

# Chapter 1

## Imperial China: Practice Makes Perfect?

The Yellow River in Northern China is one of four regions with a legitimate claim to being the ‘cradle of civilisation’—the other three being the Nile in present-day Egypt; the Tigris/Euphrates in present-day Iraq; and the Indus in India/Pakistan<sup>1</sup> In each of these regions, evidence dating back beyond four thousand years has been found of people living in settled communities, growing and storing food, specializing in particular skills and exchanging goods and services among themselves.

Things moved pretty slowly in those days. In China, just three dynasties presided over the ensuing 1800 years: the Xia for over five centuries (approximately 2000–1450 BC); the Shang, for three centuries (1450–1122 BC); and the Zhou for nine centuries (1122–221 BC)—still the record). The later emperors of the Zhou presided over ethnic Chinese (or Han) communities that had expanded well north of the Yellow River and to south of the Yangzi River in central China, as well as eastward to the coast and westward along and between these two great rivers.

From around 500 BC, Zhou authority began to erode and conflict within the broader Chinese community escalated. Over time, the warring groups coalesced into seven larger polities that considered themselves separate entities that had their own army, collected their own taxes, concluded treaties and so forth.

Chinese expansion to the north and west led to contact with the nomadic tribes of these regions, known today as Manchuria and Mongolia. The determining commodity was the horse which the nomads traded for the grain, cloth, tools and utensils produced by the settled Chinese. This practice has been traced back to around 700 BC (although it undoubtedly extends back much further) and was to become a defining influence on the history of the Chinese people. For the next two thousand years, the nomadic craving for Chinese products remained strong. Chinese entanglement with the nomadic peoples to their north, northwest and to the west turned into an endless cycle of attempts to befriend, placate, deter, defeat, conquer, subjugate and Sinocise them. One or other combination of these stratagems often worked for long periods. Over the centuries, as China’s

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1 The broad outlines of the following, exceedingly short, account of imperial China is drawn primarily from three sources: Warren I. Cohen, *East Asia at the Center*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000; Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China’s Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future*, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, 2000, available at <[http://rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1121/](http://rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1121/)>, accessed 24 June 2009; and Ross Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire and What It Means for the United States*, Basic Books, New York, 2004.

fortunes waxed and waned, these stratagems had been revived, adapted and reapplied over and over again. With occasional, and significant, exceptions, China's imperial ambitions always addressed the same regions—the heartland of the nomadic tribes that would neither leave them alone nor quietly accept that they were considered inferior to the Chinese people and should coexist as subordinate neighbours: Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet. As it has several times in the past, today's China incorporates nearly all of these regions.

In previous centuries, there were three periods when China's power and influence underwent prolonged surges. On these occasions, dynamic leadership, internal cohesion, and national economic strength came together to allow offensive security policies, creative foreign policies, the flourishing of trade and the vigorous projection of Chinese culture and traditions. The dynasties associated with these rises to conspicuous and unambiguous pre-eminence are the Qin-Han from 221 BC, Sui-Tang from 581 AD and Ming-Qing from 1368 AD.

In each case, the extent of the territory over which China's emperor exercised direct control expanded very considerably. Also, in each case, China's surge to undisputed pre-eminence occurred in the first half of the dynastic period, with the latter periods characterised by ineffective leadership, internal instability and, in the case of the Han and Tang dynasties, imperial contraction. An anomaly that we will examine below is how the borders of modern China came to embrace even more extensive territories to the north and west than any other dynasty despite more than 150 years of precipitous decline between 1800 and 1949—that is, despite the Qing emperors proving embarrassingly ineffectual from around 1800 onwards, the disruptions of civil war in the 1920s and 1930s, invasion and partial occupation (by Japan) from 1937 to 1945 and then resumed civil war between 1945 and 1949.

## **China's first rise**

As noted earlier, for the last three hundred years or so of its recorded reign, the authority of the Zhou emperors was nominal at best, as the component kingdoms of the Chinese world fought amongst themselves in shifting alliances. This era of prolonged turbulence is usually labelled the 'warring states period'. It provided the context for the works of two of China's most enduring intellectual giants: Confucius (on political and social philosophy) and Sun Tzu (on statecraft and the art of war). Ultimately the Qin kingdom began to prevail, progressively defeating or securing the allegiance of the others. In 221 BC, the Qin leader proclaimed himself the first emperor of the Qin dynasty. Ironically, the Qin were

the least Chinese of the feuding kingdoms. With a territory that straddled the western or inland flank of the other Chinese communities, the Qin gene pool was heavily contaminated by 'barbarian' elements from beyond the Yellow River.

Despite the handicap of suspect ethnicity, the Qin reunified China after centuries of civil war. Moreover, the first Qin emperor proved to be both far-sighted and extraordinarily energetic. In a reign of just 17 years, he set about demolishing the existing feudal structure in favour of centralised bureaucracy, introduced standardised weights and measures, established a single currency and a single written language, and linked the several defensive walls the kingdoms had built to repel nomads into the first instalment of the Great Wall of China. He also moved militarily against the nomads in the north and northwest and endeavoured to occupy the territories thus acquired to prevent re-infiltration. His armies also went south and southeast to accelerate the assimilation of these populations into China proper. The people of these areas, the southern one-third or so of modern China, were generally ethnically Chinese but had, to that point, remained outside the orbit of the dynasties north of the Yangzi River.

The first Qin emperor died in 208 BC and within three years, with the imperial treasury depleted by the cost of the military campaigns, the dynasty collapsed. The Chinese in the south resisted assimilation. The nomad tribes to the north and northwest, emulating the Chinese, confederated for the first time under one leader (Maodun) and became a vastly more formidable security challenge to China proper.

For a few years China flirted with a re-enactment of the warring states era during the Zhou dynasty. On this occasion, fortunately, a dominant player emerged quickly enough to consolidate the Qin gains, with Han Gaodi proclaimed first emperor of the Han dynasty in 202 BC.

The first half of the Han dynasty, a period of roughly two centuries, witnessed the first full flowering of Chinese power and influence in East Asia. Blessed by a succession of able and durable emperors, notably Han Wudi, 170–87 BC, the Han empire expanded hugely to the north, south and, especially, west. After nearly half a century of belligerent coexistence with the nomads of the north and northwest, Han emperors began a century of systematic expansion, both to secure the heartland (that is, to bring all ethnically Chinese people securely under the emperor's sway) and to control as much of the periphery from which the security of the heartland could be threatened.

The Xiongnu (or Mongols) were the first priority. Co-existence was abandoned in 129 BC, and Chinese forces drove the Xiongnu away from regions adjacent to Chinese communities to areas north of the Gobi Desert. China also drove west to contest Xiongnu control of the overland trade routes (collectively dubbed the

‘Silk Road’). Thirty years on, the Chinese dominated a broad finger of territory stretching all the way into modern Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Not only did China thereby gain control of the lucrative but still underdeveloped trade with India, Persia and what would soon become the Roman Empire, it deprived the Xiongnu of the wealth and status that flowed from performing this function.

With the balance of power in central Asia shifting to China, the Xiongnu split into two kingdoms (inner and outer Mongolia) with inner Mongolia formally acknowledging Han supremacy in 51 BC and actually becoming an ally for more than 50 years from 43 BC.

This preoccupation with the Mongols did not preclude other imperial ventures. The Han spent a costly decade (128–118 BC) conquering and occupying the Korean Peninsula, and the north of modern Vietnam, in addition to forcefully requiring the peoples of south and southwestern China to re-join the motherland.

The cost of sustaining these territorial gains, of protecting the aura of a state not to be challenged and of subordinating all domestic claims on government resources to this objective proved unsustainable. Over the 200 years of the later Han dynasty, in an uneven but inexorable process, the Han Empire shrank back to where it had started and even beyond. Containing rebellious Xiongnu thousands of kilometres from the Chinese capital required another debilitating military campaign in 73–89 AD. Each of these efforts made political consensus on the next more improbable. Korea and Vietnam proved to be fiercely resistant to incorporation into greater China, and eternally vigilant for openings to cast the Chinese out.

The Han dynasty finally succumbed in 220 AD and China reverted for another 350 years to several kingdoms vying for dominance over a shadow of the former empire, indeed with much of northern China, the original heartland, occupied by the ‘barbarian’ Xiongnu. This Xiongnu occupation provoked a mass migration to south of the Yangzi River, an experience that seemingly did little to diminish the animosity southern Chinese felt toward their cousins in the north.

China’s second rise to undisputed pre-eminence came under the Tang dynasty (581–907). Scholars debate which of the two—Han China or Tang China—should be regarded as the greater (northerners tend to identify with Han, southerners with Tang) and, with so many potential indices of ‘greatness’, it is an issue that is certain to remain open.

As was the case for the Han, the foundations for the Tang dynasty were laid by the then most ethnically suspect of the contending kingdoms that occupied China north of the Yellow River. This kingdom ultimately conquered its rival to the south and reunified China under the Sui dynasty. Though relatively short-lived (581–618), the Sui emperors relied heavily on imperial expansion to

underpin their authority. Apart from once again compelling the incorporation of the southern Chinese, the external focus was the nomads to the North. Unlike the Qin and Han dynasties six hundred years earlier, the Sui deferred tackling the Xiongnu (Mongols) and focused on the Manchurian tribes to the northeast and the adjacent Koguryo people of North Korea. The Sui fared reasonably well against the Manchurian nomads but failed repeatedly in 612–615 against Koguryo, squandering their military forces, exhausting the treasury, and provoking internal rebellion in the process.

The strongman that emerged from the rebellion founded the Tang dynasty in 618. The first two Tang emperors were obliged to consolidate the home front and to rely on diplomacy and trade to divide and contain nomad incursions. In addition to the Manchus and the Mongols, this threat included a new third player: the tribes of Tibet. Still, the accomplishments of the earlier Han dynasty loomed as the benchmark of dynastic greatness. Eventually the Tang mobilised and moved to regain control of the trade routes in central Asia, pushing the Mongols to the north and the Tibetans to the south. Within 20 years, China's armies again controlled a vast bulb of territory extending into central Asia, although the fact that this territory was connected to China proper by a relatively narrow band of territory perhaps 2000 km long constituted a significant strategic weakness. With success in the west, the Tang diverted their energies to the Koguryo in 645 but, like the Sui, failed in two major assaults. Success against Koguryo did not come until 668, and included the first significant military clash, at sea in 660, between China and Japan. To this point, the various Japanese warlords (Japan as a unitary state still lay one thousand years into the future) had paid insincere homage to successive Chinese emperors and essentially avoided any significant interaction beyond trade. Seemingly, however, the prospect of Chinese control of the whole Korean Peninsula was sufficiently alarming to cause at least some of the Japanese warlords to abandon this longstanding strategy.

Before the costly success in Korea, the Tang were forced to respond to a major Mongol attack in 657 on their newly regained territories in Central Asia. This challenge was successfully repulsed and consolidated an empire that now extended from the eastern extremities of the Persian Empire to the Pacific. After the Mongols, it was the turn of the Tibetans, who swept into China's central Asian territories in 670 and remained for decades a serious rival for control of these territories. Later in the century, various Mongol groups, occasionally in alliance with Tibetan tribes, necessitated major military campaigns in the distant territories, as did rebellion in Manchuria.

Despite these endless challenges, the power and influence of Tang China was without precedent during the seventh century and well into the eighth century. The Tang capital of Chang'an in central China lured the business, cultural, intellectual and political elites from all over the world. Sinocisation, whether

imposed or accidental, took place on a scale without precedent in China's history. And China was itself shaped by its deep exposure to cultures in central North Asia, Asia, Persia and India, as well as to those of Southern China and the northern fringes of Southeast Asia.

Eventually, however, the focus and determination required to build and then protect its empire began to fade. The relentless challenges from within (from peoples who resented invariably heavy-handed Chinese domination) and from without (from those envious of China's wealth and power) sapped the resources of the state and the fortitude of the wider populace. Governance became more difficult as the powerful military became a significant political actor and as the fruits of imperial success offered the Chinese political elite other diverting pursuits. Most particularly, perhaps, the careful attention to determining strategic priorities and avoiding simultaneous challenges on distant fronts began to wane. Over the decades 720–750, China was preoccupied with Tibetan challenges to its control of central Asia, but failed until 747 to engineer a decisive engagement. Having secured at least a respite from the Tibetan tribes, it would appear that Chinese forces drifted westward, possibly without a clear mandate from the centre, eventually clashing with an Arab army in the vicinity of Samarkand in 751. The Chinese were defeated, not least because some of the 'allied' nomad forces in their army defected to the Arab side. In the same year, another Tang army was defeated in Manchuria and a third in northern Thailand. The Tang had lost that invaluable aura of invincibility and the determination to prevail at all costs. Even if the centre was disposed to mount the effort needed to recover the losses, it was prevented from doing so by rebellion at home. In December 755, the general who had lost in Manchuria (An Lushan) attempted a coup d'état. Government and rebel forces fought for the next seven years, displaying an even-handed disregard for the interests of the general public. The rebels actually got so far as to occupy the imperial capital at Chang'an in 757. Prejudices were also indulged, including the massacre of foreign merchants by government forces, which did little to enhance China's longer-term economic interests.

The power struggle at the centre required thinning the ranks of the forces elsewhere in the empire. The Tibetans and the tribes of northern central Asia soon ended Chinese control in the West. The Tibetans also struck at Chinese territory in the southwest and briefly occupied the Tang capital at Chang'an in 793, as Chinese rebel forces had done 36 years earlier.

Government forces eventually prevailed over the rebels in 762/63 and the Tang dynasty lingered on for another 140 years. But it was a pale shadow of its former self, presiding increasingly feebly over the Chinese heartland (albeit with significant gaps in the south and southwest of modern China) and, while still a player of some consequence, lacking decisive influence in central Asia,

Manchuria, Korea and Vietnam. Starting in 875, another decade of internal rebellion proved terminal, with a bandit who had graduated to a warlord assassinating the Tang emperor in 904 and setting up his own successor dynasty in 907.

Tibet remained the most formidable adversary but progressively engaged in its own imperial overreach, accumulating more enemies than it could manage and dissipating its energies in prolonged military campaigns, not only against China to the East, but increasingly against Arabs to the West and the Uighurs to the North. The Tibetan empire collapsed in 866, never to be revived.

The next four centuries saw a curious inversion of the historical pattern in Chinese history. There was the characteristic 'shakedown period' (some 50 years) following the demise of Tang, with a clutch of warlords in south and central China and a number of self-proclaimed 'dynasties' in the north, all of which were led by 'barbarians' whose presence the later Tang emperors had either found convenient or been forced to accept. In due course, one of the southern warlords prevailed over the others and established the Song dynasty in 960. In the north, the competing non-Chinese dynasties distilled into two: the Liao directly to the north and the Xi Xia to the northwest.

The Song had inherited a depleted treasury and suppressed whatever pretensions to empire they may have had. Occasional aspirations at least to dislodge the barbarians in the north came to naught and the Song were defeated in two major wars with these regimes, one in the 1030s and the second 50 years later in the 1080s.<sup>2</sup> As a practical matter, for most of the eleventh century, the Song purchased security against the Liao through tribute, accepting a subordinate status. In 1114, northern Manchurians overran the Liao. The Song joined in, hoping to share the spoils with the new regime—the Jin. In the event, the Jin expanded south to the Yellow River, took the Song capital at Kaifeng and imposed much the same status on Song China as had the Liao.

Historians have marked this discontinuity by relabelling the Song era, following this further diminution of the Chinese state, as the Southern Song.

Despite these peculiar circumstances, China continued to flourish under the Song, particularly in economic terms, and to confirm China's status as a major trading power in East and Southeast Asia and beyond to the Middle East. Another century (roughly the thirteenth century) passed until circumstances

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2 It is striking to note the scale of the warfare that China was capable of a thousand years ago. In both these wars it is believed that the Song dynasty raised an army of in excess of 1 million. At about the same time (1066 to be exact), on the other side of the world, the Normans invaded and occupied England with 7000 men. See Andrew R. Wilson, 'War and the East', address to the Foreign Policy Research Institute's History Institute for Teachers conference on 'Teaching Military History: Why and How', 29–30 September 2007, available at <<http://www.fpri.org/education/teachingmilitaryhistory/>>, accessed 24 June 2009.

again conspired to revive Chinese aspirations of complete unification. This time it was the Mongols under Chinggis Khan that promised to re-arrange the order in East Asia to China's eventual advantage. Chinggis, already in control of Xinjiang and the now impotent Tibet, invaded and occupied the Xi Xia kingdom in 1209, and then attacked Jin in 1211.<sup>3</sup> Despite initial successes, he lost interest and spent the rest of his life (he died in 1227) conquering most of the known world to the west. His successors, however, renewed Mongol interest in China. In 1228, the Mongols again attacked Jin, occupying roughly half of it, completing the task in 1233 with Song forces as allies.

The Song-Mongol alliance was short-lived. Song attempts to regain some of the former Jin territories provoked the Mongol leadership. The Mongols, of course, were the best military strategists of their day and recognised that China, with its already formidable and culturally alien population, would not be your average conquest. Accordingly, they opened their campaign in an unusually indirect fashion, with Kublai Khan (a grandson of Chinggis) invading and occupying Nanzhou, a large kingdom to the south of China proper and west of Vietnam, in 1252. Succession problems among the Mongols deferred the invasion of China until 1258, and interrupted the campaign in 1259–60, but the Mongol assault was relentless. Kublai proclaimed himself emperor of China, and head of the Yuan dynasty, in 1271, although it was not until 1279 that all Song resistance was eliminated.

China was again reunified, albeit under foreign leadership, three hundred years after the formal demise of the Tang. Kublai was not content with ruling China. He took the title of 'Emperor of all under Heaven' as literally as any of his Chinese predecessors and considered unacceptable any neighbouring state that did not submit unambiguously to his authority. In addition, of course, with Chinggis' vast conquests now divided up and still ruled by his descendents, his extended family set some pretty high performance standards in this regard. The Mongols had pressured the Koguryo in Northern Korea since they conquered the neighbouring Jin kingdom in 1233, and in 1258, with the invasion of China seemingly imminent, the Koguryo submitted to the Mongol Court in Beijing. Kublai drove a hard bargain, extracting a debilitating annual tribute from the Koguryo.

Kublai expected the same of Japan, even though these islands had to that time fallen outside China's sphere of imperial interest. The Japanese rejected

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3 From 1949, the People's Republic of China was to insist that Tibet had been an inalienable part of China since 1206 when it came under the control of the Mongols who then brought it into China when they established the Yuan dynasty. See Eliot Sperling, *The Tibet-China Conflict: History and Polemics*, Policy Studies, no. 7, East-West Center, Washington, DC, 2004, available at <<http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/PS007.pdf>>, accessed 24 June 2009.



diplomatic overtures and, with the help of the weather, repulsed two full-scale Mongol-Korean seaborne invasions, one in 1274 and the second in 1280. A third invasion fleet, built up from 1283 was never used. Kublai died in 1294.

In addition to Japan, Kublai detected shortcomings in the submissiveness of several kingdoms in Southeast Asia. But, in campaigns against the Burmese, the Lao, the Thai and the Vietnamese, the Mongols were either defeated or victory was disproportionately costly. Kublai even sent an armada to secure the submission of kingdoms in Java and Sumatra that controlled the trade routes through the archipelago, but his forces were caught up in a local power struggle, out-manoeuvred and sent packing.

The Yuan dynasty survived Kublai's death by 70 years, until 1368, but its control over China, as well as Mongol dominance over the whole of central Asia to China's west, eroded continuously. The stresses on Mongol authority were compounded by the bubonic plague which devastated both the Mongol heartland and China in the 1320s. Roughly a third of China's population, estimated at about 120 million, is believed to have died. Soon after the plague, Southern China descended into the chaos of competing rebel groups, with a warlord eventually emerging with sufficient forces to defeat his major rivals and then to march against Beijing. The Mongol court decamped and fled into the steppes, with its armed forces largely intact. The victorious rebel leader proclaimed himself the first emperor of the Ming dynasty in 1368.

The Ming dynasty endured for 276 years, until 1644, and followed an all too familiar cycle: energetic expansion that restored China's status (and territory) to Tang levels; maturity and defence of the empire; and finally, decades of erosion.

Two energetic warrior emperors, both with a highly developed sense of Chinese superiority, dominated the first 60 years or so. China's empire expanded back into Manchuria, Northern Vietnam and Tibet. The huge area of Yunnan in Southwest China was occupied and then settled by large numbers of Han Chinese around 1390, bringing it securely into the Chinese heartland for the first time. Between them, the two emperors mounted eight major campaigns against the Mongols, but did not achieve any durable outcomes. Finally, the Ming pushed the empire back into central Asia but wisely stopped well short of the boundaries established by the Tang, thereby simplifying control over their lines of communication and supply to these distant territories.<sup>4</sup>

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4 One potentially serious challenge to Ming rule evaporated in the icy wastes of central Asia during the winter of 1405–1406. Tamerlane, a Tatar from the region of Samarkand, spent the second half of the fourteenth century in non-stop combat and in building an empire that extended from New Delhi to Ankara and north of the Black, Caspian and Aral Seas to the vicinity of Moscow. Tamerlane was not related to Genghis Khan, but proclaimed that he was following in his footsteps (even though he spent much of his time conquering the mini-empires that Genghis had allocated to his descendants). Similarly, Tamerlane was not Muslim but took great pride in being 'the sword of Islam', despite devoting most of his energy to conquering Islamic leaders in

In a potentially significant new development for China, the Ming built a blue-water fleet and dispatched it on six expeditions to Southeast Asia, India and the East coast of Africa over the period 1405–21.<sup>5</sup> There is little evidence that China had abruptly developed an appreciation of the strategic potential of seapower. Rather, the fleet is perhaps better seen as an indulgence to the emperor's vanity, to expose more peoples to the magnificence of the Ming and to break Han/Tang records on the number of states (or foreign communities) that could be recorded, however misleadingly, as having paid tribute and acknowledged Ming superiority.

Following the death of the second warrior emperor in 1424, Ming emperors became more subdued and, necessarily, fiscally responsible. Vietnam liberated itself from Chinese occupation in 1427 and the loss was allowed to stand. The Mongols remained the key security preoccupation for most of the next two centuries. The Mongols' assertiveness, when they were united, ebbed and surged while the undercurrent of Chinese distaste for engagement with them of any kind, and periodic decisions to stop trade or devalue the terms of trade, ensured intermittent war.

It was noted above that the patchwork of rival warlords on the islands of Japan had long had an instinctive preference to keep the Chinese at arm's length, even to the point in 660 of trying (unsuccessfully) to help the Koguryo kingdom of northern Korea to resist a Tang invasion. This preference was indulged by the Chinese who always looked to the west and to armies rather than east to the sea and naval power. This pattern was broken by the Yuan dynasty (Kublai Khan) and its repeated attempts to invade Japan in the thirteenth century. Against the background of these pointers, toward the end of the sixteenth century, the foundations were laid for a defining feature of contemporary East Asia—the deep antagonism between China and Japan.

As in China, the internal unity of the Japanese communities had been an inconsistent affair for centuries, but in 1590 a warrior called Hideyoshi brought

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places like Damascus, Baghdad, Isfahan and Shiraz. Tamerlane is credited with having 'saved' Western Europe in 1402 by routing the forces of the Ottoman leader Bayazid near Ankara. Bayazid had already defeated the best army (the fourth crusade) that the fractured leadership of Western Europe could mount against him. Tamerlane, however, took seriously intelligence reports that little of value lay to the West of Ankara, deciding instead to indulge an ambition that he had nursed for many years, namely, to conquer the biggest empire of all, China. At the age of 74, he succumbed to a cold en route to Beijing, somewhere in the eastern regions of modern Kazakhstan. Tamerlane had never lost a campaign, but he would have encountered a mobilised China under the second Ming emperor who was an energetic warrior prince busily engaged in extending the boundaries of China's empire. See Justin Marozzi, *Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World*, Da Capo Press, Cambridge, MA, 2006.

5 An enterprising retired British submariner has argued that elements of one of these fleets almost certainly 'discovered' America (not to mention Antarctica and Australia) more than 50 years ahead of Christopher Columbus. See Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered America*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2003.

all four of the main islands under his control. Hideyoshi appeared to have been cut from the same cloth as Kublai. Responding to a congratulatory note from the King of Korea, he sought safe passage through Korea for a Japanese force that would conquer China. The stunned Koreans equivocated, only to be invaded by Japan in 1592. Within two months, 200 000 Japanese troops were at the Yalu River. An exhausted Ming assembled yet another large force and, together with the Koreans, pushed the Japanese back to an enclave around Pusan at the foot of the peninsula. Years of negotiations on a settlement ensued until Hiroyoshi sent a second invasion force to Korea in 1597. This time the Koreans defeated the Japanese single-handedly, although their entire nation had been ravaged by the armies of both major contenders.

By this time, the authority of the Ming had begun to unravel. Rebel groups had sprung up in the south of China and pressures from the periphery—the Mongols, the central Asian tribes, and the Burmese—persisted. A new challenge emerged in Manchuria. The Jurchens in northern Manchuria, provoked by centuries of Chinese domination, had become strong and ambitious, and moved south to the boundaries of China proper in the early 1600s. They invaded China in 1618. During this time, perceived Korean loyalty to the Ming was remembered and repaid in 1636 with a Manchurian invasion. It took 40 years to subdue all the Ming forces, but the Manchurians did not wait that long. They occupied Beijing in 1644 and proclaimed the Qing dynasty. In their first one hundred years, the Qing roughly doubled the territory under direct Chinese control compared to the Ming at the height of their imperial expansion. Naturally enough, the Qing brought the whole of greater Manchuria into the empire, along with the Korean Peninsula. They also expanded dramatically to the northwest, invading and this time occupying modern Mongolia. They moved much further west than had the Ming, occupying all of modern Xinjiang and holding it determinedly against the Western Mongols.

The Western Mongols proved a persistent threat, manoeuvring widely over the expanses of central Asia, including into Tibet until the Qing secured a decisive victory near the Tibetan capital, Lhasa. The Qing annexed Eastern Tibet in the 1720s, but a later rebellion resulted in a full-scale Qing invasion of Tibet in 1751.

With central Asia relatively secure, even though the Qing found it necessary to station significant forces among these alien populations, there was spare capacity to contest Burmese aspirations to empire. As before (under the Mongols), a five year campaign (1765–69) proved inconclusive, but shortly afterwards the Thai were strong enough to squash Burmese aspirations. In an interesting new departure, perceived Nepalese interference in Tibetan affairs, which the Qing suspected had British support, resulted in the invasion of Nepal in 1792 and the extraction of submission and tribute from the King.

From the beginning of the eighteenth century, European intrusion into what had been China's exclusive preserve for millennia began in earnest. Europeans (especially the Portuguese and the Dutch) had been around for two hundred years, but had readily been confined to activities that rarely impinged on the Chinese leadership. The European intrusion was neither casual nor accidental, but instead driven by a gathering re-ordering of global wealth and power in favour of Europe on the back of the Industrial Revolution. This underlying transformation remained invisible to a Chinese leadership whose vision and curiosity was confined to an area of the earth defined by their predecessors over two thousand years earlier.

The issue of contention was trade, and trade occupied a very different space in the minds of Europeans and Chinese. For Europeans, international trade was accepted as a basic instrument to develop national wealth and wellbeing, as well as a rewarding activity for an important class in the wider population. It was presumed that foreign communities could be pressured, or even coerced if necessary, to engage in 'fair' trade. For the Chinese, timeless practice had pigeon-holed trade as a key tool of diplomacy and statecraft—and as a tool essentially to be wielded by the emperor alone. The notion of broad and uninhibited engagement in international trade was quite alien and, under Confucian values, which place trade and merchants near the bottom of the social order, deeply suspect.

The Qing response to the lengthening queue of European and American traders was to require that all international trade be conducted through one location—Canton, in the deep South—and be vetted through a Chinese guild. Direct access to Chinese officials was prohibited. This severe constraint on profitable trade not only frustrated the Europeans but came to be viewed by the British, the emergent superpower, as demeaning and unacceptable. The British took the lead to convert China to the contemporary Western conception of trade, although, disgracefully, a more specific driver was to export larger quantities of opium to offset the cost of Chinese tea.

Two British diplomatic overtures, in 1792 and 1816, were shunned by the Qing. Later, in 1839, the Qing decided to suppress the import of opium—an effort that escalated into a confrontation with all foreign traders and their expulsion from Canton. The British responded with a distinctly modest force of gunboats and 4000 troops, but they sent the bulk of this force directly to Tianjin, adjacent to Beijing, and extracted an agreement from the Qing in 1841 to negotiate more liberal arrangements. Both negotiators were penalised by their governments—the Englishman for not getting enough and his Chinese counterpart for giving up too much. But it was the British who followed through on their assessment, assembling a somewhat larger naval force that captured the ports of Ningbo and Shanghai, and sending a land force that fought its way to Nanking before the

Qing capitulated and further liberalised the trade regime. In 1857, the British renewed their military coercion, taking the city of Guangzhou in the South and again landing a force at Tianjin, and thereby extracting further concessions from the Qing, not the least of which was foreign ambassadors in Beijing with rights of access to the Emperor. In an attempt to wind back these concessions, Qing forces trounced the complacent British in Tianjin to which the British, with French assistance, responded by occupying Beijing in 1860 with 20 000 troops.

What is truly remarkable is the extraordinary economy of force needed by the British to compel the Qing to make humiliating concessions and, ultimately, to occupy the Chinese capital. It speaks volumes for the enormity of the gap in military technology that the Europeans had opened up over the Chinese. The mobility of Mongol forces had tested the Chinese for untold centuries, but they had learned to emulate this capability and to supplement it with overwhelmingly large ground forces. However, in the nineteenth century, no degree of sheer mass could offset European technology. In addition, the Qing had entered the now characteristic spiral of decline, with a succession of devastating internal rebellions breaking out from 1850 onwards that sapped the energies of a tired and bewildered dynasty for more than 20 years. China's familiar world had changed dramatically, and threatened to become unrecognisable. The Qing, with a thoroughly obsolete set of instruments of power, could do little more than watch.

There is no evidence that the Europeans or the Americans entertained the option of 'owning' China, despite the acquisition of colonies being the height of fashion at the time. The United States, of course, eschewed colonisation on principle, but was to compromise later in respect of the Philippines. Indeed, having secured from the Qing court arrangements that met their interests, this new cohort of barbarians preferred that the Qing remain in power. The precedent of British India would suggest that China's size was not a complete deterrent, but the Indian Mutiny of 1857 would doubtless have put London in a cautious frame of mind. In addition, the sheer scale of such an undertaking, amplified by an awareness that China was utterly alien in every way and an appreciation of China's long status as the local superpower, probably all contributed to colonisation not even being considered as desirable.

Japan, on the other hand, not only dreamed about conquering China, but also about replicating China's past dominance of Asia, even though that task would now entail dislodging the Western powers. Asian intellectuals were not slow to diagnose the sources of Western strength and to identify the key changes that Asian societies needed to accomplish to regain countervailing power. The Qing attempted some reforms, but only half-heartedly as many of them

threatened imperial-style governance. Moreover, as the reach of Qing authority had shrunk dramatically, the reforms took hold unevenly under regional rather than national leadership

Japan had a more fortuitous history in this regard, undergoing a thorough political cleansing in 1868 (the Meiji Restoration) and able to generate a national consensus to copy the West so as to become strong enough to expel the West. This national game plan was implemented with a thoroughness bordering on fanaticism that came to be seen as a defining national characteristic.

Within 25 years, in 1894, Japan and China had declared war on each other over control of Korea. Japan crushed Qing forces and extended its conquests beyond Korea into southern Manchuria, including the Liaodong Peninsula that commands the sea adjacent to Beijing. Combined Russian, French and German pressure forced Japan to relinquish this peninsula (but not other aspects of a harsh deal struck with the Qing). A decade later, in 1904, Japan sank the Russian fleet stationed at Port Arthur on the peninsula, and then did the same in the Tsushima Strait in 1905 to the naval force that Moscow had dispatched from the Baltic Sea to restore its position.

The ensuing settlement, brokered by the United States, accepted that Korea was essentially a Japanese protectorate and confirmed Russian claims to North Manchuria. A few years later, in 1910, Japan put Korea's status beyond doubt by annexing it, while its forces in Manchuria, seemingly just loosely controlled by Tokyo, menaced the other nations (including Britain and the United States) pursuing economic interests in this region.

Humiliation at the hands of the Japanese came on top of burgeoning activities by the Europeans and Americans throughout coastal China. The famous (anti-foreigner) Boxer rebellion at the end of the nineteenth century gave way to a more coherent nationalist movement in the south led by Sun Yat-sen. Sun eventually cut a deal with the military commander the Qing emperor had dispatched to crush his movement. Faced with this joint opposition, the Qing emperor abdicated in the commander's favour in 1912, bringing 268 years of Manchu rule to an end. But this time there was an aspiration to also change the governance of China. There was no aspirant emperor, and an imperial system dating back four thousand years also came to an end. Unsurprisingly, this transformation was to be a prolonged and untidy affair (and, in the opinion of some, more apparent than real given the ultimate emergence of Mao Zedong) and China's steep decline relative to the other major powers since the end of the eighteenth century continued for another 50 years.

Japan's belligerence—fuelled by victory over the Russians, an alliance with the British, and European preoccupation with their war of 1914–18—intensified,

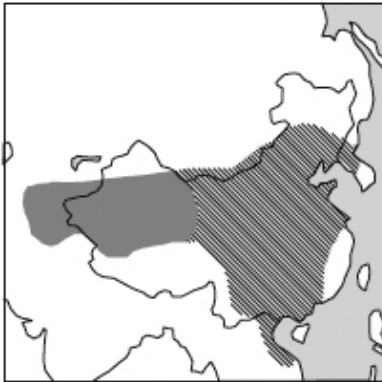
imposing an agreement on the new leader of the Republic of China in 1915 that constituted a further, and extraordinary, infringement of China's sovereignty. Japanese gains in Korea, Manchuria and China proper (particularly the Shandong Peninsula taken over from the Germans) were consolidated by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, even though it was China that had contributed troops to the winning coalition in Europe and had hoped for some reward.

Sun Yat-sen's efforts to hold China together after 1912 faced the familiar epidemic of warlordism following the demise of a dynasty. In March 1920, the new Communist government in Moscow offered some support by voluntarily surrendering some of its privileges in Manchuria—an extremely popular gesture that reflected well on Sun. Moscow's reasoning was probably dominated by the calculation that a coherent China would be the best way to contain Japan which had humiliated it in 1904–1905 and which continued vigorously to contest Russian (now Soviet) dominance of Manchuria. Aside from helping to form the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the early 1920s, Moscow followed up its gesture in Manchuria through a willingness to assist Sun in improving the effectiveness of his armed forces, led by General Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang's forces ultimately prevailed over the warlords and his Kuomintang movement (Sun Yat-sen had died in 1925) was officially recognised as the government of China in October 1928.

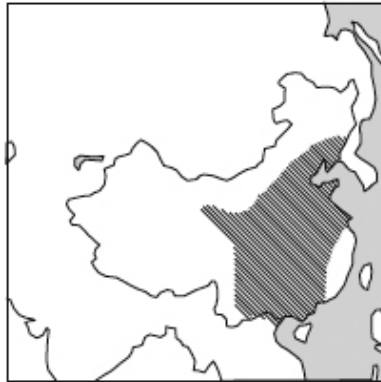
Along the way, Chiang had decided that his increasingly popular Communist allies, led by Mao Zedong, posed a threat to his leadership. He ordered a bloody purge of communists in 1927. The civil war between the communists and the nationalists that ensued consumed the next 20 years. Japan's long-heralded invasion of China, which finally kicked off in 1937 and, in a conspicuously brutal campaign, resulted in the occupation of most of the eastern regions of the country, brought about a reluctant and largely ineffective truce. China's civil war resumed after Japan surrendered unconditionally in August 1945, with Mao and Chiang Kai-shek competing vigorously to be the 'authority' that accepted the surrender of the various Japanese forces in China. Ultimately, the Communist forces prevailed in 1949, with the remnant Nationalist forces finding sanctuary on Taiwan and in northern Burma. On 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Although we have a great deal of distracting information on China's third descent from empirical grandeur and pre-eminence in Asia, the general pattern is very similar to the decline in the Han and Tang eras. But this time there was a curious difference. The empire was not lost. Even though China had fallen into impotence over the period 1800–1950, the extent of the territory internationally reorganised as China, after the Qing fell in 1911 and until Mao took over nearly 40 years later, was very nearly as great as the Han, Tang or Qing dynasties at their height.

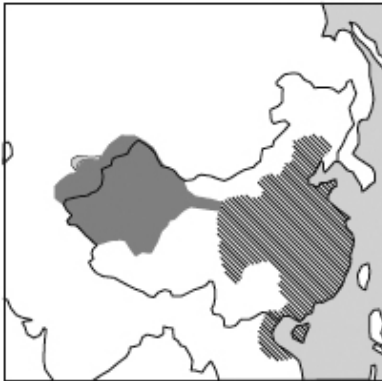
**Map 1: Early Han Dynasty**



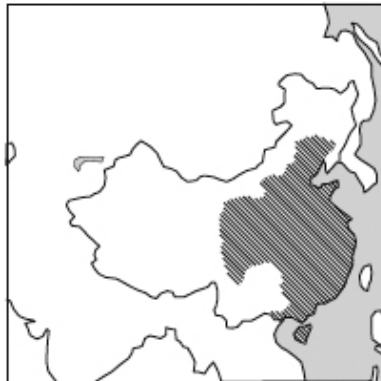
**Map 2: Late Han Dynasty**



**Map 3: Early Tang Dynasty**



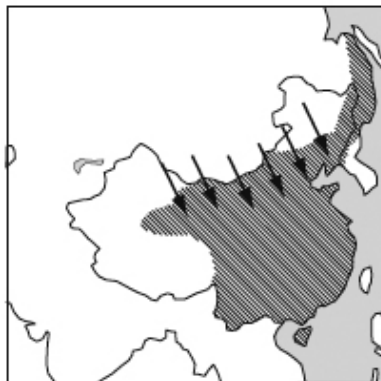
**Map 4: Late Tang Dynasty**



**Map 5: Early Ming Dynasty**

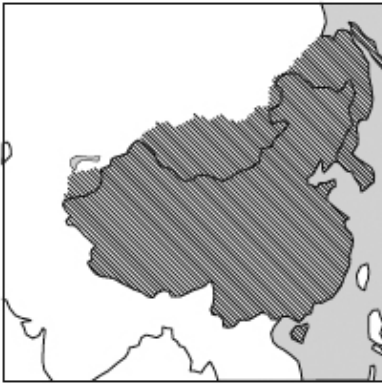
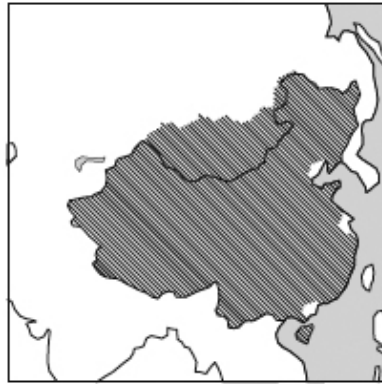


**Map 6: Late Ming Dynasty**



(Arrows denote extensive foreign incursions)



**Map 7: Early Qing Dynasty****Map 8: Late Qing Dynasty**

(Source for Maps 1–8: Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future*, Monograph Report, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 2000, Maps 4a–4h on pp. 41–44, available at <[http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1121/](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1121/)>, accessed 16 November 2009).

In 1913, the new Republic of China had to accept that Outer Mongolia and the central Asian region of Xinjiang would be autonomous regions (to protect Russian and British interests respectively). But China retained formal sovereignty over these areas, as well as Tibet and Manchuria. As a practical matter, Japan and Russia had essentially split Manchuria away from China, but Japan's defeat in 1945 and Russia's (by then the Soviet Union) limited bargaining power in East Asia relative to the United States in the aftermath of the Second World War saw this region also returned to China.

The vicissitudes of great power politics conspired, literally, to donate to today's China the empire that it had repeatedly striven at prodigious cost to acquire. Part of the explanation lies in the growing formalisation of international relations, and the strong attachment to clear borders as a pre-requisite for order and stability. A further consideration was that when the United States emerged from the Second World War as the dominant power, Asia was a subordinate interest to Europe and a region in which the priority was to strip Japan of capacities to re-emerge as a dominant player. In addition, there was already sufficient apprehension about the Soviet Union to make strengthening its position in east and central Asia generally unattractive to the United States. Finally, Britain had all but decided that its imperial days were over and was not inclined to press its interests in Tibet. China benefited from the fallout of these developments and strategic judgements.

## The tribute system

The extraordinary durability of imperial China, and the fact that so much of this remarkable national journey is reasonably well documented, has naturally produced in the Chinese something approaching reverence of the lessons of history. One might be forgiven for thinking that, over the course of four thousand years, China has prospered and prevailed in every imaginable circumstance and, presumably, made every mistake and error of judgement that it is possible to make. Thus, looking to past episodes for guidance on what to do and not do continues to be an important element in framing China's policy options in addressing today's challenges.

The question for many scholars of China has been whether this extraordinary history either reflects or has etched into Chinese minds attitudes and presumptions that help to explain China's political behaviour today and/or which offer clues about the longer-term ambitions of the Chinese leadership. Most of these scholars look for answers to these questions in the so-called *tribute system*, a term used to describe the essence of the arsenal of techniques of statecraft that China developed and used in every conceivable combination to manage its empire as cost-effectively as possible. It was, in other words, essentially the art of *Realpolitik*, Chinese style. The term derives from the view that the strongest and most consistent characteristic the Chinese projected was the belief that it had no equals in the universe known to it, that all other communities were 'inferior' and that all its international dealings and relationships should reflect this fact.

Swaine and Tellis characterised the tribute system in the following terms:

For a strong imperial state, the traditional tributary relationship served many practical, political, economic, and cultural purposes: It reaffirmed the applicability to Chinese and non-Chinese alike of China's hierarchical and sinocentric system of political and social values and thereby legitimized the entire Confucian order, it provided an avenue for regular diplomatic communication between the Chinese court and foreign rulers, and it served as a convenient and durable basis for mutually beneficial economic relations between China and foreign states, thereby increasing, in many instances, China's leverage over those states. In addition tributary relations also gave recipient periphery states important legitimacy, status, and leverage within their own subregion, by providing significant economic benefits and a form of political recognition by the dominant power in East Asia. Moreover, tributary status often, although not always, implied Chinese diplomatic and military protection of the vassal state against domestic usurpers or foreign nontributary states, as noted above.

When possible, strong Chinese imperial regimes generally sought to ground the tributary and trade relationship in a genuinely hierarchical power structure based on a clear position of military superiority. Under such circumstances, periphery powers were often pressured, enticed or coerced by strong and wealthy imperial Chinese regimes to accept a more clearly defined status as Chinese vassals that involved specific reciprocal benefits and obligations. Local leaders were usually allowed to retain their positions and rule their lands as they wished, provided they kept the peace, accepted symbols of (Chinese) overlordship, and assisted (Chinese) armies when called on. They would also often receive generous gifts, subsidies, and trade concessions from the Chinese court, ostensibly as an expression of the benevolence and generosity of the emperor, but more accurately to ensure continued loyalty and support. Such gifts and concessions (along with various diplomatic ploys) were often used by a strong regime to foment hostilities among nomadic groups and to prevent the formation of nomadic confederations. In some instances, and particularly during the early period of contact with imperialist powers in the mid 19th century, a compliant vassal state (such as Korea at that time) would also agree to avoid foreign relations with states other than China. In return, the Chinese state often assumed a level of responsibility for the security of the vassal, especially against external attack.<sup>6</sup>

Warren Cohen offers a not dissimilar view:

It was during [the Han dynasty] that the Chinese developed practices for managing foreign affairs traditionally referred to as the tributary system, a system of enormous *political* importance to Chinese ruling elites and of great *economic* importance to those regimes that accepted tributary status. Under the system, non-Chinese—'barbarian'—states accepted a nominally subordinate place in the Chinese imperial order. They demonstrated this subordination by sending missions to the Chinese court and paying homage to the Chinese ruler to whom they presented acceptable gifts. They often left what amounted to hostages at the Chinese court, usually members of their ruling families. In return they received gifts from the emperor, often more valuable than those they had submitted, and opportunities for private trade. Obviously, the greater the Chinese need for the submission of the tributary state, the greater its potential threat to Chinese security or its importance as an ally—the greater the value of the goods sent back with the tribute mission. The system appears to have been expensive for the Chinese, but the symbolic submission of the barbarian state was more palatable

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6 Swaine and Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present and Future*, pp. 69–70.

politically than outright appeasement and less problematic than endless warfare on the periphery. To the barbarians, ritual submission was the price they grudgingly paid in exchange for Chinese bribes and access to trade. Yu Ying-shih, the leading authority on Han foreign relations, argues that the tribute system was a net loss to China at the state level although individual Chinese profited.<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere in the same study, Cohen observes:

In its most obvious form, a foreign ruler paid homage to the Chinese emperor by sending an embassy or appearing himself at the Chinese court. Once there he would present gifts to the emperor and very likely leave a hostage or hostages, perhaps even his son. In return the Chinese would lavish gifts upon him, more often than not of a value in excess of those received, and permit private trade. The tributary system was at once a formula for diplomatic intercourse, a symbol of peace and friendship between unequal sovereign states—a nonaggression pact or even alliance, and a vehicle for trade relations. The Chinese received acknowledgment of their superiority, at least nominal, and assurances of the vassal states' good behavior. The tribute bearers obtained insurance against Chinese aggression, the possibility of protection against other enemies, access to Chinese goods, and a significant profit through the exchange of presents itself. It was a system the Chinese found useful when they lacked the will or the power to crush or occupy another state. But it was an expensive system and there were always those at court who argued (with occasional success) that it was cheaper to fight or even ignore a given group of foreigners. The existence of the tributary system should not be allowed to conceal the fact that the Chinese were masterful practitioners of *Realpolitik*.<sup>8</sup>

Both these characterisations of the tribute system support the more pithy observation that 'neighbouring polities sent missions to the Chinese court to pay deference as an insurance policy against being attacked'.<sup>9</sup> Both also support widespread shorthand characterisations of the Chinese as imbued with a deep sense of superiority over other communities and races and as never abandoning the thought that a comprehensively Sino-centric world order was natural and proper.

China, with the Emperor of all under Heaven at its head, had devised the optimum political and social contract for unity and harmony within. Imposing the same order externally had obvious attractions, but required both the means to do so

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7 Cohen, *East Asia at the Center*, p. 25.

8 Cohen, *East Asia at the Center*, p. 60.

9 Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire and What It Means for the United States*, p. 36.

and generating the political will to apply these capacities to this purpose. As to the former, China's marked preponderance in strategic weight over all other communities in East Asia meant that powerful leaders could, it seems, always draw on reserves of wealth and resilience that were unmatched in the region. The latter came in the form of strategic imperatives combined with the mission of exposing neighbouring peoples to the Chinese way of doing things; that is, to Sinocise them or to make the periphery as much like China as possible. Under this mindset, where overt subordination to China was seen not simply as advantageous but as the only conceivable basis for harmony and stability, neighbouring polities, necessarily inferior, had duties rather than rights towards the centre (or China) which in and of itself constituted the international system.

To impose and sustain this conception of order was difficult and hugely expensive. It inflicted massive grief on the Chinese as well as the peoples within its reach. It meant that China's emperors could never settle for anything less than absolute power. Power could not be shared. There could be no partner, not even a hierarchy of states in China's orbit.

The fact that the Chinese apparently came to this view, and burnished it so earnestly for so long, is undoubtedly testimony to the magnitude of the economic and technological edge they held over their neighbours for at least the past 2500 years. Through its indigenous efforts supplemented by continuous cross-fertilisation and technology transfer with states near and far, it seems fair to say that, for nearly all of this vast expanse of time, China remained up-to-date and, indeed, sustained an edge in science and technology and its application to economic and military pursuits. In terms of political, economic and social structures and processes, China's sophistication and depth of experience was perhaps even more commanding. Not until the Industrial Revolution in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was China exposed as having missed a decisive transformation in the sources of national power and strategic weight. The imperial system, datable from around 1800 BC, and having endured every imaginable challenge, eventually succumbed because of this strategic oversight. It staggered on for perhaps a century after it became apparent that China was unambiguously backward in this crucial dimension of national power, eventually collapsing in 1911.

It is worth pointing out that, on the two occasions that they were conquered, occupied and ruled by outsiders, their enemies took decades to accomplish this feat. The Mongols took two decades (1258–79) and the Manchurians four decades (1618–58) to completely subdue the forces of the dynasty they attacked (the Song and the Ming respectively). Moreover, it is clear from the discussion above that, for all of the past 2500 years, China accounted for such a decisive slice of the East Asian strategic pie that no alternative centre of gravity for the region emerged or was imaginable. There were extended periods when Heaven

itself appeared to lose sight of Chinese superiority. In addition to the 350 years of Mongol and Manchu leadership, for the 329 years of the Song dynasty China's emperors virtually paid tribute to the two nomad kingdoms that occupied all of Northern China and which never lost the capacity to coerce Song China. Even when the country was occupied, however, its conquerors had to step into China's world and rule from within.

China's pretensions to innate superiority could be manipulated to advantage, and they were. Foreigners gathered intelligence on the Imperial Court—the character of the Emperor, the predispositions of his principal advisers, the strength of China's armed forces, the state of the Treasury and so on—to assess how profitable they could make the gesture of tribute.

It is hard to believe that China's leaders remained unaware for very long that being seen as craving even the appearance of subordination set the stage for bad bargains. There are records of the emperors' advisors carefully weighing the tangible and intangible costs and benefits of alternative foreign and security policy settings. Although it is often observed that in many instances China paid a disproportionately heavy price to secure a measure of cooperation from another state, it is hard to believe that China's leaders did not consider it a rational act in the circumstances they found themselves in. Conversely, on the occasions when a state that was clearly not a core security problem for China refused to pay tribute and was invaded, it seems likely that the explanation could be found in assessments of how others would perceive such a refusal, its impact on China's aura of leadership at the time and the potential costs further down the road if others were emboldened to follow the example.

## The Imperial legacy

Generations of scholars of post-imperial China have naturally wondered whether China was completely re-inventing itself or adapting ancient attitudes, aims and practices to its new internal and external environments. Where does China think it belongs in the scheme of things? How does it propose, and what is it prepared to do, to get there? Does Beijing have any indicative timetable for this journey? Put in other words, does China have a grand strategy and to what extent is this strategy informed by the past, whether by memories of greatness and of how that greatness was achieved, a yearning to recreate a traditional Sinocentric world order, or by the more limited, if perhaps interim, goal of erasing the so-called 'century of humiliation'?

From 1912 to 1978, the question of China's grand strategy was a rather esoteric interest as a succession of disasters, both inflicted on and by China, kept the

country in a state of incoherent weakness. Since the seminal decisions of 1978, however, the question has steadily attracted more interest and acquired greater relevance.

The issue of whether China's contemporary behaviour should be regarded to some significant extent as an echo of the attitudes and perceptions that drove its imperial leadership in the past may be a matter of personal judgement rather than a question that can be addressed analytically.

Writing in the late 1960s, some leading Sinologists concluded that China had broken decisively with its past conceptions of world order. John Fairbank dissected the signature dimension of this world order, the tribute system through which all non-Chinese endorsed and re-inforced Chinese conceptions of superiority and centrality by being seen to pay homage to the emperor, depicting it as a far more practical and less absolute construct than popular myth suggested.<sup>10</sup> The posture of superiority toward non-Chinese, seen as central to the emperor's standing within China and therefore to political and social harmony, was implemented with great flexibility and responsiveness to China's real bargaining power at any particular moment. The terms of tribute were frequently highly advantageous to those seeking the Emperor's blessing. When the system functioned to its full potential, it not only delivered political harmony within China but also organised China's relations with the communities that surrounded it. The thrust of this argument supports the view that the tribute system can be adequately explained as a tool of political management: one does not have to resort to the contention that it is evidence of an attitude deeply engrained in the Chinese psyche.

This deflation of the tribute system fits with the alacrity with which China abandoned the imperial system and the notion of a universal Kingship—the Emperor of all under Heaven—in 1911–12, although the fact that the Qing dynasty was Manchu rather than Chinese doubtless also helped this rejection. Moreover, this went hand in hand with China's embrace of the multi-state system at the end of the nineteenth century. The system of states required that polities engage one and other nominally as equals, the antithesis of the ancient Chinese view that all foreigners were inferior and that, regardless of size, proximity and importance to China, none could engage the Chinese state as an equal or even be informally ranked as more or less important than others to China. This combination of developments led Benjamin Schwartz to contend that China's perceptions of world order had been fundamentally undermined

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<sup>10</sup> John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1968.

in the twentieth century and that any assertions that this ancient wisdom had significant explanatory value for the policies China pursued in the late 1960s or beyond should be viewed sceptically.<sup>11</sup>

This particular view, that today's China could and should be regarded, for analytical purposes, as analogous to any other major player on the international stage, was not, of course, uncontested. Writing in the same volume from the late 1960s, Wang Gungwu insisted that the Chinese sense of superiority is real, that Chinese feel that their history is relevant for all time, and the possibility that, down the road, China will again allow this attitude to shape its external posture should be a matter of concern.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Ross Terrill has devoted an entire book to the same theme, namely, that the ambitions and practices of Communist China's leaders can be shown to be deeply rooted in these ancient traditions.<sup>13</sup>

Without resorting to a personal judgement and, to some extent, anticipating the discussion to follow, several propositions related to this important issue can be advanced with a measure of confidence:

- First, East Asia is rapidly regaining the status in the world economy that it enjoyed for centuries prior to the Industrial Revolution.
- Second, East Asia is trending back to its traditional configuration in which China is the economic, political and military centre of gravity. Japanese and, prospectively, Indian economic power will attenuate Chinese dominance, giving it more the status of the first among equals rather than the marked pre-eminence that appears to have characterised the past.
- Third, China's leadership has consciously pursued policies intended to counter and break down expectations that its worldview is still informed either by revolutionary socialist principles or by the attitudes associated with its imperial past. The objectives of these policies include facilitating commerce and countering instincts among China's neighbours to be nervous about a strong China and to seek reassurance in closer relations with other strong powers, especially the United States.
- Fourth, China's confidence in its culture and history, and, increasingly, in its attractiveness as an economic partner, is palpable. China's leaders are demonstrating that playing in the game of nations at the highest level represents normality for China, and is something that they excel at.

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11 Benjamin I. Schwartz, 'The Chinese Perception of World Order, Past and Present', in John K. Fairbank, (ed.), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1968, p. 284.

12 Wang Gungwu, 'Early Ming Relations With Southeast Asia: A Background Essay', in John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, pp. 34–62.

13 Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire and What It Means for the United States*.



By the late 1990s, that is, thirty years later, analysts had a more stable foundation upon which to base their assessments and projections. For the last two of these three decades China had decisively abandoned revolutionary zeal and Socialist dogma, embracing the market economy, international trade and economic interdependence, and progressively acquiring the attributes of a regular member of the international community (by, for example, signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and joining the World Trade Organization (WTO)). The choice in favour of the market economy discarded one of the basic principles of Socialism, while accepting the prospect of deepening economic interdependence with other nations ran counter to preferences that China had displayed for millennia. The impact of these 1978 decisions was dramatic and by the early 1990s China had flourished into an economic phenomenon that people already sensed would ultimately transform the economic, political and military order, certainly in East Asia if not more broadly.

