

Title: An In/alienable Narrative? Property Rights in China and the West

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ABSTRACT

Private property rights are regarded by modern economists as crucial to the proper functioning of a market system. It is believed that, in the absence of well-defined private property rights, the production and exchange of goods and services is hampered with ramifications for the extent to which an economy can realize its full potential defined in terms of growth and efficiency. This paper challenges the view that an economy is unable to flourish and, in particular, that private enterprise is unable to function, in the absence of well-defined private property rights. The claim is that the narrative of property rights to be found in orthodox (that is, neoclassical) economics is a social construction reflecting modern European experience, aspirations and cultural forms. It fails to take into account the histories and social practices of those countries which have only recently embraced the market as a form of economic organisation. As such, imposition of the narrative constitutes a form of economic and cultural imperialism with the potential to impede processes of self-determination. The results of fieldwork in China are used to demonstrate the range of mechanisms supporting private enterprise in the manufacturing sector.