Planning Commission of Pakistan seriously.

Third, Weber would confirm that strong work ethics leads to high labour productivity, the backbone of economic growth. Although he knew only of Protestant-Calvinist workers and capitalists, the qualities of diligence, discipline, responsibility, punctuality and honesty of the skilled industrial workforce extends into the cultures of China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea etc.

In contrast, Pakistan’s labour productivity is appallingly low — less than half of China’s. Many economists and businessmen have pointed out that producing an item in high-wage China is cheaper than in low-wage Pakistan. Poor productivity owes to poor worker skills and general dissatisfaction. Exploitative employers pay minimum wages, ignore principles of fairness and disallow grievance mechanisms. But the ethics of workers are also low. Few take pride in or enjoy work, are diligent, or take initiatives. Like our parliamentarians and professors, most are shirkers who need to be reminded of their duties.

These poor habits start from Pakistani schools where kids are forced to focus on exam techniques and taught just enough to get by. Cheating is tolerated. Some parents — including those who emphasise religious rituals — encourage their children to cheat as a way to get ahead. But, at a still deeper level, quality education for all is impossible given extreme wealth disparities.

**Read:** [*Cheating on online exams*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1603040/cheating-on-online-exams)

In China such disparities had been evened up by Mao’s communism. Although huge excesses happened in the Cultural Revolution, education was universalised and hard work celebrated. China is reaping dividends from its communist past. Pakistan never saw any such evening-up. Leaders of the Pakistan Movement — Jinnah and Allama Iqbal (the post-1930 Iqbal) included — were staunchly anti-communist. Some were big landlords who saw danger in educating their serfs. Education was a low priority in 1947 and remains low.

Curiously, the country that Pakistan’s founders feared and disliked most (after Russia) is now Pakistan’s closest ally. It does bash its Muslims; the evidence is irrefutable. Yet — other than how religious minorities should be handled — China has much to teach Pakistan. Among the most important lessons is creating a skilled workforce, giving dignity to labour, distributing wealth and public resources reasonably, emphasising birth control, and encouraging a mindset oriented to the future rather than the past. If Pakistan wants to break the crutches of foreign dependence, that’s the way to go.

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*Published in Dawn, July 10th, 2021*