SINE IRA

BEYOND THE CHINA MYTH

Inside — and Against —
Keyu Jin's
The New China Playbook

MARCO DEUROPA

AD VERITATEM
SINE IRA

First Ad Veritatem edition (Italian): Genoa, 2025
First English-language Ad Veritatem edition: Genoa, 2026

Original title: *La Cina oltre il mito. Dentro e contro The New China Playbook di Keyu Jin.*

© 2026 Luigi Gaggero, English translation and editorial work.

Published under the Ad Veritatem imprint
adveritatem.it

ISBN 979-12-82328-12-8

Contents

Introduction 1

I. Jin's account: promises and ambiguities 5
1. Keyu Jin's New Playbook 7
2. Putting Chinese Meritocracy to the Test 14
3. Explaining the Economic Miracle from Within 21

II. The Chinese model put to the test 29
4. Debt and the Quality of Growth 31
5. The Demographic Challenge 38
6. Innovation and the Limits of Control 45
7. Data, Surveillance, and Digital Authoritarianism 51

III. China and the world: geopolitics of the 21st century 57
8. Economic Competition with the United States 59
9. Europe Between Openness and Dependence 65
10. The Belt and Road and the Global Order 71

IV. Against Jin, with Jin: a critical approach 77
11. What the West Can Learn from China 79
12. The Social Contract and the Security Trap 85
13. Towards a Theory of State Capitalism 92
Conclusion 99
Bibliographical and Documentary References 101
About the Author 104
Other Works by the Same Author at Ad Veritatem 106

Introduction

China has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, built an industrial apparatus of global reach, and attained a leading position in decisive technological sectors. It has achieved this transformation while retaining a political system that concentrates power, restricts dissent, and subordinates the autonomy of institutions to the primacy of the Communist Party. Both facts must find their place within the same analysis. Economic success does not absolve the regime; the nature of the regime does not make its achievements imaginary.

Keyu Jin's *The New China Playbook*, published in 2023, is a valuable interlocutor precisely because it compels us to take the first side of the problem seriously. Her attention to local incentives, entrepreneurship, and social change helps explain how China's development became possible. An account that reduces China to cheap labour, exports, and orders issued from Beijing leaves far too much of what has happened unexplained.

Yet explaining what a system is capable of does not amount to demonstrating that it is sustainable. That is the distinction from which this book proceeds. The mechanisms that have mobilised resources may also protect their inefficient use; the authority that coordinates investment may prevent mistakes from being acknowledged; the stability that underpins expectations may turn into a demand for obedience when those expectations are disappointed. The relationship between growth and control must therefore be reconstructed in its concrete conditions, rather than settled in advance by a judgement in favour of either the state or the market.

My position is critical of the Party's political primacy and of the notion that efficiency can justify power without limits. It is equally critical of the opposite conviction that markets would, of themselves, produce the conditions necessary for their own operation. China forces us to distinguish the public capacity to organise development from the right of a political organisation to dispose of society. Confusing the two weakens both the criticism of authoritarianism and the defence of democracy.

The debate with Jin concerns the relationship between economic explanation and political justification. Her 2023 book supplies the categories to be tested; subsequent data enable us to assess how well they hold up, without attributing to her predictions she did not make.

Part One reconstructs the mechanisms of development and examines the relationship between competence, incentives, and accountability. Part Two considers domestic constraints, distinguishing financial problems from demographic, technological, and informational ones. Part Three

moves the analysis to international relations, where interdependence may create prosperity while distributing power unequally. Part Four addresses the question running through the entire volume: which lessons from the Chinese experience can be transferred elsewhere, and under what conditions a strong state can correct itself.

The aim is not to predict victory or collapse. It is to identify what makes transformation credible and what obstructs it. China will continue to matter even if it grows more slowly; it may innovate in some sectors while wasting resources in others; it may retain popular support without resolving the contradictions in its legitimacy. Understanding it requires the patience to keep these possibilities distinct—and then to show where they meet.

PART I
JIN'S ACCOUNT: PROMISES AND AMBIGUITIES

Keyu Jin's New Playbook



BEYOND THE OPPOSITION BETWEEN SOCIALISM AND CAPITALISM

Keyu Jin's starting point is that the categories ordinarily used to describe China are insufficient to explain how it works. A political structure inherited from socialism coexists with commercial competition, private accumulation, foreign investment, and substantial differences in income. To call the result a planned economy is to overlook the role of firms; to call it an ordinary regulated capitalism is to overlook the Party's power. The title *The New China Playbook* invites us to change the tools of observation before delivering a verdict.

The notion of a third way must, however, be handled with care. It can designate a specific institutional arrangement, or it can become a formula that exempts that arrangement from comparison. All modern economies combine public decisions with private initiative. What distinguishes China is not simply the presence of the state, but the way the rights to decide, to benefit from outcomes, and to challenge decisions are distributed. Ownership of a company, access to credit, and political autonomy are separate

dimensions: none, taken by itself, describes the system as a whole.

The market, too, needs to be defined precisely. Price competition does not imply freedom of entry into every sector; private ownership does not guarantee independence from the authorities; the possibility of becoming rich is not equivalent to the possibility of organising a countervailing power. In China these elements can coexist in combinations that a simple opposition between public and private fails to capture. An entrepreneur may face fierce commercial competition while simultaneously depending on administrative decisions that cannot be challenged on equal terms.

Jin's account deserves credit for making this complexity visible. The system is not driven by central orders alone: it includes local administrations seeking investment, businesses experimenting with products, and households pursuing their own aims. It does not follow, however, that their interests spontaneously converge in a beneficial equilibrium. The cooperation observed during an expansion may conceal distributive conflicts that become evident when losses, rather than new opportunities, must be apportioned.

Two propositions should therefore be kept distinct. The first is historical: China developed without adopting liberal democracy. The second is causal: China developed *because* it lacked democracy. The first is a fact; the second requires proof that a simple comparison of before and after cannot supply. Between the two stand agricultural reforms, commercial opening, education, capital accumulation, and the work of millions of people. The same rigour applies to

criticism: economic deceleration cannot be attributed entirely to authoritarianism merely because it occurs under an authoritarian regime.

THE STRATEGIC STATE AND MARKET AUTONOMY

In the favourable reconstruction of the Chinese model, the state establishes long-term priorities, administrations organise their implementation, and firms compete to carry them out. This combination has an intelligible economic logic. A company may refrain from investing if energy, transport, suppliers, or qualified personnel are lacking; each of those investments may in turn depend on the others already being in place. A public actor capable of coordinating them can make an activity viable that would never get off the ground through isolated decisions.

State capacity includes the ability to overcome this problem. It cannot be reduced to the amount of money spent or the severity of commands: it requires knowledge of the territory, capable administrators, dependable revenues, and continuity of execution. China has developed capacities of this kind. To deny them for political reasons is to give up explaining why some industrial policies have produced results.

But coordination solves a problem of collective decision-making only if the goals are well chosen and the outcomes can be assessed. An administration can also coordinate a misguided investment with great efficiency. When credit, land, and authorisations are channelled into the same sector, a project starts more quickly; when many administrations choose that sector, speed can turn into excess productive capacity. The organisational advantage