

# CIVILISATIONAL CONTINUITY, HISTORICAL MEMORY, AND THE POLITICAL LOGIC OF THE MODERN CHINESE STATE

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**Civilisational Continuity, Historical Memory, and the Political Logic of the Modern Chinese State**



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### **Introduction: History as Governing Ideology**

To understand how the People's Republic of China (PRC) is in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one must look into its history of the dynasties in the past. Scholars who start to analyse the PRC from 1949 will always struggle to understand that China needs to be understood from the Zhou dynasty's ritual cosmology to the Tang dynasty imperial grandeur and the disastrous upheavals of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. China stands apart from the majority of modern great powers not just because of the age of its civilisation but also because of the extent to which its history has been deliberately used as a tool of political power. The focus of the chapter is on how historical memory functions as a structural variable in Chinese politics, shattering the trauma of the "Century of humiliation" leading to the foundation for present-day domestic legitimation and foreign policy projections. The writing below can be divided into three academic discussions.

### **Authenticity:**

Is the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) civilizational narrative essentially politically driven, or does it represent true historical continuity?

**Agency:**

Is the CCP using nationalism, or is nationalism using the CCP?

**Consequences:**

The effect that history has on the Chinese foreign policy today and its compatibility with a rule-based global order.

**The Foundations of Chinese Political Thought: Heaven, Legitimacy, and World Order****The Mandate of Heaven and Conditional Authority**

Systematically, the concept of Tianming was articulated during the Zhou dynasty (c. 1046-256 BCE), which, when translated, means 'Mandate of Heaven' or Heaven Command. This policy was established by the rulers to legitimise their rule, yet if they are unable to do so properly, it would invite rebellion, catastrophe, and dynastic collapse. This concept effectively defines the rise and fall of Chinese history over the years. The Chinese imperial authority was fundamentally conditional. Governance in this context went through various stages of development. This was very different from the European divine-right monarchy, which established itself through apostolic lineage and was irrevocable. The Confucian scholar Mencius<sup>1</sup> (c. 372-289 BCE) emphasised the same concept simply: "A ruler who failed his people could be removed, and the killing of such a ruler was not regicide but the elimination of a criminal." Professor Joseph R. Levenson<sup>2</sup>, a scholar of Chinese history, regarded in his signature work 'Confucian China' that this represents a very unique relationship between history and authority, in which the past served as a moral record against which current rulers were constantly judged. When compared to European political theology, it is instructive. In contrast to divine-right monarchy, which derived legitimacy from apostolic ancestry, the Chinese imperial power was always provisional and based on moral leadership and social order rather than inheritance.

This link between textual authority and political power was institutionalized at the core of the Chinese state by the imperial examination system, which for more than a millennium chose officials based on knowledge of the classical canon. In some senses, Chinese

governance has always been a scholarly endeavour, justified not merely by military might or ancestry but also by proven intellectual and moral development. The CCP's stress on ideological conformity and its careful presentation of historical expertise as a component of political power are long shadowed by this legacy.

### **Tianxia, the Tributary System, and Civilizational Hierarchy**

A cosmological universalism that shaped China's interactions with the outside world complemented Tianming's internal logic. The idea of tianxia, which was ingrained in Chinese political philosophy, was based on the belief that China was the civilised centre of a hierarchically structured globe rather than just one civilization among many. In theory, the Son of Heaven dominated not just China but all of mankind; those outside the purview of Chinese civilization were seen as unfinished rather than distinct, awaiting assimilation into the moral and cultural hierarchy centered on the Chinese court.

Political theorist Zhao<sup>3</sup> Tingyang has argued that tianxia implies a world-ordering project premised on hierarchical harmony rather than competitive sovereignty, a framework with significant contemporary resonance in Chinese statecraft. Its institutional expression was the tributary system: a hierarchical international order in which neighbouring states acknowledged Chinese pre-eminence through ritual tribute, receiving in return formal recognition, legitimacy, and trade privileges. John King Fairbank<sup>4</sup> identified the tributary system as the organising principle of East Asian international relations for centuries, a proto-international order with China at its normative and political centre.

Therefore, the fall of this system under Western imperialism was more than just a geopolitical event that frequently shifts the balance of power. The whole conceptual framework that China had used to understand its role in the world was destroyed, resulting in a civilizational catastrophe. This is the essential background for comprehending the intensity of China's reaction to perceived insults to national dignity and sovereignty that have defined both Republican and Communist foreign policy. From the inside, what appears to be hypersensitivity is actually the visceral recollection of a global order that has been savagely destroyed.

## **The Century of Humiliation: Trauma, Memory, and the Politics of Grievance**

### **The Structural Conditions of Decline**

The 'Century of Humiliation' did come as a surprise to a strong civilisation. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Qing dynasty was already showing a terminal decline. The bureaucratic corruption, fiscal exhaustion and demographic expansion led to the downfall. The Qing's ability to balance left the dynasty completely unprepared for the challenge of Western industrial military strength. Analytically, this aspect, which led to the fall of China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is quite significant. The CCP's narrative on this blamed the external powers for nearly all of China's misery. The narrative very well concealed the extent to which the lack of internal stability increased China's vulnerability. It furthermore did not put any responsibility for the same on the leadership.

### **The Opium Wars and the Making of a National Wound**

The First Opium War (1839–1842) opened the humiliation narrative with a demonstration of the chasm between Chinese political self-conception and material reality. The treaty of Nanking imposed the cession of Hong Kong, the opening of treaty ports, a substantial indemnity, and the principle of extraterritoriality, the humiliating acknowledgement that British subjects would not be subject to Chinese law on Chinese soil. Julia Lovell's meticulous reconstruction of the Opium War's place in Chinese historical consciousness advances an argument of considerable analytical importance: the war became the "First Humiliation" not because contemporaneous Chinese experienced it as such, but because later generations of nationalist intellectuals, revolutionary leaders, and CCP propagandists required it to serve as the foundation stone of a nationalist narrative that had not yet been written when the war was fought. The century of humiliation is, in significant part, a retrospective political construction, shaped and deployed for specific contemporary purposes.

The mechanism is most evident in the destruction of the Old Summer Palace by French and British armies in 1860. Millions of Chinese kids visit the Yuanmingyuan <sup>5</sup>ruins every year as a "patriotic education base" in Beijing. They serve not just as historical sites but

also as a tool for emotional education, a tangible memorial to foreign cruelty intended to elicit in every new generation the emotional reactions of indignation and determination that uphold the CCP's restoration narrative.

### **The Accumulation of Humiliations**

The second opium war brought psychological damage due to the continuous accumulation of territory losses and abuses of sovereignty. The biggest setback came from the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1985), which came from an Asian country that the Chinese considered to be culturally derivative. Taiwan's cession, an indemnity <sup>6</sup>equal to around three times China's yearly government revenue, and the official recognition of Korean independence were all mandated by the Treaty of Shimonoseki. A further low point was reached in 1901 with the Boxer Protocol and the scramble for Concessions, which let foreign forces occupy Chinese territory and mandated the killing of Chinese officials.

The 1919 Paris Peace Conference dealt a blow that was more significant symbolically than practically. Part of China's motivation for joining the First World War was to reclaim German holdings in Shandong province, which were later given to Japan by the Treaty of Versailles. The subsequent nationalist rebellion, known as the May Fourth Movement, served as both the CCP's and its Nationalist rival's incubator and the catalyst for the development of contemporary Chinese nationalism. The most severe stage of the century of humiliation was the Japanese invasion, which escalated from the Manchurian Incident in 1931 to full-scale war in 1937. Similar to the Holocaust in European memory, the Nanjing Massacre of December 1937, in which Japanese forces killed between 200,000 and 300,000 civilians and prisoners of war, holds a place in Chinese historical consciousness as the pinnacle of what happens when foreign predation goes unchecked.

### **The Psychological Architecture of Victimhood**

According to a Prominent scholar, Wang <sup>7</sup>Zheng's research, after the war, the idea of Guochi or national humiliation entered political discourse as a strategically developed empowering concept as the Chinese attempted to convert military defeat into a persistent

political energy of propelling national regeneration. Further, researchers like Peter Gries<sup>8</sup>, the Chinese national identity under the humiliation narrative functioned through a social psychological framework of 'face and favour' in which the country is seen as a moral actor whose lost its dignity and restoration is a symbol of acknowledgement of the wrong and material recovery. This also explains why the Chinese demand for 'respect' from foreign government are not just performances but rather a reflection of a true psychological economy.

Particular attention should be paid to Odd Arne Westad's observation that the experience of semi-colonialism, partial rather than full subjection, was in some ways more psychologically damaging than outright colonial rule, resulting in a condition of humiliated agency more corrosive than either true independence or acknowledged subjection. China was never completely colonized; although it was deprived of its actual sovereignty, it kept the formal framework. A deep awareness of the discrepancy between official status and real treatment, as well as a resolute emphasis on the entire content of sovereign equality rather than its ceremonial form, was imprinted in Chinese foreign policy consciousness by this experience.

## **The CCP as Civilizational Restorer**

### **1949 and the Maoist Inheritance**

The CCP told the story of the People's Republic's establishment on October 1, 1949, in words that had a completely intentional cultural resonance. Mao Zedong's <sup>9</sup>declaration that "The Chinese people have stood up" was more than just a revolutionary statement; it was a high-level civilizational assertion that positioned the CCP as the pinnacle of a five-thousand-year historical arc that had been momentarily sidetracked by dynastic weakness and foreign predation. However, there was a fundamental conflict in the Maoist project that was never addressed. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was an attempt to destroy the "four olds" of traditional Chinese customs, culture, habits, and ideas, including the Confucian traditions that the Party was simultaneously invoking for nationalist purposes, representing the extreme of the revolutionary pole. Much of the material and intellectual richness of Chinese civilization was being destroyed by a party

that claimed to be restoring it. Professor Levenson saw this as a fundamental paradox of Chinese modernity: the desire to embrace Western-derived modernity, which appeared to offer the only practical means of national revitalisation, while simultaneously affirming civilizational greatness.

### **The Legitimation Crisis and the Patriotic Education Campaign**

The CCP was caught in an ideological dilemma upon Mao's passing. Deng Xiaoping had weakened the foundation upon which the Party had first asserted its right to govern by rejecting socialist economics. The party replaced it with a new implicit agreement that the people would tolerate one-party rule in exchange for economic progress. However, this was an unstable basis; economic success could not be assured, and it did not address the more basic question of why China required a one-party state instead of democratic governance. The 1989 Tiananmen Square upheaval brought these flaws to light.

A comprehensive nationalist mobilization campaign centred on historical memory evolved as a methodical approach. The Patriotic Education Campaign <sup>10</sup>was a conscious attempt to rebuild the CCP's legitimacy based on nationalist passion and historical grievance rather than socialist philosophy. It was formally started in 1991 and became more intense after its unified launch in 1994. According to Wang Zheng's analysis, the campaign was carried out through several overlapping channels, including curriculum redesign that highlighted the century of humiliation, the establishment of patriotic education bases as mandatory school visits, state-sponsored film and television production that dramatized the humiliation narrative, and the reorganization of national holidays around moments of resistance and renewal. As a result, the Chinese memory landscape was completely reorganized, with the Party's origin story concurrently etched in popular culture, chronological rhythm, and physical space. According to Jessica Chen Weiss, this tactic generated a substantial complication: the Party developed a political force with its own momentum, one that could be directed and channelled but not entirely controlled by fostering really felt nationalist feelings. Once set free, the animal of nationalist feeling has a hunger of its own.

## **The Xi Jinping Era: Civilizational Nationalism as Governing Ideology**

Restoring China's glory as a civilization has been the main justification for the Party's leadership under Xi Jinping. Phrases like the "China Dream<sup>11</sup>" and the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" encapsulate Xi's political vision, which portrays the current CCP leadership as the last chapter in a lengthy historical narrative that started with China's humiliation at the hands of foreign powers. The goal date for national restoration was set as 2049, the 100th anniversary of the PRC's formation, which is telling since it portrays the whole history of Communist government as a journey toward a preset destination. By framing the entire arc of CCP rule as a teleological movement toward civilizational redemption and committing Xi's successors to a narrative whose internal logic unambiguously points toward great-power status, territorial completeness including Taiwan, and unambiguous international respect, the targeting of 2049, the centennial of the PRC's founding, as the date of national restoration is historically diagnostic.

Xi has made nationalist ideology more rigid in both its content and tone. Xi has pushed an overtly anti-Western narrative that portrays China's authoritarian model as superior to Western culture rather than just practically useful, in contrast to his predecessors' rather broad patriotism. He has methodically expanded ideological control into universities, the media, civil society, and the legal system, reconstructing a personal cult of leadership that is reminiscent of the Maoist model. This has prevented internal pluralism that may theoretically allow for course correction.

## **Historical Memory and Contemporary Policy**

### **Territory as the Body of the Nation**

According to Taylor Fravel<sup>12</sup>, the century of humiliation narrative has resulted in a structural disposition toward sovereign maximalism, wherein perceived challenges to Chinese territorial claims activate the full affective weight of historical victimization, making compromise politically disastrous even when it may make strategic sense. The extent to which historical memory has been territorially ingrained in Chinese political consciousness is demonstrated by the PRC's contention that Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan,

Hong Kong, and the disputed maritime areas of the South and East China Seas are essential parts of the national body.

The most difficult situation is Taiwan. Taiwan's distinct political position is openly presented in official CCP language as an unhealed scar from a century of humiliation, a trauma whose mending is the most personal item still on the restoration agenda. The intricacy of Taiwan's real political and historical circumstances, it was ruled by Japan from 1895 to 1945, then by the Republic of China, and is currently home to a population that does not identify as primarily "Chinese" in any politically significant sense, registers in the CCP's framework as a transitory and unacceptable result of past injustice rather than as a legitimate political reality. Facts that contradict the historical narrative are often classed as distortions that need to be corrected rather than recognized as evidence that needs to be accommodated when the historical narrative takes centre stage in the perception of political reality.

### **Japan and the Structural Persistence of Historical Grievance**

Perhaps the most striking example of how historical memory actively interferes with modern foreign relations is the Sino-Japanese relationship. Asymmetry in post-war memory politics has been constitutive, not only problematic, of the bilateral relationship, as Franziska Seraphim's <sup>13</sup>comparative research shows. A recurrent cycle of official regret followed by nationalist regression has resulted from Japan's internal struggle over wartime remembrance between conservative nationalists who downplay the horrors of the war and progressive forces demanding full recognition. China views each cycle of retractions and apologies as proof of ill faith rather than as proof of Japan's internal political complexity. The recurring crises that sabotage the bilateral relationship are not diplomatic mishaps; rather, they are the foreseeable structural repercussions of an imbalance that will continue as long as Japanese official recognition is disputed.

### **International Institutions, the Belt and Road, and Civilizational Foreign Policy**

According to Alastair Iain Johnston's analysis, China views international institutions as strategic arenas for advancing national interests and reshaping the rules of the

international order in ways that align with Chinese preferences. This strategic institutionalism is supported by the historically conditioned belief that Western powers created existing institutions primarily to serve Western interests. This perspective is consistently reflected in China's pattern of active multilateral involvement, persistent opposition to foreign supervision of domestic matters, and selective disobedience of court decisions it perceives as Western-influenced impositions. The most notable recent example of similar reasoning is its rejection of the 2016 South China Sea verdict from the Permanent Court of Arbitration.

As the Xi era's most ambitious manifestation of civilizational foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative deserves recognition. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) incorporates a massive state-led infrastructure investment program within a narrative of civilizational generosity and historical continuity. It is officially framed as a revival of the ancient Silk Road trade networks that connected China to the Islamic world, Central Asia, and Europe during the height of Tang and Song dynasty influence. This framing's historical veracity is disputed since, in contrast to the BRI's geopolitically motivated, state-directed design, Peter Frankopan's <sup>14</sup>history of the original Silk Roads highlights their nature as bottom-up, decentralized networks of private trading. However, the narrative purpose is evident: China is resuming a natural historical connection that was cut off by the century of humiliation rather than seeking strategic growth.

### **Critical Perspectives**

The story of civilizational continuity has drawn complex academic issues that need to be addressed rather than ignored. According to Prasenjit Duara, the idea of a cohesive, unitary Chinese civilization enduring for five millennia is a nationalist fabrication in and of itself, imposing coherence in retrospect on a historical record marked by extreme fragmentation, ethnic diversity, and civilizational discontinuity. A prime example of what Duara <sup>15</sup>refers to as "bifurcated history" is the narrative of the CCP, which<sup>16</sup> purports to restore the true course of Chinese civilization while methodically repressing the histories of Tibetans, Uyghurs, Taiwanese, and Han Chinese dissidents whose experiences are incompatible with the restoration framework.

This repression is a part of the story, not an afterthought. Counter-narratives must be excluded for the civilizational restoration narrative to be coherent, and the political enforcement of this exclusion is ingrained in the logic of civilizational nationalism. The long-term pathologies of a nationalism centred on victimization and restoration are identified by Edward Friedman <sup>17</sup>as being structurally resistant to compromise, intrinsically sensitive to perceived slights, and vulnerable to a "wounded nationalism" in which the emotional economy of grievance constantly needs new targets of resentment to maintain its mobilizing energy. A similar dynamic is documented by Andrew Nathan <sup>18</sup>and Andrew Scobell: what they refer to as China's "defensive nationalism" tends toward systematic threat inflation, resulting in arms buildups, confrontational foreign policy postures, and a siege-like domestic environment that prevents the kind of open discussion that allows for course corrections.

### **Conclusion: The Power and the Trap of Civilizational Memory**

Beyond the typical impact of the past on the present, historical memory shapes the contemporary Chinese state. Political authority was formed as conditional and historically responsible under the dynastic notion of the Mandate of Heaven. Chinese civilization was positioned as morally and culturally superior to all others thanks to the tributary system and the concept of tianxia. The century of humiliation that followed destroyed that sense of self and gave rise to a nationalism based on resentment and a yearning for redemption. The CCP has made this historical awareness the cornerstone of its claim to power, particularly since Tiananmen and with increasing ferocity under Xi Jinping.

This story's authentic roots are what give it its power. The agony of a century of humiliation was genuine. It makes moral sense to want national dignity. It is noteworthy that hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of poverty and that China has regained its position as a major power. The Party offers a sense of shared purpose that neither socialist doctrine nor economic growth numbers alone can deliver by tying these accomplishments to a larger historical arc.

However, the story also has a built-in instability. Nationalist mobilization is permanently encouraged by the state's commitment to a rehabilitation project with no end in sight. What might a complete restoration look like? Since there is no satisfactory response to

the query, fresh complaints can always be discovered to keep the momentum going. Additionally, it limits foreign policy in significant ways: a government whose legitimacy depends on the restoration of civilization cannot readily make concessions on matters such as maritime sovereignty or Taiwan without jeopardizing the foundation of its domestic power.

There are significant ramifications for the twenty-first century. Although it limits the range of politically feasible options, the civilizational story does not impose any particular conclusions. Most importantly, it prevents the type of real great-power accommodation that history indicates is the most dependable method to avoid confrontation; this accommodation necessitates acknowledging that one's own historical claims must be balanced against the justifiable interests of others.

Therefore, it is necessary to comprehend this civilizational language to comprehend China today. It was not invented by the CCP, though the Party has wielded it with considerable skill. It is inscribed in institutions, emotional memories, and convictions that predate the Party and may outlast it. The past does not mechanically determine the present, but in China, the present is continuously shaped by how the past is interpreted, selected, and politically deployed.

### **DISCLAIMER**

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## ENDNOTES

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