

COMMON PROSPERITY: THE PATH TOWARD THE REJUVENATION OF THE CHINESE NATION

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Abstract: This article offers an analysis of the notion of common prosperity (共同富裕, gòngtóng fùyù) as a central axis of the development policy of the People's Republic of China in the Xi Jinping era. Drawing on a combination of official sources, think tank reports, journalistic analyses, and academic literature, the text reconstructs the philosophical and historical roots of the concept, traces its evolution from Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping to its contemporary revitalization, and examines the associated public policies: poverty eradication, market regulation, real estate sector reform, the expansion of public services, and the inclusion of ecological transition as an inseparable component of prosperity.

The article also incorporates a specific section on the implications of common prosperity for China's foreign policy and for potential synergies with countries of the Global South under the idea of a "community with a shared future for mankind". Ultimately, this chapter argues that common prosperity represents not only an economic strategy for national development but also a fundamental guide to the principles, values, and norms that shape the actions and decisions of the Communist Party of China—namely, an ethic.

Keywords: common prosperity, China, Xi Jinping, development, redistribution, Global South, community with a shared future for mankind.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's complex international landscape, marked by structural inequalities and multiple overlapping crises, China has emerged with a paradigmatic proposal: common prosperity. Far from being a mere political slogan, this concept constitutes the very heart of the contemporary Chinese revolutionary process and the development vision advanced by Xi Jinping.

Rooted in historical traditions such as Confucian philosophy, the socialist ideals of the twentieth century, and the economic achievements attained through the Reform and Opening-Up policies initiated by Deng Xiaoping, common prosperity seeks to balance the remarkable economic growth of recent decades with a fair and equitable redistribution of wealth that ensures the material and spiritual well-being of the entire Chinese population.

In a global context where prevailing models in the Global North continue to reproduce wealth concentration, environmental degradation, and social exclusion, China's pursuit of common prosperity stands as both an analytical challenge and an alternative development proposal that warrants in-depth study. This article aims to examine the foundations, historical roots, practical implications, and international tensions surrounding the implementation of common prosperity as a specific ethic guiding development in the People's Republic of China.

To achieve these objectives, the chapter is organized as follows. First, we address the historical and philosophical origins of the concept of common prosperity, analyzing its ideological roots with particular emphasis on the influence of Confucian thought—especially the ideas of Confucius and Mencius on social harmony, benevolence, and the responsibility of good governance to ensure societal well-being. We also trace the connection to socialist ideals that, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, have shaped China's development vision.

The second section examines common prosperity within the broader Chinese revolutionary process, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping. Here, we explore the evolution of the concept, from its incorporation into Maoist rhetoric, through the reforms of Deng Xiaoping, to its contemporary prominence in Xi Jinping's policy agenda.

The third section focuses on concrete policies implemented to achieve common prosperity. We analyze Chinese government strategies in key areas such as the eradication of extreme poverty in 2021, the reduction of inequality, income redistribution, the development of social infrastructure, the regulation of the real estate market, pollution control, and the promotion of an ecological civilization. This section also contrasts the Chinese model with the prevailing Western conception of prosperity, where individual accumulation and the maximization of

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private profit serve as the driving forces of economic development. It argues that the Chinese approach represents a civilizational alternative aimed at harmonizing economic development with collective well-being.

Finally, the fourth section analyzes the international projections of common prosperity, particularly as articulated through the notion of a “community with a shared future for mankind”. This perspective positions China as a reference point for the Global South through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, offering cooperation in infrastructure, technology, capacity building, and access to China’s expanding domestic market.

The research adopts a qualitative approach based on documentary and critical analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official Chinese government documents, in particular the State Council’s White Paper on China’s path from poverty to prosperity, as well as speeches and interventions by Xi Jinping and resolutions of the Communist Party of China. Reports from news agencies such as Xinhua, China Daily, and People’s Daily are also considered, as they provide direct insight into the official narrative surrounding common prosperity and its articulation with national development goals and international engagement. Secondary sources include specialized literature on the Chinese revolutionary process from both domestic and international perspectives.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that common prosperity is not merely an economic strategy for national development but also a fundamental guide to the principles, values, and norms that shape the actions and decisions of the Communist Party of China—in other words, an ethic. By placing collective well-being at the center of its planning, China proposes an alternative model that challenges hegemonic conceptions of progress and social justice. Understanding this concept in all its complexity is essential to interpreting China’s role in the twenty-first century and its impact on the transformation of the global order.

2. HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ORIGINS OF COMMON PROSPERITY

The concept of common prosperity (共同富裕, gòngtóng fùyù) first appeared in Chinese political discourse in 1953, during the early years of Mao Zedong’s government, as a reference to the socialist model of rural organization (Ríos, 2021). Common prosperity was part of the socialist rhetoric aimed at eliminating class inequalities and redistributing wealth. The character 富裕 (fùyù) is sometimes translated interchangeably as “prosperity” or “wealth”; however, in this context, wealth refers neither strictly to economic assets nor to purely individual gain. Later, Deng Xiaoping revived the concept to argue that common prosperity could be achieved in stages—by first developing the Special Economic Zones and then extending growth to the rest of the country (Mantilla, 2022).

Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, the concept has gained renewed prominence and has become one of the pillars of his political and economic agenda. Xi has made it a national priority, emphasizing that after decades of rapid growth, the time has come to focus on reducing inequality and ensuring a fairer distribution of economic benefits. In 2021, Xi formally announced common prosperity as one of China’s central goals for the future, aiming for development that not only generates wealth but also redistributes it more equitably (Xinhua, 2021).

1.1. Historical Roots of the Concept

Although the concept of common prosperity is inseparably linked to the ongoing Chinese revolutionary process, it has deep roots in traditional Chinese philosophy. In Confucian thought, the ideas of harmony and collective well-being are fundamental. According to Confucius, the construction of a just society depended on the principles of virtue and morality, in which Ren (仁) was associated with benevolence and the duty of individuals toward others, fostering a community in which collective well-being was at the center (Zhao, 2014).

Another important Chinese thinker, Mencius, argued that rulers bore the responsibility of ensuring that the basic needs of the people were met; in this sense, a good government was one capable of guaranteeing the material and spiritual well-being of the population as well as equity for all. In short, common prosperity in the Chinese tradition is closely tied to the moral duty of governance to prioritize the welfare of the people.

1.2. The Reinterpretation of the Concept under Socialist Ideals

The contemporary meaning of common prosperity cannot be understood without reference to the historical dialogue between Confucian tradition and the socialist experience. In classical Chinese tradition, the ideal of xiaokang (小康)—often translated as “moderate prosperity” or “sufficient well-being”—represents a moral horizon emphasizing social harmony and the responsibility of the state to ensure material conditions for a dignified life (State Council Information Office, 2021). Both Confucius and Mencius argued that the legitimacy of the ruler

depended on the ability to secure material order and social justice; in this sense, individual prosperity had meaning only insofar as it contributed to collective well-being.

With the advent of socialism, these moral principles were reinterpreted within a normative framework that prioritized poverty eradication and formal equality. In the Maoist era, the rhetoric translated into massive redistribution and collectivization initiatives. In the Deng era, the rhetoric shifted: Deng promoted the idea that “some will get rich first,” recognizing that allowing initial accumulation could serve as a means to improve general well-being. Yet Deng also emphasized that “poverty is not socialism,” underscoring that the ultimate goal remained the improvement of living conditions for the majority (State Council Information Office, 2021).

The contemporary reinterpretation under Xi Jinping draws a dual lesson from these traditions: prosperity is both a material objective and a moral imperative, and its realization requires state instruments capable of guiding and correcting market dynamics when they generate exclusion or systemic risks. Thus, common prosperity today is not defined merely as income redistribution but as the coordinated pursuit of growth, equity, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability (State Council Information Office, 2021).

3. COMMON PROSPERITY IN THE CHINESE REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

The political formulation of common prosperity has its antecedents in the Party’s rhetoric of the 1950s but gained new centrality in the Party’s agenda after 2012 and, more concretely, after 2020, when regulatory policies and pilot programs with specific timelines were introduced (Roberts, 2021; Koty, 2022). In 2021, the Chinese government declared that it had achieved the “first centenary goal” of building a “moderately prosperous society” and, from that milestone, launched the ambition to move toward common prosperity as a long-term objective (State Council Information Office, 2021).

The instruments deployed include regulatory actions against financial and commercial practices deemed harmful to equity—such as restrictions on the private tutoring sector, enhanced oversight of technological and fintech platforms, and attention to the concentration of the real estate sector—alongside redistributive and public provision policies: social housing, increased spending on healthcare and education, and co-financing programs for rural development (Koty, 2022; State Council Information Office, 2021).

It is also important to consider the political timetable: the strategy establishes milestones for 2035 and 2050, linked to the goals of the second centenary (comprehensive modernization by 2049), combining socioeconomic and environmental objectives to ensure that growth is sustainable and socially inclusive (State Council Information Office, 2021).

2.1. Cats and Mice

In many Western analyses of China’s economic model after the Reform and Opening-Up period, Deng Xiaoping’s famous phrase—“It doesn’t matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice”—is endlessly repeated. Often associated with the supposed “pragmatism” of the national leadership, many analysts claim that “it doesn’t matter the color of the cat” reflects the flexibility of Chinese leaders in applying macro- and micro-economic policies.

However, much of the Western interpretation of the phrase has been rather arbitrary. “It doesn’t matter whether the cat is black or white” is often rendered as “it doesn’t matter whether the model is more socialist or more capitalist,” while “what matters is that it catches mice” is interpreted as “what matters is that it generates economic growth.” From this perspective, it is argued that Deng’s reforms in the 1990s moved China away from the socialist model promoted by Mao—toward capitalism—and that this shift enabled China’s economic take-off that continues to this day (Bandurski, 2010).

This intentionally biased Western reading ignores the fact that Deng never questioned the socialist system of organization and that “catching mice” does not mean “generating economic growth at any cost.” While economic growth was indeed a strategic objective of the second and third generations of Communist Party of China (CPC) leaders, it was viewed as a means to build a prosperous society, promote equality, and ensure mutual benefit (Schulz, 2022).

Deng’s famous phrase “to get rich is glorious” aimed to highlight the importance of national economic growth during the Reform and Opening-Up era, while his other well-known statement—“poverty is not socialism”—was accompanied by a strong critique of the capitalist system, which, in Deng’s view, “would not in the least solve

the problem of ensuring a comfortable life for more than 90 percent of the population” (Deng, 1984).

In other words, economic growth was not an end in itself but a means to achieve broader goals. To use an anachronism consistent with Xi Jinping’s current vision, “catching mice” implies laying the foundations for the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation, with human well-being at the center of economic policy. “Catching mice” means eradicating extreme poverty, improving the population’s living standards, and repositioning China on the international stage.

2.2. Xi Jinping’s Thought

In 2021, Xi Jinping stated that “having entered a new stage of development, China must pay greater attention to the pursuit of common prosperity” (Xinhua, 2021). In the context of debates over the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), Xi Jinping announced that China had achieved the goal of building a “moderately prosperous society” for the centenary of the founding of the Communist Party of China in 2021 and that the country was now embarking on the path set for the centenary of the founding of the People’s Republic in 2049. To do so, China needed to move from a “moderately prosperous society” to “common prosperity,” correcting imbalances in development (People’s Daily, 2021).

In an extensive article published in the People’s Daily, Zhao Xiuzhi wrote: “Common prosperity is a fundamental goal of Marxism and a fundamental aspiration of the Chinese people since ancient times. The Communist Party of China is a proletarian party firmly committed to the common prosperity of all its people” (Zhao, 2022). Similarly, Wan Yuanying stated:

With the continuous development of productivity and the steady growth of social wealth, future society will increasingly guarantee the satisfaction of all reasonable needs of each individual. Common prosperity is a key feature of the future society envisioned by Marx and Engels. (Wan, 2021)

In this framework, Xi Jinping identified three major battles that the Chinese government must face in the near term to achieve common prosperity: the prevention and mitigation of financial risks, targeted poverty reduction, and the prevention and control of pollution (People’s Daily, 2018). The goal of eradicating extreme poverty by the centenary of the founding of the Communist Party of China had long been set and was one of the main objectives of the Chinese government, which must now work to sustain this achievement amid growing international economic tensions and crises.

In recent years, China has also adopted a more assertive stance both in international affairs and in domestic policy regarding carbon neutrality, the development of renewable energy, and the construction of an ecological civilization (Schulz, 2024). Moreover, the 2021 Evergrande crisis highlighted the financial risks stemming from real-estate speculation.

In line with its goal of achieving common prosperity, the Chinese government has focused on reducing the cost of basic necessities, decreasing inequality, building social housing, increasing spending on public services, providing low-interest loans to the poorest sectors of society, and promoting infrastructure development.

4. FROM IDEAS TO PRACTICE: POLICIES, ACHIEVEMENTS, AND MEASURABLE RESULTS

Xi Jinping’s proposal to achieve common prosperity is closely linked to the broader objective of realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation by 2049, marking the centenary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. In this framework, as we have emphasized, common prosperity refers to the state’s role in creating the conditions to ensure the material and spiritual well-being of the 56 ethnic groups that make up the Chinese people.

This is not mere rhetoric. Since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policies in the late 1970s, China has lifted approximately 800 million people out of poverty, which is considered one of the greatest achievements in the history of global economic development (Trankmann, 2019). In 2021, China reached its stated goal of eradicating extreme poverty nationwide (China’s State Council Information Office, 2021).

Inequality has also declined. Since the adoption of Xi Jinping’s new development concept, the Gini coefficient has fallen significantly, from 43.7 in 2010 to 35.7 in 2021—indicating that Chinese society is now more egalitarian than that of the United States, where the coefficient stood at 41.3 in the same year. Life expectancy at birth has likewise seen impressive gains. In 2021, China’s life expectancy reached 79 years, surpassing that of the United States, which fell to 76 years. In other words, a child born in China today can expect to live longer than one born

in the United States.

China's policies in responding to the COVID-19 health crisis and to the real estate crisis following the collapse of Evergrande are practical examples of the drive for common prosperity. In both cases, the well-being of the community took precedence over market interests. The statement "housing is for living in, not for speculation," made by Wang Menghui, Secretary of the Party Leadership Group and Minister of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, clearly illustrates China's worldview on this matter (Xinhua, 2017).

3.1 Eradication of Poverty and Expansion of the Middle Class

The most celebrated achievement by Chinese authorities has been the massive reduction of extreme poverty: development policies and targeted programs were instrumental in lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty in recent decades (State Council Information Office, 2021). These efforts included resettlement programs, investment in rural infrastructure, training and employment initiatives, and the establishment of social safety nets. The eradication of extreme poverty, officially declared in 2021, is not only an economic milestone but also a pillar of the Chinese Communist Party's political legitimacy (State Council Information Office, 2021).

3.2 Regulation of Capital, Platforms, and the Real Estate Market

In practice, state regulatory policies targeted behaviors in the private sector that, in the government's view, undermined equity and stability. Between 2020 and 2022, regulations were introduced to oversee digital platforms, opaque remuneration practices, abuses in the private tutoring market, and excessive leverage by major property developers (Roberts, 2021; Koty, 2022). These measures also included restrictions on the amount of time minors could spend playing online video games—limiting it to three hours per week under state supervision—in an effort to curb youth digital addiction and prioritize study and educational development over the commercial interests of large technological platforms (Schulz, 2021).

These actions addressed concrete issues: the financialization of housing, the pressure on families due to private education, market concentration in platforms mediating consumption, labor, and financial services, as well as risks to minors' well-being arising from the digital economy. From the official perspective, intervention in these sectors is essential to ensure that wealth generated by the market does not perpetuate growing inequalities or systemic risks (State Council Information Office, 2021).

3.3 Health, Education, and Housing as Pillars of Well-Being

Common prosperity is also operationalized through the expansion of access to public goods: investment in public health, the broadening of medical insurance coverage, the strengthening of public education, and the construction of affordable housing are all part of the strategy. The aim is to lower the costs of essential goods and services, thereby freeing household income to improve the quality of life for large segments of the population (State Council Information Office, 2021).

3.5 Ecological Transition and Environmental Integration in Prosperity

A distinctive contemporary feature is the incorporation of "ecological civilization" as a core component of prosperity. China has announced peak-emission and carbon-neutrality goals, alongside environmental restoration and management programs, which the government presents as inseparable from the imperative to improve quality of life (State Council Information Office, 2021). This integration requires reconfiguring production models, encouraging investment in renewable energy, and promoting sustainable consumption practices. At the same time, it poses challenges in coordinating across levels of government and economic sectors and requires substantial investment for its feasibility.

3.6 From Common Prosperity to Shared Prosperity

Common prosperity is, at its core, a form of shared, collective, and communal prosperity. Indeed, the character 共同 (gòngtóng), usually translated as "common," can be more accurately understood as "shared." In other words, prosperity is not merely common but fundamentally shared. There can be no true individual prosperity in a society where the people as a whole remain poor. Individual wealth is subordinate to collective well-being. This perspective differs substantially from the Western capitalist conception of prosperity, which equates it primarily with individual material wealth.

In this sense, common prosperity reflects the promotion of a new humanism by the current generation of Chinese Communist Party leaders, led by Xi Jinping (Staiano, 2020). It is a vision that places the material and spiritual development of human beings at the center of public policy, offering a civilizational alternative to the Western capitalist worldview that prioritizes private individual interests.

China's concept of common prosperity also challenges interpretations that portray the ongoing transition toward a multipolar order merely as a shift in hegemony, without recognizing the qualitative transformations that China brings in proposing fundamentally different approaches to development, well-being, and justice.

5. COMMON PROSPERITY AND FOREIGN POLICY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND THE “COMMUNITY WITH A SHARED FUTURE FOR MANKIND”

The idea that China's experience in building prosperity can serve as a reference for the Global South is explicitly present in the official rhetoric: the notion of a “community with a shared future for mankind” articulates an international vision in which cooperation, complementarity, and the provision of public goods are central (State Council Information Office, 2021). From the Belt and Road Initiative and the Global Development, Global Security, Global Civilization, and Global Governance Initiatives to technical assistance programs and cooperation in various sectors, China seeks to share its capacity to produce infrastructure and public goods as instruments of shared development.

Indeed, the statutes of the Communist Party of China affirm that “promoting the creation of a community of shared future for mankind and building a harmonious world characterized by lasting peace and prosperity for all are priority goals for the current stage of humanity” (Schulz & Staiano, 2022).

There are concrete channels through which common prosperity could translate into benefits for countries of the Global South: financing for infrastructure (ports, railways, energy), technology transfer and support for local capacity-building, and expanded access to markets driven by China's growing domestic consumption.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The pursuit of common prosperity in China is not merely an economic goal but an integrated project that weaves together historical, philosophical, and political dimensions. Throughout this chapter, we have examined how this concept has been shaped both by the traditions of Chinese thought—such as Confucian harmony and collective well-being—and by the socialist vision that emerged from the 1949 Revolution and was consolidated through successive generations of leaders of the Communist Party of China. Far from being an empty slogan, common prosperity stands as a strategic pillar of the revolutionary process currently led by Xi Jinping.

At the same time, the concept of common prosperity raises a theoretical and civilizational debate. Unlike capitalism, where prosperity is measured in terms of individual accumulation and unrestrained competition, the Chinese model prioritizes collectivity and harmony. This represents a break with the ideological premises of economic liberalism and the affirmation of a humanist vision in which development is not an end in itself but a means to achieve the material and spiritual well-being of the people. In this sense, common prosperity is not only an economic proposal but also a cultural and political alternative that challenges the dominant logics of the global capitalist system.

In conclusion, common prosperity encapsulates the Chinese government's efforts to build an equitable, prosperous, and sustainable society, aligned with the vision of national rejuvenation set for the centenary of the People's Republic of China in 2049. By placing the human being and their integral development at the center of public policies, China offers an alternative that deserves serious consideration—particularly in a historical moment when humanity faces existential challenges such as extreme inequality and the environmental crisis.

In the context of global transitions toward a multipolar order, common prosperity not only redefines the parameters of economic development but also challenges the dominant narratives of the Global North. Beyond criticism and resistance, the Chinese model marks a turning point in the pursuit of a more just, balanced, and sustainable future. The pressing question arising from this experience is whether the rest of the world will be willing to rethink its own notions of prosperity, well-being, and justice in light of the structural changes that China proposes.

Thus, common prosperity is not merely a national project but a global endeavor that calls upon both the peoples

of the Global South and established powers to imagine new horizons of development based on solidarity, equity, and respect for life in all its forms.

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