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## In China, there's a lot to celebrate

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Chinese people around the globe passionately celebrated the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China this month. Maybe this is hard for others to understand. But for the Chinese people, such emotions are rooted in memories of a vastly different China, one whose destiny was not always as promising as it is today.

When the republic was founded on Oct. 1, 1949, political institutions were just starting to be formed. People were hungry. The average life expectancy was 35 years. Infant mortality reached a high of 20 percent. The overall illiteracy rate was 80 percent. There was little organized education, no health care and no means of social security. The national treasury was empty, the economy bankrupt. There was no industry to speak of and little basic infrastructure. Indeed, the Chinese people had endured a century of government mismanagement, political instability, constant civil war and warfare imposed by other countries.

In the six decades since the republic was formed, China's economy has become the world's third-largest. Life expectancy has reached 73 years; infant mortality is down to 1.5 percent. The illiteracy rate has fallen to 5 percent. A nine-year education has become available to all children. Health care and social security are improving. Modern industries are being developed. Roads, railways, airports and ports blanket the country. In the areas of democracy, the rule of law and human rights -- including the rights of 55 minorities -- China has made enormous progress. At no other point in history has so much improvement been made for so many people in such a short period.

How did this happen?

A chief factor was a strong determination to find our own way forward. Even before the downfall of the Qing Dynasty a century ago, China has searched for a way forward. We have tried to learn from the Japanese, the Germans, the Americans and even the Soviet Union, but none of these development models was right. China was too chaotic and too poverty-stricken; it had too large a population and insufficient natural resources. Our nation was too weak to respond to foreign interference. China's challenges required a development model consistent with its culture, history and stage of development.

In China's long history, prosperous times were always associated with a strong and enlightened central government, which has led the Chinese people generally to believe in strong government. Today we have such a government, with clear vision and enlightened policies. While ideological and principled, the government in Beijing has also proved pragmatic and flexible when

necessary. Rather than pursuing short-term politics, Beijing has been able to formulate sound long-term and holistic macroeconomic and geopolitical policies.

China's emergence is also the result of putting people at the center of governance. The government believes that eradicating poverty is fundamental and is the first priority of all development policies. Accordingly, 1.3 billion people have been moved from abject poverty to a much-improved livelihood.

China strongly promotes harmony in diversity as a way forward by emphasizing commonality among different interests to defuse social tension associated with reform and development. China also recognizes the need to better share the fruits of success between the rich and the poor, and among its 56 ethnicities.

As China has opened up to the outside world, its people have realized how increasingly intertwined their destiny is with the rest of the world. China shares the anxiety posed by challenges such as combating global warming, protecting the environment, creating energy security, achieving global financial stability, countering terrorism, preventing nuclear weapons proliferation and stopping the spread of infectious diseases.

Some worry that as China's economic development continues, it will become a hegemonic power. It is noteworthy that at the height of China's economic power some 500 years ago, when it controlled about 30 percent of the world's economy, instead of expanding its might overseas, China sent missions to neighboring countries only for trade and good will. China's tradition of yiheweigui, peace and harmony above all, will ensure that its development objective is for its interest and in the interest of the world.

Also noteworthy is that government efforts have received enormous support from the Chinese people, as demonstrated by the 86 percent satisfaction rating on the direction the country is heading, in the 2008 Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes survey.

China's historic journey continues to shape its future. It is a developing nation of 1.3 billion people, nearly 60 percent of whom live in vast rural areas. It will take decades for China to realize comprehensive modernization. But our 60 years of progress should give the Chinese people confidence in the next 60 years and assure other nations that China will become a greater force for a better world.

*The writer, a former chief executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, is chairman of the China-U.S. Exchange Foundation, a nongovernmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue and openness.*