

## **Intention and Objective of Chinese Foreign Policy: A Perspective of Chinese Culture and History**

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### **Abstract**

China's global economic and political expansion has raised a serious alarm to the international society. China is the only country that has the intention and capability to challenge the current international system and the United States. By employing a cultural perspective, this paper will discuss the relationship between the motivation of Chinese foreign policy and its global expansion through exploring three questions: How does the Chinese culture influence Chinese leaders' worldview? How are the Chinese culture and historical memory translated into Chinese foreign policy? How does the Chinese government use its historical narratives to mobilize nationalism to serve its assertive foreign policy? This paper will argue that Chinese foreign policy aims not only to maintain the one-party system, but also want to replace the U.S. power in the Asia-Pacific region and ultimately become the world's top superpower. However, it is still uncertain if China will be able to take over the crown of the world superpower because the intention of China's global ambitions conflicts with the mainstream of the international order and triggers strong backlashes from the global community.

**Keywords:** *Chinese foreign policy, China-U.S. relations, international relations, Chinese politics, Chinese culture*

## **1. Introduction**

U.S.-China relations is one of the central global issues in the twenty-first century. It is urgent for the United States and its allies to respond to Chinese assertive foreign policy and practice. To do so, the U.S. must accurately assess the objective of Chinese foreign policy. Realism and liberalism are the mainstream of international relations theory. Realists argue that China cannot rise peacefully<sup>1</sup>, while liberals argue that China can rise within the current international order,<sup>2</sup> because China mainly wants to ensure domestic stability and economic growth.<sup>3</sup> Some argue that China only wants to become the regional power, so China does not directly challenge the United States. International relations are comprehensive and must involve deep cultural factors in foreign policy making process (Reus-Smit, 2019). However, cultural analysis remains largely absent from the international relations studies. By employing a cultural perspective, this paper will discuss the objective of Chinese foreign policy by examining the motivation of Chinese foreign policy driven by Chinese culture and historical memory and exploring three questions: How does the Chinese culture influence Chinese leaders' worldview? How are the Chinese culture and historical memory translated into Chinese foreign policy? How does the Chinese government use its historical narratives to mobilize nationalism to serve the assertive foreign policy? This paper will challenge the argument that the objective of Chinese foreign policy primarily is to maintain the one-party system and domestic political stability,<sup>4</sup> by arguing that Chinese foreign policy not only aims to maintain domestic political stability and the one-party system, but also wants to replace the U.S. power in the

Asia-Pacific region and ultimately become the world's top superpower. The two objectives are the two sides of the same coin. Yet, it takes time for China to take over the crown of the world superpower because the intention of Chinese foreign policy driven by the historical complex of "China's glorious past" and the "century of humiliation" conflicts with the mainstream of the international order and triggers strong backlashes in the global community.

## **2. Roles of Chinese Culture in Making Foreign Policy**

A nation's culture is defined by common objective elements—language, history, religion, customs, and institutions as well as by people's self-identification (Huntington, 2004). Culture is a very broad conception, but it can be categorized into two basic components: the material component is essential for physical survival; the spiritual component sets human relations in a social order (Chu and Ju, 1993). Material culture can be used for any countries. Some rich countries enjoy modern material civilization, but they do not share the same worldview as Americans hold. American culture is everywhere in China. People's lifestyle, business management model, transportation, communication tools, and city construction are about the same as American style. However, spiritual culture is significantly different from American culture. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dominates contemporary Chinese culture, and the CCP-sponsored media shapes the spiritual life of the Chinese people. An invisible cultural wall along with the Great Firewall between the U.S. and China remains because the mentality of the CCP is anti-West in nature. The CCP will continue to reject Western spiritual culture including universal values and religious freedom while China's modernization indeed needs Western material culture especially advanced high technology.

Culture is pluralistic in the globalized world. According to Samuel Huntington, there are eight major civilizations in the world: Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Orthodox Slav, Latin American, and African cultures. Huntington suggests that the conflict among diverse civilizations will shape the destiny of humankind (Huntington, 2011). Accordingly, four basic types of Chinese culture coexist in China today: Chinese traditional culture, party culture (Marxism), Chinese nationalism, and Western culture. Chinese traditional culture represented by Confucianism dominated the mainstream of Chinese culture for over 2,000 years. Western culture has flowed into China just for 40 years since China reopened its door in the 1980s. The Party culture guided by Marxism has become Chinese official ideology for 70 years since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Although Chinese nationalism is historical so it changes from time to time, it is a sub-branch of the Party culture in the PRC and serves the fundamental goal of Chinese foreign policy. The CCP also tries to combine the Party culture with Chinese traditional values (Yan, 2018: 1). In this sense, the party culture, Chinese traditional culture and Chinese nationalism are interrelated and dominated by the party culture. All of the three Chinese cultures reject Western culture and play a role in Chinese foreign policy making.

First, foreign policy is the external dimension of a nation's domestic public policy, reflecting the international objectives, principles and strategies based on its national interests guided by ideological and political principles. Although cooperation and competition between China and the West are the inseparable parts of globalization, the differences between Chinese and Western cultural systems are an important source of the conflict and competition even if both sides deny that they are now in the Cold War period. China has shifted its low-key diplomacy to wolf-warrior diplomacy and increasingly showed its

political muscle as its economy is on the rise. The engagement policy is dead (Schell, 2020). It is no longer realistic to ignore the danger of the Party culture by overemphasizing the common economic interests between China and the West. The shift of U.S. strategy approach from engagement to competition indicates that the U.S. foreign policy toward China since the Richard Nixon administration has failed largely because the U.S. downplayed the fundamental differences between the Party culture and American values while the CCP manufactured anti-American sentiment. It is required for the U.S. to seriously consider cultural and historical factors during the process of making foreign policy toward China (Zhao, 2017).

Second, although culture does not play an explicit role in foreign policy, it influences human perception of the world, shapes policy makers' ideas to a certain direction, and guides a country's international behaviors (Johnston, 1995; Feng, 2007). Culture helps decision makers to make their foreign policies based on their understanding of their states' position in the global community and their relations with other nations (Qin, 2003: 10-15). Apparently, culture constantly shapes the landscapes of international relations so it sits at the heart of international relations theories (Jahn, 2003). Rajen Harshe (2006) put it this way, "Although nation states operate on the basis of their juridical power, cultural factors invisibly operate in the policy-making processes of all countries." Thus, it is not only necessary to understand leaders' general cultural orientation but one must also examine their political and religious beliefs in order to explain or predict foreign policy changes (Zhou, 2019). On the surface, the ongoing trade war between China and the U.S. is similar to the trade war between the U.S. and Japan in the 1980s. As a matter of fact, U.S. competition with China always has an ideological component that distinguishes it from that with Japan (McGregor, 2017). Chinese cultural orientation especially Chinese

leaders' worldview plays a significant role in the direction of the trade war and in the great power competition. Without a doubt, it is more difficult for the U.S. to solve trade disputes with China because the trade policies of the two countries are guided by the two fundamentally different political regimes.

Third, culture is one of legitimate sources for a nation to identify its position in the international relations. National identity refers to the subjective feeling that one shares with a group of people about a nation, regardless of one's legal citizenship status, so it represents its national distinctive culture, traditions, language, values, and politics. The CCP as the sole ruling party in China is guided by Marxism, which is the Chinese official ideology according to the Constitution of the PRC. The CCP identifies its country as a socialist system with Chinese characteristics. On the one hand, the Chinese socialist system, as part of the communist camps including North Korea, Cuba, and Laos, explicitly distinguishes itself from the Western democratic system, and represents the opposite development model against the Washington consensus. On the other hand, the "Chinese characteristics" mainly refers to China's reform and opening-up policy and Chinese socialist market system implemented in the post-Mao era. Chinese market system is operated within the framework of the communist political system, so the Chinese market system is actually not the typical market system in the Western sense. The combination of the communist political system and market economy has created the ambiguity of China's international identity and results in self-conflict and conflicts with the international system because the CCP/State-sponsored Chinese market system is not recognized by the mainstream of the international norm and rule. In the economic area, China supports globalization by expanding its global economic power and buying political influence worldwide while it opposes globalization in the political realm by rejecting universal values

and modern democracy. When China wants to develop new type of great power relations with the U.S., China is largely concerned about its self-interests, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang, and its maritime territorial claims (Shambaugh, 2013), but it avoids the substantive issues of how to be consistent with the international order and abide by the international rules.

Fourth, culture can be used to improve a nation's image in the global community and enhance its soft power. The Chinese government has used cultural diplomacy as a tool to improve its global image, attempting to change people's perception of China. After hosting the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government put US\$6 billion in financing to China's "Big Four" media agencies—Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI), and *China Daily / Global Times* (Ramos Becard and Menechelli Filho, 2019). Xinhua, China's official news outlet, planned to build 200 bureaus abroad by 2020. The CCTV is hiring around the world (McCormick, 2019). The Chinese government has spent a great amount of money to run workshops in Beijing to train foreign journalists how to tell China stories (*ibid.*). In addition, the CCP has established more than 1,000 Confucius Institutes worldwide to expand global cultural influence. The CCP invests heavily in global cultural expansion but receives a little in return. Sometimes, it does more harm than good. In 2020, the U.S. designated four more Chinese media outlets (China Central Televisions, China News Service, the *People's Daily* and the *Global Times*) as foreign missions, bringing to nine the total number of Chinese news media so designated. Western scholars and journalists began to be wary of the free trip to China invited by Beijing. More and more universities in Western societies are closing their Confucius Institutes. All these reflect the fundamental cultural conflicts between China and Western societies.

Fifth, cultural differences are one of major causes of international conflicts. Samuel Huntington (1993) suggests that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will be cultural. Many IR scholars have explored the causes of the conflicts between the U.S. and China, arguing that the confrontation is unavoidable during the power transition due to various reasons, such as, shrinking national power gap between the two nations has created the anxieties of the United States; the ideological and political differences have fueled the confrontation; the Cold War mentality has escalated the confrontation; and the mutual unfavorable perceptions have influenced foreign policy making process (Zhao, 2019). All these factors contribute to the deterioration of U.S.-China relations, but they do not fully explain the deep causes behind the confrontation between the two nations. Cultural factors play a significant role in making foreign policy between democratic and non-democratic countries while it has insignificant impact on international relations among democratic countries or between the same political systems. Why has China's relations with Western societies been worsening with increasing tension since Xi Jinping took charge of China in 2012? One of the explanations is that Xi Jinping has been returning to Maoism and classic Marxism and converting his worldview into Chinese diplomacy. Under Xi Jinping administration, the cultural and ideological gap between China and the West has been widening, which accelerates the decoupling process between China and the U.S. Minxin Pei points out that "the CPC faces a genuine existential threat, mainly because its mindset has led it to commit a series of calamitous strategic errors." (Pei, 2020) According to the report *Dealing with the dragon: China as a transatlantic challenge*, written by 43 top China experts from both the U.S. and Europe, engagement policy is no longer the sole paradigm for framing policies toward China, because China's present party-state is a very different one compared to the one both the U.S. and Europe sought



to work with in partnership over the past four decades (Bertelsmann Stiftung *et al.* (joint report), 2020).

Sixth, the reason for the U.S. to define China as a strategic competitor and systematic rival is not that China has become powerful, but that the intention of the Chinese foreign policy has posed a huge threat to the U.S. and the West. The conflicts between U.S. and China will be a combination of long-standing cultural and political battle and a potential military clash over the Asia-Pacific region in addition to intensified competition in trade and hi-technology. Since 2008, the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations has asked experts to rank 30 areas where conflict may escalate. The 2019 Prevention Priority Report divides the 30 high-risk areas into three preventive priority tiers. Only one possible military confrontation in the South China Sea is considered a Tier I priority. A U.S.-China crisis over Taiwan is ranked as a Tier II priority for the first time (Stares/CPA, 17th December 2018). Many IR scholars agree that China is neither Germany in 1917 and 1941, nor the former Soviet Union between 1947 and 1991. China's threat to the U.S. is more cultural and political rather than geopolitical and military because the CCP has a completely different worldview *vis-à-vis* that of the U.S. and the West, attempting to rewrite the current international rules and establishing a red global empire through its global economic and political expansions.

Seventh, it is hard to find a solution of improving U.S.-China relations within the framework of the power transition theory without seriously addressing cultural differences between the two nations. If the Chinese economy grows steadily in this decade, the Chinese economy and military power will likely surpass the United States by 2035. By that time, the "world's largest economy will be non-English speaking, non-western, and nondemocratic." (McGregor, 2017) In the world history, a power transition was usually accompanied by a war. The Hu Jintao

administration attempted to assure the world that China will rise peacefully (Kumar, 2012), but the slogan of “China’s peaceful rise” is dead under the Xi Jinping administration. According to the power transition theory, it is difficult for China to rise peacefully in the current international order due to the fact that the current international order is established and led by the U.S. and its allies. A war between China and the U.S. is inevitable if only the power transition theory is employed in the analysis of China-U.S. relations. That is why some American scholars suggest that we should not use Europe’s past to explore China’s future (Kang, 2007). The deep driving forces of U.S.-China relations are neither economic nor military factors, but cultural and historical factors that hide behind the foreign policy making process. It should not be ignored that Xi Jinping’s worldview and the Party culture have played a significant role in deteriorating China-U.S. relations. The U.S. must prepare a cultural competition with China, which is not temporary but will be a century marathon. The competition will be getting worse before getting better if the CCP does not change its worldview.

### **3. Characteristics of Chinese Culture and the Mindset of Foreign Policy Makers**

It is critical to discuss the relationship between the characteristics of Chinese culture and Chinese foreign policy makers in order to understand how Chinese culture is translated into foreign policy. Some suggest that *junmin* (military), *gumin* (shareholders) and *wangmin* (netizens) are the new foreign policy actors (McGregor, 2017). In fact, unlike the Wall Street in the U.S., Chinese stock market is operated within the socialist system and does not have a significant role to play in foreign policy whenever it falls or soars. China’s Internet is strictly monitored and controlled by the rigid censorship system and any

political opposition voices on the Internet are prohibited. Chinese nationalism on the Internet is totally manipulated by the CCP as an international bargaining tool. Theoretically, the State Council, the People's Liberation Army, and intelligence organs constitute the main body of Chinese foreign policy making, and Chinese military leaders have stronger voice after more than a decade of annual double-digit budget increases. Practically, the general secretary of the CCP is the chairman of the Central Military Commission—the commander-in-chief, so other branches of the government do not have real power to make foreign policy because there is no workable checks and balances in the foreign policy making process under the leadership of the CCP. The CCP is the sole leadership of China and the top leader of the CCP plays a decisive role in making Chinese foreign policy among the other three key actors. In this sense, the mindset of the top leaders of the CCP is especially crucial in the process of making foreign policy. Thus, it is required to explore how characteristics of Chinese culture shape the mindset of CCP in order to understand the current China-U.S. relations:

- (1) Geographically, China is largely an inland country that contributes to an inward-looking culture. China is the fourth largest country in terms of its size, and bordered by 13 countries, including Russia and North Korea to the East, Russia and Mongolia to the North, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India to the West, and Nepal, India, Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam to the South. The large size of China's land in the northwest and southwest are covered by mountains and desert. China's coastline is only about 9,910 miles. The northwest part of China is the cradle of early Chinese civilization and the heartland of an imperial culture where the First Emperor of Qin dynasty established the first unified China in 221 B.C (Leung, 2003: 192). The headquarter of the CCP

was also set up in that remote area, Yan-an, from 1937 to 1947. The Chinese civilization did not expand to the Yangtze River until modern times. China's fourteen ports in the east coast areas did not open until it was defeated in the first Opium War in 1842. This geographical location partially results in human poverty and isolated communities and produces a limited worldview of Chinese people before modern times (McCull, 1999). The mindset of the Chinese people is not open but introverted because China was only indirectly in contact with Western civilization from the remotest ages (Bishop, 1922: 19-41). CCP leaders have inherited that cultural tradition that continues to shape their mentality. The mindset of Middle Kingdom is still reflected in Chinese foreign policy and partially explains the arrogant and aggressive behaviors of current Chinese diplomacy. The CCP's Sixth Plenum held in November of 2021 clearly indicated that the CCP is rewriting "its history to elevate the status of its leader and ensure that the public will embrace the official version of its past is the latest sign of China's increasingly inward-looking attitude." (*The Asahi Shimbun*, 12th November 2021)

- (2) Agriculture is the base of the Chinese traditional culture which contributes to the narrow-minded character of Chinese communist leaders. China became an agricultural society 4,000 years ago. By the thirteenth century, China was the most sophisticated agricultural country in the world (Elvin, 1973). The size of rural areas was 88% of China's land when the PRC was established in 1949, and 82% before China began the reform movement in 1978. In an agricultural society, peasants were caged in the farm and home. They concentrated on reality and ignored imaginations; and they concentrated on human relationships but neglected spiritual life. They maintained simple daily life of "got up works at sunrise and

retired at sunset.” They were born there, grew up there, and died there. China launched the industrial revolution in 1978, about 300 years after Western industrial revolution. By contrast, modern Western societies were driven by Enlightenment rationality, science and technology, and industrial civilizations. China today still struggles to maintain the balance between its indigenous culture and modernization and struggles to absorb Western thinking because it still lives with its old civilizations in terms of way of thinking (Harshe, 2006). This agricultural culture fundamentally shapes the political nature of the CCP. The philosophy of Chinese peasant uprisings in the Chinese history is: Whoever seizes the power keeps the power forever. Similarly, the CCP rejects sharing its power with other oppositions and will never surrender its power. The fundamental objective of the CCP is to retain the sole leadership of the party, which explains why Chinese foreign policy is required to serve the principle of the one-party system and expand the red empire beyond its own territory.

- (3) The Chinese culture is patriarchal. In the agricultural society, the Chinese family was not only a basic unit of Chinese society, but also a basic work unit to keep social and political machines running. Chinese culture is family spirit in nature (Hsu, 1975). The basic patriarchal principle places the father at the center of family and society. The government is an enlarged family; the emperor was the father of the nation and the highest priest of religion. The government in Chinese, *guo-jia* ( 國家 ), means “nation-family”. The emperor was the sole source of power, final authority, and all laws.<sup>5</sup> When the principle of filial piety was applied into the political system, loyalty and obedience became the first criteria to recruit officials. The Chinese patriarchal culture and the Party culture share

the basic commonalities, because the communist radical revolution largely relied on Chinese peasants. At home, in the post-Mao era, the “red second generation” (紅二代) views China as their family dynasty and wants to keep the red regime forever. Xi Jinping publicly calls them for passing their red gene to the next generation. In order to fulfill the political ambition of his “nation-family”, Xi promotes the cult of personality. The CCP sets up the patriarchal principles for Chinese people to follow: “be loyal to the party” and “follow the party unconditionally”. Xi has gained a new title, “people’s leader” (*renmin lingxiu*, 人民領袖), which is the same as Dictator Mao Zedong’s title (Saavedra, 2019). In addition, Xi has removed the presidential two-term limit, making it possible for him to rule China lifelong, and he is now looking for a third term at the 20th CCP Congress in 2022. Internationally, Chinese leaders apply notions of filial piety and familial obligation to the international relations and attempt to expand China’s patriarchal system to the international society (Varrall, 2015). The Xi administration has been seeking the “predominance at the top of a regional and global order, where the hierarchical principle is the guarantee of order” (Saran, 2017), while attempting to share great power relations with the United States. China’s global expansion is an attempt to expand the communist “red family”. However, China will not treat other countries as equals, but will perform as a big brother (Bader, 2016). The Chinese government believes that “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact” (Lowsen, 2018).

- (4) The Chinese culture is essentially not plural but singular dominated by the culture of the Han. The early Chinese culture is nonpluralistic (Ropp (ed.), 1990). Han people, named after the Han Dynasty

(206 BC-220 CE), have long existed and expanded to all over the country while the minority nationalities inhabit mainly in the border regions. There are 56 officially recognized ethnic groups among the 1.4 billion population in China today, but the Han people is the largest ethnic group among the 56 ethnic groups, making up 93.3% of the total population. The other 55 ethnic groups are the minorities, making up only about 6.7% of China's population. Most of China's minorities live in border areas or remote areas and they are relatively separated from the developed areas. Some of the minority people have lost their own identities after moving into the developed regions. The characteristic of the Han culture implies that, first, China is not an immigrant country by nature. The concept of a Han race is a unified Chinese interest group and a unified nation under its leadership (Carrico, 2012). This unitary culture neither encourages the development of diverse communities, nor promote diverse mentality. The mentality of the Han regards its culture and tradition as superior and others as inferior. This prevents China from truly implementing the basic principles of international relations, such as respect, trust, and tolerance. Second, the Han is the identity of the mainstream of the Chinese population, so the Han culture represents Chinese official culture. The Chinese language is called *Han Yu* (漢語, the Han language); the Chinese people are called *Han Ren* (漢人, the Han people); and the Chinese clothes are called *Han Fu* (漢服, the Han clothes). The Han people consider themselves as civilized people and others as barbaric including the Westerners. Today, the CCP continues to use the phrase of *Zhong xue wei ben, Xi xue wei yong* (中學為本, 西學為用, i.e. "adopting Western knowledge for its practical uses while keeping Chinese values as fundamental structure") to describe the relationship between Chinese and Western cultures. Third, the Han people possess political and

economic powers in every Chinese province. The Han is the center to the little brothers of the minorities. The central government largely represents the interests of the Han people at home and abroad. The symbol of China's global soft power, Confucius Institutes, are under the leadership of the Han Ban (漢辦, the Office of Chinese Language Council International). The Han-centric culture contributes to the conflicts between the Han and the minorities at home and between China and small countries abroad. This explains why the CCP overly emphasizes its development model with Chinese characteristics and rejects Western culture. This could partially explain why the Chinese government has placed a million Muslim Uyghurs into "re-education camps" in Xinjiang since 2017, although the government claims that most detainees have been freed and returned to society after having graduated from the re-education camps.

- (5) Chinese culture is very conservative and resists changes. Since the First Emperor of Qin dynasty unified China 2,000 years ago, any reform or change has been regarded as an abandonment of orthodoxy. The first meaningful reform movement was the reform movement of 1898, which promoted radical changes by supporting a constitutional monarchical system and introducing Western cultures. However, the reform movement was suppressed by the military forces within three months. The leaders of the reform movement Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao fled to the Japanese embassy in Beijing. Other reformers were arrested and killed one after another. Emperor Guangxu, who supported the reform, was placed under house arrest. One of the important reasons for China's failing to complete reforms in the 19th century was that the Chinese people were unwilling to abandon their old traditions (Rozman (ed.), 1998).



History repeated itself. Under the Mao regime, the chairman of the PRC (the *de jure* head of state), Liu Shaoqi, tried to shift Mao's radical revolution model to the emphasis of the Chinese economy to improve the living standard of the Chinese people. As a result, he was persecuted to death during the Cultural Revolution. After he was dead, Mao did not allow his real name to be shown on the name tag at the funeral home. In the post-Mao era, Zhao Ziyang (1919-2015), the general secretary of the CCP, was placed under house arrest for 15 years until his death because he showed his unwillingness to support the Tiananmen Square Massacre. CCP's top leadership did not allow his family to bury his ashes until 2019. In the CCP's view, the greatest danger to the regime comes from liberal intellectuals who advocate "reform," "change" and "universal values" (Shirk, 2007). Thus, China has the largest number of detained journalists in the world in 2018, ahead of Turkey, followed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Eritrea, Vietnam, and Iran (AFP, 12th December 2019). Under the Xi administration, the slogan of the reform is in name only. China is returning to a highly centralized political system domestically and decoupling from the mainstream of the international society externally.

#### **4. Historical Memory and Chinese Diplomatic Objective**

Culture is the precipitation of history; and history is a cultural memory. The conceptions of culture and history are overlapped, and both are the cultural DNA of a nation. One of the driving forces of foreign policy is how the foreign policy makers position their nation from a historical perspective. Chinese leaders' vision for the current and future international systems draws inspiration from traditional Chinese thought and its historical experience (Rolland, 2020). To justify its foreign

policy, the CCP uses the narrative of China's glorious past to support the "China Dream" while it uses the narrative of the "century of humiliation" to promote the anti-West nationalism.

#### ***4.1. CCP Uses the Narrative of China's Glorious Past to Justify "China Dream"***

Foreign policy is the external dimension of domestic policy. The CCP "cannot succeed at home unless it is seen to prevail overseas" (McGregor, 2017). Xi Jinping began to promote the catchword of "China Dream" after taking the office in 2012 (Economy, 2017: 141). At the 19th National Congress of the CCP in 2017, he proposed China's great power plan by using the phrase of "China Dream" for 27 times (Doshi, 2017). China Dream refers to achieve "Two 100s": to achieve the material goal of becoming a "moderately well-off society" by 2021, the 100th anniversary of the CCP, and to achieve the Chinese modernization goal of becoming a fully developed nation by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the PRC (Kuhn, 2013). The narrative of "China Dream" is deeply rooted in the narrative of China's glorious past, which implies that "China Dream" is simply reclaiming its proper global position in the world history (Economy, 2017: 141). Americans believe that the U.S. is a chosen nation selected by God (Paterson, 2018). Much like the U.S., the Chinese people hold a strong sense of pride in their history and believe that China is unique (Kissinger, 2012). The conception of chosenness is ingrained even in the Chinese language. China is called *Zhong Guo* (中國), meaning "the central kingdom". China is also called *Zhong Hua* (中華), meaning "splendid country". There are several four-character "idioms" that are used to describe Chinese splendid civilization, such as *wen ming gu guo* (文明古國, a civilized ancient nation) and *li yi zhi bang* (禮儀之邦, a nation of ritual and etiquette) (Wang, 2012).

China used to be the most advanced country in the world in agriculture, education, science, and technology. China developed the earliest irrigation system in the world. The Dujiangyan ( 都江堰 ) irrigation system in the Sichuan region that still supplies water today was built in 256 B.C. to irrigate an enormous area of farmland. China established the earliest educational system in the world. Confucius was the first great teacher in the Chinese history and had more than 3,000 students during his time. The Chinese government began to recruit elite Chinese officials by adopting the civil service examination system in the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220). Whoever wanted to become a Chinese official was required to pass the exam. This helped the Chinese government to establish the most advanced civilian government in the world and allowed the civilian government to reduce military budget, avoid war, focus on social production and people's daily life, and maintain social stability. China is the home of ancient inventions in the world, and more than 50% of ancient inventions came from China, including the four great inventions of ancient China (*si da faming*, 四大發明): paper, compass, gunpowder, and print. The Chinese also made great contributions to astronomical observatory, the astronomical clock, meteorology, mathematics, geography, acupuncture, medicine, art, musical instruments, and craft.

The Chinese civilization was witnessed not only by the Chinese people but also by Westerners. Marco Polo (1254-1324) traveled on the Silk Road and in 1265 arrived in Kaifeng, the capital of ancient China. He was amazed by China's enormous power, great wealth, complex social structure and internal economy. A canal-based transportation system linked China's huge cities and markets in a vast internal network. The citizens could purchase paperback books with paper money, eat rice from fine porcelain bowls, wear silk garments, and live in a prosperous

city that no European city could match (Larner, 2001). Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) arrived in Macau in 1582, and later settled in mainland China. While staying in China, he dressed in Chinese robes, learned Chinese, and wrote books in Chinese. According to Ricci, China was a prosperous country with superior virtue. The Chinese people enjoyed perfect social harmony and were governed by meritorious scholar-officials. China was a model of peace and civilization in the world (Spence, 1985). When Americans traveled to China to do business during the early 1800s, the Chinese people were very polite and respectful.<sup>6</sup>

China loosely dominated the region through a hierarchical order because of its historical position in the world. China as the preeminent power in Asia lasted about 1,300 years roughly from the Tang dynasty (618-906) to the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). Chinese scholars argue that the Chinese theory of All-under-Heaven (*Tianxia*, 天下) is the best philosophy of global governance because the concept of All-under-Heaven shows the uniqueness of Chinese culture and history (Zhao, 2006: 29-41). Under the system of All-under-Heaven, countries in the region acknowledged the cultural and political superiority of China and showed their respect to Chinese authority in order to trade with China (French, 2017). Chinese emperors required every official visitor from abroad to obey Chinese tradition, such as *kowtowing* (kneeling and touching the ground with the forehead) before the Chinese emperor. When Lord Macartney, an English ambassador, came to China in 1793, he was also forced to *kowtow* before the Chinese emperor (Hsiao, 1979). The Chinese government enjoyed the tributary system (*chao gong*, 朝貢) under the regional hierarchical order. After the Tang Dynasty, this tributary relationship became the main form of trade between China and other countries. The system involved exchanges of gifts between foreign rulers and the Chinese emperor. Foreigners

benefited because the return gifts from China were always generous and they obtained the Chinese emperor's goodwill. In return, the foreigners show their posture to confirm Chinese superiority in the region. The tributary system was successful in the region before the first Opium War (McGregor, 2017).

According to Richard McGregor, this is Beijing's default mindset and China's DNA which will dictate to Beijing to behave more and more like an old Chinese empire. He points out that the "CCP never forgets the glorious past of China-centric world and now hopes to reclaim the status of global center" (*ibid.*). As China quickly gains global market, now Western societies are facing a dilemma: hold the principle of universal values but lose business in China or *kowtow* to the CCP to make profits from China. "China Dream" clearly reflects the complex of China-centric dream. Made in China 2025, China Standards 2035, and the Belt and Road Initiative are the specific plans to promote a China-centric regional order and reshape the future of the world order through its global expansion of manufacture, technology and investment. Graham Allison warns that it is dangerous for China to build an empire that is a Thucydides Trap (Allison, 2017). Apparently, the Thucydides Trap is deeply rooted in the narrative of China's glorious past.

#### ***4.2. The CCP Uses the Narrative of the Century of Humiliation to Promote Nationalism***

Promoting anti-West nationalism is the same process of fulfilling China's diplomatic objective. As early as 2017, Xi announced that China must take center stage in the world. As the first step toward the status of the world's top superpower, China focuses on "building regional primacy as a springboard to global power" (Brands and Sullivan, 2020). He declared that: "It is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia." His

objective is to drive the U.S. out of Asia and “destroy U.S. regional alliances” (Bader, 2016). Xi has tried to use every instrument of the country’s power in pursuing his international objectives (Blackwill and Campbell, 2016). China has increased its military presence in the South China Sea and developed “weapons that may challenge the U.S. Navy in the western Pacific” (Flint and Zhang, 2019: 296). China has the world’s largest navy with 355 ships in 2021 and will have 420 ships by 2025 and 460 ships by 2030. China commissioned its first domestically built aircraft carrier, the *Shandong*, and will put four aircraft carrier battle groups in operation by 2030 (CNN, 18th December 2019). Accordingly, wolf-warrior diplomacy (*zhan lang waijiao*, 戰狼外交) has become the unique characteristic of Chinese diplomatic behavior because the CCP really wants to “regain the respect and dignity of being a great nation” that had been lost during the century of humiliation (Weissmann, 2015). According to Xi’s assessment of the landscape of global power, the East is on the rise while the West is declining. He points out that it is time for China to look the world straight in the eye (*pingshi shijie*, 平視世界), so he has promised to restore China to its rightful great power status by 2049 (Doshi, 2017).

The “century of humiliation” spanned from the first Opium War in 1839 to 1945 as part of victory in the World War II, or in an alternative narrative, to the birth of the PRC in 1949. The Qing dynasty’s decline into poverty in the nineteenth century was primarily the result of its internal problems (Murphey, 2008). The first half of the Qing dynasty was still strong and vigorous but in the second half of the Qing dynasty, the government became very corrupted which contributed to poverty and triggered internal rebellions, such as the anti-Qing Taiping Rebellion and the anti-foreigner Boxer Uprising. In addition, because of the lack of science and advanced technology in modern times, China lost military capability in fighting against foreign invasion. Consequently, the Qing

Dynasty was defeated by the British during the first Opium War, and was forced to sign the Treaty of Nanking. According to the Treaty, the Chinese government was obligated to grant diplomatic immunity for foreign consular in China, pay indemnities of 21 million dollars, accept tariff, offer Britain most-favored nation treatment, open five new ports for trade, and cede Hong Kong to the British in perpetuity (which lasted 150 years). China used to consider itself the center of the world, and the only civilization in the world. The Treaty of Nanking along with the other unequal treaties greatly weakened China's comprehensive power. As a result, China gradually sank from an independent country to a semi-colonial country. After the Opium War, China was no longer a unified nation with an effective central government. The defeat in the first Opium War was the turning point of the "century of humiliation".

China was also defeated by Japan during the first Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895) and was forced to sign the Treaty of Shimonoseki (下関条約), which required China to cede Taiwan and Liaodong Peninsula to Japan and pay Japan a large indemnity of 16 million pounds of silver. In the Chinese mind, Japan used to be a little brother of China. The Chinese people felt greatly humiliated by the loss of the first Sino-Japanese War. Forty years after the first Sino-Japanese War, Japanese troops invaded China again in 1937, launching the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). One of important memories for the Chinese people from the war is the Nanjing Massacre. After the Japanese troops occupied Nanking (Nanjing) on December 13, 1937, Japanese soldiers raped and murdered the Chinese citizens and looted the city. According to Chinese official media, 300,000 civilians and soldiers were killed in the following six weeks. The International Military Tribunal of the Far East estimated that 260,000 Chinese people were killed while Japanese scholars put the number somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000. The incident of the Nanjing Massacre is an unforgettable memory of the

Chinese people and the nation. This incident is a fundamental keystone in the construction of the modern Chinese national identity (Askew, 2004).

Western powers forced China to sign more than 700 unequal treaties during the “century of humiliation”, of which 163 were with Britain, 153 with Japan, 104 with Russia, 73 with France, 47 with Germany, 41 with the United States, 26 with Belgium, 13 with Portugal, 7 with Italy, 5 with the Netherlands, 5 with Austro-Hungary, 4 with Spain, and 68 with other countries. The “century of humiliation” ended in 1945 as part of victory in the World War II. Seventy-five years after the end of the “century of humiliation”, it still represents the central attention of Chinese history in China’s relations with the West. For a long time, Chinese leaders have been shadowed by the “century of humiliation”. The CCP uses it to promote Chinese nationalism by portraying China as the victim of Western powers. Yuanming Yuan (old summer palace) was destroyed by foreign troops in 1860 and 1900. The CCP decided to leave the ruined garden “as it is” to remind Chinese people about the century of “national ruin of China”. The government established the museum of the Nanjing Massacre. Xi Jinping attended the 80th anniversary of the Nanjing Massacre in 2017 and led a citywide minute of silence, symbolizing that China will never forget the “century of humiliation”.

Why does the CCP emphasize the narrative of “century of humiliation”? First, The CCP wants to highlight that China and its people were humiliated by Western powers in the feudal society and at the time of the Republic of China, reminding the Chinese people that the previous governments were incapable of battling against the West. By contrast, the CCP claimed victory during the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Second, because the narrative of the century of humiliation can be applied to all major Western powers, the CCP uses the narrative to win the sympathy for China from Westerners, and it also



uses the narrative as a weapon against Western societies and as a bargaining chip to negotiate with Western governments. Third, the CCP tries to divert Chinese people's attention from domestic issues. Historical memory is not objective because governments can use historical events as a tool to mobilize popular support for their domestic and foreign policy (Wang, 2012). The CCP selects what to remember and what to forget. Many terrible events happened in the communist China – the anti-rightist movement in 1957, the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, and the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989 – but the CCP ignores these historical events and even cracks down on people's memorial activities. Choosing what to remember and what to forget is not a simple sorting process for history education, but is the process of shaping the national identity of China and the direction of its foreign policy (*ibid.*). Fourth, the CCP wants to promote the anti-West nationalism because the CCP views nationalism as one of the most powerful forces of collective action to shape the Chinese foreign policy (Tang and Darr, 2012: 811-826). In the Mao era, Chinese Marxism went side by side with nationalism to mobilize the Chinese people to go through the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Cultural Revolution. China was one of the poorest countries in the world under the Mao regime, but the CCP has survived in the twenty-first century largely because it has benefited from the national campaign to promote anti-West nationalism. In the post-Mao era, the CCP has used nationalism in response to various international events, mostly involving the U.S. and Japan. Now, the narrative of “century of humiliation” has become one of the foundations of Chinese foreign policy toward the U.S. China's top diplomat, Yang Jiechi, told the U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken of the Joe Biden administration during the first face-to-face meeting in 2021 that China is no longer going to buy the way that the U.S. is

dealing with China, which triggered another surge of anti-U.S. nationalism in China.

In addition to CCP's propaganda, other factors, such as education, income, political affiliation, age, and ethnic background, also affect the level of Chinese nationalism. Theoretically, nationalism in China is likely to decline over time while levels of urbanization and education continue to rise; practically, the CCP will continue to use Chinese culture and selected historical memory to promote Chinese nationalism and prevent the public from demanding liberal political change. Influenced by the communist propaganda, Chinese attitudes are more hawkish than dovish, and the younger Chinese may be more hawkish in their foreign policy beliefs than older generations. Jessica Chen Weiss (2019: 695) points out that: "Netizens and elites are even more inclined to call on the Chinese government to invest in and rely more on military strength." Since the trade war began, Chinese nationalism has been unprecedentedly strong and become one of the foundations of Chinese foreign policy toward the United States, driving China-U.S. relations to the lowest point since the normalization of U.S.-China relations in 1972. China has the highest level of nationalism among all countries and regions. Chao Deng and Liza Lin observe that Chinese nationalism is taking a dark turn, with echoes of China's past under the Mao regime (Deng and Lin, 2020). The new surge of Chinese nationalism has led many U.S. government officials to worry that the Chinese leadership will engage in diversionary conflict when China's economic growth slows down (Johnston, 2016). Chinese nationalism will continue to influence the Chinese foreign policy and play a significant role in the U.S.-China relations. Most recently, Xi Jinping warns that the U.S. is the biggest source of chaos of the global community and biggest threat to China's national security (*New York Post*, 3rd March 2021).

## **5. Conclusion**

The communist China has survived and become stronger although almost every oldest civilization declined in the world history. However, the direction of China's rise is not what the U.S. and its allies expected. The recent polls conducted by the Pew Research Center show that more than 80% of Americans hold an unfavorable view of China, increasingly see China as a strategic competitor or enemy. Although American politics is deeply divided, the majority of both Republicans and Democrats have unfavorable views of China (Silver *et al.*, 2021). The U.S. and the West are awakening to China's global expansion. China's comprehensive power today is much stronger than 50 years ago. The CCP possesses both monopoly political power and socialist market mechanism, so the result of the great power competition may not necessarily be the same as the result of the Cold War. Will a China-centric world become inevitable? How should the West deal with communist China's global expansion? According to the above analysis, it is safe to conclude that, first, it is necessary to understand Chinese culture and history in order to understand the intention of CCP's foreign policy objectives. Why did the U.S. foreign policy toward China fail in the past 40 years? One of the explanations is that the U.S. did not fully understand that the Chinese culture and Chinese history have played a significant role in foreign policy making, although the CCP manipulates the culture and historical memory. Second, the ultimate goal of Chinese foreign policy is very clear—the CCP wants to turn China into the world's top superpower while retaining its one-party system at home. Determined by the nature of the CCP, communist China is the biggest threat to the liberal international order. China will possibly become powerful, “but it will tilt the world away from democratic values and the rule of law” (Ikenberry, 2020). Third, the CCP's global expansion has received the strongest backlash from the West and China's neighbors.

The complex of the glorious past and the “century of humiliation” has become a historical burden that prevents China from looking into the future. When American exceptionalism meets China Dream, the confrontations between the two countries become inevitable and new normal in years to come. Fourth, what is a realistic solution of bringing China-U.S. relations back to a normal track? Understanding the nature of the CCP from a perspective of culture and history is key to improving China-U.S. relations. In order to win the great power competition, the United States is required to prepare a long-standing cultural war and potential military confrontation with China over the Asia-Pacific region while decisively competing with the CCP in economy, technology and the military.

## Notes

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*Journal of Religion & Society, The National Interests, Journal of Church and State, Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal, International Journal of China Studies, China Review International, Asia Times, Global Times, Chinese Social Sciences Today, and ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts.* He has also published more than forty articles in Chinese journals and newspapers. <Email: zhou@hws.edu>

1. John Mearsheimer (2011) believes that a policy of engagement is doomed to fail. If China becomes an economic powerhouse, it will almost certainly translate its economic might into military might and make a run at dominating Northeast Asia. A clash between the U.S. and China over Taiwan is hardly remote. Graham Allison (2017) suggests that a war between China and the U.S. is unavoidable unless China is willing to give up its ambitions or the U.S. can accept becoming number two in the Pacific.
2. See Aaron Friedberg (2002) and John Ikenberry (2008). This school of thought believes that the Western societies will be able to bring China into the current international liberal order. The three major pillars of liberal theory—democratic peace, economic interdependence and international institutions—work together to reinforce and perpetuate stable peace.
3. Quoted in Colin Flint and Zhang Xiaotong (2019: 296). Also see William A. Callahan (2013).
4. See Kevin Rudd (2018) and Mikael Weissmann (2015). According to Weissmann, the “foremost foreign policy objective is domestic political stability, which in turn is a necessity for the survival of one-party rule.”
5. See Kung-chuan Hsiao (translated by Frederick W. Mote) (1979: 23). Also see Gilbert Rozman, (ed.) (1998: 63) and Miyazaki Ichisada (宮崎市定) (1983: 55).
6. See John Pomfret (2016) and Elizabeth Economy (2017:141).

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