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Weidong Hong



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SYNOPSIS

In the next phase of China's reforms, the blueprint to drive it will be the Government of China's path to "Chinese-style Modernisation". In this endeavour, Zhejiang has been assigned as the pioneer province to undertake local experiments under the plan before its implementation at the national level.

COMMENTARY

In September 2023, President Xi Jinping visited Zhejiang and conferred on the province the prestigious title of "[Pioneer in Propelling the Chinese Path to Modernisation](#)". Three months after Xi's visit, Zhejiang's new strategic positioning was officially [acknowledged](#). To date, the province remains the only one to be so honoured by the Central Government. With China's bottom-up, experiment-oriented reform model, senior officials from Zhejiang would likely be dispatched to other provinces to lead the transfer of the province's successful experiences to the rest of the country. Zhejiang's role as China's laboratory for experimenting with and leading Chinese-style modernisation bodes well for its rising significance in China's reforms in political economy.

Through the Lens of China's Experiment-oriented Reforms

Since 1978, China's reforms have followed an experiment-oriented pattern, meaning that the country's reforms usually start with local experiments. Once the local experiment is successful, the proven experience will then be disseminated nationwide in the next stage for implementation across the country.

From the “household contract” responsibility system in Xiaogang Village, Anhui Province, in 1978, to the inception of China’s special economic zones in the 1980s, successful local/regional experiments had spread across the country, paving the way for nationwide opening up and reform in the following decades.

Under this experiment-based pattern, what would be the next experiment to lead in China’s future reforms? The answer is Chinese-style Modernisation. Almost all major policy documents, from the [CPC’s 20th National Congress Report](#) and the [Resolution of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee](#) to China’s upcoming [15th Five-Year Plan](#), have set Chinese-style Modernisation as the impetus for the nation’s rejuvenation. Embellished with labels such as “new quality productive forces”, “common prosperity”, “green development”, and “China’s peaceful rise”, Chinese-style Modernisation as a policy portfolio is portrayed as the key to China becoming a modern country by 2035.

As the only province earmarked by the Central Government to carry out local experiments for Chinese-style Modernisation, Zhejiang’s special role is equivalent to that of Xiaogang Village in Anhui in 1978 and Shenzhen in special economic zone construction in the 1980s. Once the experiment succeeds, the Zhejiang model will be introduced nationwide, providing forward-looking references and practical solutions to other provinces, helping the country achieve modernisation with Chinese characteristics.

The Political Economy of Zhejiang’s Experiment in Chinese-style Modernisation

Zhejiang is an iconic province, for it was where President Xi had previously worked as party secretary for nearly six years. It was in this capacity that President Xi initiated the “Double Eight Strategy” (“八八战略”) policy aimed at generating eight developmental forces by leveraging Zhejiang’s eight advantages. It is worth noting that many of today’s national-level projects related to Chinese-style Modernisation are derived from this “Double Eight Strategy” officially announced in 2003. In this regard, Zhejiang had already conducted the *de-facto* experiment of Chinese-style Modernisation for almost 20 years by the name of “Double Eight Strategy” before the grand plan of Chinese Modernisation was articulated on July 1, 2021, during the centenary celebration of the founding of the Communist Party of China.

Given that it was Zhejiang under President Xi’s administration that gave birth to Chinese-style Modernisation, it establishes the province as the [cradle](#) of the current mainstream ideology of China and closely connecting its performance with the legitimacy of the State and that of President Xi and his team. As the underlying methodology of the current national reforms is closely tied to the practicable policy roadmaps developed by President Xi during his tenure in Zhejiang, the ongoing reforms being carried out at the national level are expected to be sustainable. At this stage, we may wonder why Chinese-style Modernisation as a continuation of “Double Eight Strategy” could last so long in Zhejiang? In other words, what are the costs and benefits of carrying out the Chinese-style Modernisation experiment in Zhejiang?

The long-term cost is conditional and known only when the local experiment fails in Zhejiang. If this is the case, then the state will have to bear the risk of “losing” an economically productive province. However, this is less likely to happen, given that many yesterday’s reforms of “Double Eight Strategy” as the predecessor of Chinese-style Modernisation for the province have already proven successful, and some of them have even been implemented at the national level (See Table).

This is not to say that there is no cost at all for Zhejiang in carrying out this grand experiment since 2003, as some costs may be incurred during its implementation. For instance, one of the five core aspects of Chinese-style Modernisation is “common prosperity”, which demands prioritising equity over efficiency in socio-economic development through second or third-time redistribution. Given the trade-off between social equity and economic efficiency, it may cause temporary fluctuations in Zhejiang’s economic growth during the structural adjustment.

Table: Pioneering Projects of Zhejiang

	The Five Core Aspects of Chinese-style Modernisation	The Five Pioneering Projects in Zhejiang	The Projects (renamed) Promoted to the National Level
Chinese Path to Modernisation	The Modernisation of a Huge Population	Qian Wan Project 千万工程 （千村示范、万村整治）	The National Rural Vitalisation Strategy 乡村振兴战略
	The Modernisation of Common Prosperity for All	Demonstration Zone for Common Prosperity 共同富裕示范区	---
	The Modernisation of Material and Cultural-Ethical Advancement	Develop Zhejiang into A Province with Thriving Culture 建设文化强省	Develop China into A Country with Thriving Culture 建设文化强国
	The Modernisation of Harmony between Humanity and Nature	Two-Mountain Theory 两山理念 （绿水青山就是金山银山）	Beautiful China Initiative 美丽中国建设
	The Modernisation of Peaceful Development	G20 Leaders' Communique Hangzhou Summit 二十国集团领导人杭州峰会公报	Four Global Initiatives 四大全球倡议

Compared to the costs, the benefits to the state for Zhejiang to pioneer in this grand plan are more tangible. By locally testing the projects of Chinese-style Modernisation, the state can verify the plan's validity with fewer risks. If the experiment fails, Zhejiang will be the only province adversely affected. Should it succeed, the entire country will benefit.

That some pioneering reforms of the province have already been promoted to the national level demonstrates that Zhejiang is on the right track and illustrates the benefit of the experiment playing an upper hand over its potential costs, sustaining the willingness of both the state and the province to carry on this local experiment under the blueprint of Chinese-style Modernisation partially originated from yesterday's "Double Eight Strategy".

Conclusion: Implications of Zhejiang's Pioneer Role for China's Future Political Landscape

Following the success of Zhejiang's experiment-oriented reform, the central government is likely to replicate it in other provinces, paving the way for nationwide implementation. How will this be carried out? Would the process influence the landscape of China's politics?

To gain practical experience from Zhejiang's local experiments, the provinces dispatched senior officials on study visits to the province. In the first eight months of 2025, seven provinces, including the Hong Kong SAR and the Macao SAR, had paid for a government study tour of Zhejiang, exclusively to learn the latest practices of "Chinese-style Modernisation" and the rise of the six emerging tech companies ("杭州六小龙") of Hangzhou, the capital city of Zhejiang.

This is gradually transforming Zhejiang's position from that of a laboratory for local experimentation into a national training hub for Chinese-style Modernisation. Zhejiang's veterans in driving Chinese-style Modernisation have become mentors for the rest of the provinces, gradually transforming the province's position from a laboratory to a national training hub. This enhances the possibility of their appointment to senior positions in other provinces thereby better promoting and spreading Zhejiang's experience.

In fact, of the four municipalities in China, three have received officials from Zhejiang as their heads in recent years. These were Chongqing, whose current party secretary, Yuan Jiajun, was the former party secretary and governor of Zhejiang; Tianjin, whose current party secretary, Chen Min'er, had once worked in Zhejiang for over 30 years; and Shanghai, whose current mayor, Gong Zheng, had been the vice governor of Zhejiang and party secretary of Hangzhou.

Taken together, these suggest that the rollout of Zhejiang's experience can potentially influence the senior official appointment mechanism in China, making work experience in Zhejiang a potential prerequisite for future assignments as senior officials in other provinces. Zhejiang may even become another entry gate, alongside Shanghai, for Chinese officials to be promoted to the central government.

Weidong Hong is a recent MSocSc graduate in China and Global Governance at the Nanyang Centre for Public Administration, Nanyang Technological University (NTU). He also holds an MSc in the Political Economy of Europe from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He has interests in Chinese Politics, Historical Political Economy, and Regional Integration.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

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