If there is such a thing as a consensus belief among observers of international politics, it is that China, already a great power, will one day attain the status of a superpower. Most believe, too, that China’s rise will signal a general shift of strategic and normative influence away from the West and toward Asia, with supposedly very significant but uncertain consequences. One reason those consequences are so uncertain is that, even amid broad consensus about China’s rise, no comparable agreement exists as to what kind of power China will be: Satisfied or aggressive? Benign or oppressive? Predictable or erratic? Cooperative or chauvinistic?

In truth, it is not a foregone conclusion that China will become a superpower on par with the United States. That will depend on what shape European and American power takes, and whether India becomes an equal or even more influential neighbor. China’s rise could also be derailed by its own looming environmental crisis; instead of enjoying further double-digit growth, China could take what Council on Foreign Relations fellow Elizabeth Economy has called a “great leap backward.” Nevertheless, the potential is clearly there, so we would be foolish not to contemplate the character of a possible Chinese superpower.

This is no small task, in part because different theories of international behavior lead us to different assumptions and bid us pursue different methods. In assessing China’s rise, some analysts focus on China’s current motivations and capabilities. But this approach begs the question of the source of those motivations, so many have turned to Chinese history to better understand the deep roots of China’s strategic thought and behavior. But approaches to history differ too, and so, therefore, do the conclusions that emerge from them.

For historically minded scholars, history is (to paraphrase Henry Maine) in one way or another an oracle. But consulting the oracle is itself a puzzle. Some analysts hold that geography, culture and the logic of relative power are determinative. Since all these factors change slowly if at all, this view leads to an expectation that, in essence, history will repeat itself. Others agree that history matters, but principally in how it has been interpreted—in the images and lessons learned along the way—rather than in the history itself. Still others contend that it only matters how present and future leaders understand history—what it teaches them about the intersection of human nature, politics and their own day-to-day problems. Such leaders may be influenced by dominant interpretations of history expounded before their own time, but they may be influenced by a range of other factors, as well. So can models of China’s future behavior be derived from Chinese history? How have Chinese intellectuals understood the meaning of their history? How do China’s present leaders read history, and how will their successors do so?

**MODELS AND MEANINGS**

Here can be no single model of what past Chinese leaders have done with dominant power at
their disposal. To be sure, China has a realpolitik military history that portends to some a
resurgent Middle Kingdom bent on re-establishing a Pax Sinica around its elastic
periphery. Yet Chinese history also contains idealpolitik developments that could augur a
peaceful transformation of a rising China and generally cordial international behavior once it
reaches its zenith. It is only natural that over such a long period—which for practical purposes
begins with the classical Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770–221 BCE)—the
ebb and flow of historical circumstances have produced different attitudes toward the use of
power. Leaders who feel besieged will not act as those who feel secure, and those who
concentrate on consolidating recent victories will not act as those contemplating risky
adventures. There is thus little to be gained from simply describing Chinese history, and that
task would in any event require hundreds of pages merely to lay out the basics. It is more
useful to interweave history with the simultaneous, parallel efforts to give that history
meaning. When we do this, we see that there has been a tension between two diametrically
opposed traditions: Confucianism and Legalism.

For more than two millennia, Confucian scholar-officials have generally urged Chinese
leaders to adopt Confucian principles to guide their behavior. Since Confucianism advocates
moral virtues and exemplary behaviors, a Confucian foreign policy is supposed to seek
influence through benevolence and persuasion rather than domination and coercion. Force is
to be used only as a last resort: for defensive purposes or to advance righteous goals in
“punitive wars.” That does not mean that Chinese leaders have always acted on Confucian
principles. Most observers, Chinese and non-Chinese alike, have paid too much attention to
memorials penned by Confucian scholar-officials and too little to dynastic records on imperial
campaigns, giving rise to what may be fairly called a myth that China’s national security
tradition is Confucian.

Given China’s relative weakness since the Opium War (1839–42), such analysts have been
able to cite modern history as evidence to support their view, which has long been the
conventional wisdom. This view has been disputed in recent years, notably by A. Iain
Johnston’s *Cultural Realism* (1995). Johnston demonstrates that China’s military classics take
a *parabellum* or hard realpolitik view of security. In his words, they “accept that warfare and
conflict are relatively constant features of interstate affairs, that conflict with an enemy tends
towards zero-sum stakes, and consequently that violence is a highly efficacious means for
dealing with conflict.” Johnston’s path-breaking work prompted a new generation of Chinese
scholars of international relations to comb through China’s classics to prove him wrong. This
motivation is still evident: Huiyun Feng claims in *Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign
Policy Decision-Making* (2007) that, “according to the ancient Chinese philosophy of
Confucianism, the Chinese are a people who love peace and harmony.”

The problem is that the actual Chinese tradition is better characterized by Legalism than by
Confucianism. Legalism is the nemesis of Confucianism, for it is single-mindedly concerned
with the maximization of state power through strict regulations and cruel punishments in
domestic rule and territorial expansion in external relations. But many Chinese mistake
Confucianism as the single Chinese tradition because Chinese rulers ingeniously followed
what Chinese scholar Hsiao Kung-chuan called “Legalism with a Confucian façade.”

The tension between Confucianism and Legalism first emerged in China’s classical period
(770–221 BCE). When the prospect of unification arose in the late 4th and 3rd centuries BCE,
Confucian thinkers advocated unification by virtue. Mencius, in particular, believed that the unifier should be “the one who has no proclivity toward killing.” Contrary to this advice, the state of Qin crushed its competitors by brute force based on comprehensive self-strengthening reforms that facilitated total mobilization for war. Qin also pursued relentless divide-and-conquer strategies to break up balancing alliances, and employed ruthless stratagems of bribery and deception to enhance its chances for victory. Not only did Qin’s military commanders seize territory by force, they also brutally killed defeated enemy soldiers en masse to demoralize and incapacitate losing states. To facilitate consolidation of conquests into the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), Emperor Qin Shihuang, known as the First Emperor, employed severe measures to subjugate conquered populations. These included mass killings of extended royal families as well as mass forced migrations of noble and wealthy families to the capital. The Qin court also imposed direct rule on newly occupied territories, draconian collective punishment, pervasive surveillance and the establishment of settlements in frontier regions to serve as garrisons.

Chroniclers from the ensuing Han dynasty attributed the Qin dynasty’s rapid collapse in 206 BCE to its despotism and deviation from Confucian virtue. Subsequent dynastic records, in turn, explained the relative longevity of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) by its restoration of Confucianism. Chinese history textbooks to this day teach that the Han dynasty upheld Confucianism and that all subsequent dynasties followed suit; thus the myth that the Chinese tradition is Confucian.

This view, however, obfuscates as much as it reveals. It is true that Han Emperor Wu, who ruled from 140 to 87 BCE, established Confucianism as the official ideology of the state. But imperial Confucianism deviated significantly from the classical version. While Confucianism prescribes benevolent rule, the criminal codes of the Han and subsequent dynasties followed the harsh Qin Code. Moreover, while the classical text Mencius puts the “mandate of Heaven” in the hands of the people (because “Heaven does not speak; it sees and hears as the people see and hear”), Han emperors reinterpreted the mandate to rest with the emperor as the Son of Heaven. As John K. Fairbank observed, although “the first Han emperors took great pains to claim that their rule was based on the Confucian teachings of social order . . . they used the methods of the Legalists as the basis for their institutions and policy decisions.”

More than a thousand years later in the 14th century CE, Ming dynasty founder Zhu Yuanzhang even extirpated the famous passage, “The people are the most elevated, next comes the state, the sovereign

| Table 1: Typical Chronology of Chinese Dynasties |
|-----------------|------------------|
| Xia             | 2070–1600 BCE    |
| Shang           | 1600–1046 BCE    |
| Zhou            | 1045–256 BCE     |
| Qin             | 221–206 BCE      |
| Han             | 206 BCE–220 CE   |
| Three Kingdoms  | 220–265          |
| Jin             | 265–420          |
| Northern and Southern | 421–580 |
| Sui             | 581–618          |
| Tang            | 618–907          |
| Five Dynasties & Ten Kingdoms | 907–960 |
| Song            | 960–1279         |
| Yuan            | 1279–1368        |
| Ming            | 1368–1644        |
| Qing            | 1644–1911        |
| Republic of China | 1912– |
comes last”, from the *Mencius*. As Hsiao wryly remarked, the notion of a Confucian state “would have puzzled Confucius himself, horrified Mencius, and failed even to please Xunzi”, the most authoritarian of all classical Confucian thinkers.

If Confucianism had little more than cosmetic influence on state-society relations, it had even less impact on China’s incessant wars. Those who read Chinese history in a way that leads them to predict China’s peaceful rise to great power status maintain, in Huiyun Feng’s words, that “China did not expand in history when it was strong.” They argue that the only cases of expansionism in Chinese history were carried out by “the nomadic minorities of Mongolian and Manchurian people.” It is difficult to reconcile this claim with China’s actual military history. Scholars who believe in a pacifist Chinese strategic culture blithely dismiss Johnston’s argument for its reliance on military classics, including Sunzi’s *Art of War*. But many other Chinese sources—including official dynastic records devoid of any Western bias—amply demonstrate that Chinese history is a litany of military conflicts. The *Chronology of Wars in China’s Successive Dynasties*—published by the People’s Liberation Army Press in 2006 and compiled from dynastic records—lists 3,756 campaigns from 770 BCE to the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911.

China’s military history is best characterized by the relationship between opportunistic expansion and the effects of expansive efforts on the power of the state: in other words, geopolitical reality as filtered through the dominant lens of Legalism. Opportunities for expansion commonly arise when a state enjoys relative superiority or wins decisive military victories and when its opponents suffer from internal weaknesses. But opportunities are not static or external artifacts. Here is where the focus on building state power comes in. Ambitious states can overcome their own relative weakness and create opportunities by internal mobilization, diplomatic maneuvers and ruthless stratagems. The Qin dynasty’s dramatic rise from a relatively weak power to the unifier of the ancient Chinese world is a case in point. Subsequent dynasties, from Han through Tang and Ming to Qing, were similarly adept at riding military victories, exploiting opponents’ internal power struggles and deploying divide-and-conquer strategies.

Still, there are limits. Opportunities can be coaxed into being, but they cannot be plucked from strategic thin air. This is why the record shows that historical China did not engage in constant, endless territorial expansion. Opportunistic expansion does not mean starting reckless wars when costs exceed benefits, and the calculus of expansion is affected by physical constraints, such as distance—what Robert Gilpin once called the “loss-of-strength gradient.” Territorial expansion also entails the administration of conquered territories and the subjugation of resistant populations, which can turn successful conquests into millstones that drag down the conqueror’s economy. Thus, large-scale territorial conquests are usually prohibitively expensive—in China’s case as in others.

We therefore need not resort to Confucianism to understand the relative infrequency of Chinese imperial campaigns against peripheral and neighboring regimes. In the Warring States period, the state of Qin managed to roll up other states because the system was relatively small, occupying only the central plain in the Yellow River valley. When the unified Qin dynasty expanded to the Ordos in the north and the Guangdong and Guangxi areas in the south, the high costs of expansion contributed to its rapid downfall. Subsequent imperial
courts stumbled when they sought expansion beyond the Chinese heartland to the periphery in Central Asia, Mongolia and Manchuria. The immense costs of putting large armies in the field and transporting supplies over long distances led to budget deficits, heavy extractions of resources and consequent peasant rebellions. Most notably in this regard, the massive campaigns against Koguryo, a powerful kingdom in southern Manchuria and northern Korea, contributed to the Sui dynasty’s collapse in 618 CE. Although Han’s Emperor Wu (r. 140-87 BCE) had succeeded in seizing territories in the Western Region (eastern Central Asia), the Han court could not maintain such distant conquests for long. After Han’s and Sui’s examples, the Tang dynasty (618–907) also conquered the Western Region and even subjugated Koguryo in its early years, but it failed to consolidate its territorial gains.

There is a grain of truth to the conventional wisdom that non-Chinese dynasties were better at territorial expansion in the periphery, but not necessarily because nomads were inherently more warlike, as depicted in Chinese court records. It was rather because warfare in the steppe zone required effective cavalry, which Chinese courts could muster only by relying on defected or mercenary nomadic horsemen. It was not until revolutionary developments in logistical support and Western cannons that the Qing dynasty, the last dynasty in Chinese history, finally subjugated the vast periphery in the 18th century.

The famous Great Wall is often cited as evidence of China’s defensive culture, and the steppe regimes’ aggressive culture. But as Arthur Waldron demonstrated in The Great Wall of China (1990), the Great Wall as we see it today was built not by the Qin dynasty, as is commonly thought, but by the Ming dynasty. Qin did build a long wall, but it was made of stomped earth rather than more durable stones. Based on careful reading of the Han chronicle Records of the Grand Historian, Central Asia experts point out that the original Qin wall was an offensive project aimed at holding on to the Ordos (areas south of the great bend of the Yellow River) freshly seized from the Xiongnu. While the Ming dynasty’s Great Wall was indeed meant to be a static defense system against the Mongols (it ran in the southern half of the Ordos, essentially recognizing Mongol control of vast territory to its north), it was constructed in the 16th century, after the empire had declined in relative capability and had retreated from the earlier aggressive policy pursued by its founders.

Even Confucian scholar-officials were not always antiwar. From time to time they would justify offensive campaigns against steppe regimes by reciting the view of Emperor Wu’s court that nomads and semi-nomads were beastlike “barbarians” to which Confucian virtues did not apply. The same sort of “civilizing mission” arguments also applied to the many campaigns against originally non-Chinese populations in southern and southwestern China.
Nor were Chinese better followers of the Confucian tradition in dealing with one another. This was most evident during the Warring States period and subsequent eras of division. To seize “all under Heaven”, competing Chinese regimes would not hesitate to resort to cunning and ruthlessness in wars of mutual annihilation. The violent struggles between the Nationalists and the Communists in the 20th century testify to this trend. Indeed, if Chinese leaders had been true Confucianists, unification might never have been possible, from 221 BCE to the present. As Mao Zedong famously put it, “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” In this regard, Mao’s remark did not represent a break from the Chinese tradition: The vast majority of his predecessors were no more Confucian than he was.

Overall, then, there is simply no support for the view that the Chinese way of expanding its hegemony has historically been through cultural rather than military means. War, not Confucian ideals, explains how China expanded from the Yellow River valley in the Warring States era to the continental empire in the Qing dynasty. When the Republic of China, and then the People’s Republic, claimed Qing’s territorial reach, they too backed it up with military force.

Does this mean that China is hardwired by its history to seek domination in the future? Analysts who support the “China threat” theory seem to think so. Steven Mosher suggested in Hegemon: China’s Plan to Dominate Asia and the World (2000) that authoritarianism and imperialism constitute “China’s cultural DNA.” William Hawkins, a senior fellow for National Security Studies at the U.S. Business and Industry Council, has written that Beijing’s current foreign policy behavior resembles Qin’s self-strengthening reforms, divide-and-conquer strategies and ruthlessness. Qin’s dramatic rise from relative weakness to domination also demonstrates to some observers that the U.S. government should not content itself with its current supremacy in both conventional and nuclear weapons. The Pentagon, in particular, has been watching with unease China’s program of asymmetrical warfare, designed to paralyze U.S. command-and-control assets at the beginning of a war.

Nevertheless, we cannot justifiably draw a straight line from China’s past to its future. That same methodology, after all, cannot explain the West’s own circumstances. All Western states were born of incessant wars in a Hobbesian-cum-Machiavellian world. Think Charles V, Louis XIV, Napoleon and Hitler, just to cite the noteworthy few rather than the thousands of lesser examples. Germany surpasses even Qin in its meteoric rise from an originally puny Brandenburg-Prussia core. All the world’s major powers, including the United States, share bloody military histories, but those histories do not predestine the future. If the contemporary West seems different in its attitudes toward war than its forebears—whether because of the advent of nuclear weapons or other factors—attitudes in the non-West can change as well.

Here is another sense in which we may mislead ourselves through superficial historical
Understanding: As much as Chinese emperors liked to congratulate themselves on ruling tianxia, or “all under Heaven”, imperial China did not always dominate tianxia, even if the concept is narrowly defined to mean only Asia. Current debate is usually framed over whether the hegemonic Middle Kingdom was malevolent or benevolent, but the underlying assumption enabling that debate—that the Middle Kingdom was generally unified and powerful—is highly problematic.

The Chinese term for China, zhongguo, did not originally mean the Middle Kingdom. It referred to “central states” in the pre-Qin era and continued to take plural forms from time to time in the post-Qin era. (The Chinese language does not itself distinguish between the singular and plural forms.) The conventional chronology, as shown in Table 1, recognizes the divided eras of the Three Kingdoms, the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. Beyond these obvious periods of division, however, the standard chronology suggests smooth transitions from one dynasty to the next. But can we take the official founding date of a new dynasty as a genuine establishment of unification? If modern China experienced widespread peasant rebellions and civil wars for many years both before and after the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, should we not at least question the assumption of smooth transitions in earlier times?

Indeed, we should. The conventional Chinese wisdom is vague about what zhongguo and unification really mean. If we follow a standard Weberian conception of state power, which holds that an effective state is one that monopolizes the means of coercion within its territory, then practically all dynasties in their early and late years failed to achieve unification—whenever armed forces that fought for the previous dynasty or their own ambitions persisted, whenever regional power-holders pledged nominal allegiance to the court but asserted semi-autonomous status and maintained armed forces, or whenever scattered peasant protests became organized, armed rebellion. If we subtract the years in which any of these conditions obtained, the record shows vastly fewer years of unification than is commonly presumed.

As for the territorial contours of zhongguo, the Chinese historical geographer Ge Jianxiong suggests that these should be minimally defined by the Chinese heartland as controlled by the Qin dynasty at its height in 214 BCE. This territorial space is roughly bounded by the Yellow River in the northwest, the Yin Shan mountains and the lower Liao River in the northeast, the Sichuan basin in the west, the eastern part of the Yunguai plateau in the southwest, Guangdong in the south, and the coastline in the east. (Some Chinese historians include the vast periphery in Manchuria, Mongolia, Central Asia and Tibet, but as we have seen, even the powerful Han and Tang dynasties at their height had difficulties winning wars and consolidating conquests in the periphery. The situation changed only under the Qing dynasty in the 18th century. An expansive definition would then necessarily be biased against the conventional Chinese view.) Taking the Weberian standard and a minimalist territorial definition, Chinese history counts only 936 years of unification from the beginning of history to 2000. If we follow the official view that China has 5,000 years of history, 936 years represent only a small fraction. Even if we examine only imperial history beginning with Qin’s unification in 221 BCE, we can still only consider China as having been unified for 42 percent of its history. Thus, the debate between Confucianists and their critics is somewhat less significant than both sides presume.
THE THIRD DIMENSION, IN THREE PARTS

Unpacking zhongguo in this fashion allows us to see the other side of Chinese history, and to better appreciate the importance of the dialectic between power and state coherence. Chinese wisdom regards unification as a guarantor of stability and prosperity, and division a recipe for chaos and suffering. But war has been a constructive as well as a destructive force in the ebb and flow of competition among states and within them. European experiences suggest that international competition, which certainly included many wars, was a factor in the emergence of citizenship rights, diplomatic relations and expanded commerce. According to Immanuel Kant’s 1795 treatise, “Perpetual Peace”, republican government, international law and trade are the three key liberal elements that allowed Europe to escape from the perpetual state of war. Historical zhongguo experienced similar phenomena during eras of division: While a monolithic zhongguo tended to repress dissent, dominate its neighbors and hinder trade, a plural zhongguo was more likely to make concessions to society, develop international law and promote trade.

Citizenship: Many Western observers of China miss this point because they often misunderstand their own societies. Westerners looking for the origins of pluralism in non-Western societies frequently proceed as if Western democracy evolved along a straight, unbroken line from ancient Athens to the Magna Carta to the “rights of man” and the U.S. Constitution. Kant, for one, did not share this ahistorical assumption. He observed that it was warfare that paradoxically compelled absolute monarchs to liberalize their states in exchange for support from their subjects, who had to bear the burdens of fighting and supplying resources for war. Kant’s insight has been

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[credit: Source: Ge Jianxiong, Unification and Division (Sanlian shudian, 1994) *The existence of the Xia period is disputed. A research team appointed by the Chinese government compiled a chronology of Xia, but outside observers question the data. See Bruce Gilley, “Digging into the Future”, Far Eastern Economic Review, July 2, 2000. **Dates before 841 BCE are estimates.]
substantiated by modern research on state formation, which highlights that citizenship rights originated from state-society bargains over the means of war.  

Chinese often miss the same lesson: The same military basis of citizenship rights arose whenever zhongguo took the plural form. This is especially true in the more pristine Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, when war forced ambitious rulers to make three bargains in order to mobilize resources and motivate popular support. The first concerned material welfare. Because the security of the state rested with the well-being of the peasantry, rulers made land grants to peasants in return for military service, taxes and corvée. The second was legal protection: Various states publicly promulgated legal codes meant to bind rulers and ruled alike. The third was freedom of expression, as illustrated by the “Hundred Schools of Thought”, a term that refers to the flourishing of classical thought, including Confucianism, Legalism, Daoism, Sunzian militarism and others.

The classical Confucianism that emerged out of this competitive environment was unmistakably liberal. Confucian followers articulated the strikingly modern principle that the people formed the basis of government and rulers were their servants. Mencian followers argued not just that the “mandate of Heaven” rested with the people, but also that the people had the warrant to depose and execute tyrannical rulers, a justification for rebellion similar to the one developed much later by French Huguenots during the Reformation and John Locke during the Enlightenment. The point, however, is that social and political conditions, of which competition and war were key parts, gave rise to the consolidation of philosophy, not the other way around.

Unfortunately, Qin’s unification of the Warring States system aborted the development of liberal conceptions of Chinese citizenship. During the Qin-Han transition, zhongguo had a second chance to return to being a system of “central states”, when the rebel leader Xiang Yu sought to revive the pre-Qin states. But he was overtaken by Liu Bang, who established the Han dynasty, which reproduced the unified empire. While Liu ruled according to the Daoist doctrine of minimal government, several generations later Emperor Wu created the model of Legalism with a Confucian façade, which was followed by all subsequent unified Chinese dynasties. Later imperial courts occasionally revived an interest in peasant welfare in order to promote social stability. However, unification effectively turned “all under Heaven” into the Son of Heaven’s private property, so no effective sanction prevented the emperor from enslaving his subjects and exploiting their wealth. Qin’s First Emperor was not alone in extracting heavy taxation and imposing hard labor to build luxurious palaces and tombs; Wu and others followed suit. The prevalence of peasant rebellions in Chinese history is evidence against the view that unification promoted human welfare. It was instead during eras of division that competing regimes were compelled to introduce open policies to attract new talent and develop neglected regions to enlarge their tax bases.

Law and Diplomacy: Sinocentric wisdom holds that historical zhongguo did not have international relations, but only hierarchical, tributary relations. Many argue, too, that such a hierarchical system was far more conducive to peace and stability than the fragile balance-of-power system under anarchy in the West. But what kind of peace was it? Peace would hold if “barbarians” recognized Chinese superiority by paying tribute to the emperor; but pacification campaigns could follow if they refused to submit. Tributary relations thus involved not only blatant ethnocentrism, but also thinly masked coercion. Even to this day, Tibetans and Uighurs
resist Chinese cultural assimilation, and China’s bilateral relations with Vietnam, and the
Koreas continue to be colored by historical distrust.

While a powerful, unified China could impose its will on weaker neighbors, division
facilitated the development of international law in the form of treaties and customary
practices. This phenomenon, too, matured during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States
periods, when there was still no precedent for successful unification. Although warring states
frequently clashed on the battlefields, they also followed Zhou rites, diplomatic protocols,
international covenants, alliance agreements and peace settlements—practices that brought
about international order for more than three centuries.

This ended when Qin sought unification by launching wars of all-out conquest. These wars
violated norms about the proper conduct of war and diplomacy. In subsequent eras of division,
competing regimes followed Qin’s example and engaged in zero-sum competitions to take “all
under Heaven.” Even during this state of war, however, contenders nevertheless entered into
alliance agreements and peace settlements to facilitate strategic goals. This mirrors the
European experience, in which international law emerged despite (and in many respects
because of) repeated attempts to achieve domination.

*Trade:* Weak courts and divided regimes were more likely to tolerate, or even promote, trade
expansion, while powerful central courts often tightly managed and from time to time
hindered commerce. The golden era of economic development during the Spring and Autumn
and Warring States periods brought improvements in transportation, developments in coinage
and credit, growth in capital cities, new towns and cities, and merchants with enough wealth to
rival state treasuries.

Although the Qin state suppressed trade, commercial activities continued to flourish in the rest
of the *zhongguo* system on the eve of unification. After unification, however, the Qin dynasty
forcibly moved 120,000 merchant households to the capital to better keep an eye on them. The
Han dynasty under Emperor Wu similarly constrained trade through tight management, state
monopolies, heavy taxation and the compulsory migration of the wealthy from the provinces
to the capital. Subsequent unified courts continued to control local and international trade with
a heavy hand. This is not to say that there was no economic development in imperial China;
commerce breathed freely when an enlightened emperor came to the throne or when dynastic
courts lost their grip on society.

The major exception to this pattern is the Song dynasty (Northern Song 960–1126; Southern
Song 1127–1279). It is the only Chinese dynasty that actively promoted local and international
trade. Not coincidentally, it is also the only dynasty that did not achieve unification of the
Chinese heartland. (It failed to control the “Sixteen Prefectures” in northern China, which
included the future Beijing.) Surrounded by hostile neighbors in a competitive Asian system,
Song could increase revenues only by taxing commercial activities. When Song was driven
south by the Jurchens, the southern court was even forced to compensate for its declining land
tax revenues by turning to taxes on seaborne trade. It was also in Southern Song that some
degree of freedom of expression gave rise to neo-Confucianism, a response to challenges from
Buddhism and Daoism.

If powerful Chinese rulers seemed ruthless in stifling state-society bargains, pursuing
territorial aggrandizement and impeding commercial activities, they were not alone. Many European rulers similarly sought to establish absolutism, expand their borders, and hinder any commerce they themselves did not control. But the co-existence of competing states limited European rulers’ ability to do harm. Moreover, the “right of exit” should not be underestimated. It served as an implicit check on arbitrary power and even a substitute for formal representation.⁹ In divided China, scholars, traders and peasants could all “vote with their feet.” Competing central states were thus forced to lessen repression in order to avoid losing population, which was the basis of military power and economic wealth. In Amy Chua’s lexicon, they understood the need to practice relative tolerance.¹⁰

The contrast between singular and plural zhongguo is even more pronounced if we extend the analysis from the Chinese heartland to the periphery. First, steppe regimes were based on more egalitarian state-society relations, thus allowing some political freedom, but the steppes did not provide a viable exit option for most ordinary Chinese. They were hindered by both heavily garrisoned borders and their belief in Chinese cultural superiority. Second, while imperial emperors treated weaker neighbors in Korea and Vietnam as inferiors, they were often forced to recognize powerful regimes in Central Asia as equals, and even as superiors from time to time, despite the rhetoric of tributary relations. Third, the steppe zone in Central Asia was a land of plenty for millennia before it descended into poverty with its partition by the Qing dynasty and Russia. In the forthcoming Empires of the Silk Road, Christopher Beckwith observes that Central Eurasian regimes “highly valued and energetically pursued” commerce and that “the famed Silk Road was in essence the entire Central Eurasian economy, not a conduit for the movement of luxury goods between China and the West.” These three elements suggest that the prolonged independence of steppe regimes contributed to the relative stability of the historical Asian system.

In sum, Chinese history is not unlike European history in experiencing both realpolitik and idealpolitik elements. While China has a long history of domination and coercion, it also has a deeply rooted liberal tradition—a tradition that originated in the classical era and developed through subsequent divided eras. This liberal tradition therefore includes not just classical Confucianism at the philosophical level but, far more importantly, state-society bargains, diplomatic relations and commercial activities on the ground. This coexistence of realpolitik and idealpolitik impulses makes any simple linear projection from China’s past to the future misguided.

THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

Will a unified, powerful China learn how to act like the more benign, plural China of history? Unification per se is not problematic. Indeed, the experience of the European Union shows that unification can be conducive to international peace, constitutional democracy and economic prosperity. What has haunted Chinese history is the means by which unification has been achieved and maintained—by force. Chinese intellectuals from Sun Yat-sen to Yan Jiaqi have understood this root problem of Chinese politics and advocated a federal-democratic model with the potential to push China toward liberal transformation. Have contemporary Chinese leaders learned the same lesson from history? What do China’s current leaders think Chinese history means now, many decades after Mao’s “barrel of a gun” summary?
In a charm offensive, Chinese President Hu Jintao declared in June 2005 that the watchwords of his leadership would be harmony and peaceful development: “A harmonious society should feature democracy, the rule of law, equity, justice, sincerity, amity and vitality.” As these developments help to forge a closer relationship between the people and government, a harmonious society will bring about “lasting stability and unity.” According to Wen Jiabao, Premier of the State Council, “peaceful development” means that “China does not seek to pursue its national interest through aggression, expansion or colonization... nor does it challenge the territorial integrity and sovereignty of other countries.” Appealing to the Confucian concept of “great order under Heaven”, Hu points out that China has always “yearned for an ideal society where everyone loves everyone else, everyone is equal, and the whole world is one community.” To reassure the world that this is not empty talk, Hu and Wen have highlighted that “the pursuit of peace and harmony is central to the Chinese way of thinking.” To bring Chinese culture and the Chinese language abroad, Beijing has established Confucius Institutes in major world cities in rapid succession.

Hu’s attitude is a long way from Mao’s virulent denunciation of anything Confucian. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, Confucius was labeled “a reactionary who doggedly defended slavery and whose doctrines have been used by all reactionaries, whether ancient or contemporary, Chinese or foreign, throughout the more than 2,000 years since his time.” Mao disliked Confucianism not because he was ignorant of it; growing up with a traditional classical education, he must have been as well-versed in Chinese classics as he was in Marxist dialectics. His hostility may rather have something to do with his admiration for the First Emperor. As he put it in a 1973 poem:

_I urge you to scold Emperor Qin Shihuang less,_
_His burning of books and burying of scholars, we should reassess._
_Our ancestral dragon, though dead, lives on in our minds,_
_Confucianism, though renowned, is really worthless._
_Qin’s political model has been practiced through all time..._

Such official demotion and then promotion of Confucianism reminds us of similar efforts by Qin’s First Emperor and Han’s Emperor Wu. But selective use of political philosophy is not inherently problematic. Confucianism does advocate harmony and peace. It would be good news if China’s new leaders finally abandon the model of Legalism with a Confucian façade and genuinely revive the classical Confucian tradition.

Nevertheless, Chinese leaders have selectively used Chinese history in ways that are more worrisome. In the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, the Jiang Zemin government began to compensate for the bankruptcy of communism by propping up nationalism as a new form of ideological legitimacy. Expansionist emperors were promoted as historical heroes to instill national pride. Long before Jiang, Mao Zedong had already glorified Qin’s First Emperor as a great hero who unified China, despite the negative assessment of his tyranny in Han’s “Records of the Grand Historian.” History textbooks now praise not only the Qin emperor, but also Han Emperor Wu and Tang Emperor Taizong (r. 626–50 CE), both of whom conquered eastern Central Asia and more. Beijing’s official statements rarely mention that the Han court record “Discourses on Salt and Iron” criticizes Emperor Wu’s campaigns for bringing about hardships to subsistence peasants. The official view is even more silent about the historical pattern that plural _zhongguo_ was conducive to the development of state-society.
bargains, diplomatic relations and economic activities. Indeed, the Party line preaches the opposite lesson, and Chinese media have cooperated with the official position. The movie *Hero* (2002) glosses over the brutality of Qin’s wars of unification and praises the First Emperor for bringing unity to “all under Heaven.” The popular television series *Han Wu dadi* (“The Great Han Emperor Wu”) recounts the Emperor’s glorious campaigns against the Xiongnu and southern China.\(^\text{12}\)

Chinese leaders have propagated not just a one-sided history of a glorious distant past, but also a one-sided history of a “humiliating” recent past. Jiang Zemin designated relevant historical monuments and museums as “patriotic education bases” to serve as reminders of the humiliation of foreign encroachment and the heroism of national struggles. Of course, every people should learn about its painful past. For this reason, China’s efforts to expose the facts about the Nanjing massacre by the Japanese imperial army have gained international sympathy. However, the so-called “century of humiliation” is vastly overstated. In 1973, Mao famously lamented to Henry Kissinger the loss of “a half million square kilometers” of territory in Eastern Turkestan, Outer Mongolia and Manchuria to the Soviet Union. But as we have seen, these peripheral regions were incorporated into China only in the 18th century. “The amazing fact of the 20th century”, noted William C. Kirby, “is that this space [the periphery] was not only redefined as ‘Chinese’ and as the sacred soil of China, but also defended diplomatically to such a degree that the borders of the People’s Republic of China today are essentially those of the Qing.”\(^\text{13}\) Chinese leaders should honor Chinese history as faithfully as they do the history of the Japanese invasion.

Is the selective use of Chinese history evidence that China remains stuck on the age-old model of Legalism with a Confucian façade? Recent developments suggest that it is, and it is difficult to expect younger generations, who have grown up with intensified “patriotic education”, to steer China away from the Legalist path. Yet history also shows that leaders can be trapped by their own rhetoric. Unlike Mao Zedong, who openly disdained Confucianism and excused Qin’s brutality, Hu Jintao will have a harder time acting contrary to “harmony” and “peace.” If Hu imposes “harmony” on dissidents and especially on neighbors, he should be reminded that Confucianism distinguishes “harmony” from “sameness.” As Wen Jiabao properly understands it, harmony means “harmony without sameness, and difference without conflict. Harmony entails co-existence and co-prosperity, while difference conduces to mutual complementation and mutual support.” And if Hu conflates patriotism with submissiveness, he should be reminded of the Confucian principle in *The Analects*: “Do not deceive [the ruler]; rather, oppose him.” In other words, blind obedience to a bad ruler is tantamount to destroying the state. A bitter pill for future Chinese leaders, perhaps, but as a Chinese saying puts it, “good medicine is bitter to the taste.”


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