

Profile of Dr. Kerry Brown

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China's success at slowing the internal spread of the viral contagion COVID-19 raises the question whether autocratic nation states are better equipped than Western democracies to tackle 21st century pandemics.

This position was stated by Kerry Brown, professor of Chinese Studies and director of the Lau China Institute at King's College, London, in a [podcast](#) interview with the Global Summitry Project's Alan Alexandroff, released on March 9th.

“The critical thing is, which one will be able to deal with this issue and control it,” he said in the interview with Alexandroff, director of the Global Summitry Project at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto and senior editor of the publication, *Global Summitry*.

Brown recently shared his views in an online seminar titled “China-West Relations: The Search for a 21st Century Global Order,” hosted by Boston University in March. The private event was moved online after the COVID-19 lockdown and held before a virtual audience of leading experts in the field.

The Lau China Institute is an important centre for Chinese studies in the U.K. and Brown has been the director of the institute since 2015 and a frequent commentator on China and the West.

In an [article](#) for the publication Inside Story, Brown had recently predicted that the coronavirus pandemic would pose a unique “black swan test” for the leadership of Xi Jinping, the president of China.

In a political climate that stifles diversity and relies on unified nationalistic trust in the hands of a strongman like Xi, a lack of critical voice can lead to gaping holes in plans to develop and deliver good governance for the country, he said in the podcast episode.

Brown argues that this is what led to the party’s earlier failure of being unable to detect the pace at which COVID-19, could spread.

Brown alludes to this recent Chinese trend of a pointed assertion of anti-pluralistic authoritarian politics in his recent book *China’s Dream: The Culture of Chinese Communism and the Secret Sources of Its Power*. This is Brown’s 11th book about China and he is undoubtedly a leading scholar in the field.

He suggests that perhaps the lack of pluralistic division of power in the Chinese model of politics was a factor that led to the oversight of not taking the coronavirus seriously in the nascent stages of the contagion’s spread.

In the book, he notes the difference between the inner language of the Communist Party (of China) and the language of the world outside about the party. The new understanding of Chinese nationalism sheds a light on President Xi’s motive to move from a passive ideology of tolerance to a more aggressive stance as an economic superpower without compromising on the party’s importance in the governance model.

This approach, Brown predicts, is being pursued to ultimately attain the Party's centennial goals of 2021 and 2049 respectively. These goals envision a Chinese state that has attained the status of a Xiaokang society. While Xiaokang, roughly meaning "moderately well-off" is an abstract concept, the Communist Party of China has more tangibly defined it as the doubling of 2010's per capita income figures for the country's population by the year 2021.

Brown, a frequent contributor to The New York Times, CNN, Al Jazeera and the BBC, has the unique advantage of being a scholar with diplomatic experience in China. From 1998 to 2005, prior to pursuing research into Chinese foreign affairs, Brown served as head of the China section at the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London and subsequently as first secretary at the British embassy in Beijing in the year 2000. These roles provided him with the critical opportunity to develop a nuanced understanding of China and the Communist Party.

Brown's overarching hypothesis is that despite following drastically different ideological and political structures, "China and the U.S. both want the same things, but go about it in a different way," as he notes in the podcast episode.

This common goal, according to Brown "is to provide good lives for their people." He suggests that despite the animosity that they might show on the global stage, there is an understanding that the other is an entity that needs to be worked with and not against.