

**Some Things We Used to Know about China's Past and Present
(But, Now, Not So Much)**

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Conference on History and China's Foreign Relations:
The Achievements and Contradictions of American Scholarship
U.S.-China Institution, University of Southern California
16 February 2008

(Conference draft—**内部资料: 请勿外传, 注意保存**)

American public discourse today about the rise of China and its implications for the United States frequently draws on broad themes and parallels from Chinese history, both to explicate China's present and to project its future. These themes and parallels draw on a picture of the Chinese past that, as recently as 25 years ago, was embraced by many (though by no means all) professional historians and propagated by some of them as the best means to understand contemporary China. But since the 1970s, the community of historians of China has produced work that severely undermines longstanding conventional judgments of China's past. As a consequence, the historical themes and parallels that once were thought useful in illuminating interpretation of contemporary China have been stood on their head.

The professional historical community has thus worked a revolution in understanding of China's past over the past three decades. Nevertheless, the historical themes and parallels that once enjoyed some consensus among historians persist in American efforts to comprehend China's present and project its future. This paper surveys some of the major truths of history that regularly figure into American public

discourse about the rise of China and suggests some of the ways in which they are no longer tenable if the more recent conclusions of professional historians are to be taken seriously. It then assesses some of the reasons for the divergence between the history adduced in American public discourse today about the Chinese present and the history produced by professional historians of China in recent years. Finally, the paper sketches some of the major points of departure for a new narrative of the Chinese past that might better serve interpretation of China's present and future.

China's Past in Current Public Discourse

What follows is a catalogue of four major themes from Chinese history that continue to inform American public discourse about contemporary China and a discussion in each case of how each theme has been subverted by the work of professional historians. Without doubt, there may well be more than four such themes, and so the catalogue might be supplemented with others. These four, however, are critical in producing a framework that has proven to be sufficiently durable to accommodate the sweeping changes that contemporary China has undergone in recent decades. In that regard, they remain as useable today in the post-Deng era as they were in the Mao period.

HISTORICAL TRUTH #1: The Pattern of China's Past

Chinese history before 1911 was just one damned dynasty after another.

Contemporary Corollary: Chinese history since 1949 is best understood as another damned dynasty.

The propensity to see China's history in terms of the long succession of dynasties is understandable for several reasons. As the world's longest continuous civilization, China's 3500-year history presents the immediate dilemma of adopting a framework of periodization that makes this long span manageable. Scaling the Chinese past according to the succession of dynastic regimes resolves the dilemma efficiently. Whether according to the long series of a dozen dynasties that began with the Shang (c.1600 BCE) down through the Qing or, better, simply using the half dozen major dynasties of the imperial era from the Han through the Qing, China's long past is rendered into digestible chunks. Since each dynasty claimed to base its institutions and ideological precedents in some measure on those established by preceding regimes, there is a superficial rationality to this periodization.

Use of such a periodization in American writings grew naturally out of the chronological framework with which the traditional dynastic histories (正史) were written. Since these histories were among the first resources on which the founding generation of American China historians drew, the dynastic framework was easily transplanted chronological framework as the standard in American and other Western scholarship. Textbooks—which in all fields play key roles in synthesizing authoritative “knowledge”—have generally followed it, as has the monumental survey begun in the late 1960s, *The Cambridge History of China*.

Use of the succession of dynastic regimes as the fundamental unit of chronology, however, brings with it a number of faults. First, it invites understanding the dynamic of China's history in terms of a dynastic cycle. According to the Confucian legitimation myth drawn from the Zhou appeal to a "mandate of *Tian*" (天命), the succession of dynasties reflected a recurring cycle of virtue giving way to moral neglect and degeneration. In American historiography, the cyclical succession of dynasties is stripped of the explicit moral judgments of the traditional Confucian rendition, but the American version is a morality tale no less, reflecting a recurring cycle of vigor and competence giving way to incompetence, stagnation, and demise. Despite attempts by many historians to play down the moralistic overtones of the dynastic cycle idea or to break out of it altogether, it has remained a staple in textbook accounts.

For example, the chapter on the Qin and Han in first volume of the watershed textbook by Edwin Reischauer and John King Fairbank, *A History of East Asian Civilization: The Great Tradition*—a textbook that I revere because I cut my own teeth on it long ago in the previous millennium—discounted the validity of the dynastic cycle concept as "a major block to the understanding of the fundamental dynamics of Chinese history." "Even today," the chapter went on, "historians are only beginning to grope their way toward the establishment of such useful generalizations as are afforded in Western history by its divisions into ancient, medieval, and modern periods." Nevertheless,

despite these cautions, the chapter went on at some length to defend the utility of the dynastic cycle in several respects.¹

Similarly, the chapter in its second volume (*East Asia: The Great Transformation*) introduced the events of the 19th confrontation with the Western great powers in these terms:

In the nineteenth century, China slipped into the downward phase of a dynastic cycle, that oft-repeated pattern of initial vigor, subsequent stability, slow deterioration, and eventual collapse which had characterized the administrative and political history of most regimes. By 1800, institutions that had functioned with remarkable stability since the Manchu conquest and the establishment of the Ch'ing dynasty in the seventeenth century were seriously degenerating. At the same time the expanding Western powers began to beat upon the gates and demand the opening of the empire to Western diplomatic contact, trade, and evangelism, all of which were subversive to the old Chinese scheme of things. These two domestic and foreign developments went hand in hand, as the nineteenth century advanced, each abetting the other, until by mid-century the dynasty was in dire peril from the ancient twin perils of "internal disorder and external aggression," which had proved the undoing of so many dynasties before.²

In comparable fashion, the text by Fairbank's student Immanuel C.Y. Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, sums up a survey of symptoms of Qing decline at the end of the eighteenth century, as follows:

All of these signs—administrative inefficiency, intellectual irresponsibility, widespread corruption, debasement of the military, pressures of a rising population, and a strained treasury—reflected the inner workings of the phenomenon known as the "dynastic cycle." Indeed, by 1800 the ruling power had passed its peak and started to decline, making the country vulnerable to the

¹Edwin O. Reischauer and John King Fairbank, *A History of East Asian Civilization*, Vol.1: *East Asia: The Great Tradition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 114-18.

² John King Fairbank, Edwin O. Reischauer, and Albert M. Craig, *A History of East Asian Civilization*, Vol.2: *East Asia: The Great Transformation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 80. The single-volume abridgement preserves the essentials of both of the original volumes' discussions of the dynastic cycle. *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation*, 2nd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 70-73 and 435.

twin evils of internal rebellion and external invasion (*nei-luan wai-ho*) so characteristic of dynasties in their later years.³

The danger here, of course, is that it invites to the impression that each dynasty replicated the previous one. Which is to say: If you've seen one dynasty, you've seen 'em all. Even a cursory study, nevertheless, will demonstrate that the successive imperial dynasties were not cookie-cutter copies of their predecessors, whether with respect to their origin, to their patterns of governance, to the societies, economies, and populations that they governed, or to the external challenges that they faced.

Further, resort to a dynastic cycle to explain the rise and fall of regimes masks the underlying evolutionary trends that both made each dynastic era different from its predecessors and that contributed to its course of decline. For example, work over the past 25 years by scholars on late imperial era, such as Philip Kuhn, Susan Mann, Mary Rankin, William Rowe, and others has contributed a new narrative of the reasons for the Qing's demise that shares little with the hoary cyclical story of dynastic decline. By this new narrative, the imperial state was being overrun by unprecedented challenges to governance posed by domestic commercial expansion and integration into a global trade system after 1550, dramatic population growth, and a steady hollowing out of the reach of the imperial state into a rapidly changing local society by the local elite. That is to say:

³ Immanuel C.Y. Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, 6th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 127. The same paragraph appears in all previous editions of the text, beginning with the 1974 first.

the late imperial order was heading toward revolutionary change even before the West “opened” China.⁴

Setting the dynastic framework aside makes possible alternative approaches to periodization of China’s past according to other criteria that transcend the succession of dynastic regimes. Such an alternative periodization might build on several watershed dates and phases:

- 1600-550 BCE: emergence and decline of the patrimonial soft state;
- 550 BCE-25 CE: the sixth century BCE military revolution and the accompanying state-building transformation;
- 25 CE-755 CE: the rise of a privileged landowning aristocracy and its competition with the claims of centralized empire; the integration of the south;
- 755-1550 CE: the emergence of the commercial transformation and the rise of the examination gentry; and

⁴ Thus, in a wonderfully provocative chapter in the *Cambridge History of China*, Susan Mann and Philip Kuhn wrote: “The early nineteenth century is usually viewed backwards, over the historical shoulder of the events of the 1840s and 1850s—the Opium Wars, the Taiping Rebellion. But it is more accurately understood from a perspective that looks ahead, out of the context of developments of the late eighteenth century...Contemporaries frequently explained what was happening in their society in terms of the dichotomy of ‘public’ (*kung*) and ‘private’ (*ssu*). In their view, the proper realm of public interest, controlled by the government, was shrinking under the encroachment of private interests. These included such obvious groups as the patronage networks, salt smugglers and sub-bureaucratic personnel (clerks and runners), who took the public resources of the state—tax revenues, waterworks projects, grain and salt distribution systems—and transformed them into sources of private profit. Yet the shift from public to private seems to have been more profound than ever these observers realized. Instead of public employment, scholars were now turning to private employment. Instead of using conscripts, the canal system was hiring private laborers. In the place of effete hereditary soldiers, the army rolls were increasingly composed of paid militiamen. Tax collectors purchased their grain from private traders; grain tribute administrators leased boats from private shippers. In other words, commercialization as well as corruption, increasingly social complexity as well as decadence, were among the forces altering Chinese society and the distribution of power within it, on the brink of modern times. As the monarchy lost its capacity to defend its realm against the assertion of private interests, the role of the central government itself in dominating and defining the sphere of public interest was being irreparably damaged.” Susan Mann (Jones) and Philip A. Kuhn, “Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion,” *Cambridge History of China*, Vol.10 Part 1, 160-162.

- 1550-present: accelerating commercialism and global convergence.

This framework builds on long-term trends in political economy and transformations that, in their way, shaped their respective eras decisively. Such a narrative, of course, may present new problems of its own. But note that none of these dates coincides with those of dynastic change: 550 BCE (later Spring and Autumn period in the Eastern Zhou); 25 CE, the restoration of the Han after the Xin interregnum; 755, the mid-Tang; and 1550, the later Ming.

Finally, the propensity to organize China's past according to the rise and fall of dynastic regimes invites treatment of the PRC as the latest in the long succession of dynastic regimes. Such treatment has been irresistible in public discourse about contemporary China. *New York Times* reporter and commentator Nicholas Kristof, for example, resorted to it in the *Sunday Times Magazine* section in projecting China's future only four days after the passing of Deng Xiaoping in 1997:

It was Mr. Deng's genius to cut through the propaganda and chimera of Maoism and thereby save communism in China. His 18-year reign as Chinese Emperor was one of the greatest since the legendary Yellow Emperor who supposedly helped found the nation thousands of years ago, and he rescued the Communist Dynasty when it was tottering after Mao's death. But his own departure leaves the dynasty in fragile shape. The Communist Dynasty, founded by Mao in 1949, has today lost the "mandate of heaven"—the moral authority and popular support

or acquiescence—that gives it legitimacy and enables it to rule. So China may now be approaching a transition not only of emperors but also of dynasties.⁵

Similarly, Ross Terrill draws explicitly on the dynastic cycle in assessing the future trajectory of the PRC in his recent book for a popular readership, *The New Chinese Empire (And What It Means for the United States)*. He identifies “a number of factors prominent in the fall of dynasties that bear on Beijing’s future,” including spreading corruption, succession struggles, farmers’ uprisings, military defeat, “Legalist policies” that “did not satisfy the Chinese people’s moral sense,” rapid population growth, and “isolation of the court.” Each element in this list may be criticized not only from the perspective of whether they accurately apply to trends in the PRC but also with respect to whether they actually were “prominent in the fall of dynasties in the past.” On the former count, for example, succession struggles were ironically a far more destabilizing feature of the early decades of the PRC, under Mao, than they have been since Deng Xiaoping institutionalized the succession procedures that produced the orderly succession of Hu Jintao in 2002-2005 and that are now preparing Xi Jinping to replace Hu in 2012-2015.

On the latter count, Terrill stipulates the following with regard to military defeats as a symptom of dynastic decline in the past:

Early in a dynasty, military victories were numerous. Later, vigor lacked, the cost of campaigns led to excessive tax on farmers, and wars were lost. The Han Dynasty lost battles to the Xiongnu, the Song met defeat at the hands of the Jin, the Qing were beaten by Britain in the Opium War three-quarters way through the dynasty.⁶

⁵ Nicholas Kristof, “The Communist Dynasty Had Its Run. Now What?” *New York Times*, magazine section, 23 February 1997.

⁶ Ross Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire (And What It Means for the United States)* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 320-21. For the broader discussion of the symptoms of dynastic decline, 318-24.

The difficulty here is that neither the Han nor Song examples fit the general pattern Terrill puts forward. The Han did indeed lose battles to the Xiongnu, but these were early in the Han, not late. Thus, Gaozu suffered a crushing defeat (and was nearly captured) at the hands of Modun's Xiongnu federation in 200 BCE, prompting the Han to resort to appeasement (和親) policies with respect to the Xiongnu for the next several decades. Han military successes against the Xiongnu began later in the dynasty, beginning with Wudi's campaigns in 134 BCE, and especially after the Xiongnu federation fractured in 57 BCE. The Northern Song did indeed suffer defeat at the hands of the Jin in 1125-26, but this was only the latest in a long string of military defeats against the Qidan Liao and the Tangut Xixia that went back to the very beginning of the empire's founding. Finally, the Qing defeat at the hands of the British in the Opium War (1839-42) is far more easily attributed to the superior military technology used by the British—including the iron-clad steam-driven *Nemesis*—that marked the advent of the industrial revolution's impact on warfare than it is to the strains of Qing taxation on farmers.

Treatment of the PRC as replicating the imperial regimes of China's history requires massive, cringe-inducing distortions of both the past and present to accomplish. That leads to a second major parallel drawn between China's past and present.

HISTORICAL TRUTH #2: The Nature of the Chinese State

The imperial state possessed monolithic, authoritarian, even totalitarian capacities.

Contemporary Corollary: The PRC state builds on the monolithic, authoritarian/totalitarian capacities of the imperial state.

Those who draw these parallels argue that Mao and his successors in the PRC have ruled in the fashion of the great emperors of the traditional past, that Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought has played the same all-encompassing ideological role that Confucianism did in traditional times, and that the PRC bureaucracy and the CCP cadres who staff it govern China today as did the imperial bureaucracy and the “gentry” did in traditional times. Fairbank himself noted these similarities and others in his 1966 essay in *Foreign Affairs*, “The People’s Middle Kingdom.” Though he cautioned that there were also striking discontinuities between the communist political order and those of the imperial past, he left little doubt about which he thought paramount.⁷

More recently, Nicholas Kristof defended the utility of viewing the PRC’s top leaders as emperors. “It may seem odd,” he stated, “to speak of China’s leaders today as emperors, but that historical lens is probably the most useful in explaining their behavior.” Drawing on the dynastic cycle narrative of the declining ability of successive emperors as a dynasty waned, he went on:

Mao was a classic dynastic founder, and Mr. Deng was a strong ruler too. But Jiang Zemin, the stocky, bespectacled and totally uncharismatic “weather vane” which Deng picked in 1989 to be the next emperor, is almost immediately recognizable as the kind of emperor who belongs at the tail end of a dynastic cycle—if he becomes any kind of emperor at all.⁸

⁷John King Fairbank, “The People’s Middle Kingdom,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.44 No.4 (July 1966), 574-586.

⁸Nicholas Kristof, “The Communist Dynasty Had Its Run. Now What?”

Similarly, Ross Terrill depicts Mao Zedong as the “red emperor” presiding over a more effective version of the monolithic imperial state in terms of its organization reach, its pervasive ideological doctrine, and its “teleology of history.”⁹

The problem with such comparisons and parallels is that they illuminate less than they obscure. On closer examination, the imperial state shows far greater discontinuities with the contemporary Chinese state than it does continuities. For example, despite the connotations of despotism that come to mind when thinking of the position of emperor in traditional times, emperors were more often than not weak figures in the politics of their courts. In the politics of the early imperial regimes, emperors were frequently overshadowed by their prime ministers, by their empresses and their clans, and by powerful court factions. While the later imperial regimes witnessed a consolidation of autocratic power in the hands of the emperor, especially in the Ming, following the Hu Weiyong affair in 1381,¹⁰ emperors in the Ming and the Qing more often reigned than actually ruled. As Beatrice Bartlett has shown in her painstaking analysis of the creation and consolidation of the Qing Grand Council in the eighteenth century, emperors had to engage in institutional tinkering between their inner and outer courts, manipulate factions in a court balance of power, and recruit allies among the constituencies at the court in order to impose their rule on their own courts. With the exception of a few, such as the Yongzheng Emperor (1722-1735), most failed at this. “Although in many cases a mature Ch’ing autocrat could impose his will if he so desired, there were indubitably a great

⁹Ross Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire (And What It Means for the United States)*, 119-124.

¹⁰ Frederick W. Mote, “The Growth of Chinese Despotism,” *Oriens Extremus*, No.8, 1-41.

many more occasions when the much vaunted powers of Ch'ing autocrats were successfully thwarted by official coalitions or simply not exercised at all," Bartlett concludes. "In fact," she continues, instead of supporting what has been viewed as the increasing imperial despotism of the eighteenth century, the rise of the Grand Council created a government that could run effectively whether or not a strong monarch prevailed in Beijing."¹¹

Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and their successors, of course, faced struggles for power of their own in asserting dominant power in CCP politics. (Having build a career of dissecting CCP leadership struggles, I readily acknowledge this parallel, as superficial as it is.) But the authority of these leaders and the ideology-driven mechanics of power in the CCP differ fundamentally from those in imperial politics. No analog of the *Quotations of Chairman Mao* comes to mind at any point in the imperial era, nor are there clear precedents in traditional times for mobilization of a mass movement to unseat rivals in the leadership decision-making bodies as occurred in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. While the cult of personality around Mao erected in the late 1950s and taken to hideous extremes in the 1960s is often cited as drawing on a cult of the emperor in traditional times, a glance at the connotations of the examples of political iconography below ought to give pause:

¹¹ Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers: The Grand Council in Mid-Ch'ing China, 1723-1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 277-78.



The Kangxi Emperor (1661-1722)



Mao Zedong (and Lin Biao) (1968)

In the same vein, the contrast between the roles of the political elite in each state is stark. In the PRC's "revolutionary" phase down to 1978, CCP cadres served the twin purposes of social transformation—"waging class struggle" to create achieve egalitarian social goals—and economic modernization. For these purposes, the institutional system and scope of cadre activism penetrated to the very foundations of Chinese society, far beyond anything dreamed of in imperial times. Since 1978, when the PRC entered its "post-revolutionary" phase with the 11th Central Committee's Third Plenum, the former goal of social transformation has been discarded, or perhaps postponed indefinitely pending achievement of the latter goal of development. In step with this, a "zone of indifference," to borrow Tsou Tang's apt term, has emerged in state-society relations. But there remains no doubt about the ability of the state to reach into basic levels of contemporary Chinese society or of the awareness of China's citizens of the state's

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capacity to do so. In short, the PRC has capacities of social penetration, mobilization, and integration far beyond anything imaginable in the late imperial era.

The imperial state shared neither of the CCP regime's goals. As scholarship by several scholars has shown since Zhang Zhongli's path-breaking work in the 1960s, the late imperial state was instead dedicated, in principle at least, to Confucian notions of "benevolent minimalist" governance. In late imperial times, the reach of the state was short and growing shorter as China under the Qing entered the nineteenth century. Faced with the alternative of expanding the imperial bureaucracy to keep pace with accelerating economic, demographic and social change, the imperial state opted instead to rely on minimalist mechanisms of gentry brokerage to govern an increasingly diverse and complex local society. The symbiotic balance between the prerogatives of the imperial state and the gentry—who played dual roles politically, both facilitating imperial governance in local society but also buffering it—began to tip decisively in the latter's favor.

In sum, insistence on the purported parallels between patterns of rule in the imperial era and in the communist period is simplistic and misleads fundamentally. And it obscures the critical discontinuities in politics that ought to inform an accurate understanding of the communist political order and its likely evolution.

HISTORICAL TRUTH #3: China's Foreign Relations Outlook

In traditional times, China practiced a moralistic foreign policy based on the presumed superiority of Chinese civilization and on premises of self-sufficiency until Britain “opened” China in the Opium War.

Contemporary Corollary: PRC foreign policy has since 1949 reflected a moralistic “middle kingdom” outlook, sought self-sufficiency and, severely limited foreign influences in China.

This parallel drawn between China’s contemporary foreign relations outlook and practices and those of the imperial past enjoyed a particular heyday in American discourse in the early decades of the PRC. Fairbank himself drew them in his 1966 *Foreign Affairs* piece, as suggested by its very title: “The People’s Middle Kingdom.” For example, in assessing Beijing’s scathing rhetoric against both the USSR and the United States in the 1960s, he suggested that:

...the vehemence of Peking’s denunciations of the two outside worlds that now encircle the embattled People’s Middle Kingdom (*Jen-min Chung-kuo*) seems more than “ideological” in the usual sense of the term. Such impassioned scorn, such assertive righteousness, also echo the dynastic founders of ages past.

Noting that Beijing’s strident nationalism amounted to “sinocentrism in modern dress,” he concluded that “Peking’s intractable mood comes out of China’s history, not just Lenin’s book.”¹²

But these parallels have had staying power down to the present. Ross Terrill’s indictment of “the new Chinese empire” reiterates many of them in assessing Beijing’s

¹² John King Fairbank, “The People’s Middle Kingdom,” 585-586.

approach to foreign relations today. In his chapter “Imperial Goals and Modes,” for example, Terrill seems continuity in the foreign policies of the PRC today and dynastic empires as far back as the Qin:

As early as Qinshihuang, there existed a Chinese foreign policy doctrine using both Legalism and Confucianism. After maximizing domestic power, the emperor looked abroad, to ward off foes and procure good horses for antinomad wars. Into this framework it is possible to fit much of the PRC’s mercantilism, insistence on independence, bureaucratic caution, and obsession with the unity and security of China’s territory.

And further:

Defining traits of Chinese foreign policy include: Difficulty in practicing give and take with other nations; open compromise occurs but it comes hard. Small interest in international solutions to problems; a preference for warding them off. Capability of caving in—the other side of the coin from high arrogance—when stonewalling proves counterproductive. Wariness of “enemies,” against which the Chinese *jia*, as a vast household, must do battle. All of these traits stem from the hierarchical, Us-and-Them nature of the Chinese dynastic state.¹³

Another example of the use of such parallels comes from a well-reviewed and in most respects solid textbook on contemporary China’s foreign relations by two political scientists, who offer a summary of China’s traditional foreign policy outlook and practices that is breathtaking in its generality:

Except for seven maritime voyages of exploration between 1405 and 1433, in which Chinese ships sailed as far as the Middle East and Africa, China did not seek information about the outside world. It neither fought external wars nor searched for external markets, and foreigners who came to China were welcome so long as they accepted the superiority of Chinese civilization. Those peoples such as the Mongols (1279-1367) or the Manchus (1644-1911) who dared to invade China and establish their own dynasties were quickly sinicized. The Chinese nation could easily afford to practice what today would be called an

¹³Ross Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire (And What It Means for the United States)*, 263-264.

isolationist foreign policy. All under heaven could be found within the Middle Kingdom.¹⁴

From a historian's perspective, there are so many problems with this summary that it is hard to know where to start. But perhaps the following tally of objections may suggest the scale involved:

- *Traditional China practiced isolationism?* This notion ought to seem patently nonsensical at the outset, given China's geographical location as a huge empire sharing continental frontiers with Inner, Northeast, and Southeast Asia. No Chinese regime attempted to wall itself off from its neighbors because it was a practical impossibility. Instead, Chinese regimes of necessity practiced activist policies toward their neighbors and, as in the case of the "cosmopolitan" Tang, regions beyond.
- *Invading peoples were quickly sinicized?* This would be a difficult case to make with respect to the fortunes of the Northern Wei Emperor Xiaowen's reforms in the 490s, for example, and even harder to make with respect to the Mongol regime, which did not get around to restoring the examination system until 1313, nearly 40 years after the conquest of the Southern Song. And contrary to the longstanding view that the Manchus were assimilated and soon indistinguishable from Han Chinese, recent work by Crossley, Rawski, Elliott and others has shown that, as adept as the Manchus were in utilizing Chinese institutions and practices to govern China proper, they also sought to preserve their Manchu identity.

¹⁴ (John R. Faust & Judith F. Kornberg, *China in World Politics: Policies, Processes, and Prospects* (Boulder: Lynne Reiner: 1995), 12; also in the text's second edition (2005), 10.

- *Chinese did not seek external markets?* This conclusion would seem to ignore, among other things, the commercial motivations for Han expansion along the traded routes around the Tarim Basin as well as the junk trade with Southeast Asia and points beyond that developed from the Tang forward. In the latter regard, an unfortunate consequence of the attention that the spectacular fifteenth century voyages of the Ming eunuch Zheng He has garnered is that, ironically, it has left the impression that China has no tradition of maritime commerce. One wonders in that instance where early Ming shipbuilding expertise came from.
- *Chinese did not fight foreign wars?* The authors would do well to study the military history of the Song, which maintained an army of, by some estimates, of a million professional soldiers and which devoted some 80 percent of the imperial treasury to military expenditures. The historical reality is that Chinese regimes fought wars almost constantly across the span of the imperial era and before.
- *Chinese did not seek information about the outside world?* Forget the diplomatic and information gathering mission of Wudi's emissary Zhang Qian late in the second century. Forget the translation projects of early Buddhist pilgrims such as Faxian and missionaries such as Kumarajiva. Simply spend a little time sampling the range of Chinese interest in and taste for foreign material objects, styles, and ideas in the Six Dynasties and Tang eras.¹⁵

¹⁵ As places to start: Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Sextants of Beijing: Global Currents in Chinese History* (New York: W.W. Norton: 1999), 11-37; Albert Dien, *Six Dynasties Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), various sections; S.A.M. Adshead, *Tang China* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), chapters 3 and 5; and the massive compilation by Hans Bielenstein, *Diplomacy and Trade in the Chinese World, 589-1276* (Boston: Brill, 2005).

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Even were these parallels valid in light of historians' current judgments about China's past, they do not well suit contemporary Chinese foreign policy. In fact, their validity seems more and more dubious as time goes on, given China's massive engagement with the present international order. Nor, on reflection, do they seem to fit the earlier decades of PRC foreign relations. The shrillness of Beijing's denunciations of Moscow and Washington in the 1960s comported with the tone of other parties in the inter-communist polemics of the period and, to my ear, was easily surpassed by the vituperative attacks on Moscow and Washington by Albania, not usually thought of as an inheritor of Chinese tradition. In addition, Beijing's penchant for "self-reliance" was in context making a virtue out of necessity, given the American economic embargo of the PRC and the strains in PRC-Soviet trade after 1960. The PRC's year-on-year trade statistics show, to the contrary, that when China after 1949 could trade, it did.

HISTORICAL TRUTH #4: China's View of World Order

China was Asia's traditional hegemonic power.

Contemporary Corollary: China today seeks to become again the hegemonic power of Asia (Blue team: And maybe the whole world!!!!)

The most extended development of this perspective is probably Blue Teamer Steven Mosher's jeremiad *Hegemon: China's Plan to Dominate Asia and the World*, in which he announces his thesis:

The Hegemon is deeply embedded in China's national dreamwork, intrinsic to its national identity, and profoundly implicated in its sense of national destiny. An unwillingness to concede dominance to any foreign power is deeply rooted in

China's imperial past as the dominant power of Asia and in the ongoing certainty of the Chinese that they are culturally superior to other peoples.¹⁶

Depending on how one defines a "hegemon," there is some validity to this truth. In cultural terms, China was the cultural center of East Asia for much of the time since great Tang florescence. Beginning in that era, Chinese became the written language of official correspondence and elite discourse in Taika and Nara Japan, in Korea under unification under Silla in 668, and even earlier in Annam, and remained so for the next millennium and longer. Chinese imperial institutions were borrowed in Asuka and Nara Japan and in different degrees by successive Korean regimes—though especially by Yi after 1393, to enhance centralized rule, though with adaptation to indigenous social and political realities. Possessing a civilization already two millennia old by the time centralized regimes emerged in Japan and Korea, China was seen as the fount of authoritative knowledge. In those respects, China was and remained the region's cultural hegemon until the modern era.

In some sense, China was the economic hub, if not hegemon, of the region for a comparably long time. As the center of trade via the Silk Road as well as maritime routes through the South China Sea and up the western Pacific to Korea and Japan, China was the economic engine that drove much of the region's commerce. By the later 16th century, if not earlier, China was linked into a global trade network that now included trans-Pacific trade bringing New World silver via the Spanish entrepot at Manila after 1571

¹⁶ Steven W. Mosher, *Hegemon: China's Plan to Dominate Asia and the World* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), 1.

and the entry of other European maritime traders into longstanding routes through the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia long dominated by Chinese and Arab traders.

But in the sense that is usually implied by assertions of China's "hegemony" in traditional times—military domination—China was not the hegemonic power for most of the time. Over the last thousand years of imperial Chinese history—with the exception of the Hongwu and Yongle reigns in the early Ming—Chinese regimes were almost constantly on the defensive against their Inner Asian neighbors. More than a third of that millennium—the 89 years of Mongol rule in China and the 268 years of the Manchu Qing—China was subsumed under foreign empires. On its part, the Song was from its founding on the defensive against the Qidan Liao in the northeast, against the Tangut Xixia in the Gansu corridor, and against the Nanzhao kingdom of Dali in the southwest. For a time, it was forced to acknowledge Liao suzerainty, and it paid tribute both to the Liao and the Xixia. It lost power in North China in 1125 when an alliance with the rising Nuzhen Jin to break the Liao hold on the "16 prefectures" backfired, and the Jin turned on the Song, sacking Kaifeng in 1126 and forcing the regime to retreat southward, inaugurating the "southern Song." After the far-reaching campaigns of the Yongle reign and with the rise of the Oyrat challenge to the north in the 1440s, the Ming did not again campaign effectively into Inner Asia and was confined to the traditional Chinese core region for its duration until it succumbed to the Manchu invasions in the 1640s.

Although it has long been argued that the Manchus were thoroughly assimilated into Chinese ways and it is true that the Europeans arriving after the Manchu conquest

thought of the Qing as “China,” recent scholarship has challenged these ideas. Work by Pamela Crossley, Susan Naquin, Evelyn Sakakida Rawski, Mark Elliott and others have argued that the Manchus were careful to sustain the distinctiveness of Manchu identity separate from that of China. Other work has broken down the assumed identity of the Qing empire with China, showing rather that China was one component of a more complex Manchu empire that included regions not previously incorporated into Chinese empires on any long-term basis and that was administered with multiple techniques of governance drawn from traditions indigenous to those regions.

For these reasons, the notion that China is Asia’s traditional hegemon is misleading and requires careful qualification. The assertion, therefore, that Beijing today seeks to restore a position of regional hegemon that it once enjoyed but that it lost in the confrontations with the Western great powers in the nineteenth century and after is fundamentally anachronistic.

Whence the Divergence?

Why have the older parallels drawn in the 1950s and 1960s between China’s long past and the PRC regime persisted in American public debate today about China’s rise and its implications for the United States ahead? Why has the more recent work of the professional historians of China had so little visible impact on the way American policy-makers and public commentators think about China today? There may be several reasons.

For one thing, the relationship between history on one hand and politics and policy on the other is not straightforward. One might think that the relationship ought to be linear: new information and understanding of China's past should translate directly into new understanding of China's present and into new, better informed policies to deal with it.

This view of the didactic value of history--the idea that study of the past may inform the present and assist projection of the future—is a commonplace, not only in the United States. In traditional China, the idea that history is a guide to present action and, especially, a guide to conduct of government has been an abiding motivation for historians. This didactic role is emphasized, for example, both in the title of one of China's greatest works of historiography, Sima Guang's *A Comprehensive Mirror for Aiding Government* (資治通鑑) and in the circumstances by which the work acquired it. Sima's original title for his work was *A Comprehensive Record* (通誌). In 1066, however, he presented a portion of his still incomplete work to the Song emperor Yingzong, who thereafter enjoined him to complete it. In 1067, after Sima read the completed work aloud to Yingzong, who wrote a preface for the work and gave it the title by which the work has since been known.¹⁷ In his preface, Yingzong elaborated on his use of the metaphor “mirror” for history, deriving it from a line from a poem in the *Book of Songs* (詩經). As translated by Arthur Waley, the line reads, “A mirror (鑑) for Yin is

¹⁷ E.G. Pulleyblank, “Chinese Historical Criticism: Liu Chih-chi and Ssu-ma Kuang,” in W.G. Beasley and Pulleyblank, eds., *Historians of China and Japan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 153-54.

Yingzong's preface may be found in *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976 reprint of 1956 edition), 31-32.

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not far off; it is the time for the lord of Xia,” meaning that the times of a preceding era offer the rulers of the present era lessons to be drawn in the conduct of government. In the PRC, of course, historical materialism promised scientific methods of analyzing the universal laws of history that, in the hands of a vanguard leadership, enabled policies that would aid the progress of humanity.

Nevertheless, the relationship between history and politics is not in fact linear, nor does it act solely in one direction. It is a commonplace in communist countries the past changes constantly to adjust to shifts in the political present. A probably apocryphal but no less true account of a Soviet academic conference on historiography during the Khrushchev thaw depicts one party historian rising to declare, “Comrades! The present situation is excellent; the future is bright; it’s just the past we’re uncertain about.” In the PRC, where Mao Zedong’s watchword that “the past must serve the present” (古为今用) prevailed, the shape of the Chinese past has been repeatedly recast in step with the twists and turns of contemporary ideology and politics. Zeng Guofan, the self-strengthening leader of the Hunan Army, has been both a representative of the landlord class who butchered the progressive peasantry and a progressive reformer who sought to strengthen China against Western encroachment. Lin Zexu, the imperial commissioner who implemented the Daoguang court’s ban on the opium trade, has been both a representative of the traitorous Qing elite who failed to rally local peasant resistance to the British and a far-sighted statesman who understood the challenges of Western military power. Qinshihuangdi has been both an outstanding leader who unified China’s first empire out of the chaos of the Warring States era and, like another great “unifier” of

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the contemporary period, a leader whose great achievements were offset by tragic mistakes.

In the United States, where the pursuit of objective knowledge of the past and the subjective priorities of politics in the present are supposedly separate realms, the past nonetheless serves the political present. However much history may inform the judgments of policy-makers, it is also true that politics shapes the history that historians create. This has been particularly true with respect to the study of China in the United States.

The long prevailing American narrative of “modern Chinese history” has been the story of the Chinese revolution. Produced by the first two generations of postwar American China scholars, the vast majority of “modern China” historiography sought directly or indirectly to explain why communism succeeded in China, of all places, and to assess the degree of Western responsibility for it.

Two key dates structured this narrative: 1840, marking the Opium War, after which China had to respond to the stimulus of the West; and 1949, marking the communist victory. Before 1840, Chinese history unfolded within China’s “great tradition”; after that date, China was forced to change and adapt to pressures outside that tradition. The Opium War demonstrated the inadequacies of China’s traditions for the modern world, and so to survive, China would have to reject its traditions. That is to say, China’s survival required a revolutionary response. China’s “modern history” is therefore the story of the 1949 revolution as the outcome of this long struggle.

The Taiping rebellion of the 1850s and early 1860s marked the “first phase” of this long revolution and signaled the locus of the coming revolution in rural society. The Tongzhi restoration’s failed attempt to ground modernization on a platform of Chinese tradition proved “with a rare clarity that even in the most favorable circumstances there is no way in which an effective modern state can be grafted onto a Confucian society.”¹⁸ The restoration leadership was “facing the past instead of facing China’s new future creatively,” and “the very strength of their conservative and restorative effort inhibited China’s responding to Western contact in a revolutionary way.”¹⁹ The 1898 reform movement, inspired by Kang Youwei’s radical New Text-based reinterpretation of Confucianism, demonstrated the same truth.

After repeated trials and failures, the communist victory in 1949 brought to culmination the century-long revolution, launching a new political and social order inspired by the Western stimulus but made by the Chinese themselves. In essential ways, however, the revolutionary regime recapitulated aspects of the traditional past. Mao ruled autocratically in a fashion reminiscent of Qinshihuang, Ming Taizu, and other founding emperors of the great dynasties of China’s traditional past. Communist Party cadres staffed out the PRC’s mammoth bureaucracies and waged factional warfare at Mao’s court in ways that recalled the literati-bureaucrats and imperial bureaucracies of the past. As the imperial state had in traditional times, the communist state penetrated

¹⁸ Mary C. Wright, *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism: The T’ung-chih Restoration, 1862-1874* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 300.

¹⁹ John King Fairbank, *The United States and China*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 141; *ibid.*, 3rd edition (Harvard University Press, 1971), 170; *ibid.*, 4th edition (Harvard University Press, 1979), 193; *ibid.*, 4th edition enlarged (Harvard University Press, 1983), 193; and *China: A New History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 214.

deeply into Chinese society. Communist Party cadres propagated a unifying Marxist-Leninist ideology down to grassroots levels in a manner that recapitulated the role played by the traditional gentry in integrating local society with the social glue of Confucianism. Not surprisingly, therefore, the foreign policy pronouncements of the “people’s middle kingdom” likewise recapitulated aspects of imperial China’s ways of conducting external relations in traditional times.

For a long time, this narrative of modern Chinese history as the story of China’s long revolution dominated American historiography. Major works arguing this line of interpretation became classics in the field. This interpretation provided the intellectual and historical backdrop against which PRC’s domestic politics and foreign policies have long been evaluated, and it remains the basis for those outside the China field who seek to use China for comparative work.

In many ways, this dominance made sense. It made Chinese history intelligible in explaining the great event of the postwar era, the 1949 revolution. It provided a highly productive research agenda for a fledgling academic field. But it was also useful in providing an alternative, balancing explanation in the charged political context of the “who lost China” debates of the day. A narrative of Chinese history that explained the Chinese revolution in *Chinese* terms was thus politically useful in countering the political argument that the communist revolution of 1949 reflected a victory for Soviet expansionism in China. All of which is to say, this narrative of China’s modern history and the conclusions that might be drawn from it in assessing the politics and foreign

relations of the PRC derived not simply from the best judgments of professional China historians of the day but also from their political perspectives and their hopes for political relevance in their day.

But why has this narrative persisted in public discourse about China today, long after historians' views about China have evolved? As argued above, it is not that the changes in historians' views have been small. They have been revolutionary:

- First, the historiography of late imperial and modern China in the last 20 years has taken an increasingly evolutionary, society-centered turn that has significantly modified, severely altered, and in some respects completely overturned foundational judgments of the older state-centered historiography of revolution. On such questions as the reach of the late imperial state into society, the role of cities and commerce in the Ming and Qing economy, the degree of social diversity and change, the domination of the gentry in local society, the monolithic hegemony of Confucian culture, and the power of the emperor in regime politics, the new historiography has inverted longstanding conclusions about state-society relations in late imperial times.
- Second, proceeding from William Skinner's mid-1960s analysis of regional market systems, the new historiography disaggregates China. Many historians no longer find it convenient or comfortable to speak in generalizations about "China," but rather focus on "macroregional" cores that possessed distinctive economies, dialects, and regional and local cultures. In the opposite direction, past generalizations about "China" now appear not to have taken sufficient

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account of how much China changed shape over time.²⁰ The PRC's present geographical extent reflect the frontiers established during the spectacular episode of 18th century Manchu expansionism, which were then hardened into fixed national boundaries following the imposition of the Western nation-state system onto Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries. Setting aside China's incorporation into the Mongol khanates in the Yuan era aside, this marked the largest geographical extent of "China," encompassing an area twice the size of Ming China.

- Third, historiography of imperial and modern China is no longer as sinocentric as it once seemed. Writings by Wills, Hevia, Atwell, and others have shown that late imperial China's interactions with other societies were far more complex and diverse than as portrayed in the earlier portrait of traditional China an isolationist realm whose foreign interactions were conducted primarily through the tribute system. In addition, the old argument about the merits of "sinology," area studies, and the traditional Western social science and humanities disciplines has given way to (or perhaps fostered) comparative approaches that unite the models of historical change in the West with an apprehension of the unique and indigenous patterns and trends of a more "China-centered" approach, and an appreciation of

²⁰ Even the contemporary Chinese term for what Westerners have called China—"Zhongguo"—and which they commonly take to mean "the Middle Kingdom" is modern (19th century) neologism, as a cursory survey of the semantic history of the term in the OED-like *Hanyu Dacidian* and Morohashi's *Dai Kanwa Jiten* suggests. The term "zhongguo" dates at least back to the Eastern Zhou era, but among several meanings, it then signified the "central states" of the Yellow River plain in the Zhou ruling coalition, not the "middle kingdom." It appears to have retained that sense down through the early Qing. The earliest cited usage of the term to signify "China" is by Lin Zexu in the 19th century. *Hanyu Dacidian (suoyinben)* (Shanghai: Hanyu Dacidian Chubanshe, 1995), Vol.1, 606; and *Dai Kanwa Jiten*, Vol.1, 297. Cf. also Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy, eds., *Cambridge History of Ancient China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 993-995; and Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual*, revised edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 132.

the particular skills that traditional sinology brought to bear together with a broader effort to set China in world history.²¹

- Fourth, all of these trends have in combination undermined the chronological propensity to generalize broadly about “traditional” China versus “modern” and “contemporary” China. As discussed above, the previous historiography invited an impression of imperial China as one long succession of repetitive dynastic cycles, limited change within tradition, and perhaps ultimate stagnation. The assertion of parallels and continuities between past and contemporary China rested on bold generalizations across 2,000 years of imperial history, extracting seemingly enduring truths for comparison with a few decades of the PRC present, and so abetted this impression. Later historiography, in contrast, is producing a finer-grained sense of dynamism and change that challenges the older periodization of the imperial past, tracing out long spans of demographic, economic, and social trends that transcend the political boundaries provided by the rise and fall of dynastic houses. The periodization proposed above on pages 7-8 builds on some of these.

Given the scope of change in American historiography on traditional China, therefore, the remarkable thing is how little it has affected public discourse on China or, for that matter, academic analysis of China after 1949. There may be several reasons for

²¹ On the merits of sinology versus the traditional Western academic disciplines, see the debate in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.23 No.4 (August 1964, 505-538 and Vol.24 No.1 (November 1964, 109-114). The landmark exposition on China-centered historiography and critique of the “stimulus-response” approach is Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). On a world history perspective, see the salutary essays in Lynn Struve, ed., *The Qing Formation in World Historical Time* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

this lack of impact, but the main reason may be the disciplinary division of labor in China studies as the field developed. Those studying China before 1949 have been and remain almost exclusively historians, while the field of study of China after 1949 is overwhelmingly populated by political scientists and their dubious ilk. In a real sense they have become separate fields that require different skills, speak in different vocabularies, and so appear to address different research agendas. It is natural therefore that they have hardened into self-sufficient communities that, like walled kingdoms, enjoy only occasional and incidental contact. Pursuing different agendas and asking different questions, neither community seems to read the other's work very much. As a consequence, historians until recently rarely ventured across the forbidding 1949 boundary, while those engrossed in analyzing contemporary China seem largely unaware how radically the historical experience they sometime generalize from has been revised. Historians rarely write for popular audiences and apply their research insights to contemporary issues. Political scientists do frequently write trade books for broader audiences, but many continue to draw on the older narrative of China's past that they may have studied briefly in "rice paddies" surveys that they took while embarking on the quest for universal laws of human political behavior during undergraduate and graduate studies.

The ideas and perspectives of neither historians nor political scientists as academics have any perceptible impact on policy-making. Both disciplines remain medieval guild-like communities whose respective scholarly agenda and discourse are driven by internal concerns of tenure, status within the community, and making

recognized contributions to the ongoing conversation among credentialed professionals, whether in journals, at conferences, or hallway conversations. Historians write in a style inverted from the concise, Kiplinger newsletter style—preferably on one page and bulleted--sought by policy-makers, beginning with observations on some seemingly arcane incident or artifact and then building through intricate prose and evidence to a grand conclusion at the end. Political scientists focus their China research on advancing the latest frontiers of theory, often resorting to axioms and lemmas, Markov chains and partial differential equations, and Jacobian matrices and statistical regression analysis. As insightful as work in either discipline may be, policy-makers simply do not have time or patience to slog through historians' tomes or abstruse political science journals. In 18 years' service in the intelligence community and regular interactions with the American policy community, I never once observed a single instance in which a policy-maker sat back and pondered which IR theory best accounts for the issue of the day in U.S.-China relations or noticed a policy-maker toting around a volume of the *Cambridge History of China*. The demands of their work is too tightly focused on the concrete problems of American relations with Beijing, too much driven by the pressures of absorbing information from a titanic flood of open and classified sources, and too much shaped by the need to address immediate issues to take in a perspective longer than, say, a couple of weeks at best.²² As a consequence, as Ernest May concluded in a thoughtful analysis of the use of history in American foreign policy in the 1960s:

Potentially, history is an enormously rich resource for people who govern...such people usually draw upon this resource haphazardly or thoughtlessly. By and

²² On the pressures faced by policy-makers and the irrelevance of academic work, see the essays on "Bridging the Gap Between the Academic and Policy Worlds" by Kenneth Lieberthal, Robert Sutter, and Ezra Vogel in *Asia Policy*, No.1 (January 2006), 7-15, 25-30, and 31-34.

large, those of us professionally occupied in teaching and writing history have put out little effort to help them.²³

Finally, the longstanding parallels and themes between China's past and present persist because they continue to be politically useful. In part, this may be because there is a peculiarly fungible slipperiness about what is taken for Chinese "tradition." China's historical experience is so vast and varied that elements of it may be plucked out and applied as evidence of continuity between past and present, whether it is true to context or truly representative or not. In some measure, Fairbank was guilty of this himself in his most appealing and justly influential effort to make China's past serve America's present, his book *The United States and China*. Published in four editions (1948, 1958, 1971, and 1979) and revised again and enlarged in 1983, the editions of this landmark book offer snapshots of Fairbank's evolving assessment of the PRC from the perspective of Chinese history. In that regard, it is instructive to compare the section on "China in Light of Her Past" in the successive editions, an exercise that will show that different elements of the past were adduced as evidence of continuity as the PRC evolved down through the early 1980s. For instance, in the third edition of 1971—written in the context of the Cultural Revolution—Fairbank observed:

Chinese Marxist thinking stresses the populist strain, and Mao Tse-tung extols the power of will, voluntarism, to change man's social environment and behavior. The edifying example of that paragon, the Confucian Emperor, is substituted by the cult of the Chairman's personality.

²³ Ernest R. May, *Lessons of the Past—The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 190.

In the 1979 and 1983 enlarged fourth editions—written as Deng Xiaoping’s reform coalition was consolidating power--this passage from the 1971 edition was dropped.

Instead, the following continuity was added:

Meanwhile the positive force in the rise of the People’s Republic was not simply the one man, Mao, whom we use to symbolize the event, but rather the devotion and organizing capacity of a whole generation of patriots who served mainly in the Chinese Communist Party. Their work, snowballing from 1921 to 1949 and into the 1970s, has been a tremendous feat of organization. Only the inheritors of China’s political traditions, one may argue, could have done it. Foreign models and foreign activities in China, whether Japanese, Western, or Soviet, could serve only as stimuli, not substance. To say that the new order under the PRC is the latest phase of China’s response to the outside world would omit the heart of the matter, which is the Chinese people’s great mass, inertial momentum, and native genius for creating their own culture.²⁴

Because of the fungible quality of Chinese “tradition,” it may be that themes drawn from the past become reusable in what are perceived to be comparable trends with respect to China. Many of the longstanding parallels between China’s past and present were drawn in an effort to help explain a China that appeared truculent, bellicose, and threatening. It may be, therefore, that these parallels and themes have sustained relevance because, for some Americans at least, China’s rise today seems threatening.

If that is true, perhaps American use of China’s past to elucidate its present and project its future might benefit from a healthy dose of self-reflection and self-knowledge. In that regard, perhaps Chinese history may indeed serve as a mirror, providing us with a means of reflection on our own perceptions, emotions, and motives.

²⁴ John King Fairbank, *The United States and China*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 409, and 4th edition (1979) and 4th edition revised and enlarged (1983), 470 and 470, respectively. For the section in each edition on “China in Light of Her Past,” see the 1st edition (1948), 296-410; 2nd edition (1958), 307-317; 3rd edition (1971), 403-412; 4th edition (1979) 462-470; and 4th edition revised and enlarged (1983), 462-470.

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An Alternative Past for an Alternative Present

What perspectives on the Chinese present might the new historiography on the Chinese past offer? It is likely too soon to suggest anything close to a consensus on what this picture might look like and how it might be applied to understanding China today. But a number of points of departure suggest themselves. First, rather than searching for long parallels and enduring continuities, an alternative approach might underscore the evolutionary and revolutionary discontinuities between China's past foreign relations patterns and its contemporary and probable future outlook. It would seek to account for these discontinuities in terms of the sweeping changes in state capacity, social evolution, international context, and the successive revolutions in warfare over the past 500 years. Such a narrative would be linear—not cyclical—and dynamic--though not inherently progressive. Second, it would disaggregate “China” geographically and temporally, being sensitive to the modern propensity to retroject modern concepts of sovereignty, nationality, territoriality, and identity into eras for which there was yet no footing for them. Finally, it would locate “China” in its broader regional and even global context in a genuinely world history, as Peter Perdue's recent work *China Marches West* has done so well.²⁵

Thus, one alternative narrative of China's “modern” history might proceed to build on the recent historiography on long-term economic and social change in late imperial China, adding to it the approaches of two other recent literatures. One is the work on

²⁵ Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

European state formation by Charles Tilly and others, which has attempted to account for the diversity of “national states” over the past millennium by assessing the various approaches to building and applying the instruments of state coercion--its military forces--and to extracting capital from urban commercial classes--creating the “fiscal state.”²⁶ The other literature is the “new military history,” written by Michael Howard, Geoffrey Parker, Jeremy Black, and others, who have sought to situate the history of warfare more clearly in its social and economic setting and to assess the impact of successive revolutions of military affairs on international politics and on the economy and society of European states.²⁷

The general line of argument in these literatures is that the modern nation-state emerged in Europe as a response to the insecure setting and consequent need to wage war after the 16th century. These characteristics included: the development of increasingly large standing armies; the development of new methods and levels of taxation to finance

²⁶ Among the array of new writings analyzing the roles of war and taxation in the creation of the modern nation-state, see: Charles Tilly, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), and especially the essay therein by Samuel E. Finer, “State- and Nation-Building in Europe: The Role of the Military,” 84-163; Tilly’s more recent reworking of these themes, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD990-1990* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Brian Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change: Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Bruce D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Hendryk Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Janice E. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). On the role of new methods and levels of taxation, see in particular Richard Bonney, ed., *The Rise of the Fiscal State in Europe c.1200-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). A useful and succinct assessment of the distinctive capacities of the modern nation-states is Christopher Pierson, *The Modern State* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

²⁷ In addition to William H. McNeill’s watershed study *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force and Society Since AD1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), which should be consulted first, recent assessments of military revolutions include: Michael Howard, *War in European History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800*, 2nd edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jeremy Black, *European Warfare, 1660-1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); and *ibid.*, *War and the World: Military Power and the Fate of Continents, 1450-2000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). On the critical evolution of technology shaping these military trends, see Joel Mokyr, *The Lever of Riches: Technological Creativity and Economic Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

increasingly expensive military establishments; state bureaucracies to manage an expanding array of state functions; an enhanced capacity to penetrate society and mobilize increasingly large segments of its population for its purposes; and an integrative capacity to enlist the identification of its subjects as “citizens” with state fortunes.

Accompanying this evolution in state capacity was the emergence of an ideology of sovereignty, enshrined in the Treaty of Westphalia ending the Thirty Years War in 1648, that hardened previous frontiers into fixed state boundaries and defined the internal prerogatives of states with respect to the populations they governed exclusively.

Abetting the emergence of nation-states was a political economy based internally on the rise of commercial cities and externally first on mercantilism and later, following Adam Smith and David Ricardo, on the ethos of free trade.

This evolution in Europe was spurred in major part by successive revolutions in military organization and technology that made warfare far more complex and expensive and so raised the criteria of effective state capacity. These included the changes in weaponry, tactics, and army size after the second half of the 16th century, the conduct of war *en masse* in the Napoleonic era, the development of breech-loading rifles and steamships in the mid-19th century, the use of rail transport and telegraphic communications in the 1870s, the use of tanks, aircraft, submarines, and chemical weapons in World War I, and the nuclear revolution in World War II.

Although both of these literatures specifically address Europe, taken together they offer a broader framework for assessing the evolution of the Chinese state in its broader international setting. This is emphatically not to say that China’s experience need be judged according to the degree it conformed or deviated from the trajectories of European

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nation-states (and the work of Tilly and others shows how diverse these in fact were). Nevertheless, the framework of state formation developed by Tilly and others does offer a basis from which to analyze the patterns of China's modern state-building--a project in which Chinese have undeniably been engaged. The international context in which China has pursued this project, moreover, has been one created and defined by the capacity of successive European, and then American and Japanese nation-states to project their power in East Asia according to increasingly modern criteria.

As this hybrid state-building framework is applied to China, an alternative chronology of key dates suggests itself. In place of the key dates of 1840 and 1949 in the older framework, 1550 and 1901 emerge as the fundamental turning points around which to organize a narrative of China's "early modern" and then "modern" history. The date 1550 marks inception of several roughly coincident transitions:

- The mid-16th century witnessed the beginning (or resumption) of China's economic revolution in agricultural productivity and commerce, which in turn stimulated the demographic explosion that raised China's population by a factor of five over the following three centuries.
- The mid-16th century also marked the advent of the European powers to East Asia, establishing their presence in Southeast Asia and inserting themselves into existing Asian trade patterns and linking incorporating them into an emerging regional and even global trade system. Complementing China's longstanding trade links to Southeast Asia, the Spanish establishment of a trade entrepot at Manila in 1571 linked China into a network of trade with the Spanish colonies in Mexico. Together with the import of metals from Japan, the Manila trade brought a flood of New World silver

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into China. Although foreign trade probably did not occupy a high proportion of overall Chinese production in the late Ming and Qing periods, it played a critical role in facilitating the emerging long-distance inter-regional domestic trade in China and stimulating the monetization of the imperial state's tax base through the single-whip reforms. The importance of this silver influx may be discerned from the impact of its disruption on Chinese economy and society during the Ming-Qing transition and early Qing attempts to ban trade for security reasons.

- The end of the 16th century also saw the consolidation of Tokugawa rule in Japan, providing the setting for Japan's early modern evolution over the following two and a half centuries.
- By the end of the 16th century, following the "time of troubles," tsarist Russia began its eastward expansion across Siberia, inaugurating a complex Central Asian politics of coalition-building, balance of power, and diplomatic manipulation with China and among various Mongol tribes and federations.
- The mid-16th century marked the beginning of the emergence of the early modern European state system consolidated at Westphalia in 1648, as well as the first of the military revolutions that shaped the nature of these states and their capacity to project power.

All of these events and trends inaugurated patterns of interaction that inaugurated the "modern" era and that remain with us today. Taken together, they suggest that China's "early modern" and modern history must be written from multiple levels, incorporating global, trans-Asian, national, and local perspectives.

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The other key date in the alternative chronology is 1901, marking the onset of the Empress Dowager's "New Administration" (新政) reforms and the first effective effort at modern state-building. Among the reforms aimed at establishing modern state capacities were:

- Reorganization of the central bureaucracy in 1906 along contemporary Western and Japanese lines, including a Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
- Authorization in 1904 for the creation of China's first modern centralized army--the Lujun--around the core of Yuan Shikai's Beiyang units, together with a system of military academies;
- Education reform, incorporating a system of local schools and provincial academies that featured a modernized curriculum, together with abolition in 1905 of the traditional examination system;
- A constitutionalist movement that the regime intended as a means of national integration and of recentralizing power devolved to regions and locales since the Taiping era; and
- The beginnings of a modern-style police system.

These efforts, of course, did not succeed under Qing auspices; the reforms in fact created tensions that ultimately brought about the Qing's demise. But they did lay the foundation for successive episodes of state-building thereafter, first under the early Republic, then under the Nationalists in Nanjing after 1928, and then under the communists themselves after 1949. Recent historiography on the evolution of the Chinese state in the 20th century has thus blurred the previously sharp chronological

divisions that demarcated imperial from Republican China and Republican China from the PRC.

From the perspective of this framework and revised chronology, a number of things may immediately stand out. First, events in twentieth and twenty-first century China are the product of trends of very long gestation, not the cyclical recapitulation of longstanding traditions and patterns. The 16th century economic and demographic revolutions spawned social changes unprecedented in China's past. For a long time, the Qing philosophy of minimalism in governance worked efficiently and well in adapting state purposes to these changes. But by the 19th century, social change had outrun the limits of these Qing preferences and had begun to tilt the foundations of the traditional imperial order decisively.

Second, modern state-building began very late in China, at the beginning of the 20th century. Successive episodes of state-building after the 1901 reforms aimed at creating increasing higher degrees of centralization, extraction of resources from society, capacity for coercion, and penetration into society radically different from the capacities of the late imperial state over the previous 450 years. In these critical respects, the Republican, Nationalist, and PRC regimes share far more in common than any of them do with the late imperial state.

Finally, and perhaps most germane, such a narrative may help bring several elements of contemporary China and its foreign policy outlook in sharper focus than has been offered by the longstanding effort to draw parallels and purported continuities from the Chinese past. These may include a surer grasp of the orientation, preoccupations and

force of Chinese nationalism, of Beijing's interest-driven rhetoric of nation-state sovereignty and its dilemmas in an interdependent international order, and of the value it puts on modern military power.

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