

# Understanding China's Historical Impetus

MAJ DAVID GEANEY, USAF



## Abstract

Since 1949 China has focused on a national renewal and overcoming a “Century of Humiliation” that saw it fall from the pinnacle of its power and become subjugated by Western and Japanese imperialists. This recent history and cultural memory from thousands of years of successive dynasties drive China’s pursuit of lost glory but also establishes expectations for the Chinese Communist Party that must be lived up to, lest the government face a legitimacy crisis domestically. Understanding this dynamic is essential for US policy makers because it will help them anticipate and overcome China’s revanchism within Asia and on the international stage.

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With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the calls to postpone America's so-called pivot to the Indo-Pacific have already begun<sup>1</sup> and will become more vociferous, but heeding such calls would prove disastrous for the United States. While Russia currently poses a threat to Europe and the international rules-based order, the larger and longer-term threat to the United States comes from a grievance-laden China,<sup>2</sup> which for three-quarters of a century has been steadfastly pursuing the return of lost glory and the "Middle Kingdom" status once held at the pinnacle of its power, when Chinese imperial courts held sway over most of the Asian continent.

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rhetoric and actions on the international stage are frequently driven by historical impetus and a need to project strength domestically. If US policy makers better understood these motivations, they would better anticipate Beijing's attitudes and decisions, consequently producing more strategically favorable interactions between the two countries. If the United States wishes to triumph in great-power competition against its ascendant rival, then US decision makers must fully comprehend China, its strengths, weaknesses, and inclinations. The first and easiest method to begin understanding China, its government, and its people, is to learn the historical events, stories, and lessons that hold sway over Chinese perspectives and motivations.

### **The Impact of History**

As Francis Fukuyama explains in his book *The Origins of Political Order*, "Countries are not trapped by their pasts, but in many cases things that happened hundreds of even thousands of years ago continue to exert major influence on the nature of politics. If we are seeking to understand the functioning of contemporary institutions, it is necessary to look at their origins, and the often accidental and contingent forces that brought them into being."<sup>3</sup> China's current actions and aspirations can only be understood through the prism of the country's past and the historical narratives that continue to shape the country, its people, and government. In fact, it was Xi Jinping himself who stated in 2012 that it was the CCP's responsibility to "'take over the relay baton passed on to us by history' to achieve the 'great renewal of the Chinese nation.'"<sup>4</sup> China has spent more than 30 years focused on overtaking the United States on the world stage and has closed the gap diplomatically, economically, technologically, and militarily.<sup>5</sup> It is important to understand what motivates the Chinese and where it leads; we can do so by understanding the historical context that China harnesses and has manufactured to explain the country's past, current, and future place in the world.

Students in China study the classics from a young age. One such epic, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, begins with the adage that "Empires wax and

wane, states cleave asunder and coalesce,”<sup>6</sup> ingraining the fluidity of the global status quo in the Chinese population. This perspective directly influences the Chinese interpretation of the current US-dominated international system as impermanent and even destined to change. The CCP promotes itself as the driver of a destined Chinese ascendance that will see Beijing reassume the power China once held as the Middle Kingdom of old.

The CCP sees itself as the inheritor of a rich legacy of kingdoms spanning thousands of years, with leaders of legendary benevolence, like the apocryphal Huángdì (黃帝), King Wen of Zhou (周文王), or Emperor Wu of Han (武皇). CCP leaders have further internalized the lessons of great thinkers and strategists like Jiāng Ziyá (姜子牙) and Zhūgě Liàng (諸葛亮), while the failures of figures like Lǐ Hóngzhāng (李鴻章) in the sunset years of the Qing Dynasty encapsulate the Century of Humiliation (百年國恥) that still enflames Chinese passion to this day.

### **The CCP's Place in History**

In school, Chinese children are taught about the hundred years of national humiliation. A period from 1839 to 1949, this Century of Humiliation saw Japanese and Western imperial powers (including the United States) subjugate China, starting with the Opium Wars and subsequent unequal treaties, ultimately culminating with the Second Sino-Japanese War (World War II). This, according to the narrative, was only overcome by the CCP's ascendance to power in 1949.<sup>7</sup> It was during this period of weakness in the face of “great changes not seen in three thousand years”<sup>8</sup> that China was forced to cede swaths of territory in the North, West, and offshore and saw its suzerainty over much of Southeast Asia evaporate.

The aggressive assertion of territorial claims in the South and East China Seas can be seen as Chinese attempts to re-establish the historic boundaries and sphere of influence held prior to the Century of Humiliation.<sup>9</sup> As I have previously opined, the CCP's emphasis on the need to overcome past shame is a double-edged sword in that a failure to aggressively assert sovereignty over historically held territory could be seen by the increasingly nationalist Chinese people as an echo of past humiliations.<sup>10</sup>

### **Historical Mandate for Government Performance**

The CCP's domestic emphasis on regaining China's status and overcoming historic humiliation is a dangerous game that has impacted the way Beijing conducts foreign affairs since the party rose to power in 1949.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese people have a historically established belief that their government has a “social contract”<sup>12</sup>

to serve the interests of the people, and that a failure to perform is a sign the government is in need of change. This concept originated more than three millennia ago after the fall of the Shang Dynasty, when the successor Zhou rulers legitimated their rule by claiming that the Shang rulers were corrupt and inept at running the state and that as a result Heaven had taken their mandate to rule and bestowed it upon the Zhou. Successive dynasties used this same method to claim the “Mandate of Heaven” and legitimize their rule over the Han people, and over centuries, “the domination of performance-based state legitimacy shaped people’s understanding of the power of the rulers and the state in Chinese political culture.”<sup>13</sup> These concepts became further ingrained in the Chinese people through the teachings of Confucius and other prominent Chinese scholars, preserving their influence to the present.<sup>14</sup> A neo-Mandate of Heaven line of thinking, in the form of performance-based legitimization, continues to influence the Chinese people and pressure the government to meet expectations.

### **Meeting Expectations**

The idea that the government is only legitimate through performance makes it imperative that the CCP live up to the expectations it has set for itself since coming to power. Premier Zhou Enlai’s first speech to the newly formed Foreign Ministry in 1949 “told the group that ‘China’s last hundred years of diplomatic history is the history of humiliation, of reactionary governments kneeling on the floor to conduct diplomacy,’” but emphasized that the “new China’ . . . would do things differently.”<sup>15</sup> These assertions have transformed into modern-day incantations of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” from Pres. Xi that risk backfiring on the CCP if not fulfilled in their entirety.

This great rejuvenation includes retaking lost territory like Taiwan<sup>16</sup> and areas contested along the Line of Actual Control with India but also includes the establishment of a Monroe-esque doctrine that enforces suzerainty over a Chinese sphere of influence in Asia.<sup>17</sup> Understanding the aforementioned history that drives this revanchist attitude and behavior will help the United States anticipate and message against it.

Historical impetus and the pursuit of what some have dubbed “the Chinese century”<sup>18</sup> have driven China to challenge the United States and the international system Washington created. It is essential that American leaders understand Chinese motivations and effectively articulate what a fully realized “Chinese Dream” would mean for the United States, its allies, and their people, because only by understanding the impulses and ambitions driving China can they be countered and eventually overcome.

## Conclusion

The momentum driven by grievances makes the Chinese population exceedingly sensitive to perceived weakness or failure from their government, and thus creates an expectation of performance that, if unmet, would put domestic pressure on the CCP. Only by understanding how the CCP has harnessed history to sell the narrative that this century will witness the “great renewal of the Chinese nation”<sup>19</sup> can the United States best anticipate and counter the actions Beijing will take within Asia and on the international stage to overcome what China views as a historical aberration and assume its former status as the world's central nation. ✪

### Maj David Geaney, USAF

Major Geaney is an Air Force Logistics Readiness Officer with multiple assignments and deployments to the Middle East and Pacific region. His articles on China have appeared in the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Defense News*.

### Notes

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